

**Report for GURC on Synod Together
Meeting 13th March 2021
Zoom meeting**

The theme for the meeting was "Caring for.....the environment, ministers in retirement, the marginalised, small Churches.....".

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 Alex Mabbs to lead us in worship with an environmental theme. Routine matters, including accepting the minutes of the previous meeting, the remembrance of members of Synod and of ministers and others who had died since the last Meeting, and celebration of Jubilee ministers.

Papers including the Synod Council Report, a report on Ministries' and on Children's and Youth work and the work of the Synod Church Building Fund Panel were accepted without discussion. There was, however detailed discussion on finance Matters and the URC Ministers' Pension Fund. The Treasurer was pleased to report that the 2020 Ministry and Mission commitments had been met. He requested that Churches should submit their 2020 accounts as soon as possible, even if they were still in draft, so that the Finance Committee could consider how to set the M & M contribution for 2021.

In passing the Treasurer mentioned the difficulties Churches faced in finding new treasurers and suggested prospective treasurers should be introduced to the literature and training courses provided by the Association of Church Accountants and Treasurers.

The Treasurer then led a lively discussion about the future funding of the URC Ministers' Pension Fund. The discussion in the meeting was solely about the future funding of the scheme and did not cover the possibility of changing the Fund from a defined benefit scheme, where future benefits were known from the outset, to a defined contribution scheme, where any future benefit depended on the level of contributions by members of the fund. The Pension Fund Deficit after a re-evaluation in January 2021 on a more prudent basis than in previous re-evaluations was £45 million to be met by 2031.

Discussions are continuing to decide on how Southern Synod should meet its share. Consideration is being given to Southern Synod initially contributing up to £3.6 million and 50% of the proceeds from the sales of redundant church buildings. The meeting asked whether it would be possible to bring the value of the Retired Ministers' Housing Society assets into account against the pension fund deficit. The Treasurer noted this suggestion, which would be taken into account during the continuing discussions, with a view to putting the result of these deliberations before a meeting of all representatives in June.

After a short break to refresh ourselves after this heavy discussion we reconvened to watch the presentation of Lundie Memorial Award to 5-year old Noah for creating services for children; the service he led in June 2020 can be watched on the web-site for Christ Church, Westgate-on-Sea or by googling Lundie Memorial Award. The award included a large chocolate medal and a cheque for £100 to his Church. This award is designed to spotlight and celebrate individuals using their God-given skills, time and talents to good effect within their church, their community, their synod or even nationally.

There followed a short discussion of the needs of small churches, defined as those with fewer than 12 members. In the view of the speaker these required resilience, optimism, self-belief and a willingness to adapt.

Martin Hayward, the speaker, proposed a day's meeting to launch a Small Church Network. Any ideas should be emailed to missionofficer@urc.southern.org.uk.

In a subsequent discussion of Racial Advocacy it was suggested that each church should have a Racial Advocate to ensure that there should be no barriers to inclusion in the church community. The example was cited of a Church in Surrey, which has a many Korean members, where services including hymns were routinely in Korean with appropriate subtitles on screen.

The speakers pointed out that people will not go to church, if they feel that they will not fit in.

The meeting then moved on to discuss the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC) initiative. This is trying to discover what it means to be church. Ten churches have already been exploring this theme and it is hoped that a further 10 churches will be grouped together in September. There will be a Vision session to explore this proposal.

Finally the participants were broken into discussion groups to discuss environmental matters. One church, St John's Church, Marsh Green, has already received an Eco Church Gold Award for its commitment towards caring for the environment and others are encouraged to follow.

Among suggestions from the groups were that members should try car-sharing to and from church events, the use of hard-wood in construction projects, the greater use of water butts and possibly wind power. It was pointed out that doing the right thing can help connecting with the community.

Questions were asked as to whether Synod could help with technical advice on insulation etc. and provide a pool of experience for churches to draw on.

The Moderator then closed the proceedings noting that General Assembly will be on-line in July and the next Synod Together meeting is scheduled for 9th October 2021 at a place to be decided. Finally the Moderator wished us all a safe journey home.

The meeting closed at 1.00pm.