

**Report for GURC on Synod Together
Meeting 9 October 2021
Zoom meeting**

The Synod Clerk, the Reverend Russell Furley-Smith, opened the meeting with a short explanation of Zoom etiquette.

We were welcomed to the formal meeting by the Moderator, The Reverend Bridget Banks, who introduced the Reverend Nadene Snyman and the Reverend David Pickering, who have been appointed "green Apostles to lead us in worship with an environmental theme including a video film from the Eco Congregation in Scotland and a story about a rowing boat with a hole in the bottom, symbolising the way we were losing our environment.

This was followed by routine matters, including accepting the minutes of the previous meeting, the remembrance of members of Synod and of ministers and others who were ill. The Synod's Report was discussed in some detail. In particular it was noted that not enough Ministers of the Word and Sacraments were coming through to replace retiring ministers. This whole topic is currently under review. At present more ministers were retiring than starting. Synod was working currently on a threefold plan to improve the situation. The Reverend Andy Twilley reported that 60 people had come forward as lay preachers, some of whom might go on to become ministers. The Report was accepted by the meeting.

After a short break the meeting moved on to discuss the URC's legacy of slavery. The discussion was introduced by Synod's Legacy of Slavery team starting with a video statement on the topic from an historical and current point of view. The report's authors proposed that the URC should apologise for the actions of the antecedents of the URC; make reparations by becoming involved in development work and striving to abolish "white" privilege. It was noted that the UK was going to be multi-racial. The Legacy of Slavery team is looking for views from members of the Synod to take to General Assembly next year.

A paper on Finance was the basis for the next discussion. The meeting agreed both the Strategic Mission Panel and the Buildings Grant Panel, which were set up two years ago to run for an initial period of two years, should now be established as permanent grant making bodies within Southern Synod. Both panels had operated easily within their budgets of £1.0 million. Establishing them as permanent grant making bodies would give churches a more visible sign of the grant making procedures. Adjustments to the annual budgets for grants were agreed. The annual budgets for grants relied largely on income from the sales of redundant churches. Part sales of church properties would have to be reviewed to see whether they fell within the definition of sales of redundant churches.

Following this discussion attention turned to discussing the matter of the pension scheme for retiring ministers. It had been accepted that General Assembly had decided to move from the present defined benefit pension schemes within the URC, which currently faced a deficit of £45 million between now and 2030, to a defined contribution scheme. A defined benefit scheme usually pays out pensions on a pre-determined basis such as 1/80th of final salary for each year of service, whereas in a defined contribution scheme the contributions are known but not the probable final pension. The meeting passed a resolution along the lines of asking General Assembly to "look at ways that the Church puts in place a suitable form of financial safety net, funded by the Church, to underpin a minimum fair pension for all ministers at retirement."

Still on the topic of finance, the meeting discussed the budget for 2022 showing a possible deficit of £2,653,135 to be met from Reserves. The budget is kept under constant review, as it is particularly difficult to produce a budget in present circumstances. The meeting endorsed the recommended Synod budget for the General Purposes Fund for 2022. In further comment the Treasurer stated that expenditure had been reduced by holding Zoom meetings and that Synod finances were very sound.

Leaving finance the next topic was the forthcoming 50th anniversary in 2022 of the formation of the URC. It was suggested that this should be an occasion to reflect on progress so far. Many events and meetings were being planned and details are available on www.urch.org/50.

Finally the meeting examined a paper on the way churches should take the effect of climate change into account when planning the way ahead. For example when planning for a replacement boiler a renewable energy source should be considered. Synod officers may be available to advise. New builds should follow an environmental path and renewals should consider the technologies available. Trinity Church, Wimbledon has asked the URC to declare a climate emergency and has decided to become "net zero" by 2025. No formal resolution was put to the meeting as not all churches were represented.

The closing worship on an environmental theme was led by the Reverends Nadene Snyman and David Pickering.

The Moderator then closed the proceedings noting that the next Synod Together meeting is scheduled for 12th March 2022 at a place to be decided. Finally the Moderator wished us all a safe journey home across the lounge.

The meeting closed at 2.50pm.

