**United Reformed Church South Western Synod**

**Minutes of the 104th Meeting of the Synod held on Saturday 19th October 2024**

**at Westfield URC, Bridgwater.**

**ATTENDANCE:** The meeting was well attended.

**WELCOME** to David Downing as Moderator of the South Western Synod.

**OPENING WORSHIP** was led by Revd Gerald England.

**CONSTITUTION** Revd David Downing constituted the 104th meeting of the Synod.

**OPENING NOTICES** from Rachel Leach, Synod Clerk.

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

**MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING -** these were approved as a correct record and signed.

**MOVEMENT OF MINISTERS -** a list was projected and all those attending Synod Meeting for the first time were welcomed.

**BOOKSTALL**

Andy Jackson, Head of Communications at Church House, was welcomed to the meeting. He introduced himself and outlined the current work of the Communications Department. He spoke about the contents of the bookstall he was running and hoped everyone would come and take a look during the course of the Meeting.

He reported on the “A Place for Hope” contract with the URC, extending over the next 5 years. It is a mediation service which supports people and faith communities as they navigate conflict, showing how it can be both creative and destructive. Details will be published within the URC.

**FINANCE REPORT (report attached)**

A copy of Dick Gray’s presentation was projected on the screen for the Meeting. With regard to the Budget for 2025-27, Dick commented that budgets can never be exact as we are looking into the future but the estimated figures should be reasonably accurate.

The budget proposal is based on the planned donation to the URC Ministers’ Pension Fund. Making significant contributions to the Ministers’ Pension Fund will cause us to show a deficit budget for several years. The Synod is contributing £500,000 this year and next year. We will increase our expenditure in 2025 on Synod staff and office costs, Church support, grants and property.

Resource Sharing We plan to offer £50,000 to the Inter-Synod resource sharing.

Ministry & Mission Fund In 2023 we failed to meet our target largely due to churches facing challenging times with near total loss of lettings income. For 2024, the Synod Trust will make up any shortfall in M&M contributions, and this will continue into 2025. For 2025, we are planning to contribute £1,500,000 to the central M&M fund. The factors affecting guided church contributions will not change. M&M income is not counted in the budget as it is not a Synod income but is passed directly to Church House. The M&M calculation is not based purely on the number of members in a church.

Grants and Loans From 2025 we plan to give grants only to churches that are up to date with their 5-yearly property inspections and have completed all their Annual Return forms. There is no change to the rules affecting church loans for building work. A loan is normally expected to be repaid within 5 years.

Fixed Car Allowance The allowance from the beginning of 2025 will increase from £1200 per annum to £2400 per annum. The current figure has not been changed since 2008 but will now be reviewed regularly.

Licences and Leases An ever increasing level of care is needed over leasing, letting or hiring of church properties. Where a licence, lease or hiring agreement is required, the Synod Trust will meet 100% of the legal costs of preparing such a document.

**LMMR REVIEW**

A new streamlined version of LMMR is to be introduced. The scheme is being overseen by Revd Stephen Newell (SPA) and details will be available on the website. Churches will run LMMR by themselves, although SPAs will be available to assist if necessary.

**DISCIPLESHIP AND SERVICE COMMITTEE REPORT (report attached)**

Neil Thorogood, Convenor of the Committee, was unable to attend the meeting but, in addition to a printed report circulated in advance, had prepared a short video for transmission at the meeting. Relating to the Church Life Review, a questionnaire had been prepared and copies distributed at the meeting for Churches to complete. The deadline for return of completed questionnaires is the end of November and a Report on the Questionnaire’s findings will be given at Synod Meeting in March 2025.

**LEGACY OF SLAVERY REPORT**

Revd Tracey Lewis (Racial Justice and Interfaith Advocate for the Synod) reported that at General Assembly 2022 a Statement of Confession and Apology was formally given by the United Reformed Church for the trauma caused by slavery and the legacies of slavery. At General Assembly 2024, practical actions and upcoming projects were discussed. The General Assembly Report is available on the URC website and in the Book of Reports. Initiatives include a programme of mentoring focusing particularly on young black men and working more widely with global partners on the issues identified.

**STEPWISE REPORT (report attached from Revd Roy Lowes - Stepwise Coordinator)**

The report had been circulated in advance of the meeting. Three Stepwise groups are currently running – one in Bristol, one in Royal Wootton Bassett/Cricklade and a Synod-wide group who are meeting on Zoom. All these groups are undertaking the first Stepwise Stream called Faith Filled Life. After this, groups can move on to other streams focusing on such things as worship and community. A short video on Stepwise from Church House was shown to the Meeting.

**PASTORAL COMMITTEE REPORT (report attached from Revd Roy Lowes - Convenor)**.

The Pastoral Committee is continuing to support local Churches and is advising them, if they are struggling, of options to consider other than closure. The Committee is keen to emphasise that Churches should approach their Synod Pastoral Advisor when difficulties arise. The Committee has also begun to work on how best to adopt and adapt the lighter form of LMMR proposed by General Assembly.

**MANSE POLICY (Copy attached)**

The Synod Trust is aware of the likelihood of changes to the laws governing letting of properties and that properties may require an EPC rating of “C” or above, where possible. The Synod currently has 54 manses on our property register but only 16 Ministers in pastoral charge. Therefore, the Synod Trust has decided to offer churches and pastorates the opportunity to hand over responsibility for their manses to the Synod Trust. This is a voluntary choice to be made by the Church Meeting. The Synod Trust will be responsible for all maintenance and insurance costs. Where a Church decides to hand over their manse, the Synod Trust will make available to the church or pastorate a sum of at least 40% of the value at handover, which can be used for major capital works or repair to Church buildings. The Synod will continue to provide a manse for any Minister or CRCW. The policy only applies to URC owned manses at this stage.

Acceptance of the Manse Policy was carried by a majority.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST POLICY**

This is an important matter for Churches to consider when decisions made by a Church clash with personal interests.

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS**

A paper showing the en bloc Resolutions passed at this year’s General Assembly was available at the Meeting. These to be taken back to Churches for information.

**GREEN APOSTLES REPORT (report attached from Revd Robert Weston - Green Apostle)**

Revd Robert Weston reported that 50% of Synod Churches are now registered Eco Churches. Today we need a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty to address the threat posed by fossil fuel production. A binding plan is needed to end the expansion of new coal, oil and gas projects and manage a global transition away from fossil fuels. A growing bloc of 14 countries is seeking a negotiating mandate for a Fossil Fuel Treaty. Individuals and local congregations can pledge their support. A Resolution relating to this to be found in the attached Report.

**SYNOD EXECUTIVE REPORT**

Ian Harrison reported that copies of a Synod booklet about Hiring, Leasing and Letting Properties were available at the Meeting for Churches to take with them, if required. The booklet clarifies what type of agreement is required for outsiders who use the Church or part of a Church building on a regular basis.

Good stewardship of Churches requires an up to date Quinquennial Inspection and grants will be dependent on a copy of this having been received by Synod. The Synod aims to have manses at EPC Level C or above. Work on Listed Buildings has an extra degree of complexity and Churches need to allow time for the process to be worked through.

**SAFEGUARDING REPORT**

Janet Raven reported as Convenor and Chair of the South Western Synod Safeguarding Committee. The Safeguarding Committee has been in place for 2 years. It meets once a quarter and feeds back to Synod Executive Committee. Claire Partridge, Synod Safeguarding Officer, draws up an Action Plan for each meeting and cases are discussed. Training is delivered partly online and partly by the Synod. Claire has run training sessions at Intermediate and Advanced level. A National Caseworker has now been appointed to oversee all the cases Synod-wide. The Safeguarding Policy is regularly updated. DBS renewals are every 5 years. Safeguarding Returns are sent out annually to all Churches.

**FUTURE PATTERN OF SYNOD MEETINGS**

Synod Meetings have changed since the development of Zoom. More people are enabled to take part in the meetings and a hybrid format can be offered. Please let the Synod Office know how you feel about the future frequency and pattern of these Meetings.

**SYNOD PROCESSES FOR APPOINTING REPRESENTATIVES TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

There is a mechanism in place to ensure the replacement of a General Assembly Representative where someone is legitimately unable to attend. The Pastoral Committee makes this decision and Synod Meeting is informed. Moderator of General Assembly nominations used to be made every 2 years, this will now change to every year. This to be a suggestion of a name rather than a nomination.

**ISRAEL AND PALESTINE**

Revd Tracey Lewis, Racial Justice and Interfaith Advocate for the Synod, spoke on the Gaza crisis. The Mission Committee report prepared for reflection, discussion and further learning with the aim of aiding a just, lasting and equitable peace in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. A number of Resolutions (38-45) were passed and agreed at General Assembly and are now the policy of the URC.

**THANKS**

Thanks were expressed to the following people in recognition of their work and commitment to the Synod, particularly during the Moderator vacancy period:-

Revd Steve Faber (Moderator, West Midlands Synod)

Revd Roy Lowes

The Synod Pastoral Advisors (Revd Sue Cossey, Revd Gerald England, Mrs Janet Gray, Revd Stephen Newell, Revd Jim Thorneycroft.

The Synod Executive Committee

Rachel Leach, Synod Clerk

Hilary Bradshaw, Moderator’s PA

Dinah Firmin, Synod Office Administrator

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