

## URC: Eldership within Church Groupings Receptive Ecumenism

1. Over the past five years the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, has been spearheading an ecumenical venture: Receptive Ecumenism and the Local Church. The research takes into account three key shifts. **First**, a general shift in ecumenical sensibilities, away from the assumption that church union would lead to the unity of the whole church, recognising that while we have much we can offer one another, in all humility, there is much that we need to and can receive from one another;<sup>1</sup> **second**, the shift in URC sensibilities from an ecumenical to a mission-shaped church; **third** the growing need for forms of shared ministry across congregations and churches in response to the decline of numbers. Many in the Northern Synod have already assisted the research by participating with our researchers at various learning and discipleship events, assisting in interviews, or completing a questionnaire on leadership. What follows represents only one strand of the Ecumenical project.<sup>2</sup>
2. Our research painted an interesting picture of the URC in the Northern Synod. In particular it highlighted the strong levels of identification on the part of its members with the URC. Half of those who responded exhibited patterns of being very committed and loyal to church; members agree that their individual congregations have confidence in themselves and there is a high level of cohesion within its congregations, all mediated by trust between its members and ministers. The church remains somewhere people gain a sense of spiritual well-being which contributes to their lives a whole, although the level of those thinking about quitting and/or switching churches stands at 7%. In short the basis is there to take the church forward in its congregations and the region as a whole; the question remains how?
3. The picture also presents a model of church which may be characterized as a 'family-model'<sup>3</sup> which shapes how congregations attend to their core tasks: **a)** developing the church's sense of its own community; **b)** reproducing themselves through worship and or educative programs; and **c)** witnessing to others be it through outreach or simply by being a presence in the community. In the congregations of the Northern Synod **a)** the community aimed at is one of close, family-like attachments for most members; **b)** religious witness according to this model tends to be centred on being a presence in the community; and **c)** witness is simply the way a church lives its life within a given wider community. Hence the data suggests that members are much better at helping those already in the church than outside. And while the congregations undertake adult Christian learning, that learning is principally directed toward developing personal discipleship and sharing stories to help deepen relationships. It might be argued that some of the problems aired within Mission Partnerships resulted in part from the type of conflict which arises when a given model of church is asked to become another; e.g. from a 'family' church to one engaged in mission outreach. The data also suggests the field to which the URC is best suited in regard of mission: an older church that is deeply pastoral to its members.
4. Coming out of our on-going discussions was a clear sense of the role of Eldership in developing the culture and practice of the URC. At their best, Elders are a potent body, moving churches forward, but they can become a management group which while providing good co-ordination entrenches congregations in routine rather than taking the church forward. Within the current climate Eldership has the potential to come into its own. Eldership has to function more solidly within groupings of churches. Moreover, because the URC can no longer operate in terms of 'one minister/one church', any existing dependency of Elders upon a minister will inevitably break. And in its a continued role of representative ministry among its local ecumenical partners Eldership continues to say something distinctive about the identity of the URC.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.urch.org.uk/mission/ecumenical-relations.html> (Last accessed 22.08.13)

<sup>2</sup> The results of the questionnaire can be obtained from Dr Marcus Pound, [m.j.p.pound@durham.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.p.pound@durham.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Penny Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Religious Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> 'Changing Ministry For The Challenge Of Mission', A Report From The Future Patterns Of Ministries Working Party (§5.3.4) <http://www.urch.org.uk/ministry.html?id=571:equipping-the-saints&catid=21:ministry>

5. Much of the current literature and debate focuses on the need for more flexible and diverse ministry and training; empowering ministers in an outward looking way rather than sucking them in. Following David Peel's recommendations to the Northern Synod, outlined in 'Eldership: An Education and Training Strategy' (2008) an electronic database was established and the hope was to develop an informal network of Elders with a view to raising their profile, tapping back into their spiritual and cultural role. Yet arguably both the network and training for Elders remains undernourished. Discipleship training must balance its commitment to develop spirituality and prayer through reading and studying the Bible, whilst recognizing that its principal field of mission is an un-churched nation.
6. In the light of the above the following proposals are made:
  - i. **The re-development of the Elder's network within the context of the groupings of churches.**  
Initial drives to re-establish Eldership took place in the context of Mission Partnerships, but with Mission Partnerships developing into joint/group pastorates, the context of Eldership, in both its pastoral and governance role needs to be readdressed. And because church groupings may offer a clearer constitution and include a treasurer, they may provide a clearer structure for debate including finance. Such an Eldership network developed around groupings of churches should in its initial stages be employed to formally raise the following questions: does the idea of locality need to be re-negotiated in regard of Eldership? How does Eldership function when congregations move to being one church in different buildings? How will Elders learn to identify within groups of churches?
  - ii. Elders' meetings should foster a vision of what it means to be a community of God's people in that place, which requires them to recognise needs, gifts and opportunities within the congregation. Individuals who are developing leadership gifts (e.g. through participation in worship groups) should be encouraged to exercise these more widely within the grouping. Elders should recognise that within a collaborative context there is need for spiritual discernment and pastoral care as well as practical management.
  - iii. Adequate provision for training must be established in support of the above. One could re-begin through an event, aimed at developing models of good practice and offering support. Strong representation from individuals/groups with gifts working in the congregations should be encouraged, as should representation from ministers; the network would thereby serve as a platform to help clarify the role of Eldership.
  - iv. Such training should extend the call to explore new ways of gathering by establishing discipleship and training within an ecumenical context. This might be conceived in terms of a regional day on diaconal ministry (i.e. ministry which does not include presidency yet which is charged with building bridges between church and society).<sup>5</sup> In practice this ministry includes Eldership alongside other roles (including commissioned CRCWs) and should be inclusive. The point is *not* to propose the establishment of a separate diaconate order, but develop diaconal themes more broadly within the context of Eldership governance within the Northern Synod and the increased interdependency of local congregations. Through such an ecumenical gesture, the URC could not only draw on the diaconal practices of its ecumenical partners as a means of reflecting on and refining its own view and practices, but could also allow these to become a means of enriching its own gift of Eldership. A more effective Eldership is surely essential wherever the encouragement of lay ministries is seen to be a priority.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Changing Ministry for The Challenge Of Mission', A Report From The Future Patterns Of Ministries Working Party (§5.6.3). <http://www.urch.org.uk/ministry.html?id=571:equipping-the-saints&catid=21:ministry>