

A FUTURE FOR THE URC?



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BRIEFING

Winter 2017

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THE FUTURE OF THE URC

Martin Camroux's paper was the spark for the responses printed in this edition of Briefing. It draws on the many months of study and thought he spent in writing his book

Ecumenism in Retreat

An ecumenical church

The United Reformed Church came into being in 1972 by uniting the Congregational and Presbyterian Church with the aim of breaking the ecumenical log-jam and initiating a move towards wider unity. This hope failed leaving the Church with long-term problems of identity. At the time of union Arthur Macarthur had warned that without the hoped-for wider unity, "Any union between the Congregational Church and ourselves would result in a united church confused about its purpose and unable to find a role". In 1997 he wrote: "I sometimes feel the chill of that prophecy".

There were 3 main factors militating against the ecumenical dreams:

- Apart from the Methodists no-one else was willing to dissolve themselves into a wider union.
- Ecumenists imagined that people outside the Church would be impressed by churches uniting – in fact they hardly seemed to know the difference between denominations, or care.



Arthur Macarthur: 'a united church confused about its purpose..'

- Growing churches were mostly boosted by immigration from cultures largely untouched by ecumenism.

A church in rapid decline

Both Congregational and Presbyterian Churches were already in decline and this trend has continued inexorably year after year.

United Reformed Church Membership 1972-2016

1972	2016
192, 136	52,060
Decline 72.9%, -2.93% per annum.	

In fact the decline is slightly worse than this since the URC was joined by the Churches of Christ in 1981 (2317 new members) and the Congregational Church in Scotland (4151 new members) in 2000.

United Reformed Church Membership 1996-2016:

1996	2016
100,192	52,060

Decline 49.9%, -3.22% per annum
(again the adjusted figure would be slightly worse).

United Reformed Church Membership 2006-2016:

2006	2016
76,013	52,060

Decline 34.1%, -3.72% per annum.

Last year the decline was 4.12% (after revising the grossly unreliable figures in the 2016 Yearbook). This decline can be expected to continue to accelerate. Churches are beginning to close in greater numbers and, once the age of the URC membership is factored in, accelerating decline is inevitable.

If the decline in membership continues at the current level, this will lead to a Church in 2026 of approximately 37,000 members and, something like 25,000, in 2036. If however the rate of decline continues to increase, by 2036 we are likely to be a church of 15,000-20,000 members. It would

be wise to plan on that assumption.

John Bradbury comments:

Purely anecdotally, I suspect the demographic time bomb might be larger than overwhelmingly thought. My sense is that a huge number of congregations have been run by the same people for the last 40-50 years, and they can run them no longer hence a rapidly rising number of congregational closures.

My experience is the same. A significant number of keen young people (often not long out of University) moved in the 60 and 70s into leadership roles in all my churches. They were the *Honest to God* generation, ecumenically committed, socially concerned and sensing the increasing problems in Christian belief. If they have not died, they are often still in leadership positions (or were until recently) and no similarly strong age cohort has come into the church since. Sometimes they are still among the younger members of the congregation. In many cases the URC's situation is reaching desperation point. Alistair Smeaton comments:

The demographic time bomb has 'gone off' for me. I have done 9 funerals of church members so far this winter (out of a total membership between the three churches of less than 100). In the three congregations I primarily serve, I have one properly functioning treasurer and no functioning secretaries (though I have one in development who may turn out to be a gem). In fact in one church I have no treasurer at all and in one I have no secretary at all. What I have discovered is that the denominational system still expects its pound of flesh and simply assumes that I will fill in the gaps.

Comparative decline

The Congregational Church in particular had a record of decline longer and faster than almost any other British Church. However, today URC decline is in line



with the general level in most British Churches. If one takes the period 2005-2010 overall church membership fell by 6%. If however we take the mainstream churches the following fell by 15% or more:

The Scottish Episcopal Church -16%
The Baptist Union of Wales -16%
The Roman Catholic Church in Wales -17%
The Roman Catholic Church in N Ireland -23%
The Union of Welsh Independents -16%
The Methodist Church of Great Britain -21%
The Presbyterian Church of Wales -20%
The Church of Scotland -25%
The Free Church of Scotland -18%
United Reformed Church 79,000 - 15%

The Roman Catholic Church has recently been boosted, especially by Polish immigration. The 2011 census showed that in ten years the number of people who identified as Christians had fallen from 37.3 million (72 per cent) to 33.2 million (59 per cent). The Catholic population however had remained constant at 9.00 %. The number attending Church of England services is now less than half the levels of the 1960s. In Scotland regular church attendance has fallen by more than half over the last 30 years to 390,000 down from 854,000 in 1984. Of these 42% were aged over 65.

The statistics hide the real weakness of the United Reformed Church

Membership figures are notoriously unreliable. There are regular attenders who never join and there are people who long ceased to have any real connection with churches who are still on the membership. None the less real membership is almost certainly less than the statistics suggest. One reason for this is the statistics from ecumenical churches. In many ecumenical URCs where there is a common membership roll the membership is split equally between the different denominations. Since the URC is often in reality the weaker church this exaggerates the URC's real strength. Many newer members in practice will also have little idea what the URC is or commitment to it. In practice in some URC

whatever the membership returns say the relationship with the URC is fading away.

Nor is the number of attenders at 55, 579 a reliable guide to the strength of the church. Churches estimate attendance in a variety of ways, some count, some guess. One suspects numbers are rarely under-estimated. Crucially in LEPs the figure estimated is the total ecumenical attendance, not simply those with a connection to the URC. It therefore significantly over-states the number of URC attenders.

A church of small congregations and fewer ministers

The URC is a church of ever smaller churches.

	1973	2016
Number of Church buildings	2080	1426
Average size of Church	92	36

Not all ministers are in pastoral charge but it may be relevant to note that the number of active ministers has fallen from 1844 in 1973 (nearly one per church) to 438 today. Even if one adds 253 ministers from our ecumenical partners that is now close to one minister to every 3 churches. This is



leading to treadmill of impossibly configured pastorates in which ministers have little hope of being able to grow their churches. One of the concerns of some English Presbyterians prior to union was that the large number of small Congregational churches would render ministry ineffective – they could not know how percipient these fears would turn out to be or how the URC’s deployment strategy would exasperate it.

In the future the number of ministers can be expected to decline dramatically. Figures presented to General Assembly in 2016 saw projections of deployment numbers as:

Predicted number

2015 393

2016 372

2017 351

Declining to

2024 251

However in fact the 2016 figure was 346 (two years decline in one). I am still waiting for an explanation of this discrepancy. If the current pattern of ministerial deployment is continued the result is likely to be increasing ineffectiveness. At the last Ministries committee the proposal was seriously made that manses should be placed near Motorway and major road junctions to facilitate driving between churches – a nightmare prospect and totally inimical to effective ministry, which must be rooted in the community. If there is one certainty about viable church life in the future it is that the focus has to be relentlessly local.

How long can the structures survive?

The URC employs more staff per member than any other denomination I know of. With declining membership the current synod and national structures can hardly be maintained in their present form much longer. Already 3 of the synods have only just over 2000 members. In Wales (where the main work of the URC Trust is disposing of redundant church buildings) the 95 churches have only 2055 members (average church size of 21). Northern Synod has 69 churches and 2501 member (average church size 36). If, as is not unreasonable, one estimates that in 20 years membership may only be a third of this, synods become untenable, as does the current total staff numbers. In all probably the URC will soon, for all practical purposes, cease to exist in some parts of the country. The proposal to close the Windermere centre is one further stage in the fading away of the United Reformed Church, and one wonders how long it will be before Reform becomes impossible to maintain in its present form? We are at a crunch time.

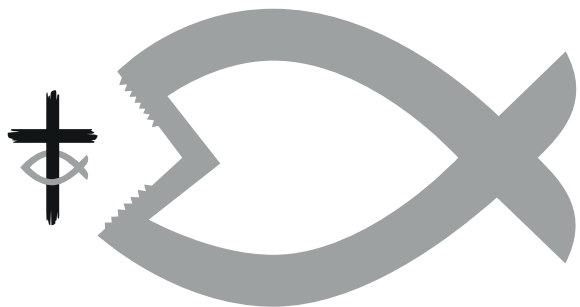
It is worth noting that the URC is not the only denomination in this situation. The Methodist Church is on a similar trajectory towards collapse and even the Church on England faces difficult choices. The Church of

England has only 10% of adherents in their twenties, compared to 50% of over 60s, the number of paid clergy has dramatically declined and the majority of both paid and unpaid clergy are over 50. There are less than 100 full-time salaried clergy under 30, and the total loss of clergy exceeds new recruitment. The number leaving the ministry for other reasons now exceeds those who are leaving to retire. Several commentators date the time of absolute crisis for the Church as it is now to within the next 10 years.

What are the options?

- The most likely option is to stick our head in the sand and try to pretend nothing is happening, this is always the default position of the United Reformed Church and was, for many years, the preferred option when our ecumenical hopes failed to materialize. Some such phrase as “Over the centuries of the Christian era churches have waxed and waned and, in due time, the Lord has always sent revival, so I have faith things will change” was recently used by a former Moderator of Assembly and is probably not in copyright.
- An ecumenical option. Seek union with any church who will have us on any terms we can get. The options however are not promising. The Methodists have never shown interest in a union with the URC, and are, in any case, not in a significantly better position than we are. The Church of England would hardly want most of our churches. The Congregational Federation might have us if we adopted their constitution and denied our own ecumenical *raison d’être*.

Where the ecumenical option makes sense is locally where it offers at the very least a way of providing care for our members as their churches close, and sometimes may lead to the creation of a more viable local congregation.



- Decide that our day is over. Do the reasons that lead us out of the Church of England still hold valid? Would it not be better if, giving local churches the option to remain open or join the Methodists or Congregational Federation if they wished, most of the Church just decided to re-join the Church of England? I personally still believe there is a value in a non-state, non-hierarchical church in the Reformed tradition but I note that a number of retired ministers do worship in Anglican churches apparently without serious spiritual harm.

Is there any other option? I remain by nature an optimist.

*Hope is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -*

Not all of our churches are in total decline. There are a number who, if not usually growing, at least have maintained their numbers over the last 10-20 years. An obvious example is my own former church of Sutton Trinity.

1996-218 * 2006-230 * 2016-226

Another seems to have been the church in which I grew up, Plume Avenue Colchester,

1996-124 * 2006-149 * 2016-139

There are enough of such churches to encourage me that that we are not inexorably going to disappear at least in the medium term. We may have a future as a small niche church. A good model might be the Quakers who currently have a membership in the UK of 15,000 but have a greater sense of identity, and probably more impact, than we do. We need to look very carefully at churches such as the Congregational Federation, and the Unitarians to see if there are lessons for us in existing small church organization.

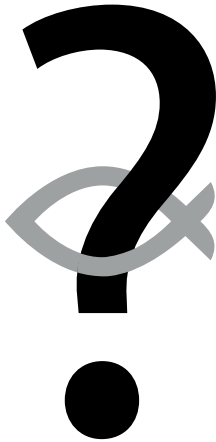
The choices are, to say the least, difficult.

- We need adopt a structure which would be viable with a church of 15,000 members. It is beyond doubt that our regional structures cannot and need not survive (except perhaps as residual legal entities).

This must mean the end of diocesan synods with their extensive (and expensive) staff. Moderators could be retained but along the original modest lines, as a focus of unity with an office and a secretary, visiting ministers and congregations on a regular basis. Otherwise everything will need to be run from a central office mainly concerned with supporting local churches.

John Bradbury offers this scenario with which I broadly concur.

I think what you say about needing to prepare for being a church of 15,000-20,000 members is right. That means one trust, not 14+, one central office that holds trust, legal, compliance, financial and employment (including ministries) stuff, one RCL that covers everything and has a governing body that relates directly to Assembly, a far, far smaller assembly and mission council equivalent, regional moderators who are probably also in pastoral charge, removing the CYDO and CRCW schemes, getting rid of all Synod based posts (training, mission enablers etc.etc.etc.) and throwing as much resource as we have at the church proper, which is ultimately its worshipping communities and members.



- There is clear evidence that even within the Church of England the growing churches are those which concentrate on their local congregational identity. We need to relearn this. As David Cornick says: “I long for the day when we stop the national church designing programmes and allow local churches to get on with the mission where they are – and they are quite capable of working that out for themselves.”
- We need to rediscover the value of locally based pastoral ministry. I notice on Ministries committee a great deal of stress on non-pastoral forms of ministry, chaplaincies, synod appointments etc. Some of our chaplaincies and experimental ministries are valuable and I would want to retain them (and develop others) but if we have no thriving churches we shall not be able to afford any of these. So I would give priority to pastoral ministries, and rather than spreading ministry

so thin that it is inevitably ineffective, would concentrate it on the churches that seem likely to survive. David Cornick says:

We adopted a 'no taxation without representation' understanding of ministry in 1972. Whilst that is understandable in retrospect, for many years it has hampered our ability to use ministry strategically. However, we now need to deploy the people we have with great strategic care with the intent of consolidating and perhaps even nurturing growth in those places where it is possible.

Personally I would be radical.

- 1) Withdraw the promise of ministry for every church. Churches without ministry contribute less.
- 2) Support a number of strategic ministries from the equivalent of a Home Missions Fund.
- 3) Other churches told they can seek a minister if either individually, or as a group, they can cover the costs. I am pretty sure churches would raise more money this way.

As David Lawrence says:

Churches need to be made to understand that their future is in their own hands – the URC cannot give them any guarantees of long term support and oversight. If we continue to provide wafer-thin ministry, which achieves nothing, and which can only be paid for by starving potentially viable congregations of resources, there will be no way back.

This is going to be hugely difficult since it runs counter to the increased emphasis on the synod which has been, and continues to be, central to much URC strategic thinking. However Gethin Rhys is, I think, right when he says: “I am absolutely clear that the existing structures are collapsing.” Certainly I am aware of suggestions that already cutbacks in synod staff are meaning that some questions can no longer be adequately handled. Sadly, the time when our problems can be addressed at the level of the synod is now past.

- A major issue is the quality of worship. One of the things that really struck me when I was doing the interviews for my book was the number of retired ministers who told me how depressing the qual-

ity of worship they found was. Some of this is the inevitable sense that no-one else does it as well as we do! But we need to revalue and renew our worship. Public worship is the primary activity of the church. It is by no means the only activity, but it is primary, and it is the source of the people's life together. Public worship is the context for the proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament and the occasion when Christian faith and life intersect, above all in the sermon. If this isn't lively why would anyone come?

- Mission Orientation. A recent research study financed by the Church of England found the key factors in local church growth are those predicated in general management literature such as leadership, mission and purpose and the willingness to continually reflect, learn and adapt. There clearly is a chicken and egg problem here! But churches must have a motivational desire to grow and a sense of mission.
- If we are going to justify our existence as a separate denomination we must stand for something distinctive. For me that is a call to be an equalitarian, radical, inclusive, prophetic church. As Jürgen Moltmann writes, "Christians should be a community that waits for the kingdom of God and whose life is determined by that expectation." Recently I went to a service where the punch line seemed to be: "May love triumph everywhere." If that kind of empty cliché is the best we can do we might as well shut up shop.
- What's the best thing to do when a Church is in trouble? My answer is simple when things are going poorly, get together and discuss some theology. Trying to look at the churches which are surviving what do they have in common I see no obvious sign that they represent only one theological position. Trinity Sutton and Plume Avenue could hardly be further apart. Is it however possible that what most viable churches have



in common is that they offer a serious theological perspective?

A socioloical perspective

It is important to put the future of the United Reformed Church in a wider sociological context. The sociological context both for ecumenism in general and for the history of the United Reformed Church in particular is a secularizing society. Secularization theory is one of the classic meta-narratives of the sociology of religion and originates with one of the founding fathers of sociology, Max Weber, and his interpretation of modernity. Its meaning was well expressed by Bryan Wilson in his *Religion in a Secular Society*, where he defined secularization as a process by which "Religion - seen as a way of thinking, as the performance of particular practices, and the institutionalisation and organization of these patterns of thought and action - has lost influence . . . in western societies" Today it is a sharply contested concept, with the impact of immigration from non-secularised countries into Europe, the world-wide rise in fundamentalism and suggestions that a more diffuse kind of spirituality is replacing traditional religion in the west. What however is clear is that all major churches in Britain have faced secularising challenges and the history of the United Reformed Church only makes sense within this context.

Looking to the future is more difficult. The believer can simply hope that God will send 'showers of revival rain'. Social scientists are no better placed than anyone else to judge the likelihood of that but we can consider what is known about the social requirements for revival and what is known about the current social conditions of religion. In considering obstacles to religious resurgence, I believe that 'late secularization' — a condition I define as a combination of a largely formally secular society and an active-involvement-in-organized-religion rate of less than 10 per cent — has some characteristics (such as lack of people with more than basic religious knowledge) that make revival markedly less likely than it was fifty years ago. Even if such a revival should occur it seems extremely unlikely it will benefit the United Reformed Church.

The second relevant social development is the wide-spread adoption of a consumerist lifestyle. The late 1960s and early 70s were a watershed

in the history of post-war democratic capitalism, which led to the collapse of a production and consumption regime we now call Fordism, reflecting Henry Ford's dictum about his T2 model, "you can have it in any colour as long as it is black." By 1971 consumers were becoming



Have religious consumers moved on too?

more difficult. Basic needs had been met. What this led to was increased product differentiation which matched goods more closely to individual consumer's choices. Eric Hobsbawm argues that the marks of such a society are "an otherwise unconnected assemblage of self-centred individuals pursuing only their own gratification." In such a society increasingly the basic unit is the individual as hedonistic consumer.

Once consumer satisfaction becomes dominant in a society it is likely to affect religious practice. Increasingly people make choices between religious options (churches) in the same way as they choose supermarkets. The religious market is wide open; there are no longer any natural monopolies. To thrive, or even survive, religious institutions must market themselves to people who have no denominational loyalty. Looking at my two examples of viable churches Trinity Sutton draws people from 26 nationalities with more people of Anglican background than URC. Of these it is doubtful if more than a dozen have any sense of belonging to the URC – and nearly all of these are over 60. Plume Avenue does not even put on its notice board that it is a URC Church- because they say no-one comes because of that. What interests people increasingly is what an individual church has to offer – not its denomination. You might describe this as a form of default ecumenism in a post-Christendom, post-denominationalism context.

This is both good and bad news for the URC. It is bad news for most URC congregations which, with very limited resources for worship, aged congregations and no children's work, have very little to offer to

the church seeker. It may be better news for those who offer more. Such churches can buck the trend.

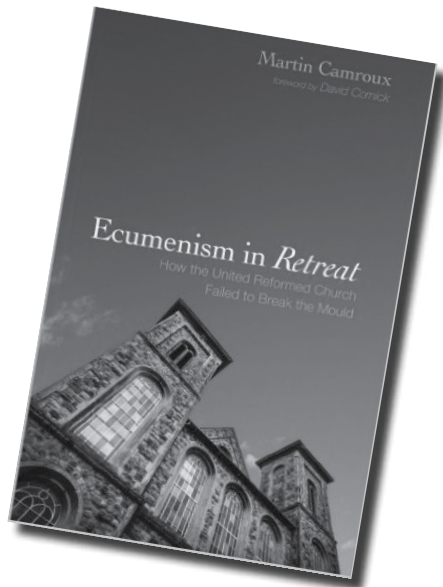
Theological Postscript

God is not going out of business. Life with God seems to be something of a journey all the time, always calling us out of the familiar into something new. Our entire biblical text has running through it the theme of journey: biblical patriarchs and matriarchs like Abram and Sarai; even Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem and a cross; and the first Christians who left their homes to take the gospel message to new places. It seems that following God requires a life that is characterized by a willingness to leave the old and take on the new. Now is the time.

ESSENTIAL BACKGROUND READING

*Ecumenism in Retreat:
How the United Reformed Church
Failed to break the Mould.*

Available from 4 Sorrel Close Colchester CO4 5UL
£17 including postage.



The following pages contain a self-selected collection of reflections on Martin Camroux's article, from a variety of different perspectives...

As dead as...?

Anthony Tucker

In a fascinating book on the disappearing religions of the Middle East Gerard Russell asks 'What does it matter if we become extinct?' At the present rate the United Reformed Church faces the possibility of extinction – or effective extinction – well within the present century.

'Does it matter?' is a question that might fruitfully be discussed in our local churches, synods, Mission Council, General Assembly etc. The answer is likely to be that it would matter greatly – to individuals, local fellowships etc – but that does not in itself provide a remedy. We cannot discount the possibility of a religious revival as

has happened historically on many occasions, and therefore we should pray without ceasing for this to happen, In a post-denominational age this might not rescue the URC as a denomination, though it might strengthen individual congregations.



On a practical level, given that the URC faces the probability of diminishing membership in its congregations, would it be wise to anticipate the probable future by exploring what structures a much smaller national Church might need? If, say, our total membership declined to 20,000, would we need the same number of Synods or as extensive a central structure? Synods are likely to remain wealthy through an increasing sale of church properties, and it might be fruitful to explore how (within legal constraints) that wealth might be deployed to provide resources – of ministry etc – to build up local churches where there is potential for growth. It might be better to plan in advance for a slimmed down denominational structure that would not require the immense personal resources of our present Synods rather than be overtaken by events. Also

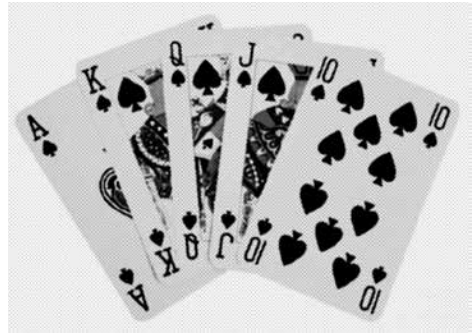
our tradition has esteemed the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and it is important that this ministry should be highly visible in our local communities, and be a potential growth point for the Church. This may be an old fashioned view to many (including some ministers) but there is some evidence – not only in the URC – that there is a link between ministry and church growth. But it must be locally rooted and not spread over a multiplicity of dispersed congregations.

From the bottom up

Marian Tomlinson

I've observed churches of all denominations and the successful ones have certain common features. But first we must eliminate that now-out-dated class of 'top churches' based on adoration of a superb preacher. These belong to history and there are few superb preachers left.

Vigorous and growing churches are those which live out the root meaning of 'church'. They are assemblies of people, genuine communities grown from the bottom up, not top down efforts of ministers and elders. Most likely the inception was the mothers and toddlers group fostering friendship and mutual support. Similarly, special interest groups, making their base the church premises, lead to a belief in the church building as a familiar place and the members an hospitable crowd.



Try to run a 6 day a week café. Get a decent coffee machine; don't expect to attract people with undrinkable instant. I belong to a bridge club that hires rooms in a lively undenominational evangelical church. Their bookstall makes me cringe as do the jejune songs accompanying our 3 No Trump contracts. But week by week we observe the café/lounge area where people are comfortable or being comforted by listening church officers. This living space is testament to a caring active organisation.

Bridge players who normally never darken the doors of a church go away saying what a good job the church is doing. Some have even come to services there.

Say goodbye to preacher-centred success, but make one thing a priority in worship: don't bore people. Each worshipper is needy. We know our weaknesses and deepest fears. The services should reach the places that other messages can't reach. The weekly worshipper needs his/her heart to be 'strangely warmed,' for no well-intentioned message about helping a suffering world will succeed if we personally are not touched.

Dear ministers, I have a special message for you. You seemed to be so hooked on your own sermons: please put the needs of the people before your own desire to preach a brilliant sermon. And let's have singable hymns, no dirges please; and all tunes by Eric Routley to room 101.

One congregation's dilemma

Roger Wilson

What do you do when you are told your vacancy is not going to be filled? Here at Church Stretton, we have 44 members; our last minister retired in September 2015 – he was 78. We have had great support from our Interim Moderator, also in his 70s. This is not a whinge but a reflection on our situation and how we hope to keep our church viable.

Our congregation reflects our town demographic with a heavy slant towards the over 70s. As individuals we are very involved in community activities such as our active community centre and the 150 or so support groups and clubs.

We seek ministry which questions and challenges, having tired of repeated exposure to more traditional preaching and now having more time for reflection. We would define



ourselves as ‘rational’ and ‘liberal’, some might say ‘radical’.

The West Midlands Synod, between a rock and a hard place, has produced a plan for ministry in Shropshire which does not include our church. It feels like a deliberate amputation – whatever the issues, the system is chopping us off. For two years now we have sustained a weekly service, supported by a range of retired ministers and visiting lay people. However they, like our congregation, are getting older.

The latest theme is ‘House for Duty’, offering housing in return for limited ministry. I personally feel that there are unreasonable expectations from this move although I would be happy to be proved wrong – Church Stretton is a good place to live.

In the meantime since our vacancy our M&M contribution has actually *risen*. Virtually all our voluntary giving goes to the URC, not to developing our work. We are funding a church for which our congregation has no value beyond its financial contribution. ‘Tough-luck’ is all the sympathy we get. Contraction and decline on a tired organisational model seems to be the URC’s strategy of choice. Do we have to follow that lead?

Looking for God

Michael Powell

Where do we want to go?

To a living way that is ‘marvellous, easy and open.’ Thomas Hooker in his 1645 Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer had one of his best moments when he wrote: *God is our Father / We have a cheerful readiness to repair unto the Lord / There is a fresh and living way that is marvellous, easy and open....*

What have we got to do to get there?

Take rigidity and inflexibility out of documentation, systems, liturgies etc. The medieval hymn *Vene Sancte Spiritus* includes the line: *Flecte quod est rigidum* (Bend what is rigid). It should be in big letters **everywhere** in the URC, especially the sacred cows of M & M, deployment etc

What repair most needs to be made?

The 'small' needs to be reunited with the 'beautiful'. EF Schumacher said 'small is beautiful' and demonstrated that big is often not better. He drew attention to the 'Sin of Statistics' and over-emphasis on the quantitative.

Good small churches are not failed big churches. Good part-time and/or unpaid ministries are focussed on particular small localities or specific situations..... again, focus. In big terms, ecumenism may have lost its way but in some localities and some institutions it most certainly hasn't.

What theological emphasis is most important?

Incarnational. Involved, down to earth, practical, material, secular.

Who are our most stimulating forbears?

What the Essex Congregational Union called 'Men (sic) of Business, Property and Christian Character'. Sometimes bothered about their salvation but their practical work in society and business matters more.

Where would you recommend someone to start looking for god?

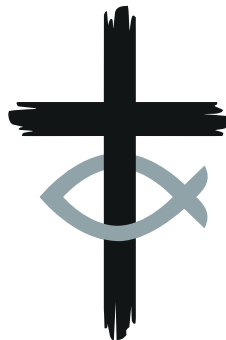
Not in church.

What's in a name...?

David Parkin

A good start might a change of name to reflect the possible future - perhaps 'The Church for the Common Good'. Walter Brueggemann describes the common good as 'the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny - haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor' and if not that, what is the Kingdom of God on earth about?

Our calling is surely to be counter-cultural in a world



The
**United
Reformed
Church**

not unlike that of ancient Egypt in the Genesis/Exodus narratives, with wealth and power concentrated in the hands of the few, who take care that this should continue. In the Exodus story, God tells Moses that he has seen what is going on in Egypt and is going to do something about it, and you can imagine Moses thinking ‘Wow, this is going to be really something!’. At which point God sends him to Pharaoh to ‘bring my people out of Egypt’. All that God plans to do becomes human work.

So it may be that there are times when God tasks us with being the answers to our prayers for the common good. Jesus’ ‘life in all its fulness’ is surely for everyone, not just the rich and powerful. Yet we should not underestimate the power of prevailing ideas on us. Some years ago a book from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Prosperity with a Purpose*, sought to explore the idea of ‘true prosperity’. Its underlying presumption, that increasing wealth is a good thing per se, had perhaps forgotten what Jonathan Sacks in *The Dignity of Difference* calls ‘an older tradition that spoke of human solidarity, of justice and compassion, and of the non-negotiable dignity of individual lives’. And Jesus suggested that if we are to follow him, it is going to cost everything that we have. Dare the church, dare we, risk that for the common good?

As a Church for the Common Good we might, like the people of Israel, have to spend time in the wilderness, distancing ourselves from the prevailing culture. One way might be to stop using Gift Aid, as it could be argued that taking that money means colluding with the government – with the current government, not something of which to be proud.

I leave the thought with you.

A nomadic church?

Adrian Skelton is Executive Officer, Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand

There is no direct New Zealand equivalent to the URC, the church of my ordination. Nevertheless, in 1970, many Congregational churches chose to integrate within the Presbyterian Church. Then there are 120 further congregations where Presbyterians or Methodists partner with each other and/or another Partner.



Individual Cooperative Ventures, as they are called, have varying enthusiasm for their status. Some are proudly ecumenical, others openly wonder why they maintain this 'hybrid' status.

Regardless, it is only creative change that will see these congregations, or indeed URC congregations, survive.

The confronting issues are not hard to see: property and/or ministry. It is the tacit assumption that a church is largely defined by its ownership of property - often inappropriate in size and with crippling maintenance costs. And congregations still aspire to at least a fraction of dedicated professional ministry.

Neither property nor minister-as-chaplain need define our churches. Instead of property-owning branches, we might have vigorous fellowships, rooted in a locality, meeting in schools or halls, and gathering in Assembly to ensure the continuing quality of theological resources. Large-scale sale of property could fund this. Why not a self-denying ordinance to become an entirely nomadic movement – or is that too Jesus-like?

Responsibly managed, nationwide resourcing (anchored in Westminster College) might offer training to the lay ministry teams that are undoubtedly the only sustainable pattern.

Theologically, why are we so resistant to the Church's being dissolved more fully into the fabric of society? Jesus preached the kingdom not the church. In Revelation there is no temple in the city, for "the home of God is among mortals" (Revelation 21:3).

Outreach at the heart

David Bedford

As a Christian I often say 'we don't know what the future holds but we know who holds the future!' We are where we are because of choices

we have made as a denomination. I recall the prophetic 'we were born to die' statement which we decided to abandon relatively recently. Matthew 16:25 suggests to me that we should not have done this.

If we are honest, we just don't do evangelism and our confidence in the Gospel is very low. Growing churches have outreach at their hearts. I recently spent time at City Gates Church in Ilford, 1200 members in a predominantly Muslim area. Recent evangelism in Reading, Liverpool and Southampton have resulted in hundreds coming to Christ.

I sat at a recent Synod feeling like we were moving deckchairs on the Titanic: the elephant in the room was that everyone knew we were sinking, but the powers that be choose to ignore it. Even 'Walking the Way' is too little too late, and it is top down, rather than bottom up.

If we even now choose to live up to 2 Chronicles 7:14, to humble ourselves and pray and seek God's face, the future could be very different. The gospel is still as winsome and powerful as ever and if we can leave behind the 'people decide' church of Laodicea and allow Jesus to be our Head then even now there is a future.



I never cease to be amazed at the cavalier way we guard the institution and ignore the local congregations which are our reason for existence. More national and synod staff with no question as to their effectiveness. Soon we will have more synod/national staff than ministers in pastoral charge!! Some Synods sit on millions for a rainy day: we could die a very rich church. Couple that with crazy decisions like spending £3 million on Church House refurbishment whilst reducing minister numbers.

Let me finish, as I am now in leafy Dorking, once but no longer URC heartland. Well it's not anymore. Discussions over new noticeboards will include the URC logo but with absolutely no one on the Eldership

believing that it would make any difference to our mission potential.

By the way, and bucking the trend, we received eight new members at Easter and most will be younger than the average!

Leaving behind the local call

David Coaker

If we are to have a future we need to re-establish a foundation upon which we can build: congregations self-sufficient in the basics of regular worship, offering communion and baptism, functioning meetings, pastoral care, contributing to M&M and funding building maintenance. The alternative must be reinvention, closure or uniting with an ecumenical or URC neighbour. That would leave us with fewer buildings, greater ecumenical engagement, and more resilient congregations. It would also relieve elders and members of the pressure to keep running to stand still and liberate them to catch sight of the Kingdom.

If each congregation is self-sufficient ministry becomes an addition to take the congregation somewhere, with a focus of ministry needs to be on exploration, engagement and experiment. It will need some reflection on our ecclesiology. Every minister is unique, with a different view of their role, let alone members' views. Through preparation, continuing training, and the review process we need to place a priority upon coming alongside and building on the strengths of congregations whilst providing opportunities for individual ministries to be explored.

This will need some thought on how we deploy and oversee ministry. At present after an initial assessment of viability, ministers are left to negotiate their priorities and workload with their elders. The wider church has little further involvement unless a concern or issue arises. Whether a minister has multiple congregations or one, tens or hundreds of members, ministry always finds a way to fill the available time. The negotiations need to be about setting priorities, strengthening the local foundation, and increas-



ing their self-sufficiency.

This move away from the local call is already well underway with the inherent compromises of multiple church or team pastorates. Churches must choose between holding onto that diminishing sense of call, with the inherent uncertainty of vacancy, or accepting oversight with the assurance there will always be ministry when needed. We are already drifting from a system based on pastorates to something closer to a Methodist Circuit, so a conscious decision, grounded in our own tradition and honouring it whilst adapting to changing circumstances, would be preferable.

Thoughts on the end of the URC

Peter Varney is a retired Anglican priest and member of Norwich Quakers

Recent surveys of church going and belief in the UK offer very different conclusions.

The latest, conducted by ComRes on behalf of several Churches, suggests that more than 20% of young people are active Christians. It seems their activity is not always seen in church attendance but in bible reading, prayer and youth activities. If this is even partly true it suggests the future is positive, particularly if organised churches find ways to attract them. There is evidence from places like cathedrals and 'forest church' that attendance is growing where people of all ages find a space and opportunity to make connections with the world of the Spirit.

Getting serious

John Bradbury

Unless we get a very serious grip, massively reduce what we do at denominational and synodical level and concentrate our resources on the ground in places that really can make a difference, I think we're totally sunk. People really do need to get used to the fact that we are a small church, and not get so upset when we can't do everything that a big denomination can. By my top of the head calculations we could probably easily release the resources for 40-50 additional ministers on

the ground if we stopped the burgeoning ‘middle management’ that is everywhere...that could, if deployed sensibly, really help. I think we also need to take seriously how we help churches discern when the end of their life has come and make much easier for them the process of bringing fellowships to an end.

Instead of seriously getting a grip on our structures and processes to sort some of this, we still seem to be in the mindset that says ‘one more national programme will sort us out’. It won’t..

Forward with chaplaincies

Gethyn Rees

While most Synod appointments are a waste, chaplaincies are a different matter. Our local churches have decreasing amounts of contact with people; good chaplaincy, on the other hand, provides such contact, and creates demand for pastoral ministry – most chaplains I know find they are overwhelmed with pastoral requests from people who would not go to a church building. I can think of no better use of our limited financial resources than such ministries – far better than local pastoral ministry, the signs of whose failure are all around us.

And we must build on eldership. The best bits of my ministry have been done with elders – and elders have prevented some of my worst mistakes! Once an eldership moves beyond “we need a minister” mode to “we are the ministers” mode, churches can begin to take off in new ways. More resources need to be put into resourcing elders locally. Synod Training and Development Officers are certainly not the answer. But some money to produce good materials, to subsidise occasional residential weekends or day courses, and so on would go a very long way. Those local churches which can raise up good elders will survive and thrive; those which cannot – I agree – should not be subsidized further.

Whither the denomination? I am absolutely clear that the existing struc-



tures are collapsing. In practice, the URC will become a parallel Congregational Federation, as regional structures cannot and need not survive (except perhaps as residual legal entities). Ultimately, reunion with the Cong Fed may be the answer; or else we end up with two. We can certainly learn a great deal from the Cong Fed's amazing ability to plant new churches in its old buildings.

The answer is positively NOT to become a second Methodist Church as the current proposals to make all ministers called by Synods proposes. The steepest declines are in hierarchical denominations. The greatest growth is in congregationalism/independency. I know these are dirty words in the URC – but the fact is that our growing or stable congregations in effect are already congregational. Let's set them free to do what they do well, providing a bit of resource to help them and use the central funds not needed for pensions for chaplaincies and elders' training.

The myth of the URC

David Lawrence

The real question is not whether we can sustain the current structure, which we can't, but why we would even try. The URC is already pretty much a myth. Is any significant body of members, or congregations, influenced by doctrinal or theological discussions or decisions at the level of the denomination? Clearly there is an influence in terms of resources because people have been led to believe they are bound by the URC system, backed up by blackmail over ministerial allocation.

The URC persists in a more or less coherent way because of a durable 'establishment' who need to believe we are a significant national group, rather than the tattered remains of a small denomination from a previous century. No-one else is either fooled or even particularly interested, including ecumenical 'partners'. Gripped by the illusion that we are a National Church, we have to behave like one, sucking resources from local churches to finance synod and national uses which demonstrably achieve nothing.

The shorthand changes needed:

1. Churches must understand their future is in their own hands – the URC cannot guarantee long term support. With limited exceptions they should get the ministry for which they pay, singly or in self-negotiated groups. The overall sum raised would increase dramatically.
2. The centre should act as a clearing house for vacancies, offering advice (not control) and ensuring that candidates are in good standing.
3. Resources for training, together with the rigour and length of ministerial training should be increased. We need a new generation theologians, people with theological depth and a broad hinterland.
4. Synods should be abolished and central functions reduced drastically to the provision of demand-led resources and services. Remaining structures should be financed by a levy separate from the cost of ministry.
5. Nationally we should position ourselves as open, inclusive and theologically questioning - like most of our members of all ages. Fellowships unhappy with that should be encouraged to take their leave as friends, with their resources. Those who remain should be encouraged to develop their own styles and personalities, free from central imposition.

A Baptist view...

Andrew Kleissner is a Baptist minister who served the URC

1. I do fear for the future of the URC in general. I have noticed a real decline in denominational life since 2005. I simply cannot see a viable future for many of the smaller chapels and I do wonder how churches will manage to move ahead strategically with clergy spread ever thinner.
2. The descent from the bright hopes of ‘God is still speaking’ to the calamitous events surrounding ‘Zero Intolerance’ did at least have the effect of exposing the very real problems faced by the denomination. Whether any lessons were learned from the debacle, I cannot say!
3. At one Assembly I was concerned that the community projects held up as examples, in many cases admirable and sacrificial, seemed to have

little or no explicit evangelistic aim or even avowedly Christian content, nor did they seem to relate much to Sunday worship. I was left with the feeling that, for some of these churches, worship is much less important than community work and could be left to wither. Yet without an active worshipping community these projects would be unsustainable.

4. I have been seriously concerned at the quality of worship on offer at some of our churches as, at least anecdotally, it is dull, simplistic, unimaginative and “tired”. I suspect that part of this is due to the reliance on so many lay preachers, who have been doing the job for many years. I suspect that there is reluctance to evaluate their efforts because they are giving freely of their time and are “doing their best”.

5. I suspect that ‘successful’ churches need a sense of shared vision and common purpose. To many Christians, the idea of a church having a “vision”, “aims” or a “strategy” seems alien. However the early Church – informed by Jesus’ comments in Acts 1:8 – had a fairly clear idea of what they wanted to achieve, and dedicated itself to that goal. And while the setting of such goals ought to be the task of Elders and members, perhaps the lack of ministers may have contributed to this state of affairs.

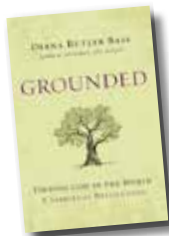
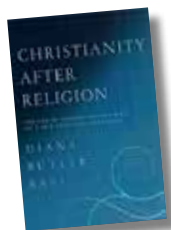
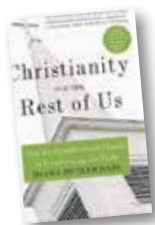
6. It strikes me that the URC, with its thoughtful approach to the Christian faith, ought to be highly attractive. So why isn’t it? Perhaps because “progressive” views of Christianity are often allied with traditional forms of worship, or because churches seem to lack the “buzz” or excitement in worship which many people – rightly or wrongly – seem to crave.



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