

Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

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Briefing Paper: United Reformed Church

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1 Introduction

This paper has been written by Revd Dr Elizabeth Welch, with the help of the Revd Dr Robert Pope, the Revd Philip Brooks and comments made by various members of the URC team¹, on zoom or in writing. Elizabeth Welch has been a minister in the United Reformed Church (URC) for forty-seven years, serving in both ecumenical and leadership roles across the church, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.² She has shared in the URC's commitment to unity, which brought the church into being in 1972, and has been saddened at the seeming movement away from ecumenism in the UK over the years since then. Robert Pope serves at Westminster College, Cambridge, as Interim Principal and Director of Studies in Church History and Doctrine. Philip Brooks is the URC's Deputy General Secretary (Mission) having previously served as the URC'S Secretary for Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations.

While the word 'Synodality' is unfamiliar within the URC, its meaning seems close to 'conciliarity', a word used by some to describe URC polity, although it is not a word that is universally known amongst URC people in each congregation. The nearest the URC comes to using the word Synodality is in its naming of the 11 regional bodies in England and the national bodies of Scotland and Wales as Synods. Conciliarity and its interpretation lead to a particular understanding of the way this church lives out her life in practice, in each place and across the church as a whole, with regard to structures, decision-making, and the nature of faith and mission.

This paper will give a more in-depth example of the interpretation of conciliarity in the local church meeting. However, the comments made refer equally to the church meeting, Synod

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² She began work in a Local Ecumenical Partnership with the URC, Methodists, and Baptists in 1976 on a new housing estate in Langney, Eastbourne. She then moved on in 1983 to the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes, another Local Ecumenical Partnership, this time including Free Churches, the Church of England, and the Catholic Church. After that she served as Synod Moderator (the nearest the URC comes to bishops) for the West Midlands Synod from 1996 – 2008), including a year during this time in the national role as Moderator for the General Assembly of the URC (2001-2002). She has chaired various national groups, including the URC Faith and Order Group, a URC task group on Human Sexuality, the Society for Ecumenical Studies for the UK (2011-2023), and the International Reformed Anglican dialogue (2015-2020).

and Assembly, where conciliarity is seen as helping to shape the life and nature of the church and her mission.

In order to see the historical context of this approach, this paper will look briefly at the background to the United Reformed Church and its predecessor church bodies and give a brief introduction to the nature of the United Reformed Church since its inception. There will then be a focus on the significant URC study document '*What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?*'.³ There will be an emphasis on the distinctive role of the local church in each place, as part of the URC's contribution to ecumenical discussion about ecclesiology.

The paper offers a particular focus on the Holy Spirit, following on from the references to journeying together, and listening together to the one Spirit, as highlighted in the Catholic briefing paper.

2 Vision of Synodality

There are a number of phrases in the Catholic briefing paper on synodality with which the URC resonates. Examples of these are as follows:

- 'A synodal church is a listening church' and 'not a parliament or an opinion poll; the Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit'⁴. The URC places an emphasis on the discernment of the Holy Spirit, (also expressed as 'seeking the mind of Christ together' ... or 'the will of God') across all the levels of its structures, hearing the voice of the Spirit both through the voices of particular people and together as God's people, discerning the Spirit's guidance.
- This is followed up with 'The centrality of listening is a defining characteristic of this synodal process'⁵ and what the paragraph says about not advancing an agenda nor privileging majorities but seeking to 'discern the "mind of the church."' In the URC we would refer directly to the mind of Christ, or the guidance of the Spirit, rather than to the church.
- 'The common dignity of all the baptised'⁶ is referred to. This resonates with the URC understanding of the nature of the Church Meeting in the local church, discerning the guidance of the Spirit, as perceived amongst the company of the baptised, for the local church's life and mission.
- While '*semper Reformanda*' is seen as a key phrase for the Reformed tradition of the church, it is not a phrase that is found in the URC Basis of Union, although the thought about being willing to change is present, for example in terms of the significance of continual renewal and of being missional in a contextually appropriate way. This is echoed in the Catholic synodality paper when it says 'the Church is called

³ The document was worked on between 2011-16 and shaped by a variety of introductory papers at the General Assembly level, and then taken forward with a request for local churches to respond with comments. Discussions and resolutions were taken to the 2014, 2015, and 2016 General Assemblies. Elizabeth Welch helped to work on this document when she was convenor of the URC Faith and Order group.

⁴ Catholic Briefing Paper p 4 (Robert Pope, interim principal at Westminster College, has helped with identifying these areas)

⁵ Catholic Briefing Paper p 7

⁶ Catholic Briefing Paper pages 12 and 20

to constant conversion'⁷. So also the phrase 'to share with Pope Francis a "conviction that the process of understanding Christ's message never ends ...⁸"' also resonates with parts of the Basis of Union.

The significance of 'conciliarity' can be seen in each aspect of the life of the URC, from the local church to the regional or national Synods and in the life of the General Assembly and Assembly Executive (a smaller conciliar body which takes church-wide decisions between Assemblies). This understanding is based on the interpretation of the role of the Holy Spirit, in that the Holy Spirit is seen as being discerned both by the people of God across the church as a whole and in each place, in a non-hierarchical way. This discernment arises out of the prayerful consideration of scripture alongside the issues faced by the church and involves listening to the variety of views expressed, and waiting upon the Spirit's leading.

Scripture plays a key role in the Reformed tradition. It is given authority and weight in each place and across the church as a whole. There can however be challenges. One challenge is in terms of the time needed to dig deeply in to scripture or bible study across the church. For example, at times the discussion about structures has been separated out from scriptural interpretation and can be seen as more important than engaging deeply with God's word. Another challenge relates to the need to give time to understanding the tradition of the church between the time of the writing of scripture and the present-day experience of the church, rather than only focussing on the present.

The understanding of conciliarity itself can be seen to have limitations as this paper will explore later.

3 History and development of conciliarity in the United Reformed Church and its participating traditions.⁹

3.1. Congregationalists and Presbyterians

This section offers a brief reference to the background and history of the United Reformed Church, from the early days of the development of Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and the Churches of Christ in the United Kingdom. This history illuminates the particular ethos and influences that shaped the understanding and development of the URC, regarding the significance of the way the faith is shared and lived out across the church and in each place.

The history of the United Reformed Church's antecedent traditions is complex and draws on events which occurred in all the nations of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The first union, in 1972, involved English-speaking Congregationalists in England and Wales and English Presbyterians.

Congregationalists and Presbyterians trace their history to the debates in sixteenth and seventeenth century England around the true nature of the church. Specific matters contributed to the initial break with Rome, while the more pronounced Calvinism of the Edwardian period gave way to Queen Mary's attempt to convert England back to

⁷ Catholic Briefing Paper p 20

⁸ Briefing Paper p 21

⁹ This section is primarily contributed by the Revd Dr Robert Pope, Church Historian and Interim Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge.

Catholicism. Those who felt that the Elizabethan Settlement had not gone far enough in reforming the church were called, at different times, ‘Precisions’ and ‘Puritans’. While some of them conformed to the episcopalian *status quo*, two less satisfied groups emerged: the Presbyterian party which was content with a parish system but considered that an episcopalian order was unbiblical and that the church should be governed instead by councils of Ministers and Elders; and the Separatist (Independent and later Congregational) party which considered that the parish system was unnecessary, with the church on earth consisting of those whom God had called and who agreed to enter into a covenant with other Christians.

These Puritan groups were divided by their respective understandings of the visible and the invisible church: the former comprised all the baptized on earth while the latter comprised those on whom God had graciously bestowed salvation (or the ‘elect’).

For **Presbyterians**, at least initially, the church on earth was considered to be a gathering of the elect and the reprobate and they held that the identification on earth of either group was impossible. As a result, the church was to be governed by Assemblies consisting of those whose vocation it was to lead, namely Ministers and ‘church-governors’ (Elders). The Westminster Confession identifies three types of Assembly which are ‘agreeable to the word of God’ and through which the ‘office of the keys’, which Christ gave to the apostles, was to be exercised. These three Assemblies were: (i) ‘Congregational’ (made up of officers of a particular congregation – what the United Reformed Church might term an Elders’ meeting); (ii) ‘Classical’ (made up of ministers and others meeting in ‘presbytery’ – what the United Reformed Church might term a Synod); (iii) ‘Synodical’ made up of pastors, teachers, and church governors which might be provincial (as with URC Synods), national (as with URC General Assembly), or ecumenical (a gathering of the whole Church).¹⁰ Not all these Assemblies existed in reality but this formed a blueprint for an alternative order for the Church of England which was aspired to by English Presbyterians.

For **Congregationalists**, the church comprised the gathering of Christian people and, because these were deemed to be gatherings of ‘visible saints’ (the godly or the elect), they could be governed by the decisions of the local meeting. Although representatives (or ‘messengers’) from the Congregational churches could gather to discuss aspects of church life, they had no authority over the local church and could act only in an advisory capacity. These advisory meetings are termed ‘synods’ or ‘councils’ by the Savoy Declaration, the two words being taken to represent the same phenomenon.¹¹

Though initially part of a debate connected with the Church of England, eventually those holding Congregational and Presbyterian convictions found themselves outside the establishment, both Church and State, and, willingly or otherwise, marked as Dissenters and Nonconformists.

¹⁰ Thomas Cartwright first advocated a Presbyterian polity for the Church of England in 1570. An outline of a Presbyterian structure can be found in the appendix to the Westminster Confession, ‘The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government’ (1647).

¹¹ The Congregational way is perhaps most classically expressed in John Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government* (London: William Darshall, 1689) and in the appendix to the Savoy Declaration, ‘The Institution of Churches and the Order Appointed in them by Jesus Christ’ (1658).

3.2. URC Structures pre-1972

In 1972, most local churches belonging to the Congregational Church in England and Wales united with all but two of the churches belonging to the Presbyterian Church of England to form the United Reformed Church. Though the URC inherited conciliarity from its antecedent traditions, the two uniting denominations had very different approaches to church Councils. The former Congregational Church located decision-making authority in the local church and its *Church Meeting*, while the Presbyterian Church of England located decision-making authority in *Presbytery* and *General Assembly* (known until 1920 as 'Synod').

The Church Meeting was a gathering open to all those who had been accepted into membership of the local church. Though advised by the Deacons (a group of members elected by the Church Meeting), it was the Church Meeting which had the authority to decide on all aspects of the life of the local church. All those accepted into membership of the Church Meeting were eligible to attend, speak, and vote. Though there were county union meetings and an annual assembly for representatives of all the Congregational churches, these meetings had primarily an advisory role in church life. The Church Meeting was no 'parliament' but a credal gathering, seeking to discern and live out God's calling.

The Presbytery and General Assembly were meetings of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Elders. Elders were elected by local churches to sit alongside Ministers in Presbyteries which had oversight of churches in specific geographical areas. These were the bodies overseeing the life of the church as a whole and, at least theoretically, their decisions were binding on the local church.

Perhaps the polity differences are best demonstrated in the fact that each local Congregational church had to vote to join the United Reformed Church, but the decision for the Presbyterians was made by the General Assembly.

3.3. Further Unions

After the first union, the United Reformed Church united with the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ (1981) and with the Scottish Congregational Church (2000). Churches of Christ in Britain sought to 'restore' the shape of the New Testament church, with an emphasis on Believer's Baptism and the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Originally the ministers were peripatetic evangelists whose task was to establish new churches. Each congregation was independent and led by a group of Elders, one of whom would preside at the Communion Table. Since the union with the Re-formed Association of Churches of Christ in 1981, the URC has had a presence in Scotland and the union with the Scottish Congregational Church in 2000 resulted in the inauguration of a National Synod of Scotland.

4 Structures and decision-making in the URC

4.1. Structures for Conciliarity

With some ecumenical exceptions, the United Reformed Church's conciliarity is currently structured in the following way:¹²

Church Meeting: this is made up of those accepted into membership of the local church. Others who attend the church but have not been received into membership can attend and speak but cannot vote. The Church Meeting exercises 'responsible decision and care for one another, to strengthen each other's faith and to foster the life, work and mission of the Church';

Elders Meeting: made up of those elected from the membership of a local church, ordained to the ministry of eldership, whose authority is devolved from the Church Meeting, and who 'exercise oversight of the spiritual life of the local Church' and who 'serve the local Church and by its relation to the wider councils of the United Reformed Church represent the whole Church to the local Church';

Synod: consists of Ministers and Elders who represent local churches in a given geographical area and gathers, twice a year, to deal 'with matters of wider concern';¹³

General Assembly: meets once a year and consists of Ministers and Elders who represent Synods. General Assembly is described as the 'central organ of [the United Reformed Church's] life' and the 'final authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, in all matters of doctrine and order and in all other concerns of its common life'.

These Councils are responsible for the mission and ministry of the church, for providing leadership, oversight, and care. They enable contact between the local church and the wider church and offer a broader forum in which matters facing the church's mission can be discussed. Although not always appreciated, or experienced, as such, these Councils are not intended to be hierarchical, but mutually-supportive ecclesial, prayerful gatherings where, under the authority of Scripture and through collective sharing and listening, the guidance of the Holy Spirit is sought and discerned.

4.2. The role of Synods and moderators¹⁴

Synod moderators are the nearest the URC comes to the role of bishops. The Synod Moderator is an office within the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. Moderators exercise a ministry of oversight, being a pastor to the ministers and working with local churches to support their mission. They work within the authority of the

¹² The following functions are quoted from 'The composition and functions of the Councils of the United Reformed Church', found in Section B of the United Reformed Church's *Manual*.

¹³ In 2005, the United Reformed Church's General Assembly resolved to abolish the District Council as a gathering of local churches in a defined geographical area, the decision taking effect after General Assembly 2007. There being certain legal requirements that could only be changed by Act of Parliament, District Councils remain in the structure of the denomination, but they are required to meet only once annually and only in order to exercise legal responsibilities. Rather than consisting of representatives of local churches, the District Council is now appointed by the Synod.

¹⁴ The section is primarily contributed by Revd Dr Michael Hopkins, URC History Society

Synod and the General Assembly, rather than under a personal sense of authority, and do not have the authority bishops may have in some church traditions.

In the Joint Committee leading to the formation of the URC, the Congregationalists were keen to retain the ministry of their Moderators. Despite strong Presbyterian reluctance about anything that could be perceived as being like a Bishop, in the end it was agreed "thus far, and no further". However, the Presbyterians were keen to ensure that the ministry of the moderator was set within a Council, giving rise to the creation of Synods as the conciliar structure to do that.

Alongside the talks leading to the 2000 union, the terminology of 'provincial Moderators' was changed to 'Synod moderators' a more appropriately theological and ecclesiological term.

As the URC developed, the Welsh and Scottish Synods were named National Synods, and the use of 'Provincial' with regard to the English Synods diminished, with the English Synods being known only as 'Synods'. This change of the use of name reflects an ongoing debate as to the authority of the Synods, whether they have a role independent of the General Assembly, or whether their governing body is the General Assembly. The Synod meets twice a year and works within the organisational structure of a Synod Council - moderator, clerk, treasurer, administrators, and others that take forward the synodal structure on a day to day basis and decide on the agenda for meetings of Synod.

5 'What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?'¹⁵

The Catholic briefing paper offers many helpful references to the work of the Holy Spirit. One of the ongoing discussions with regard to oversight, conciliarity, structure, and mission in the URC relates to the way in which the URC discerns the leading of the Spirit, and how far this is based on the understanding of the Spirit at work in the church over the centuries, and how far the Spirit is primarily seen as working in new ways in the present. Another ongoing discussion is about the way in which the Spirit is interpreted differently in different traditions of the church, leading to separated Christian bodies, rather than to a sense of the one body of Christ, lived out in different ways through the power of the Spirit.

In order to examine this further, this paper now moves on to the URC study document '*What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?*' This document contains the URC's most recent interpretation of conciliarity, structures, and the way in which the Holy Spirit is seen as leading the church.

5.1. The Gift of Conciliarity

Under the heading '*What is the Spirit saying to the United Reformed Church?*' Section 3 of the 2015 General Assembly text from Faith and Order looks at 'The Gift of Conciliarity':

¹⁵ Text from URC Faith and Order committee.

United Reformed Church conciliarity is about discerning the mind of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in the community of believers. “The existence of the Church is not the product of human activity, but is to be traced back to the Lord himself, in the sovereign self-giving of God in his Spirit, who, through his Word, calls the Church into being and by his own breath makes it alive with the very life of Christ.” Arising out of this understanding, Professor Alan Sell argues that our councils are credal gatherings, primarily there to affirm and interpret the Christian faith, and, as a consequence of that affirmation, to encourage people in their living out of that faith (§3.2).

This is followed in §3.3 by five marks of the Holy Spirit, shaping the nature of conciliarity:

There are five marks of the Holy Spirit which affect the way in which councils are seen. These marks are offered as an aid to reflection both to those who organise and those who participate in church meetings, to see the ways in which the Holy Spirit is recognised in each place:

- a) The Holy Spirit is the giver of life and the energiser. In shared discernment, the Church identifies the aspects of life that give energy and learns to sit lightly to those aspects which drain people of energy. This is not about choosing an easy road, but about being passionate disciples, set on fire by the Spirit.
- b) The Holy Spirit is the giver of gifts and these come through different languages and voices. The Church is called to identify and celebrate the diversity of gifts held within the body of Christ, not judging people, but helping each one to discover his or her particular gifts, giving thanks for the gift of each person in each part of the Church’s life and recognising that it is the same Spirit drawing all people to God.
- c) The Holy Spirit is the Indweller, dwelling in the midst of God’s people. A high priority of the Church’s life is to rediscover the importance of worship, prayer and theology, to sense the tangibility of God – in sign and symbol, in bread and wine, in each other – and to convey that tangibility to a needy world. The Church needs to find again an appropriate sense of ‘fear and trembling’ in encountering the mystery and wonder of the living God in our midst.
- d) The Holy Spirit leads God’s people into truth – not my truth or your truth, but God’s truth. As members of the body of Christ talk together, different perceptions of truth are shared, recognising that God’s truth will only be seen in all its fullness at the eschaton. One of the Reformed characteristics that the United Reformed Church cherishes is wrestling to discover where the truth lies, continually open to new insights.
- e) The Holy Spirit is the Sender. The Church is not here for itself alone, but, by sharing in the life of the Holy Spirit, shares in God’s purpose for God’s world.

There is an interesting conclusion at this point, with regard to the relationship between functionality, structure, and theology, pointing to the need to have a greater theological and faith emphasis on conciliarity in this contemporary world, a concern that is still ongoing:

3.4 It is interesting to note that in the Basis of Union, the founding document of the United Reformed Church, theological considerations with regard to the nature of the Church are offered separately from the functions of the various parts of the structure. Where the church meeting is explicitly discussed, it is through a list of its functions. While the first functions listed are helpfully about outreach, mission, and considering the Christian faith, the church meeting's dependence on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and its part in God's purpose for the Church and the world are not spelt out at this point. In the 42 years since the original coming together of Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the United Reformed Church, there has been a sea change in the UK in terms of the reducing visibility and prevalence of the Christian faith, a change which has had an effect on Christians' understanding of their faith and the way this faith is held. There is therefore a need to spell out the theological undergirding of conciliarity, rather than only looking at function.

5.2. Conciliarity in the Local Church

Section 4 of the report goes on to look at 'Affirmations with regard to conciliarity as expressed in the church meeting', outlining the detailed understanding and interpretation of conciliarity in the local church. While the detailed example is given of church meetings, the majority of the references can be equally taken to refer to Synods and Assembly.

4.1 The United Reformed Church is not alone in honouring the role of church meetings, but the United Reformed Church is distinctive in its understanding of the relationship between the various councils of the Church, from the congregational to the Church-wide level. The church meeting is only one of the councils of the Church and operates in mutuality with the conciliarity embodied in the other councils. Conciliarity also occurs outside the formal councils.

4.2 What follows is a list of affirmations with regard to the role and purpose of the church meeting. These are the aspirations arising from the United Reformed Church's interpretation of conciliarity and the promises that this holds for the discernment of the Holy Spirit.

a) The United Reformed Church's understanding of conciliarity and the role of the church meeting within this understanding is a defining characteristic of the United Reformed Church, but not the only defining characteristic.

b) The church meeting reflects the underlying spirituality of the United Reformed Church in terms of the discerning of the mind of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit by the whole people of God. It connects with a range of other expressions of this spirituality, including the regular worship life of the Church, prayer, study of the Scriptures, and small group discussions.

c) The church meeting is rooted in prayer, worship, and listening to the Holy Spirit.

d) The church meeting is a place in which people listen for the voice of God in and through the multiplicity of different voices that speak. It symbolises and celebrates God's affirmation of each person as worthy and valuable, each of us a vehicle through whom the Holy Spirit may be heard.

- e) The church meeting is based on Scripture reinterpreted over the centuries in response to different ways of discerning the mind of Christ. Acts 15, for example, offers a picture in which an issue arises, there is heated discussion, agreement is reached, and a decision is then disseminated.¹⁶ Revisiting scriptural understandings of conciliarity and the models it offers would be helpful.
- f) The church meeting is the place in which people (lay and ordained) hold each other to account in mutual faithfulness to the Gospel.
- g) The church meeting is a place for bringing to the surface the conflicts between different personalities, diverse interpretations of the Gospel and different viewpoints, and working these through in creative ways.
- h) The church meeting is inspirational in that it depends on the Holy Spirit who energises, renews and equips the whole people of God.
- i) The church meeting is about discerning God's path for that particular local community, which means developing an understanding and connection with the people of the place.
- j) The church meeting is about wrestling with the intellectual, social, political, and theological issues of the day.
- k) Church meetings in any given locality are shaped and informed by their connectedness to other church meetings and the wider councils of the Church. As the interconnected network of relationships is built, so the mind of Christ is discerned.

The three main tiers of decision-making across the URC – local church (elders and church meeting), Synod (representatives of each local church), and General Assembly (representatives of Synods) are at times seen as having an equal status, in terms of equally being guided by the Holy Spirit. The different layers of conciliarity, and the way in which each one is regarded as significant marks a gathering together of Congregational insights regarding the life of the local church and Presbyterian insights regarding the structure of the wider church.

There is an ongoing debate as to how far the General Assembly decision-making processes cover the breadth of decisions to be made locally and in the Synod, and how far the local church and the Synod have the freedom, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, to make their own decisions with regard to the issues that lie in front of them.

5.3. Issues That Need Addressing

'What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?', also comments on areas which need further consideration about the URC's conciliar structure and how the Spirit is discerned to lead through it. These comments illustrate the long-standing discussions within the URC in relation to structures, decision-making and conciliarity. The points made relate to issues around how local church meetings operate in practice, but many of the observations apply to

¹⁶ This refers to the account of the vigorous debate with regard to circumcision, ultimately leading to the decision that Gentiles did not need to be required to be circumcised.

wider councils in the URC, such as Synod meetings, Assembly Executive, and General Assembly:

“The United Reformed Church confesses that the practical experience of church meetings does not always live up to its aspirations”. The following areas are identified as being areas of significance that need further attention, in order that what the URC believes are God’s gifts to the URC may be developed further:

- **The spirituality which undergirds the church meeting** is not always clearly understood or easily made visible.
- **The relationship between elders and the church meeting:** It is not clear to everybody the roles of each and which topics are best addressed by one or the other¹⁷
- **The relationship between personal and conciliar leadership: is such diffuse leadership appropriate** for the rapidly changing times in which we live? Or in fact, is it precisely attentiveness to the different voices in church meeting which demonstrates an alternative style of leadership in these changing times? It would be helpful to look further at the way in which individuals’ gifts are affirmed and offered alongside the gifts of shared leadership in each church.
- **Vocation:** One of the roles of church meeting is to help those attending church feel affirmed, enthused, and confirmed in their vocation in God’s world: in whom, and to what degree are these dimensions present?
- **Conflict:** Church meetings are not always attentive enough to power struggles and conflicts and are sometimes insufficiently equipped to resolve them. More reflection on the sources of conflict, and more training on how to respond well to it, would be helpful.
- **Frequency of meetings:** Does the church meeting meet too often, so that it is in danger of looking into the detail of practical business rather than being attentive to the Holy Spirit and the time in which the Holy Spirit moves? Or, should the church meeting meet more frequently, so that it has sufficient time for the whole community to wait upon God? Can we determine ‘first order’ issues pertaining to the Gospel that need the primary focus of the gathered people, and ‘second order’ issues of good order and regulation that could be delegated to smaller groups?
- **Attendance in relation to church size:** In larger congregations, a small percentage of people attend church meetings. More work needs to be done on this phenomenon and the consequent effectiveness or otherwise of church meetings.
- **Wider connections:** church meetings are not always seen as connected to the wider councils of the church and vice versa. The connection and interplay between the different foci of church life needs to be addressed if the relationship between these councils is to be experienced as a matter of mutuality between the local and the wider church.

6 Mission

The mission work of the URC is also supported by its structure: it is both acted out in the local church, and nationally and internationally through Mission Committee and the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT - the formal partnership between the URC, the Baptist Union of

¹⁷ This is further complicated by the fact that elders are trustees and that trustee legislation has opened up a new raft of issues for elders to discuss.

Great Britain and the Methodist Church which considers and speaks out into the public space on matters of peace and justice).

Mission Committee has within its membership lay and ordained representatives drawn from each of its 13 Synods, and is attended by the Church House's Mission Team staff. The committee seeks to encourage growth in discipleship, evangelism, and witness by:

- reflecting on the church's mission practice and theology
- formulating policy, strategies, and programme (action) priorities
- reading the signs of the times and speaking prophetically
- continuously evaluating the place of mission and evangelism
- working with partners

The Mission Committee reflects the nature of the URC, in the way the global, national and local work of the denomination is discerned and given authority through this conciliar structure, which in turn is rooted in meetings of the local church, its regional Synods, and in the life of the General Assembly and Assembly Executive.

In practice, local churches' prophetic action under the guidance of the Spirit supports such areas as foodbanks, Warm Hubs, environmental concerns, locally-housed asylum seekers, evangelism etc, which work is further led and encouraged by Synod officers, Mission Committee and JPIT. One example of this work took place during Holy Week 2023, when JPIT delivered a petition to 10 Downing Street signed by over 1,450 church leaders opposing the government's 'illegal migration bill', reflecting local feeling. Such local concerns and activities, through which churches are living out the gospel, are also often ultimately reflected in resolutions brought to General Assembly, which in turn impacts more local churches.

One recent example of where this is working is in our progress towards becoming an Anti-Racist Church. A number of factors coming together at the same time allowed the Church to hear more clearly the voices of those who were suffering from racism both within and outside the church. A series of consultations took place which led to the forming of two working groups and to a resolution passed at GA 2022, which has empowered both local and national church to begin to effect real change. It doesn't seem coincidental that last year we elected both our first Black Youth Moderator and our first Black woman Moderator of General Assembly, who will represent the URC and sign public statements on behalf of this church. The position of our Moderators embodies the way in which our conciliar nature is expressed outwardly.

The final strand, 'working with partners', includes Mission Committee's oversight of both ecumenical and interfaith relations. The URC relates to each of the national ecumenical instruments and has several bilateral dialogues including one with the Roman Catholic Church, which is currently working on a paper encouraging close working between local URC and RC churches. It also actively participates in many global partnerships.

7 Brief Conclusions

There is a need to hold together the way in which the church is attentive to the Spirit speaking at particular moments in the history and tradition of the church, and the way it is possible to

discern the different ways in which the Spirit might lead in the present in different eras of the church's life and outreach, alongside the need for it still to be seen to be the same Spirit.

There is also a need to focus on ecumenical discernment, in order to understand the way in which the Spirit is present more widely than in the URC. There is value in looking at the way the Spirit is interpreted across different traditions, not just as something we can ignore, but as something with which we need to engage and which brings new life.

8 Questions for reflection

8.1. *What might the URC offer to Catholic thinking?*

- What impact is there on the idea of Synodality if there is a 'substantive difference in roles between the voice of the faithful and bishops' (p.14 'Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway'). This is one place where the URC's understanding of conciliarity, as shared between the local and the wider church, would be different to the understanding of synodality. Would it be helpful to explore this further between our two traditions?
- It would be helpful to look more deeply at the understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit as present in the midst of gathered believers, whether locally or across the wider church, when it comes to decision-making. Does the spectrum of understanding with regard to the leading and the guidance of the Holy Spirit need to be explored further both within and between the churches?
- It would be helpful also to look further at our understandings of the role of the Holy Spirit in worship, and at the act of Holy Communion and the sharing of the bread and the wine as the body and blood of Jesus in our different traditions. In particular it would be interesting to look further at the way in which we believe that the one Holy Spirit is present, and the one Lord Jesus Christ is shared.
- Is the experience of the URC in terms of the discussions with regard to same-sex marriage, and allowing local congregations to go in one direction or the other, (an experience which has not led to division or separation of churches) a helpful experience to be shared? The URC also points to the way in which conciliarity can be time consuming, as diverse issues are prayerfully considered from different perspectives, and contrary discernments are discovered. This can sometimes be a painful experience.

8.2. *Issues for further reflection in the symposium groups (practical and theological)*

- Are there ways in which the different traditions of the church, as seen in our separated churches, can work better together ecumenically at both the local and wider levels?
- How can we reflect more theologically together across our different traditions, sharing our discernments of the Holy Spirit in our traditions, and comparing these with other traditions?
- Can we share some of the many ways in which we separately encounter God, in order to see that it is the same God we are encountering, who will lead us closer together?

- Can we look more deeply at our understanding and practice of worship as the encounter with the triune God, an encounter which sends us out to share in the transforming of God's world?
- Can we offer examples of the way in which we engage with contentious issues in our separated traditions, and look at what these ways might offer to our ecumenical dialogue?
- How far do we experience the life of faith as a journey, which the Holy Spirit leads us on, and which takes us in new and different directions, depending on the different circumstances in which we find ourselves?