



THE NORTHERN SYNOD OF THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH met at St Columba's United Reformed Church, North Shields, on Saturday 21 March 2015, with the Moderator, the Revd Lis Mullen, in the chair.

Present: Revds M K Alberg, E Blair, J A Breslin, S Collinson, R A Crofton, H M Drummond, W Ellerby, I T Farnsworth, J E Grindrod-Helmn, K Harris, Dr A P Haws, D A Herbert, G Hume, M Johnson, M Lloyd, A E Mills, C E Morrison, P C Moth, Dr F J Nelson, C H Offor, S J Orange, R M Poolman, D A Pratt, P S Rand, M M Robb, M Shepherd, J M Smith, G Thompson, Dr G F Wilson (**Ministers**)

Ms M Bellshaw, Ms A C Honey, Mrs H Stephenson (**CRCWs**)

Dr G Aitken, Ms B Allen, Mrs D J Barker, Mrs J Boyd, Mrs M A Campbell, Mrs E M Conran, Mrs G Cox, Mrs R Dawson, Miss J M Degenhardt, Prof J W Derry, Mrs M Dobie, Mrs C Eddowes, Mrs D Gollan, Mr H J Gowland, Miss S Griffiths, Mrs M Humberston, Mr R M Jones, Mr D Mackay, Mr P B Matthew, Mrs S McNabola, Miss E Meikle, Dr R Menzies, Miss F E Middlemist, Dr D Moore, Mrs D Muckles, Mr W Offler, Mr A T Ogilvie, Mr D Pigeon, Mrs N Pigeon, Mrs E Robertson, Miss L Robson, Mrs C L Roddam, Mrs C Smith, Mrs A Stears, Mr D Stembridge, Mrs J Stewart, Mr J C Storer, Mrs J R Tomlin (**Representatives**)

Others: Mrs S A Ames, Mr A Atkinson, Mrs M Davidson, Mr A B Dobie, Mrs A Drew, Mr J H Drew, Mr P S Etwell, Mr R Golightly, Mrs L Gowland, Mrs J Haws, Mrs H E Hogg, Mr L Moore, Mrs D M Perry, Mr J M Robson, Dr A Sinclair, Mr I Smith, Mrs B Storer, Mr W Sutherland, Revd J Thorns

Apologies for absence: Revd R Anglesea, Mrs J Armstrong, Mrs M Barlow, Mrs S N Bell, Revd E K Brown, Revd G R Brown, Mrs S M Bush, Revd E J S Butlin, Mrs J O Calcraft, Dr P H Clarke, Revd H J Collinson, Revd G L Connacher, Revd A J Dawson, Dr P G Dempster, Mrs R Dunn, Revd J C Durell, Mr J C G Forrest, Mr D L Fox, Dr A Hamnett, Revd S M Hamnett, Miss S M Hill, Revd A F Jackson, Revd N Johnson, Mr A S J Lie, Revd J Magee, Revd E H Marley, Revd J S Martin, Revd H S May, Revd J M McCallum, Revd D M McFarlane, Revd R C Mills, Revd J C Paul, Mrs V J Pears, Revd R Richardson, Revd J Ross, Miss M Russell, Revd A Shepherdson, Revd A J Spivey, Revd K W Stocks, Mrs H Sutton, Mrs S J Swanston, Revd M E Taylor, Revd V A Towler, Revd Dr D E G Whiting, Mrs L Whiting, Revd J C Young

15/5 **OPENING AND WELCOME**

The Moderator opened the meeting and no objections were given to use of photographs from the day. Revd Liz Blair welcomed Synod to St Columba's. Opening worship was led by St Columba's, with readings from I John 3: 1 and I John 4: 7-21.

15/6 **MINUTES** of the meeting of 11 October 2014 and further minutes were approved and signed, with the addition of apologies for absence from Revds Douglas McFarlane and Max Shepherd.

15/7 **MATTERS ARISING**

No items were raised.

15/8 **NEWS OF PEOPLE AND PLACES**

The Moderator welcomed Revd Max Shepherd to his first meeting of Synod. It was noted that Revd Colin Offor would retire from the Teesdale Group before the next meeting. The Synod Clerk, Melanie Campbell, recorded the deaths of Revd Professor Charles Cranfield, Dr Anne Graham, Mrs Judith Hanning, Mrs Maisie Hughes, and Revd Dr John Rutherford. She also noted that Revd Suzanne Hamnett, Mrs Helen Sutton, Dr Alan Bush, Mrs Pamela Askill and Revd Stan May were not well at present. Mr Rob Wylie had been appointed as Evangelist, working with churches in Newcastle, and Mrs Barbara Allen had been commissioned as Synod Lay Preaching Commissioner. All those mentioned were remembered in prayer.

15/9 **MISSION, COMMUNICATION AND TRANSFORMATION**

The Moderator welcomed Lawrence Moore, Director of the Windermere Centre, who led the Synod in a Bible study based on John 3: 16. He reflected on Jesus as God's conversation with us, as the Word become flesh, with a purpose of love for the whole world. The church was challenged to take the message to where people were, to engage more in online conversation, using relevant language, and favouring dialogue over broadcast. Synod then discussed its reactions to this in small groups. The Moderator thanked Lawrence for his presentation.

15/10 **COMMITTEE REPORTS**

Convenors were invited to speak to their printed reports.

15/11 **MISSION**

The Convenor, Revd Meg Robb, highlighted the *Love Your Neighbour... Think! Pray! Vote!* pack. Hustings were being organised around the region ahead of the General Election.

15/12 **CHILDREN'S & YOUTH WORK**

The Convenor, Sandy Ogilvie, shared two items of good news: there had been 9 applications for the post of Children's Work Advisor; and the third annual workshop for those working with children and young people would be at Roker on 6 June, looking at dance, animation, IT and media.

15/13 **PASTORAL**

Peter Etwell spoke on behalf of the Convenor, highlighting the training for Local Mission & Ministry Review volunteers on 20-21 April at St James's, Newcastle; and the completion of the review of the Holy Island Special Category Ministry post.

15/14 Lay Presidency

He then moved resolution 1, which was agreed. It was confirmed that the training had been completed. Barbara Allen (Lay Preaching Commissioner) asked whether her name should be added, but it was pointed out that South East Northumberland Ecumenical Area was responsible for its own pastoral decisions. (It was otherwise up to mission partnerships to nominate suitable candidates).

Synod grants authorisation to the following individuals, subject to satisfactory training (except for those who have already completed it), to preside at the sacraments within their own mission partnerships in cases of pastoral necessity in the coming year: Patrick Sheard (North Northumberland), Andrew Atkinson (Coast), Paul Dempster (Hospital Chaplaincy).

15/15 Chatton

Peter moved resolution 13, which was carried. It was explained that the two remaining members planned to worship at Belford.

Synod agrees to the closure of Chatton United Reformed Church, with effect from a date to be determined, giving thanks for its life and witness, and commending its members to the care of Almighty God.

15/16 **MINISTRIES & DEVELOPMENT**

In the Convenor's unavoidable absence, Chris Eddowes (TLS Coordinator) promoted Training for Learning and Serving to stimulate imagination. It was confirmed that the proposed second Elders' Conference would be on 21 and 22 October.

15/17 Lay Education & Learning Grants

Revd Lis Mullen explained that lay education and learning grants had been used more by some mission partnerships than others, and that it was therefore proposed to combine these sums in a single pot. Resolution 2 was carried.

Synod resolves that from 1st January 2016 the Lay Education and Learning Budget will be managed for Synod by the Learning and Development Officer and will cease to be the responsibility of Mission Partnerships.

15/18 Elders' Badges

Arising from the first Elders' Conference, Elizabeth Conran (Barnard Castle) proposed *that Synod support provision of badges for Elders*, so that they would be identifiable in the community. Ann Stears (St Andrew's, Benton) seconded this. It was questioned whether the word would mean anything to those outside the United Reformed Church, and there could also be difficulties in terminology for Local Ecumenical Partnerships. Revd James Breslin moved an amendment, adding the phrase *subject to agreement on costings*, as this had not been budgeted. On a vote for the amended resolution, there were 8 in favour and 25 against, so it was not carried.

15/19 **SYNOD EXECUTIVE**

The Synod Clerk, Melanie Campbell, moved and Synod agreed resolutions 3-6:

15/20 **Synod resolves to next meet at Denewell Avenue United Reformed Church, Gateshead, on Saturday 17 October 2015, or at such other place and time as may be convenient.**

15/21 Nominations

Synod appoints Sandy Ogilvie and Lucy Cooke as joint convenors to Children's and Youth Work Committee for a period of three years commencing 21 March 2015.

15/22 **Synod appoints Revd Joan Grindrod-Helmn as Northern Synod representative to Mission Council with effect from 21 March 2015, for a period of three years.**

15/23 Lingdale

Synod agrees to the closure of Lingdale United Reformed Church, with effect from 5 April 2015, giving thanks for its life and witness, and commending its members to the care of Almighty God.

The Moderator led the Synod in prayer for the churches at Lingdale and Chatton.

15/24 **MISSION COUNCIL**

One of the Synod's representatives, Bob Jones, gave a verbal report. Changes were being considered to the standing orders of General Assembly, which would give the Moderator more options. There had been a complicated discussion at Mission Council on legal differences in Scotland regarding same-sex marriage. The papers could be downloaded from www.urc.org.uk/about-mission-council/936-papers.html.

15/25 **LISTED BUILDINGS ADVISORY**

There was nothing to add to the printed report.

15/26 TRUST

The Chair of the Board, Revd James Breslin, highlighted the Trust's and the Synod's gratitude to Danny Pigeon for his 6 years as Treasurer, during which he had overseen the restructuring of Synod finances. He had given time, effort and expertise, and would be missed. A search committee was to meet to seek a successor. James added that as other trustees would also be stepping down this year, new people were sought to help the Trust oversee financial and property matters. Anyone interested should speak to him or Andrew Atkinson. He also thanked those churches that had met their assessments in a time of financial stringency.

Jane Tomlin (St Andrew's, Nunthorpe & Marton) expressed thanks for the clear financial information provided in the book of reports. She pointed out that both the Treasurer and Finance Officer did a lot of work to manage assets of £9 million, and that professional help may be needed in future if it proved impossible to cover all of the Treasurer's work on a voluntary basis.

15/27 MISSION PROJECTS

The Warden, Revd Rachel Poolman, explained that communication was now at the heart of the work of St Cuthbert's Centre, Holy Island, with a prayer going on its Facebook page every week. Methods of communication with the Friends of St Cuthbert's were under review. Rachel was available to organise retreats.

Helen Stephenson (CRCW Minister) reported that the Grindon Church Community Project now had its own board of trustees, and was keen for more people to join. They were currently focussing on the community garden, worshipping in different styles, and *Messy Church*.

Revd Stephen Collinson reported that the Keld Resource Centre had raised almost enough funding for the next phase of development. Alongside this, a programme of events was being promoted on Facebook and the centre's website www.tkrc.org.uk.

15/28 MARRIAGE OF SAME-SEX COUPLES

The Moderator explained that synods as well as churches were invited to respond to the consultation on the question "Should local United Reformed Church congregations who want to offer and host same-sex marriage services be allowed by the Church to do so?" The law prevented local churches deciding whether they wished to register for such ceremonies until General Assembly, as the Church's governing body, had allowed this on behalf of the denomination as a whole. She then led the Synod in prayer.

In the course of an open discussion, the following points were made.

- Attitudes to homosexuality can change depending on different experiences of relating to people who are homosexuals.

- Opinions can change over time.
- Same-sex marriage is not necessary. Civil partnerships gave all that was needed.
- Same-sex marriage is for Christian couples who wish to marry before God.
- The question is not whether we are in favour of same-sex marriages or how the law recognises them.
- A decision in favour would divide the world Church, and cause unnecessary offence by using the wrong terminology.
- There is a risk that the Church will tear itself apart over this issue, as it provokes strong opinions.
- General Assembly heard people's pain on this issue.
- The Church is one and holy. We should not allow parts of the Church to do this if we believe it to be wrong and dishonouring the body of Christ.
- The Church should not change simply to please society.
- We have to accept that society has changed the nature of marriage, whether we like it or not. It's the law of the land.
- The Church should seek to be seen as a relevant influence on society.
- Young people see the Church as disapproving of same-sex relationships.
- The Government has asked a question that makes no sense to a free church that makes pastoral decisions locally. We should empower local churches.
- Giving the decision to local churches is the least worst option. Those that wish to offer these services can do, and those that in all conscience cannot, need not do so.
- The URC way is not top-down. Each local church should choose for itself, rather than be told what to do.
- The debate should be about the autonomy of local churches, which is paramount in the URC.
- We need to examine our beliefs and the scriptures to discern what God is saying.
- The URC discerns the will of God from scripture under the influence of the Holy Spirit. There are many things in the Bible that we no longer approve of, such as concubines, polygamy and *lex talionis*. Context is important.
- Although the Church is always reforming, this is not a device to throw away those parts of Christianity that we don't like. Reform should be towards God.

- God would not bless same-sex marriage, as homosexual behaviour is clearly disapproved of in the Bible, and Jesus did not need to spell this out. The Bible never refers to same-sex relationships as blessed.
- Although Jesus didn't reject anyone, he did tell them to change, take up their cross and follow him. It is about repenting, and living to please God, rather than conforming to the world's values.
- We need to be aware of medical research and scientific knowledge.
- Psychology does not see sexuality as a lifestyle choice. Why should we limit behaviour that does not hurt others? Who are we to deny a human relationship?
- Marriage should be offered to same-sex couples on the same basis as heterosexual couples, namely that they were honestly committed to having Jesus Christ at the centre of their relationship.
- Marriage is God's chosen way of bringing children into the world and the setting for bringing them up, and therefore a same-sex civil partnership cannot be called marriage from God's point of view.
- Marriage is not just for procreation. Some people marry later in life.
- God is bigger than this. How can we deny marriage to a couple who clearly love each other?
- Why should we judge people and deny them marriage? Jesus came to welcome people on the edges of society, and churches should not turn people away.

The Moderator led the Synod in a time of quiet and prayer, after which a ballot was held.

15/29 **TRAINING FOR LEARNING AND SERVING**

Synod reconvened after a lunch break, and Chris Eddowes awarded certificates to Susan Griffiths, Cynthia Smith and Ann Sinclair. Lucy Cooke had also completed the TLS course, but was not able to be present. Chris described the course as gruelling and life changing, and celebrated the amazing amount of service being done.

15/30 **#THINK PRAY VOTE**

The Moderator welcomed Revd Joanne Thorns, Regional Officer for North East Churches Acting Together. Joanne explained that NECAT had held its inaugural meeting in September 2014, and that its aim was to support the churches of the North East in their relationships with each other and their mission to the world. It was hoped to have a website, www.necat.co.uk, up and running soon. NECAT's social action work included focussing on poverty, food banks and relationships with local authorities and the North East Combined Authority.

NECAT was currently encouraging churches to engage with the political debate ahead of the General Election, whilst remaining politically neutral. A number of churches together groups were holding hustings, and Joanne asked to be kept up to date with these. There were advice and resources on www.jointpublicissues.org.uk, <https://ctbielections.org.uk>, www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk, and <http://urc-northernsynod.org/the-church-and-the-general-election>.

Revd Peter Rand asked if a church could use its website to gather questions and put them to the candidates then publicise their answers. Joanne confirmed this, ensuring that all the candidates gave permission for their answers to be published. Revd Helen Drummond asked if the number of candidates at a hustings could be limited. Joanne confirmed that fringe parties could be left out as long as those with a reasonable chance of winning the seat were included.

15/31 APPOINTMENT OF THE NEXT SYNOD MODERATOR

The Clerk explained the process, which would start before the next meeting of Synod. Three panels would be appointed, one to develop the role description, one to develop the Synod profile, and one to be part of the interview process.

Revd Rachel Poolman was concerned that there should be adequate ecumenical consultation, possibly inviting a regional church leader to be involved in the interview process. The Clerk undertook to explore with the General Secretary what might be possible. Accordingly, resolution 11 was amended, and then agreed.

15/32 Synod agrees to the arrangements for calling the new moderator as outlined in the book of reports pages 29-32, subject to ecumenical involvement.

Ian Smith (Visitor) asked if a young person might also be included on the panel. The Clerk indicated that this may be the case, but that flexibility was desirable in the resolution. Resolution 12 was also agreed, noting that Synod Executive would hear what had been said by Synod.

15/33 Synod requests Synod Executive to oversee and monitor the arrangements on its behalf, ensuring suitably experienced individuals are called to sit on the panels, and that the panels are effectively resourced and supported.

15/34 JESMOND

Revd Ruth Crofton, Chair of the Jesmond URC Development Group, explained that the development was now completed, and a re-opening service was to be held. The vision had taken 6 years to realise, as different options were considered. She recommended that churches should start fundraising as soon as they had a sense of vision, because this gave the church greater credibility with grant-making bodies.

15/35 PASTORAL CARE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The Moderator invited Lawrence Moore to give this presentation. He pointed out that the Church was in the business of communication, so needed to engage with the Internet and social media. A short video illustrated this point. He highlighted the huge opportunities in pastoral terms to engage with people who were not able to attend church physically.

Lawrence then introduced Gina Dennison, an 80-year-old Elder at Carver Uniting Church, Windermere, who joined the meeting online through FaceTime. Gina explained how she used her computer for keeping in touch with friends and family, sharing photographs, and researching information for worship. It was a good alternative to being with people in person, and was not too scary. She sometimes took her tablet computer when visiting isolated church members, as they were desperate for news, and she could show them photographs and videos from social events. Gina then led the meeting in prayer.

15/36 Relaunching the Synod Website

Lawrence then launched the new Synod website, which the Windermere Centre had helped to produce. He demonstrated the new layout, and explained that it was tablet-compatible. He was delighted to commend it, as the Synod had put a lot of work into it.

Revd Lis Mullen thanked Lawrence for his work, and encouraged members to visit the Synod website, www.urch-northersynod.org. She also commended Grant Wilson's *Heaton Saints* sermon blog on www.stgeorgesurc.org.uk.

15/37 **MARRIAGE OF SAME-SEX COUPLES**

The Moderator then announced the result of the earlier ballot, which was 93% in favour of the resolution. She stressed that this was not a decision, but an expression of opinion.

15/38 **WORKING WITH CHILDREN**

The Moderator invited Hannah Middleton, Children & Family Worker at Ponteland and Wideopen, to give a presentation. Hannah spoke about her work with 7 schools over the last 6 years, using the acronym SPROuts (Serving People, Reaching OUT). She actively led at least 2 school assemblies every week from inner city Newcastle to rural Northumberland. Her work had led to her being appointed a community governor in one of the schools. As fewer teachers had a living faith, they tended simply to follow the given syllabus. Churches had an opportunity to help, if they could do so in an interesting and relevant way, finding the human edge in the story. Following her example, churches could build relationships with local schools, leading assemblies, running lunchtime *Messy Church*-style clubs, celebrating Christian festivals and teaching about rites of passage such as baptisms and weddings. Hannah ran FROG (Fully Reliant On God) clubs at church, which reached 40 families. She encouraged churches to try to engage with schools and become known in their communities, and finished by quoting Proverbs 22: 6 "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."

15/39 **SAFEGUARDING**

The Clerk introduced the Synod safeguarding policy as the framework for Synod events. Churches should also have safeguarding policies, and a template had been provided. The documents also included information and advice. The Synod was also carrying out some research, and was providing training for those in leadership roles in local churches, in conjunction with the Methodist Church. The Synod aimed to support churches as much as possible, and hoped to appoint or employ an advisor and share good practice and experience within a network.

15/40 The Clerk moved resolution 7, which was passed (Ruth Dawson abstaining as her Local Ecumenical Partnership had already chosen to follow Anglican procedures).

Synod agrees to adopt the draft Safeguarding Policy and appendices.

15/41 Prof John Derry (Cromer Avenue, Gateshead) queried why the named person in the local church policy had to be an Elder. This would not necessarily be a merely nominal role, and there may not always be an Elder with the required expertise, sensitivity, etc. Smaller churches may need help from their mission partnership to make this policy effective. Linda Robson (Robert Stewart Memorial, Newcastle) agreed that this was potentially a massive job, and would be daunting even for someone with experience. The Moderator thanked Synod for taking this issue seriously, and pointed out that the proposed resolution did allow for sharing of resources and expertise. The Clerk accepted that the requirements could be adapted, but stressed that the Safeguarding Lead may have to take decisions that could affect the life of the church, and therefore it would be appropriate for them to be in a leadership role. Resolution 8 was then agreed, with the amendment of *a named Elder* to read *a named member, if possible an Elder*.

15/42 **Synod reminds each church of the requirement to have a safeguarding policy, a named member, if possible an Elder, for safeguarding (known as the Safeguarding Lead) and to monitor and review their safeguarding arrangements on an annual basis. Synod acknowledges that churches may wish to share resources and expertise to fulfil this requirement.**

15/43 Synod also approved resolutions 9 and 10.

Synod recommends to churches the draft Safeguarding Policy for Churches to adopt or use as a guide for their own safeguarding policies.

15/44 **Synod supports the introduction of a Synod Safeguarding Advisor role, and notes that further details about the appointment, and related terms and conditions are to be shared with the October 2015 Synod meeting.**

The Moderator thanked the Clerk for all her work on this.

15/45 NORTHERLY SYNODS COLLABORATION

The Clerk reported that work was progressing in exploring options for collaboration between the five northerly synods. Jane Tomlin (St Andrew’s, Nunthorpe & Marton) asked whether there was one synod driving this. Revd Meg Robb responded that it now felt as though all five were really engaging with this. The Moderator added that this had begun with fears about Northern Synod’s viability, but they had now been laid to rest, so the focus now was on improving efficiency. Northern Synod was a big player in this, and Melanie Campbell had been paid by the northerly synods to work on this one day a week.

15/46 MODERATOR’S UPDATE

The Moderator spoke of the recent Thinking Day which had been held to reflect on options for future mission and ministry in Northern Synod, in the light of the declining numbers of members and ministers, and consequent stretching of the workload of the remaining ministers. A fuller report with questions for discussion would be sent out before the next meeting of Synod.

Revd Alasdair Pratt had been struck by the forecast reduction from 20 full-time ministers to 15 in 5 years’ time. How could that work? Perhaps the model of the Churches of Christ may help. Revd Max Shepherd highlighted the increasing scope of chaplaincy in the UK, showing that not all ministry was church-based. In China, the ministers were used as pioneers to grow new churches, not to lead existing ones. The Moderator considered that current patterns of ministry were not sustainable, so the Synod was seeking to empower the laity to take on leadership roles. Ian Smith (Visitor) reflected that it was not a failure to close. At St Aidan’s, Thornaby, members had joined other churches, and continued to meet together for monthly fellowship which they led themselves. Revd Stephen Collinson reminded Synod that sometimes small churches had a greater mission impact on their communities than larger ones, so it should not be assumed that they should close.

15/47 MOZAMBIQUE

Jane Tomlin (St Andrew’s, Nunthorpe & Marton) advertised a soup recipe book being sold by the East Cleveland Group to support the Mozambique Partnership Fund.

15/48 CLOSE

On behalf of Helen Sutton, who was not able to be present, Sandy Ogilvie extended a welcome to Synod to come to Denewell Avenue, Gateshead, on 17 October.

The Moderator then led Synod in closing worship.

..... Moderator

..... Synod Clerk

..... Date