

**United Reformed Church South Western Synod
Minutes of the 105th Meeting of the Synod held on Saturday 8th March 2025
at Taunton United Reformed Church.**

ATTENDANCE: The meeting was attended by 77 people, a proportion of whom were on Zoom.

CONSTITUTION Revd David Downing constituted the 105th meeting of the Synod.

OPENING WORSHIP was led by Revd David Downing, with the suggestion that all attending should add to the lego creation. Readings were by Janet Gray.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE had been received at the Synod Office and noted.

MOVEMENT OF MINISTERS - None

CELEBRATION OF MINISTRY – Revd Brian Woodcock will celebrate his 60th anniversary of ordination later this year. Arrangements are in hand for Revd Neil Thorogood to present his certificate.

CHURCH CHANGES OR CLOSURES - None

WELCOME to new members – included Brenda Drake from Southmead New Brunswick.

VOTING CARDS – the system of voting using the blue and orange cards was explained; abstentions would not be accepted.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING – agreed that the minutes of the last meeting be amended to show that CRCWs are included in the Manse Policy. Following this change the minutes were accepted.

MATTERS ARISING

Conflict of Interests Policy – to be covered later in the meeting.

Synod Review – no response received to date.

FINANCE REPORT (report available on the Synod website)

Dick Gray began by apologising for the omission of CRCWs from the Manse Policy – this was an oversight. The accounts are currently in draft form as they are being audited and, as a result, may undergo some alterations. Income is down this year due to fewer churches being closed. Grants – more grants were awarded in 2024 than in 2023. Ministers were encouraged to attend conferences and include their spouses where appropriate. Very little expenditure has been made on Safeguarding or Youth Work (noted that salary, expenses and materials etc are covered under Synod Office Expenses). Synod makes significant contributions to M&M. In 2024 the surplus of income vs expenditure was £777,887. The last two years have been good. Tangible assets include manses and the Synod Office. Income from stocks and shares covers the running costs of the Synod Office.

We owe approximately £2.5m to the URC Ministers' Pension Fund. Control of the fund is to be moved to an Insurance company, we will not then owe any more money.

Cranbrook – The congregation currently they meet in a school building but wish to construct a church building. The cost is likely to be £1.8m - £2m. Discussions have been taking place with the CofE regarding contributions and how to expedite the project. East Devon Council are pressurising the special ecumenical church project to construct a building; building work needs to commence within 18 months or the Council may reclaim the land. In principle, we have agreed to help the CofE with a loan of up to £2m towards construction.

Discussion followed covering various aspects including ultimate ownership of the building, contributions from other denominations, financial security of the loan etc.

Resolutions:

1. The URC Southwestern Synod accepts and endorses the recommendation that we should be involved in bringing Cranbrook Church building into existence. **Agreed**
2. The URC Southwestern Synod accepts and endorses the recommendation allow the Synod Trust to invest up to £250,000 in the new building in addition to the 90% Grant already approved for the planning works. **Agreed**
3. The Synod authorises the Synod Trust Officers to provide a loan of up to £2M to enable the building works to progress. **Agreed**

Manse Policy - Resolution:

The URC Southwestern Synod agrees that any funds held by the Synod Trust on behalf of a local church for the maintenance of the manse will be transferred to the Synod Trust when that manse is transferred to the Synod Trust. **Agreed**

M&M - Planned to include whole membership of an LEP church for M&M purposes. This information is offered as advance information as the detail has not yet been determined. A resolution will be brought to October Synod.

Grants – No change.

CLERGY PACK

The Moderator's period of shadowing two other Moderators gave an insight into how other Synods support local church life and minsters. One proposal is the Clergy Pack Churches will be asked to reflect on what might be helpful in terms of content to make church life easier. Churches could pay a set monthly amount to the Synod and the Synod would cover their expenses. In the next few weeks Elders and Church Treasurers will be sent information for feedback and review at October Synod, in order for the new system to be brought into effect in 2026.

DISCIPLESHIP AND SERVICE COMMITTEE REPORT (report, including Stepwise, available on the Synod website) Neil Thorogood, Convenor of the Committee referred to the report and also reported that Revd Don Macalister will take up the role of Synod Candidating Secretary.

PAID STAFF TASK GROUP (report available on the Synod website)

Neil reported on the continued work of the Task Group which brought three Resolutions to the meeting. Discussion groups were held, with positive feedback, followed by some further conversation. The Moderator expressed the Synod's thanks to the Task Group.

Resolutions:

1. South Western Synod, meeting on 8th March 2025, agrees to enhance its communications by seeking a contract with a suitable organisation or company as outlined in the staffing task group's report. Any such contract to include a suitable review process in the light of experience and as synod requirements and Church Life Review outcomes evolve. **Agreed**

2. Part A: South Western Synod, meeting on 8th March 2025, agrees to create a new full-time post for admin support for churches. This post to fulfil the role description as outlined in the staffing task group's report. **Agreed**

Part B: Synod authorises the Synod Executive to oversee the creation of a suitable appointment pack (to include details of terms and conditions, job description, person specification etc.) and to advertise, interview and appoint for the post as soon as is practical. **Agreed**

3. Part A: South Western Synod, meeting on 8th March 2025, agrees in principle to create five new part time posts of Mission and Learning Mentor, one in each existing Synod pastoral area. These posts to fulfil the role description as outlined in the staffing task group's report and as developed through further consultation. **Agreed**

Part B: Synod asks the Synod Executive to ensure suitable consultation with the existing SPA team in order to clarify exactly how these new roles will work with the SPAs to enhance Synod support for local churches. **Agreed**

Part C: Synod Meeting invites Local churches to send any reflections on these MLM proposals that they wish the Synod Executive to consider to Revd Neil Thorogood (minister@thurc@gmail.com) by Monday 20th May. **Agreed**

Part D: Subject to the outcomes of B and C (above), Synod authorises the Synod Executive, at its meeting on 10th June 2025, to take the next appropriate steps up to and including recruitment for these five MLM posts. **Agreed**

THE NICENE CREED

David spoke about the marking of the 1,700th anniversary of the opening of the Council of Nicaea, which took place in Asia Minor in the year 325. Discussion Groups were held on what in the Creed connects with us.

LEGACY OF SLAVERY VIDEO (Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson) was shown. General Assembly wishes to create an overall fund of £1M, with the SW Synod being asked to contribute £120K. Each Synod is being asked to assist in various ways. The fund will support a mentoring programme in the UK aimed particularly at young black men and to address residual racism, provide anti-racism education and training and to support the reclamation of land and housing in Jamaica. Discussion followed with the agreement to amend the motion to "The SW Synod agrees a one off payment of at least £120K to the fund. Any additional contributions would have to be agreed by the Synod." All were in favour. Any change to the figure to be brought to October Synod for agreement.

NOMINATIONS AND ITEMS FROM THE SYNOD CLERK

Nominations – Noted that we now have a Synod Moderator. The Moderator is the convenor of the Synod Pastoral Committee and Executive Committee and is also an ex officio member of all committees. A number of vacancies currently exists across the Synod, eg Synod Ecumenical Officer, Worship & Preaching Advocate Coordinator, Commitment for Life Coordinator, LBAC Secretary and Convenor. These are currently being addressed; enquiries/applications for these posts would be welcomed. Anyone wishing to become involved with the churches or wider Synod is encouraged to make contact. An updated list of vacancies will be shared in due course. General Assembly asks each Synod to put forward nominations for Moderator to GA. This year the Synod would like to nominate Revd Neil Thorogood (who left the room during the voting process).

Resolution: The SW Synod nominates Revd Neil Thorogood as Moderator of General Assembly 2026-27. **Agreed**

En-Bloc Resolutions from October Synod – no queries raised.

PASTORAL COMMITTEE REPORT (report available on the Synod website).

Proposed and agreed by vote that the as the title “Transition Minister” does not adequately cover the role, it should be changed to “Companion Minister”. This new name would explain the role more accurately. Terms of Settlement will need to be altered to accommodate the new title. There are currently two vacancies for SPAs. Application packs have been sent to those interested in applying for the roles. Change to ministry noted: Revd Jessica Ascroft-Townsley to be Companion Minister to the Somerset Group of Churches.

CHURCH LIFE REVIEW

Many changes to the way the URC runs have taken place since it was founded in 1972, including the disbanding of District Councils some years ago. In order to assess what is needed for the future, the Church Life Review is looking at the whole life of the Church and how local churches are supported. Updates are available in “Reform” and on the URC website. There will be two General Assembly meetings this year; one in July as usual and an Extraordinary Meeting in November which will focus on the CLR. Areas to be covered in the November GA will include Shared Support Services; Employment; Communities of Worship and Discipleship; Financial Resource Sharing (eg M&M where the SW Synod contributes £50K annually to a pool for less affluent Synods). Currently procedures differ across the URC, the CLR will offer standardisation for the Synods. Contributions from Synods are needed over the next ten years to fund the projects involved. If agreed at the November meeting, work could begin in December. The annual contribution from the SW Synod would be £250,000. Some discussion followed.

Resolution:

The SW Synod of the URC endorses the recommendation of the Synod Executive Committee to contribute up to £250,000 per annum to the CLR fund for the next 10 years. **Agreed**

GREEN APOSTLES (ECO) REPORT (report available on the Synod website)

Rob Weston reported that we continue to add to the list of Eco registered churches, Central Church Swindon having just been awarded bronze status. Of the 48 churches Eco registered in the SW Synod, 33% have achieved Bronze, 16% Silver and 1% Gold awards. Those churches not yet having achieved an award are working towards bronze. Encouragement is important. Eco Grants have been awarded to six churches (as listed in the report). Noted that there is no limit to the number of Green Apostles the Synod could appoint, so anyone who is interested is invited to contact Rob Weston for more information.

SYNOD EXECUTIVE REPORT (report available on the Synod website)

Ian Harrison reported that many issues had already been dealt with under earlier items, so he was reporting on 3 items only:-

Large Building Projects - a number of churches are in the process of requiring significant funds, eg roofing or two church congregations joining together in one building. This necessitates an assessment of mission and outreach which is the gateway to the funds and views how the project enables the church to go forward.

Repeat Grant Applications - In considering repeat grant applications, Executive Committee would expect to see evidence of planning for sustainability and recognition of how the project would progress. Additionally, other sources of funding should be considered.

Conflict of Interest Policy – General Assembly adopted a resolution encouraging local churches, Synods, Synod Trust Companies and the URC to adopt a Conflict of Interest Policy. The Synod Conflict of Interest Policy was sent out with the Synod papers and a vote was taken for its adoption by the Synod and its Committees.

Resolution:

The SW Synod adopts the Conflict of Interest Policy as of 8th March 2025.

Agreed

Local churches are encouraged by General Assembly to consider the Policy for use themselves.

Church Mutual Credit Unions – their current shortage of funds means they are unable to offer loans. Proposed that the Synod invests £200,000 in CMCU for the benefit of those who need the assistance of a loan. The interest rate is lower – currently 2%. Any investment can be reclaimed at any time. Discussion followed regarding the respective/relative merits of the CMCU.

Resolution:

The SW Synod of the URC endorses the recommendation of the Synod Executive to invest £200,000 with the CMCU.

Carried by majority vote

SAFEGUARDING REPORT (report available on the Synod website)

Janet Raven reported via Zoom link on progress to date. An action plan has been drawn up by Claire Partridge (Synod Safeguarding Officer) and shared with the Committee. The picture nationally is changing. A Casework Officer has been appointed by Church House and a casework database has been set up to share information across the URC. There has been a big increase in the number of Annual Safeguarding Returns completed this year. So far 70% have been received. Thanks were extended to all who had completed their Returns as the information and data received are very important in helping to keep people

safe. Claire Partridge has begun an online Forum for sharing safeguarding knowledge on adults and children across the Synod and URC. The SW Synod Safeguarding Officer post is a part time role; some training is organised online by E-Learning but certain levels have to be carried out either by Zoom or face to face.

Manse Policy – Corrective Resolution (on screen)

Resolution:

The Synod Meeting notes the current Manse Policy and agrees to add “/CRCW” after every use of the word “minister”. **Agreed**

CLOSING WORSHIP was led by Revd David Downing, including In Memoriam (list attached).