



Synod Meeting

16 October, 2021

THE NORTHERN SYNOD OF THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH met online on Saturday 16 October, 2021, with the Moderator, the Revd Dave Herbert, in the chair, along with 21 ministers, 30 representatives and 18 visitors.

21/47 **OPENING AND WELCOME**

The Moderator opened the meeting, which had a theme of forward in hope. *[The Principal of Northern College]* led the Synod in opening worship, based on 1 Peter 1: 13, 1 Thessalonians 1: 3, Ephesians 1: 18 and Mark 1: 14b-15.

21/48 **MINUTES** of the meeting of 13 March, 2021, and further minutes were approved, to be signed at a later date.

21/49 **MEETING TOGETHER IN DIFFERENT WAYS**

The Clerk, Melanie Campbell, explained how to participate in the online meeting, which was constituted using the General Assembly Standing Orders for virtual meetings. A screen shot would be taken later in the day. The discussions on the youth and children's strategy and future patterns of ministry would be recorded and made available on the synod website and YouTube channel. Participants would have the opportunity to turn off their camera.

21/50 **NEWS OF PEOPLE AND PLACES**

[The Synod Operations Coordinator] shared news of ministerial moves, retirements and anniversaries. Since Synod last met, sadly, retired ministers the Revds Tom Ellison, David Brown and Rhona Jones, minister's widow Betty Sutherland, and Trust director Jo Kennedy had died, and the churches of Christ Church LEP, North Broomhill; Boldon; St Paul & St John's, South Shields; and St Andrew's, Hebburn, had closed.

The Moderator welcomed ecumenical guests and those new to Synod. He then explained that he planned to step down in two years' time at the end of his first term as Moderator, feeling that a fresh pair of eyes would be helpful. He was thankful for the opportunity to serve in this way, and felt humbled and honoured to do so. This would give the synod time to think about the future.

[The Synod Operations Coordinator] led the synod in prayer.

21/51 BIBLE STUDY: VOCATIONS

[The Principal of Northern College] led a Bible study on a theme of 'Dimensions of hope', based on Mark 1: 14b-15. She outlined many opportunities for spiritual nourishment. Stepwise, Growing Leaders and non-stipendiary ministry model 4 training could be useful in equipping local church leadership. Northern College ran some courses online.

21/52 SYNOD EXECUTIVE

The Clerk explained that much of the committee's work had been around emerging priorities. It was planned to have a joint committee for safeguarding, following the same pattern as in North Western and Mersey. Detailed terms of reference would be brought to the next meeting.

It was not yet clear where the next synod meeting would be held, depending on space requirements and the pandemic.

21/53 Safeguarding

Resolution 1 was moved and carried unanimously.

Synod resolves to commence formal discussions with Yorkshire Synod to create a joint Safeguarding Committee and instructs Synod Executive Committee to report final arrangements to the March 2022 synod meeting.

21/54 Nominations

Resolution 3 was moved and carried, with one abstention.

Synod appoints *[a minister]* as the synod's Rural Consultant for a three-year term from 16 October 2021 to the October 2024 synod meeting.

21/55 THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH (NORTHERN PROVINCE) TRUST LIMITED

The Convenor, the Revd David Grosch-Miller, began by expressing gratitude for Jo Kennedy's contribution to the Trust's work, and sadness at his death. Thanks were also given for *[a director's]* dedication to the Trust over many years. He appealed for new directors. The Trust had significant responsibilities, in balancing the demands of the state and the expectations of local churches.

He explained that the budget for 2022 was being reviewed with the aim of more accurate forecasting, to enable the Trust to support the synod's priorities. This would be brought to the next meeting of synod. The Trust

recognised financial challenges in local churches, and provided support where it could.

He remarked that capital would have to be ring-fenced to pay for increasing numbers of staff, and difficult decisions would have to be made about which buildings could be saved where significant repairs were needed. Honesty, prayer and reflection would be needed on financial priorities.

21/56 Ministers' Pension Fund

David reminded synod that the Ministers' Pension Fund had a potential gap in assets, so the Pensions Regulator was seeking reassurances. The thirteen synods and the church centrally had agreed a formula to satisfy this, which would potentially entail a contribution of £3m from the Trust over nine years, depending on future actuarial valuations. The Trust now sought synod affirmation of decisions taken. Ministers were free to vote on this.

He then moved resolution 5, which was carried, with one abstention.

The Northern Synod recognises that the extra prudence now required in the valuation of the Ministers' Pension Fund ('MPF') has created a substantial deficit in that Fund; and acknowledges that, although the United Reformed Church Trust Ltd ('URC Trust') on behalf of the United Reformed Church has an obligation to meet the deficit on the MPF, it does not have the resources to do this on its own and that this challenge requires a URC family solution.

The Northern Synod notes and affirms the decision of the directors of the United Reformed Church (Northern Province) Trust Limited to make the following payments to the URC Trust for the sole purpose of funding the pensions of ministers and church related community workers:

2022: £400,000 2023: £400,000 2024: £400,000

The Northern Synod also notes and affirms the decision of the United Reformed Church (Northern Province) Trust Limited to make the following provisional offers to the URC Trust for the sole purpose of funding the pensions of ministers and church related community workers, noting that these amounts will only be asked for if subsequent actuarial valuations of the MPF demonstrate that these are necessary:

**2025: £400,000 2026: £400,000 2027: £250,000 2028: £250,000
2029: £250,000 2030: £250,000**

The Northern Synod notes that any of these funds that are ultimately not required for this purpose will be returned.

Potential changes to the ministers' pension scheme would be brought to a future meeting.

21/57 Listed Buildings Advisory Committee

David explained that churches had an exemption from local authority planning control as regards consent for works to listed buildings. Providing this system in house required specialist skills, and it was proposed to form a joint committee with Yorkshire Synod. He then moved resolutions 6-9, which were carried unanimously.

21/58 **Synod discharges with thanks its existing Listed Buildings Advisory Committee and agrees to form a new single and united Listed Buildings Advisory Committee, to fulfil its duties under the Ecclesiastical Exemption across the geographic areas of the Northern and Yorkshire Synods under [The United Reformed Church And The Planning \(Listed Buildings And Conservation Areas\) Act 1990 Procedure For Control Of Works To Buildings.](#)**

21/59 In response to a query, it was confirmed that the property officers would not be full voting members, but simply in attendance. This understanding would be shared with Yorkshire Synod by the Clerk.

Synod adopts the terms of reference for the joint Listed Buildings Advisory Committee set out in Appendix 2 to the Synod reports, and requests that any subsequent amendments be agreed by both synods.

21/60 **Synod appoints [two people], Andrew Lonsdale and John Niven to the joint Listed Buildings Advisory Committee, to serve from 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2024.**

21/61 **Synod appoints the Northern and Yorkshire Synod Property Officers as members *ex officio* of the joint Listed Buildings Advisory Committee.**

21/62 David concluded by noting the work of the Trust was detailed, and expressed thanks to staff and officers for their expertise and commitment.

21/63 **COMMITTEE REPORTS**

21/64 **MISSION**

[The Convenor] explained that restructuring had been discussed, and it had been agreed to establish a new pattern of working, without changing the committee's terms of reference. Subgroups would work on special interests, reporting to the main committee. This would make its agenda more manageable.

21/65 **PASTORAL**

The Convenor, the Revd Joan Grindrod-Helmn, expressed sadness at the closure of four churches. She noted that St Mark's, Amble, would be moving to new premises. She highlighted lay presidency training, provided by Ministries & Development Committee. Refresher training was needed every six years.

21/66 North West and Central Newcastle

Resolution 12 was moved and carried, with one abstention.

Synod concurs with the decision of the Church Meetings of the North West and Central Newcastle joint pastorate to call [a minister] as minister, effective September, 2021.

21/67 South East Northumberland Ecumenical Area

Resolution 13 was moved and carried unanimously, noting that the induction was scheduled for 28 November.

Synod concurs with the decision of the SENE Area Meeting to call [a minister] as minister, effective November, 2021.

21/68 Joan expressed her thanks to [*the Moderator's PA*] for her support.

21/69 **CHILDREN'S & YOUTH WORK**21/70 Building Capacity and Connections: Proclamation not Preservation

The Convenor, Sandy Ogilvie, presented a new strategy to reignite an approach for children, youth and families. The focus was on being salt and light, from Matthew 5: 3-16. Consultation with local churches confirmed that coverage was patchy, and many lacked activities to attract children, young people and families. Challenges identified included a lack of capacity and connections. Synod resources would be used to support this strategy.

Children's Work Advisor, Hannah Middleton, and Youth Work Advisor, John Stephenson added that it was proposed to increase capacity through a range of schemes including employing part-time workers, approving sessional workers, increasing the youth opportunities scheme, and providing a ministry experience scheme. Resources and tailored advice could be provided. The cost in the first three years had been budgeted at £874,553.

Questions were discussed in groups. Responses fed back included:

Which of these do you think applies to your situation?

Is there anything else we should be considering which could help improve capacity locally?

What opportunities exist in your situation to do this or would this be a fresh start/new beginning?

Do you think the strategy as proposed could give you the impetus you need to begin to make these new connections?

Do you have any suggestions or ideas to improve the strategy?

Having discussed these questions and read the proposal, what questions or comments would you like to feedback to this meeting?

- It was felt to be a good idea, though expensive, and predicated on local resource to be able to do it. Not all churches would be able to engage.
- Each congregation was different, and they needed someone to come and listen to their hopes and fears. It was fine for churches just to do a small number of things, or even nothing.
- It was exciting, and could make a great difference. Capacity is a big issue. Ecumenical working would be encouraged, although this had dwindled during the pandemic. Other denominations were not funding this work so much.
- There was a risk of defaulting to events that entertain, rather than do work that involves sharing faith. Recruiting workers may be difficult.
- We should talk to parents, not just children.
- There was hope and positivity, but also acceptance that what worked in the past will not necessarily work in future. People are tired.
- We need to make links to groups that use the church buildings for meetings. It's not enough just for a paid worker to do all the work. Church members also need to engage, and this requires commitment. Resources would be put in only where requested, and would be tailored to local needs.
- A suggestion was made of holding a young people's synod meeting to run concurrently with the adults' one.
- This was the biggest allocation of synod funds ever, and would substantially deplete the Mission Fund. However, the fund was not presently being spent in big ways. The money had been allocated from the sale of buildings, and was available for mission purposes under the direction of Synod Executive Committee. There would be a review

after two years to see how well it was working. It should not be assumed that further funding could be available once the Mission Fund had gone. Conversation would be needed with the Trust at the review, when the position would be clearer. There may also be consequential expenditure in general purposes.

- It might be helpful to circulate the questions for written responses.

21/71 Sandy moved resolution 10, which was carried, with two abstentions.

Synod resolves to endorse the five-year strategy “Building capacity and connections” (2022-2027), and to approve the initial three-year budget of up to £874,553 to be drawn from the Mission Fund as and when required.

21/72 He then moved resolution 11, which was carried unanimously.

Synod requires a full review of progress and activity after the first two years; with the review reporting to the March 2024 Synod meeting, using the experience gained to make budgeted recommendations for the programme to December 2027.

21/73 Synod reconvened after a break for lunch.

21/74 **URC 50TH ANNIVERSARY**

Alison Dalton introduced a video from *[the General Secretary]* and an advertisement for next year’s 50th anniversary. Celebratory events were planned across the denomination. A resource pack would be available from January. There would be a hymn-writing competition.

21/75 **MINISTRIES & DEVELOPMENT**

The Convenor, the Revd Ron Forster, thanked all the serving ministers for their work during lockdown, and encouraged them to undertake Education for Ministry phase 3 (EM3), as increased funding was available at present. *[A minister]* advertised the spring retreat at Shepherds Dene on 8-10 March, 2022, led by *[a member]* of the Iona Community. This was open to anyone to attend.

21/76 **EN BLOC RESOLUTIONS**

Resolutions 2, 4 and 14-18 were moved and carried unanimously.

21/77 Next Meeting

Synod agrees to meet on Saturday 19 March 2022 at a venue to be decided.

21/78 Nominations

Synod reappoints [an elder] as a Director of the United Reformed Church (Northern Province) Trust Limited, to serve from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2022.

21/79 Elsdon Avenue LEP, Seaton Delaval

Synod gives thanks for the oversight ministry of [a Methodist Presbyter] at Seaton Delaval LEP while the pastorate was in vacancy and wishes him well.

21/80 Church Closures

Synod gives thanks for the life and witness of Christ Church, North Broomhill, and concurs with the decision of the Church Meeting to close on 25 July, 2021.

21/81 Synod gives thanks for the life and witness of Boldon URC, and concurs with the decision of the Church Meeting to close on 12 September, 2021.

21/82 Synod gives thanks for the life and witness of St Paul & St John's, South Shields, and concurs with the decision of the Church Meeting to close on 26 September, 2021.

21/83 Synod gives thanks for the life and witness of St Andrew's, Hebburn, and concurs with the decision of the Church Meeting to close on 30 September, 2021.

The Moderator then led the synod in prayer.

21/84 **COMMITMENT FOR LIFE**

[The Commitment for Life Advocate] thanked churches for continuing to support the programme. She mentioned that *[someone]* had moved to Durham and was available to speak on this. She urged members to press their MPs for action on climate change ahead of the forthcoming COP26 conference, which would affect the whole world.

21/85 **MINISTRY IN NORTHERN SYNOD**21/86 Patterns of Ministry – A Way Forward to 2025

The Moderator introduced a synod-wide conversation, with decisions to be taken in March. These were suggestions, and by no means a *fait accompli*. The Pastoral Committee Convenor, the Revd Joan Grindrod-Helmn, explained the plan for 2025 had been prepared by a working group. The reason for this discussion was a reducing number of ministers – a long-term trend across many denominations. The pool of members from which ministers were drawn

was reducing and ageing, whilst there had not been a comparable decline in the number of separate congregations.

Northern Synod was looking for an equitable sharing, and this would impact on ecumenical commitments. The situation was predictable, as the deployment quota reduced to twelve full-time stipendiary ministers by 2025, and this could best be managed by planning. Future vacancies would have to be declared consistent with this medium-term plan. Whilst the number of ministerial posts was not negotiable, how we used them was. Groupings had been suggested based on geography and membership numbers, and the committee was conscious that the situation was constantly changing. The goal was to attach every church to a group, with access to ministry. Churches could say if they felt the proposed groups were wrong for them. It would be up to each group to decide what would work for them. The Mission Fund was available to support this transition. It was hoped each group would form a leadership team. Creativity was encouraged, as well as realism about how long changes can take.

The deployment quota included a 10% vacancy rate. The synod currently had a quota of 15 ministers, but there were only nine actually deployed, including the Mission Enabler and the Green Apostle. There may be other ways of continuing the work of synod-wide ministries, such as the planned lay Learning & Development Officer post.

The proposals were discussed in groups. Responses fed back included:

- Gratitude was expressed that the conversation was beginning in good time.
- This would require changes in expectations for both ministers and congregations, to avoid stress and overload. Mind-sets needed to change. Ministry was constantly evolving.
- Some of the rural churches were already working this way informally. The lessons of technology learned during the pandemic could make better use of time and make connections possible across multiple locations. There was a willingness to think creatively.
- There was a tension between those who wanted to return to how it was before and those who wanted to use technology, resulting in ministers trying to be all things to all people. Ministers were very tired because of these expectations and this could lead to burnout.
- Ministry could be by different types of church rather than necessarily geographically, and could include house groups. Amble's move to meet outside its buildings could provide pointers for the future.

- We could learn from other synods and other denominations, even around the world. Deployment could be coordinated with ecumenical colleagues of all denominations, by having one minister in one location and another in another location.
- The mission enabler role was valued.
- Elders were having to multi-task, doing work they had not been trained to do. They too would welcome support, to enable them to concentrate on their core role. The deployment of youth and children’s workers could help with this. Pressure would build on officeholders to keep the show on the road in terms of administration, safeguarding, compliance, finance and buildings. Churches also needed capacity to handle these administrative tasks. It would help if LEPs didn’t have to report separately to each parent denomination.
- A conference of all involved in leadership and ministry might be helpful. The conversation could be wider than stipendiary ministry. The URC had the ability to be fleet of foot in challenging circumstances.
- Comments and alternative suggestions would be welcome, and this feedback would help to shape the resolution that would come to the next synod meeting. There would be a timetable for responses. Churches should have a realistic view of what their future will look like in 2025.

21/87 The Moderator led synod in prayer.

Resolution 20 was moved and carried unanimously.

Synod receives the report on *Patterns of Ministry – A Way Forward to 2025* for consideration in Elders, Church and Group meetings with a view to Synod decision at the March 2022 meeting.

21/88 **CLOSE**

The Moderator led the meeting in closing worship, with a reading from 1 Peter 2: 1-9.

..... Moderator

..... Synod Clerk

..... Date