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## The United Reformed Church: A Paradoxical Church at a Crossroads

Nathan Mladin



Theos is the UK's leading religion and society think tank. It has a broad Christian basis and exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society through research, events, and media commentary.

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# Foreword

**Religion in the UK is changing, and fast. This change is often presented as a simple story of declining church attendance and Christian affiliation – and it is true that the UK as a whole is becoming less religiously affiliated. But digging deeper, the picture is more complicated.**

As recent Theos research shows, many of those who tick a ‘no religion’ box still hold a range of spiritual beliefs. So too, the share of the UK population who adhere to a non-Christian religion is growing, and British Christianity has itself diversified – mainly through an upsurge of new and younger networks and denominations, and an increasingly global population. Taken as a whole, the Church in the UK is a patchwork of theological diversity that encompasses nearly 230 denominations and 45,500 congregations, where it can be counted at all.

The public conversation often focuses on what this complex picture means for the established Church of England. Yet such complexities also present unique opportunities and challenges for smaller historic denominations that are themselves called to adapt to significant religious and social change. Many of them also retain buildings and responsibilities that cannot easily be redirected in response to changing circumstances.

Here is a rarely told aspect of the story of contemporary British Christianity: how have they met the challenge.

In 2022, Theos and the United Reformed Church (URC) entered into a partnership to undertake an in-depth study of just one of these groups – the URC.

The United Reformed Church itself was seeking ways to listen attentively to the lived reality of the church at local level.

A key question was: “What does it look like when local URCs flourish?” The follow-up question to this was: “What do local churches need from the wider church to enable flourishing?” For the URC, there was a desire to see itself as others might see it, and the project has been an opportunity to reflect on the voices of those deeply immersed in the daily life of the church, especially at a local level. The hope is that this report will help inform and shape its discernment of how its resources are best used to enable local flourishing.

For Theos, the research offers a glimpse into how historic Christian denominations are responding on the ground, as they are required to adapt to the fast-paced changes of the modern world.

It is striking that theological heritage continues to shape modern-day religious practice in this unique church tradition. For example, the distinctive congregationalist and presbyterian theologies which underpin the URC mean that normally individual congregations (rather than central leadership) make the final decision about which churches should open, and which should close. This reflects a commitment to equality and participation but it can be a strategic challenge.

At the same time, the URC’s marriage of several different historic traditions also allows it to engage particularly constructively with disagreement. Not every observation made in this report would reflect the perspective of the whole URC or its agreed policies and positions. This itself is a sign of difference lived creatively together. It also reflects the intention of this report to listen to local perspectives which may reflect something different in tone, content or language from that of the formal policies of the church. The United

Reformed Church at its core finds ways to live into significant diversity whilst remaining united.

Yet above all, what shines through from the URC's core identity is something simple and practical: a deep commitment to community engagement.

It is easy to see small churches and read a narrative of decline. The lived reality is that, very frequently, small congregations have a disproportionate effect within their local communities. Small groups of people act as salt and light, offering transformation in the light of Christ to the communities they serve. In the quantitative element of this research, we found URC respondents listing "community outreach" as their highest priority, even above pastoral care of their own members. In towns, villages and cities across the three nations, the URC is in partnership with many others at local level, meeting community needs, and serving Christ as it serves those beyond its walls.

Popular perspectives of historic denominations are that they represent an overwhelmingly older demographic. There is much truth in this. But again, behind that reality lies something more complex. The URC is a place where the voices of children and young people are heard, and actively influence the decision-making of all the governing councils of the church. Just as the URC places service to the local community above meeting the needs of its own members, its members, who are of an older demographic, place attending to the voices of young people centrally within the decision-making processes of the church.

In the end, then, the Church's place in a changing religious landscape is not solely understood by grasping the right statistics or the high-level demographic changes, but by

the way it acts on the ground. This report illustrates that the human face of the Church in modern Britain is found locally, as it is called to love its neighbour as itself.

**Chine McDonald (Director, Theos)**  
**Rev. Dr. John Bradbury (General Secretary, United  
Reformed Church)**



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# Introduction

In late 2021, the United Reformed Church (henceforth the URC) approached Theos to conduct research into the life, identity, and flourishing of the URC. The key objective of the proposed research was to provide a snapshot of the URC today, exploring its identity rooted in practice, what flourishing looks like, what resources exist or need to be sought, and what barriers there are to flourishing in the future.

The project was conceived as a partnership, reflecting Theos' belief that the proposed research, while immediately relevant to the United Reformed Church itself and the 'Church Life Review' it was undertaking, would also be of wider interest and help nuance the picture of Christianity in the UK at a time of complex change in the religion and belief landscape.

The public conversation surrounding religion and society in the UK is often dominated by certain recurring themes, namely disagreement, secularisation, and polarisation. In contrast, this review would consider the life of the church on the ground through a particular case study: the lived experience and practices of local URC congregations, including how these congregations interact with their communities, and how they are supported (or not) by the church structures of the URC.

## Methodology

We adopted a mixed-methods approach to the project, with the research consisting of desk-based study, qualitative and quantitative components.

The qualitative element consisted of 56 semi-structured interviews, conducted in person and online, with local church leaders and volunteers in 12 local contexts, synod staff from

two representative URC synods, Church-Related Community Workers (CRCWs), and members of the URC Youth Executive, among others. 39 out of the 56 were individual (1:1) interviews, and 17 were group interviews. The size of each group ranged from 2 to 8 people. In effect, we were able to hear from over 90 individuals, across 7 synods, and at different levels of church structures and responsibility.

The local contexts chosen as case studies included single congregations, but also pastorates and Local Ecumenical Projects (LEPs). Pastorates are congregations grouped together in a particular geographical area for administrative and



**The aim was to achieve, within the constraints of the project, a cross section of the denomination, capturing the shared challenges and opportunities, the diversity (theological, churchmanship, and ethnic) and different levels of flourishing within the denomination.**

pastoral purposes that are under the care and leadership of a single minister or team of ministers. Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) are – as the name suggests – formal partnerships in which two or more denominations work together in mission and ministry at the local level. This can take a variety of forms, including shared worship services, joint outreach programs or the sharing of resources and facilities.

These locally-based case studies, along with the ones run at synod level (Yorkshire and South Western) were chosen in consultation with the project’s steering group and synod moderators. The aim was to achieve, within the constraints of the project, a cross section of the denomination, capturing the shared challenges and opportunities, the diversity (theological,

churchmanship, and ethnic) and different levels of flourishing within the denomination.

The quantitative element, developed to complement the qualitative data, consisted of a short online survey sent to all URC churches. The survey gathered 402 responses, with the data providing additional insight, nuance and clarity to the picture resulting from the qualitative element of the project (see Appendix 1). We also made use of data collected through the ‘Jubilee Questions’, a survey run in-house by the URC to mark the denomination’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2022, which yielded 40 responses. 62.5% of respondents to this survey were individuals, while 37.5% of respondents completed the survey on behalf of a local church/pastorate. This phase of the research ultimately enabled direct consultation with over 30% of URC congregations across the UK.

In addition, we engaged in a limited mapping exercise, matching URC church closure data in England, Scotland and Wales to deprivation data, the purpose of which was to ascertain whether URC churches are disproportionately closing in deprived areas. A summary of the findings can be found in Appendix 2.

### Structure of the report

This report consists of three main parts. The first chapter unravels positive examples of church life and flourishing in the URC. The second examines some of the key barriers to flourishing that we identified during the research. Some of these are found at the level of local congregations, while others emerge at the level of wider church structures, including synod and other conciliar forums. The final part of the report presents a series of recommendations and possible pathways to flourishing for the URC.



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# 1. Aspects of flourishing

### Vibrant community action

The URC is made up of around 1300 churches which, despite having an average size of 30 people per congregation, contribute far more than might be expected in terms of community outreach. A local church leader we interviewed noted:

*I've often been surprised how churches that have maybe 20 people can still be quite active in running things for the community. And I think that sort of wanting to serve the community is part of the DNA of the URC.*

Indeed, this came through in a large number of interviews with local church leaders and synod staff, and is also reflected in the quantitative data. According to our survey, community outreach emerged as the number one priority of URC churches. Asked “What are your congregation’s top two priorities? Where do you direct money, time, and energy?” a remarkable 71% of respondents (289/402) chose “Community outreach”.<sup>1</sup> This is all the more impressive considering it came above the pastoral care of members (see Appendix 1).

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**Wanting to serve the community is part of the DNA of the URC.**

As came through in the qualitative and the quantitative elements of the research, a clear strength of the URC is its vibrant activism or, as one survey respondent put it, “its unrelenting generosity to the local community”. All the churches we visited as part of the research had at least one project or initiative of building relationship with, and serving, its local community. In many cases, despite their small size, churches were involved in multiple projects, engaging a variety of groups, and responding to a variety of needs.



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## Close-up: St Andrews, Brockley

Through its position, architecture and tall spire – making it probably one of the least subtle buildings in the South East of London – St Andrews URC holds a unique place within the local community, especially among the majority ethnic, Caribbean population who settled there in the Windrush period.

“When I moved into the area I did a tour of the churches and when I eventually came to St Andrews I was welcomed – I was really, really welcomed,” says Sonia, the church secretary. “I appreciate the love and the warmth that exists among the congregation. You can almost feel it. It’s tangible when you come into the building”, she goes on to say. Or as Rev. John Grundy, the minister of St Andrews describes the church with a smile, “We may not always like each other here, but we absolutely love each other”.

Describing the church’s relationship to the wider community, Rev. John Grundy says “It’s all about being responsive to the community. We let the community tell us what they need and we do the best we can to help.”

Besides a youth club, and a nursery they’ve helped run for almost 40 years, one of the main things St Andrews now provides for the wider community is a funeral ministry. “It doesn’t matter what your background is, we want to offer a place for the bereaved family to come and have a couple of hours of peace, of tranquillity, and draw something of the love, warmth, and peace that we try to provide here.”

“We always keep our doors open to the community. Because if we don’t do that, we have nothing.”



One church we came across, for example, despite having no more than six members who attend Sunday services, used its premises throughout the week to run a social café, a homework club, a clothes and food bank, a social boutique, and a laundrette. They were able to provide this level of community provision taking a decidedly relational approach, building trust with community members, involving them in the work and partnering with other civic organisations in the area. While the range and number of projects run by this church were not themselves representative of the broader URC, this example was illustrative of how a small number of committed people can make a tangible difference working for the flourishing of their local communities.

For example, a respondent to our questionnaire wrote:

*We are a very small church, four active members, and for two years without a minister except for the overview from our local Methodist minister who has been a real support. We have engaged a wide volunteer team, over twenty, from the community, some from other churches, many from none at all. We are very active in the community and becoming well-known for all the love and concern we share with the local population in a variety of ways. In this way we are building up the church and hopefully, now with a church leader and possibly a self-funded community worker, we hope to gradually engage some of the volunteers to become church members.*

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**Our mission is to be out there, doing the work, and maintaining a place of welcome, friendship, love and support.**

Similarly, a local church leader we spoke to noted:

*Our mission is to be out there, doing the work, and maintaining a place of welcome, friendship, love and support, where we talk honestly about things and where we share as much as we can of our life and faith, and our assets of time, money, and gifts.*

The marks of successful community outreach that we came across include (1) intentionally listening to the needs of the community; (2) recognising the assets of the community; (3) creatively deploying the assets of the congregation, and (4) working as much as possible in partnership with the community, in a model of mutual, rather than unidirectional service.



## Close-up: Llanfair Uniting Church

High on a hill above the Rhondda valley in south Wales, at the centre of the Penryhs village community sits Llanfair Uniting Church. A partnership between eight denominations, Llanfair is “the structure of Penryhs, the backbone of our community”, according to Kyle, a local resident and volunteer. The locals see it as their church – an extension of home, a place to belong and care for each other through thick and thin.

“We try to help everyone in all the ways they need,” says Neil, one of the driving forces in the community. “We help people with budgeting. But we don’t judge if they have addictions. We simply take that into account. We help them with food, through the foodbank, we help with clothes, through the social boutique, if they need counselling we put them in touch with the right people.”

For anyone who visits, it’s plain to see that Llanfair is the estate’s community hub. At the heart of it all is a deep sense of trust and shared ownership. The social café, the homework club, the parents and toddlers’ group, the youth activities, the clothes, toys and foodbanks are all run with the community, for the community.

“It’s important the church stays a church – a community church, and doesn’t just become a community group,” says Neil. Sharon, the church’s key project worker, adds: “Everything we do here is faith and love in action.”



### Church-Related Community Workers (CRCWs)

During the research, Church-related Community Workers, or CRCWs as they are informally known in the denomination, were widely praised for their work. CRCWs are trained and accredited workers who help churches engage and serve their local communities with relational savviness and imagination. They create and nurture relationships with local authorities, local civic groups and organisations (e.g. homelessness charities, food banks) and seek to mobilise the churches to which they are attached for projects and initiatives aimed at community transformation. As one interviewee put it, “It’s never about imposing something on the area, it’s about getting the area to come and tell you what they need, and then helping.”

At their best, CRCWs prompt congregations to reflect on why they exist as churches in their specific areas and broaden their understanding of, and mission within their localities.

### A culture of listening and collective discernment

#### How is the URC organised?

The URC was formed in 1972 through the union of the Congregational Church in England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England. The URC subsequently united with the Reformed Association of Churches of Christ in 1981 and the Congregational Union of Scotland in 2000. It has a unique structure that reflects its dual heritage, with roots in both English Presbyterianism, with its more developed and hierarchical churchmanship, and Congregationalism, with its strong emphasis on the autonomy of the local church.

As a result, at the local level, the URC is organised into individual churches, each of which has its own governing body called the Church Meeting. The Church Meeting is composed of all the members of the local church and is responsible for making decisions on matters such as the appointment of ministers, the use of church buildings, and the allocation of funds. Each local church also elects a group of Elders, who work together with the Minister to provide pastoral care and leadership.

The highest governing body of the URC is the General Assembly, which meets every year and is composed of delegates from local churches, regional and national synods. The General Assembly is responsible for setting the overall direction of the URC and making decisions on matters of doctrine, worship, and mission. It also elects a Moderator, who serves as the presiding officer of the Assembly and represents the URC in public affairs.

Beneath the General Assembly are the Synods, which are regional bodies that oversee groups of local churches. There are 13 Synods in the URC, each with its own Synod Clerk and Executive. The Synods are responsible for ensuring that the local churches within their area are fulfilling their responsibilities and are properly resourced. They also coordinate mission initiatives and provide support to local churches in areas such as finance, property management, and pastoral care

One of the distinctive features of the URC's structure is its "emphasis on decisions made by the whole body of the church membership"<sup>2</sup>. The URC believes that all members of the church, regardless of their position, have an equal voice in

its affairs. This is reflected in the way that decisions are made at every level of the church, from the local church meeting to the General Assembly. This commitment to equality and participation is grounded in the Reformed tradition, which holds that all believers are called to be priests and prophets.

Several interviewees, when asked about what they valued about the URC, mentioned the quasi-autonomy of the local church and democratic deliberation.



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URC members appreciate that nothing is imposed in a top-down fashion. "The URC feels like an extended family", a survey responder noted. "We have not lost the congregational traditions of sharing and friendliness," remarked another one. The "sense of democracy" and freedom to participate in decision-making was widely appreciated. One survey

respondent said: "It is a wonderful privilege to be included in decision making, when every member can make a contribution if they wish, including the minister!"

In the same vein, though a small denomination, the URC sees itself as a 'broad church', which comprises and celebrates a diversity of theologies, ethical visions, expressions of congregational life, worship styles and political leanings. A representative sentiment was that "the URC is a church for all".

As fitting for a denomination that has unity written in its DNA, a number of interviewees highlighted the URC's ability to peaceably negotiate and live with difference as one of its key strengths. "We do disagreement well... we have a generous

spirit,” a survey respondent noted. We regularly came across this sentiment during the research. Commenting on the denomination’s approach to same-sex marriage, a church leader noted: “We have not said yes, this is the right thing to do. What we’ve said was we trust local churches; we recognise that we’re a broad church and we trust local churches to make their own decisions.”

### Children and youth work

The URC’s Youth Assembly and Youth Executive are forums which parallel but also communicate with the main structures of the denomination.

They were born out of the ethos of listening and inclusivity, mentioned above, to encourage URC youth and children to participate in church life and decision-making in an institutionally recognised and formal way. During interviews, members of the youth executive and staff responsible for facilitating youth and children’s work in the denomination saw these structures, and what was achieved through them, as an extremely positive feature and as a source of pride in the denomination. A Youth URC interviewee said: “They are authentically a voice for young people – run by young people for young people, which is one of the amazing things about them.”




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In interviews with URC Youth, we heard of various justice-themed statements and motions developed through these youth forums and successfully brought to the attention of the General Assembly. These included initiatives aimed at deepening a culture of inclusivity in the denomination, particularly in relation to sexual and ethnic minority groups, environmental justice and mental health: “This year we had a resolution that was passed on banning conversion therapy in the UK in which we condemned the exclusion of transgender people,” said one member of the Youth Executive.

Moreover, according to an interviewee facilitating children’s and youth work in the URC, the denomination is beginning to embrace “a more intergenerational ethos” with local churches worshipping and developing congregational life together. This, they argued, “is actually the best way for faith formation not just for children and young people; everybody benefits from being together, from different generations being able to learn from one another and engage together.”

### **Vulnerabilities and challenges**

All the examples and aspects of flourishing outlined above, however, present vulnerabilities and challenges. These, too, came through in the course of the research. We mention these briefly here, but they are picked up in the rest of the report. With regards to community outreach, several church leaders pointed out that, as a whole, community social action in the URC has been diminishing, tracking wider trends of congregational decline. Put simply, as congregations close, there are fewer people to run the community cafés, homework clubs, parents and toddlers’ groups and other similar forms of outreach. Related to this, there are obvious concerns about

sustainability, given that a large part of URC congregations are aging.

Furthermore, studies show that congregations can grow through social action, though this is by no means inevitable.<sup>3</sup> And while Christian congregations generally don't see it as covert evangelism, social action is one way whereby churches and individual members build up networks of relationship and neighbourly connection, by which some can connect to faith. However, qualitative research for this project found that cases of members of local communities who join local URC congregations as a result of congregational social action are very limited.

Regarding CRCWs, despite the fact that a large number of interviewees see them in an overwhelmingly positive light, with some suggesting they should be considered a "model of service" for churches, we nevertheless found that many think they are "undervalued and underused" within the denomination. In some cases, there are tensions that arise because congregations do not understand the role and remit of CRCWs. In others, relationship between CRCWs and local ministers and leaders can be strained due to a mismatch in expectations. "We need a church-wide consultation on the role of CRCWS in the church," said one interviewee, voicing a representative sentiment.

Regarding the URC's culture of collective discernment and decision-making, while this was widely seen as a positive feature, several interviewees, at different levels of church leadership, acknowledged this often translates into extremely slow and inefficient decision-making, as well as a lack of coherence and consistency across the denomination. As one

interviewee put it, “You have thirteen synods and thirteen ways of doing things.” In a similar vein, a church leader noted:

*Our distinctive is having church meetings as our primary decision-making body. Whether that’s a good thing or not it depends on who you ask. My view is that, theoretically, it should work really well. But in practice, it stops us from making the difficult decisions that we sometimes need to make. You know, it’s hard for churches sometimes to take that step to close or it’s hard for churches to realise that they need to do something quite radically different.*

Also, while the culture of inclusivity and diversity was widely appreciated, several interviewees highlighted the tensions inherent in speaking with ‘one voice’, particularly on controversial and contested issues such as same-sex marriage, gender and sexuality. In connection with this, one church leader complained specifically about certain communications from Church House (the administrative centre of the URC) which, they argued, obscured the diversity of viewpoints within the denomination and failed to represent how decisions on an issue like same-sex marriage were left to local congregations. They noted:

*People sometimes feel frustrated that what comes out of Church House and the media is that we’re in favour of same sex marriage, when, actually, as a denomination we haven’t made that decision. We’ve said we’re happy for local churches to make their own decision, which I guess is a subtle distinction, but it tends to get lost. I think it’s an important distinction that has to be made actually.*

Regarding the work of the Youth Assembly and Youth Executive, some interviewees worried that the structures “mirror the flaws of the ‘adult’ URC, focusing on debates,

procedural stuff and resolutions to be forwarded to General Assembly,” as one interviewee expressed it. It was also reported that the Youth Assembly is not free of the wider denomination’s diversity problem, with a similar profile of people, in terms of ethnic background, theological and political persuasion, being sought out to sit on committees. One interviewee with responsibilities for the denomination’s children and youth work also noted how youth “from a more conservative or evangelical background feel less able to express their opinions and perhaps find Youth Assembly is not a safe space to speak because they feel they will be speaking against the grain.”

1. The question allowed for multiple answers. The other options were: evangelism (verbal proclamation); discipleship/Christian maturity; pastoral care of members; maintenance and improvement of building; developing local ecumenical relations; global justice campaigns.
2. Anonymous respondent to the 'Jubilee Questions' survey.
3. Hannah Rich, *Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England* (Theos, 2020): Growing Good; Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England - Theos Think Tank - Understanding faith. Enriching society.



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## 2. Barriers to flourishing

In the first chapter we described encouraging aspects of flourishing within the URC, while also noting challenges and vulnerabilities for each of the things highlighted. We now turn to discussing some of the key barriers to flourishing in the denomination, as borne out by the data collected during the research. These are split into barriers found particularly at the level of local congregations and barriers that relate to wider denominational structures and dynamics.

## Local challenges

### Congregation overstretch

The URC is people-poor and most congregations are overstretched and tired. As one interviewee put it, “It’s mostly retired folk, and those who are active are getting a bit older.” This creates a *financial burden* as fewer people are asked to give more to keep up with demands (‘Ministry & Mission’ contributions, which are contributions to the denomination’s ‘common purse’ for ministers’ salaries, pensions and other essential expenditure, day to day ministry costs, and so on) and a *volunteering crisis* as fewer lay people are asked to take on more jobs – attending meetings, filling in forms, and taking a variety of other roles.

The “biggest problem is not lack of willingness to go out and reach the community, it is a lack of energy and resources,” a synod staff member said. They added: “There’s no real desire to do anything because people are tired... People who were confident, have lost confidence. People who were healthy have lost a sense of healthiness...”

When asked “What are the barriers to your congregation thriving?”, 50% of respondents chose “limited staff resources”.<sup>1</sup> The second most common response to this question was written in by respondents (“Other”). Of the 157

“Other” responses, 20% (79/402) mentioned the age profile of the congregations and age-related factors as barriers to congregational life and thriving. Specifically, while responsibilities for ordinary congregational life and worship, as well as building upkeep, compliance and safeguarding demands have remained broadly the same, small, ageing congregations rely on a limited, indeed diminishing, aging and overstretched body of volunteers. Representative responses included: “Members are all elderly and unable to fulfil tasks”; “Ageing congregation, finding it hard to fill volunteer roles”; “Aging membership struggles to deal with the increasing amount of administrative work – very challenging to the point of being beyond its capabilities.”

Both qualitative and quantitative phases of this study showed many churches are consumed with the fear of closure and lack the energy and imagination to be more outward/mission-focused and experiment with new initiatives. When asked “What kind of growth do you expect to see in your congregation in the future?”, 22% of respondents (90 out of 402) to our survey replied, “No growth”.<sup>2</sup> One respondent to the ‘Jubilee Questions’ expressed their concern tersely: “We would like to be free of the worry about having small numbers and declining revenue.”

### The impact of Covid

Both regular and more novel forms of worship and fellowship (e.g. Messy/Café Church; community Christmas tree decorating) were stopped during Covid lockdowns and have either not restarted or are returning slowly, in a diminished form, with fewer people.

Where congregations had the technology, people with know-how and time to develop some form of online worship,

initial pick up was in many cases significant, but this tapered off. Some members were happy to receive ‘Daily Devotions’, a discipleship resource produced and distributed by the URC containing Bible readings,<sup>3</sup> reflections and prayers, but have got out of the habit of showing up in person, when restrictions were lifted.

With the pandemic over, the post-covid legacy is mixed. According to data from Peter Brierley consultancy, the URC as a whole has “an average digital congregation of 20,000”.<sup>4</sup> But as one interviewee put it:

*Providing worship in hybrid real life/Zoom forms enables people who cannot get to church to participate, but makes it more difficult for us to feel a single community and is deleterious for the experience of worshipping in person, as the sense of corporate worship is diminished when there are fewer people present.*

Similarly, Martin Camroux, a retired URC minister and researcher, points out that online worship “cannot be a substitute for personal contact, and some of those who worship digitally will be existing church members and/or may visit more than one church website.”<sup>5</sup>

Regular, in person midweek activities, like prayer and fellowship meetings, have suffered. Several interviewees and survey respondents noted a marked drop in attendance and loss of volunteers following the pandemic, although it should be noted that this may be true across other denominations. Some churches reported that they have seen attendance drop by a third or even a half, to say nothing of congregations that simply closed during the pandemic. A survey for the Evangelical Alliance found average attendance 32% down, as well as a drop in financial support and in children’s and youth work.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, organisations that would hire out church halls and other spaces managed by churches are either slow to come back or never return. This has had a knock-on effect on congregational revenue and raises questions of financial viability and ultimately survival, especially when that income is critical to the financial viability of the congregation.

### Shortage of ministers

To say there is a shortage of ministers in the URC is to state the obvious. Indeed, this was a recurring complaint and source of sadness in many of the interviews we conducted. It

also came through clearly in the survey we ran. The minister-to-church ratio varies from synod to synod, but in one of the synods we studied, the ratio was approximately 20 ministers to 100 churches. As one interviewee put it, “ministers are now becoming more like little bishops of a small diocese.” In a

similar, only half-humorous vein, a local church leader referred to this as the “bubble gum model of ministry”, where ministers are stretched thinner and thinner across congregations. Many interviewees and respondents to the questionnaire reported that the absence of a full-time minister has a negative effect on the congregational life and ministry of local congregations, limiting particularly their ability to meet the needs of their local communities through outreach activities. “Without a full-time minister and therefore relying on a list of lay preachers it is hard to establish any sense of continuity and future progress,” said a survey respondent, voicing a representative sentiment in the research.



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**In one of the synods we studied, the ratio was approximately 20 ministers to 100 churches.**

Indeed, qualitative data from our research revealed that congregations which experience a level of flourishing have either a full-time minister or a minister who, while not strictly speaking full-time, is sufficiently embedded within and present to the congregation in order to, among other things, meet their pastoral needs and mobilise for local mission.

Dependence on ministers can be seen in the responses to the online survey we conducted. 36% of respondents (effectively 145 out of 402 churches) identified “limited ministerial support” as a barrier to thriving as a congregation. In the same question, 18 out of 402 churches selected “all of the above”.<sup>7</sup> “Synod cannot expect growth if it continues to say ‘NO’ to our requests for help personnel/hours”, said a respondent to the survey.

However, we also came across congregations who, although they had not had ministers for several years, were self-reliant and resourceful. This was largely down to having “very capable elders and local leaders,” as the minister who eventually came to one of the churches in question said during our interview. “A small group of committed people can make a huge impact and can continue congregational ministry with little stipendiary support,” they noted. In a similar vein, another interviewee remarked how “a group of committed people can really be an excellent witness to the community; they can keep things going, maintaining their building extremely well and nurturing the sense of fellowship.”

Indeed, several interviewees were keen to stress that having a minister or a greater share of a minister’s time should not be seen as a panacea. When asked whether there are “any church burdens that, if freed of, would liberate you to flourish?”, a respondent to the ‘Jubilee Questions’ survey

identified “the idea of leadership being predominantly for ordained clergy...” as a barrier which, among other things, can sometimes prevent not only members to receive Communion (because they lack ‘Ministers of Word and Sacrament’) but also to develop as mature, local leaders who can take ownership of the life, discipleship, and mission of local congregations. This points to what several interviewees described as a crisis of discipleship and leadership development throughout the denomination. More on this further below.

### Buildings: a blessing *and* a curse

On one level, church buildings were seen by many interviewees as a clear asset, providing critical community space at a time when such spaces are becoming increasingly

scarce.<sup>8</sup> This was especially true for churches using their premises for community outreach. But on another level, they are expensive to maintain, especially old, traditional buildings from the Victorian period, in a context where congregations are diminishing and the cost of living is rising.



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**16% of respondents to our survey said their church building was no longer fit for purpose.**

16% of respondents to our survey said their church building was no longer fit for purpose. We heard that synods are mitigating this through maintenance and building development grants, although we also heard that not all congregations are aware these exist or struggle with accessing them, lacking people and the capacity to fill in and submit the necessary applications.

At the same time, church buildings are for many congregations a vital revenue stream, with churches renting

out their premises (e.g. church halls) to local or regional organisations. But as noted above, the pandemic has adversely impacted this. Fewer organisations returned and those that did, are coming back slowly. This is putting a strain on church finances and adding to the sense of precariousness and uncertainty.

Deeper still, we found that there isn't always missional alignment between churches and the organisations they hire their venues to. In some cases, venue hiring is seen in purely transactional terms, with church leaders failing to recognise any missional potential to the relationships established. Where some missional alignment was discernible, we noticed limited imagination to see the full missional potential of relationship with the guest organisations being realised by, for example, creating further touchpoints and pathways for faith-sharing.<sup>9</sup> One respondent to the 'Jubilee Questions' put it starkly: "Mostly [buildings] take up a lot of time and fool congregations into thinking they are doing mission when they are only a community centre."

During interviews with synod staff we were made aware of situations where synods assisted congregations in selling their buildings in order to purchase smaller, more accessible, multi-purpose/flexible spaces. In some cases, this has been transformational, freeing local believers to pursue new missional opportunities. A survey respondent to the 'Jubilee Questions' painted a picture of what a local gathering of believers could achieve in the absence of a large building:

*Our expenses are minimal, because we rent a simple room within a building for a nominal rent. We can also say from experience that the money we gave our local youth project, for mentoring, will liberate some disadvantaged young people from the barriers*

*around them, including lack of opportunity and confidence, and in some cases, mental ill health.*

## Church-wide challenges

### Denominational structures

Overall, the structures at all levels were reported to be unwieldy and unsuited for a significantly smaller church than when they were originally created. They assume a much larger and thriving denomination. A large number of interviewees said the URC is “top heavy”, with structures and modes of operation that are in tension with the congregational and grass-roots ethos of the church and the need of a denomination experiencing decline. As one survey respondent put it: “The structures and culture of the church often appear to work against acting with flexibility, pace and momentum.” Another respondent noted: “We perceive many layers of bureaucracy within the organisation which prevent rapid solutions.”

When giving examples of structures that need reforming, several interviewees complained about the number of committees, the shortage of people and the lack of diversity among those who do sit on them. One interviewee said: “Most committees are just the same people over and over again.” This problem was also reported by members of the Youth URC.

But there were other voices that warned against rashly reducing the number of committees. One local church leader we interviewed worried that this may prevent valuable work from being delivered:

*You’ve got to have some safeguards in place when you’re spending thousands of pounds. Yes, there’s some paperwork. Yes, there’s some structure. But I think it’s there for a reason. And I think if we lost it, we would lose the support we currently have.*

*I don't honestly think this would solve our problems at all. It will just push the can down the road, because we'll have more money, but no ideas and people paid to do the job.*

The same interviewee went on to note what they perceived to be the root problem: “We’re trying to take people from local churches... there is a smaller and smaller pool. We’ve got the right number of committees but not the ‘right’ number of people in the URC.”

The general sentiment that came through, both in the qualitative and the quantitative research, was that the denomination is excessively bureaucratic, with structures that risk stifling rather than enabling congregational life and local mission.

### Relationships between local churches and wider church structures

Several participants in the research noted how, at their best, synods equip local churches to carry out their mission, connecting them to resources and initiatives coming from the national level. One synod member of staff said:

*We [synod] stand in the middle, because we reach out with one hand to the local church, and we reach out with the other hand to the centre.*

Indeed, synods can ensure local churches and the Centre remain aware of each other, that tasks are not duplicated and decisions are made at the appropriate level of the denomination. “Congregations, synod and ‘the Centre’ belong

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**Synods can ensure local churches and the Centre remain aware of each other.**

together, they fit into each other and they relate to each other,” said a synod member of staff.

Furthermore, other interviewees noted that the sweet spot of the work of synods is, as one interviewee put it, being “close enough to the local to understand a bit of what’s going on, but far enough away to give [churches] a corporate sense of accountability so that people aren’t completely [on their own].”

This being said, during the course of the research we came across congregations where the role of the synod was not clearly understood or the support it can offer was perceived to be limited. As a result, relationship between synod and local congregations was often limited. For example, a survey respondent said: “Our congregation is asking... what is Synod doing for us? Frankly we don’t know. Please, can you itemise the actual, practical help you intend to give?”

Furthermore, survey and qualitative data we collected showed many churches feel weighed down by their obligations as charitable organisations, and by day-to-day administrative responsibilities. Expressing a recurring sentiment in the research, a respondent to the survey noted:



**Many churches feel weighed down by their obligations as charitable organisations.**

*The URC asks a lot of congregations to maintain buildings – time, and money of maintenance, health and safety, compliance, copyright etc. is complex and time consuming. More generic help e.g. templates and model policies would be incredibly helpful. During COVID we had very little support to navigate the different licences etc. we needed. We need a proper forum to share resources and expertise.*

As this shows, congregations expect synod to help, and indeed, we learned of synods stepping in to provide support with areas such as safeguarding, compliance and other governance issues. But several interviewees cautioned against expecting synod to completely take over admin issues for local churches. A synod member of staff said:

*We've done that with one of our churches recently... and it's absolutely swamped the paid staff of the synod. And, that's just one church. And so there's this tension: we'd love to say, 'Okay, give us your finances, we'll look after your bookkeeping', you know, 'We'll sort out your building contracts.' But actually, we're just not set up for that level of centralisation.*

Moreover, some churches, especially very small, aging congregations that lack a full-time minister feel burdened by their mandatory M&M contributions, especially when this is a substantial part of their expenditure, and report failing to see its benefits. As a result, a sense of frustration sets in. We came across congregations feeling as if they were on their own, disconnected, and lacking meaningful relationship with synod.

Lack of relationship was even more acute in relation to the national level of the URC (Church House). In the absence of other intermediate structures, such as the now disbanded 'district councils', this feeling of alienation was compounded. Among other things, this prevents churches from being aware of each other and joining, where appropriate, in fellowship and mission. This is a particular problem where churches in an area are few and far between.

To address this problem, one of the synods we researched for this project created the role of a 'Synod Pastoral Advisor' tasked with creating and nurturing connections between local congregations and synod.

As for the relationship between local congregations and Church House, we spoke to several local church leaders who felt disconnected from the national structures. Indeed, as one synod staff member put it:

*Church House are, for many, 'faceless bureaucrats', there's a lack of personal relationship and also a lack of clarity regarding the organisation. They see Church House as 'them', as if they are in competition, rather than belonging together.*

### Finances

The denomination finds itself in the paradoxical position of being 'people poor', yet 'cash rich', with general congregational decline explaining both aspects. Concretely, as churches close and the denomination loses members, its financial situation paradoxically improves in part as a result of the proceeds from the sale of closed church buildings.

But this paradoxical position is itself a generalisation, which holds in some geographical areas and synods more than in others. Some synods have more financial resources available than others and funds are either not always accessible to churches (as per above) or not accessed (e.g. missional grants). One church leader noted in this regard: "It's amazing how



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**The denomination finds itself in the paradoxical position of being 'people poor', yet 'cash rich'.**

few applications they [synod] get. People seem to be quite cautious or not willing to try new things." This was explained in terms of the communication barrier we alluded to earlier, but also in terms of the local churches' limited capacity and vision for trying new things.

Several interviewees also decried the lack of sharing of financial resources between synods, suggesting new pathways

should be forged and mechanisms be put in place to enable financial help to be given by wealthier synods to poorer ones in a spirit of missional collaboration and fellowship.

1. We did not specify if staff referred to paid staff only or to volunteers as well, though we intended the latter.
2. The options included: numerical, discipleship, impact in the community/ community outreach, other.
3. Daily Devotions Archive United Reformed Church
4. Martin Camroux, 'Another Year in the Life of the United Reformed Church', *Future First*, Number 80, April 2022 [static1.squarespace.com/static/54228e0ce4b059910e19e44e/t/639215b1e901795622717215/1670518200806/FUTURE\\_FIRST\\_Issue+80+April+2022.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54228e0ce4b059910e19e44e/t/639215b1e901795622717215/1670518200806/FUTURE_FIRST_Issue+80+April+2022.pdf)
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. The other options were 'denominational bureaucracy', 'limited financial resources', 'building no longer fit for purpose', 'limited staff resources', and 'disinterest/disengagement of local community'.
8. See Madeleine Pennington, *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People* (Theos & Free Churches Group, 2020), pp. 63-74, for a detailed analysis of the value of church buildings in fostering social cohesion and nurturing community at a time of increased scarcity of public space and loss of community spaces.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 66.



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### 3. Pathways to flourishing

Having described some of the key barriers and challenges faced by the URC, this final chapter explores a series of pathways to flourishing. The suggestions collected during the research are grouped around the themes of mission, leadership (including ministerial and lay training) and changes to the denominational structures.

### Mission

The URC will flourish at the local levels or not at all. As a local church leader said in an interview:

*I think the church structures need reforming, but I don't think they will make a huge difference in the long term. I think the focus has got to be on supporting local churches in their mission... as a denomination we need to be looking forward and looking outwards rather than just worrying about the internal mechanics.*

This was a representative sentiment in the research.

'Mission' is admittedly a broad concept, but multiple interviews with church leaders and synod staff revealed a desire to recover a holistic understanding of mission which includes the kind of vibrant community outreach described in the first chapter, but also culturally appropriate and imaginative forms of faith-sharing/evangelisation. Commenting on the denomination's strengths, a local leader wryly: "We are quite good at outreach, we struggle with evangelism. We are happier talking about the football than talking about Jesus." Similarly, a survey respondent noted: "I think that wanting to serve the community is part of the URC DNA. I really do. I don't think we're always quite so good at evangelism."

Indeed, several interviewees intimated that without intentional and concerted efforts to encourage faith-sharing/ evangelisation as part of a holistic vision of mission, the future of the denomination is in peril and the opportunity to stay true to the theological traditions that run through the URC, which include sharing the Good News of Jesus, is missed.



## Close up: Mill Hill East Church, Mill Hill

Joshua and Rachel Kane have been the co-pastors of Mill Hill East Church for over seven years, after moving to an estate in Mill Hill nine years ago. They describe the church as “a place to call home, and a reason to hope”. “Home is about belonging, participation, and welcome – an anchor in a place that is very transitory; and hope is about sharing Jesus and being very open about our spirituality... We’re diverse, inclusive and welcoming and always want to share why we do what we do – it’s about Jesus and the difference he makes to our lives and communities.”

“In everything we do we work with rather than for the community... We want to make sure people see this as their home, a place where everybody can come and contribute and be involved and collaborate. We are not just hosts but also guests alongside other people.” They point to the community garden or the coronation lunch planned and run by neighbours, to which they are only contributing the food.

As part of this vision, the role of leaders, they note, is not so much to set direction, but “to facilitate, serve, and invest in others in a very relational way.” Asked if there is a ‘secret ingredient’ to their flourishing church life, Rachel says “we are very open to change and doing things differently. We also try to keep a really low bar for participation. Everybody is welcome to come and be involved. Another thing is being okay with a bit of mess... we are happy to be a little less programmed in order to give people opportunities to get involved.”



To engage in, and sustain holistic mission, members of local congregations must be mature in their faith. We note in this regard that, on the one hand, discipleship is very low in the order of priority for URC churches. Only 15% of respondents to the survey we ran (62 out of 402) chose “Discipleship/Christian maturity” when asked “What are your congregation’s top two priorities? Where do you direct money, time, and energy?”. On the other, when asked what growth they expected to see in their congregations in the future, 36% of respondents (147 out of 402) indicated discipleship. This indicates an awareness of the need for growth in this area and highlights the opportunity for the wider church to meet this need appropriately.

A deepening of discipleship throughout the denomination will require, among other things, continuing to curate and produce appropriate discipleship resources that, among other things, equip members for holistic mission. It will also require distributing and deploying such resources throughout the denomination. Several interviewees mentioned ‘Stepwise’, a “discipleship development programme from the URC”, as an excellent existing tool. Investment should be made in training and deploying facilitators to assist churches in this effort, where local capacity is missing.

Despite many examples of outward/mission-focused churches we came across in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research, we were made aware there continue to exist churches that lack the energy or intent to seize missional opportunities and generally take a more mission-orientated approach to ministry. The question that exercised several interviewees was how to help such churches shift from looking inward, lamenting their losses, and feeling anxious about the future, to looking to their communities with missional imagination? “There is too much focus on pastoral

care, but a lot of pastoral needs would disappear if people focused on their discipleship, mission and their purpose of serving God,” noted a local church leader.

Key to this shift, as one leader noted, was to nurture “a culture of experimenting and risk-taking, trying new things... to reach different people”. To this end, nurturing and deploying mission enablers/workers/pioneers to help bring this change in local settings should be considered.

The challenge, however, will be to get buy in from congregations. Churches will need to acknowledge their need to change and be willing to do so. As one interviewee put it, “I think attitude is the thing. It’s how to change the attitude of the can’t-do’s to the can-do’s.” “If it comes as another directive from Synod, it’s almost doomed to failure,” the same interviewee added. The key is “finding the right person who will chime with the congregation and help them without doing it all themselves.”

## Leadership

In other words, churches need a locally based catalyst leader to inspire congregations to push beyond the comfort zone.

Indeed, at several points during the research we picked up on a strong desire to see both the accessibility and quality of ministry as well as lay/leadership training improved and oriented in a missional direction as a means of responding not only to the shortage of ministers but also the wider issue pertaining to denominational decline. Referring to the accessibility of training, a survey respondent said: “Make ministerial training more convenient by providing training nearer home for those with full-time jobs.” Indeed,

current ministry training provision was described by several interviewees as inadequate in preparing ordinands for church

life as it currently exists, where ministers are stretched thinly across several congregations and face multiple challenges as a result.



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**One suggestion was for ministerial training to programmatically include building lay capacity.**

In connection with this, one suggestion was for ministerial training to programmatically include building lay capacity. One church leader said:

*What churches need is leadership, and that's what we need to support. How do we support churches in being led? Either by helping the elders internally do that or by looking at lay leadership in other ways than we have done.*

Speaking about a minister's responsibilities, another interviewee said: "A ministers' job is to nurture and grow a congregation, so that the congregation have the confidence to look out and to reach out." Indeed, a number of interviewees suggested both ministerial and lay training needs to be decidedly orientated toward mission and nurturing leadership within local congregations rather than post-holding. In this vein, a local minister noted: "In the URC's ministerial training, it isn't emphasised enough that the role of a Minister is to encourage others to develop their ministry."

Furthermore, given the positive stories about Church Related Community Workers we consistently heard throughout the research, there is a strong case to be made for the denomination to further affirm, recognise, develop and deploy CRCWs. Displaying visible enthusiasm, one synod staff said: "Every time I hear about the projects they're doing, I think,

‘Gosh, that’s excellent. They do amazing work that more churches should be doing. There should be more of them.’



## Close-up: Simon Loveitt, Church Related Community Worker

Simon is the URC's longest serving Church Related Community Worker, with over 33 years of service. Currently working out of St Andrews URC and St Michael's Anglican Church, Simon sees his role in terms of community transformation – “creating change in church and community” as the strapline for CRCWs has it: mobilising churches to help tackle some of the big issues in society, from the shortage of affordable housing, to access to education, problem debt, and so on... “it's about ‘upskilling’ both those within the church and the wider community, creating partnerships and building networks... for transformational work.”

““My role has always been one of a catalyst and enabler,” he says, “making strategic connections and developing partnerships to tackle some of the huge issues affecting communities. I have been involved in five community credit unions over more than 30 years, and I am now part of the committee of Lewisham Plus Credit Union.

“In working with churches I usually ask them ‘If your church wasn't there [in the local community], who would notice and who would care?’ “Part of being a church,” he goes on to say, “is being embedded in the community and taking care of those who are in your neighbourhood.”

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**Training opportunities for future CRCWs should be developed.**

To this end, training opportunities for future CRCWs should be developed and pathways for becoming a CRCW made clearer and better publicised throughout the denomination and beyond. The current challenge is that, as noted earlier in the report, a coherent, shared and theologically informed understanding of CRCWs – the remit of their role, their mission brief, and their relationship to local churches and synod – is lacking. As per above, we note the real opportunities for URC churches to draw further on CRCWs as catalysts of holistic local mission.

Among the suggestions for the future of small yet viable churches who cannot support a minister on their own (should one even be available), and which may struggle with discharging their charitable obligations, was the possibility of pooling resources and supporting a (full-time) minister to become what one interviewee called a “viable unit of ministry” in a local area. “Combining smaller local congregations is an effective way to ease the burden on individual members,” a local church leader suggested. This would be different, they noted, from the current model of clusters or pastorates where members churches are still independent charities with the statutory responsibilities and liabilities that attach to them.

In a similar vein, another survey respondent noted: “Every church subject to same governance rules and legislation – if liberated from necessity to administer locally would free up local resources – could be more focused on mission.” There seem to have been attempts at this but so far this model has not taken off. The reasons for this include local churches having little appetite for large scale change and the inevitable disruption

this brings (this would hold particularly true of elderly/aging congregations); geographical distance between churches whose identity is place-based; complexity of the merger, including uncertainty about how synod resources (including ministers) would be allocated to subsequent “units of ministry”.

Another suggestion we came across in the research was to not simply consolidate congregations but start new ones: “We should be investing some of the resources that we get from closing churches in trying to plant new churches,” said a local church leader. He went on to note, however, that “there doesn’t seem to be any real desire or willingness to do that, at a national, synod or local church level.” Another church leader made similar suggestions, saying:

*We need to be really brutally honest with ourselves and say, ‘What is the thing we need the most at the moment?’ And the thing we need the most is evangelism and new churches being planted. And we need to be really honest and say, ‘That’s where we need to spend the bulk of the money.’*

Adding details to their proposal, they went on to note that “the URC needs to identify key geographical areas and invest in evangelists and church planters over several years, nationally if possible. This can build on discipleship groups to provide people that are prepared to start new churches.”

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**Most members we spoke to wanted structures of the denomination to be streamlined and simplified.**

## Structures

Both qualitative and quantitative data collected in the research reveal strong conviction regarding the need

for structural reform. Most members we spoke to wanted structures of the denomination to be streamlined and simplified to account for the current size and condition of the denomination and to facilitate a clearer orientation toward local mission.

Concrete suggestions ranged from reducing the number of synods, disbanding committees, simplifying processes, including access to synod grants, and generally strengthening relationships and communication, forging new collaboration pathways between different levels and departments of the denomination, including individual churches.

Casting a vision of what the future of the URC might look like, a synod member of staff said:

*It should be about being local, being comfortable with being small, being flexible, approaching the ministry in a more missional way. Yet remembering there is something tying the congregations together, pooling resources, helping each other, connecting meaningfully with each other, practicing 'intelligent networking' and remaining in constant dialogue.*

Indeed, several interviewees noted that sharing of money across synods and local contexts, according to need and missional opportunities should be encouraged and facilitated accordingly. Financial resources should be made more accessible to local congregations particularly where there is intent and opportunity to engage in mission-related work (e.g. employing visionary and theologically trained youth workers; projects that create new or deepen existing links with local communities; projects and programmes that build confidence in the Gospel and the sharing of faith through deeds *and* words; creative expressions of evangelism).



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# Conclusion

As the title of this report suggests, the United Reformed Church is a paradoxical church. It is top-heavy, with structures forged in, and arguably fit for a different era, yet vibrantly activist at the level of local congregations. It is people poor, as a result of on-going congregational decline, yet for the same reason – and somewhat ironically – ‘cash rich’, with a solid financial situation resulting in part from the sale of closed church buildings.

At just over 50 years since it was established as an expression of ecumenical fervour and hope, the United Reformed Church now finds itself at a crossroads: will it simply manage its decline or leverage its paradoxical position and rich heritage to rediscover its *raison d’être* and forge a path towards the future? This report is offered as a resource to help with answering this question.

Chapter one outlined areas and aspects where the URC is flourishing, notably in the vibrant community outreach of many URC local congregations, the positive culture of listening, inclusivity and collective decision-making that are at the heart of the URC identity. Chapter two identified key barriers to flourishing, at both local and wider levels of church life. These include the various challenges faced by largely aging and declining local congregations, as well as denominational structures that risk stifling rather than enabling local congregational life and mission. Finally, in chapter three we suggested a series of pathways to flourishing, which include the improvement of leadership and ministerial training and reforming the structures of the denomination.

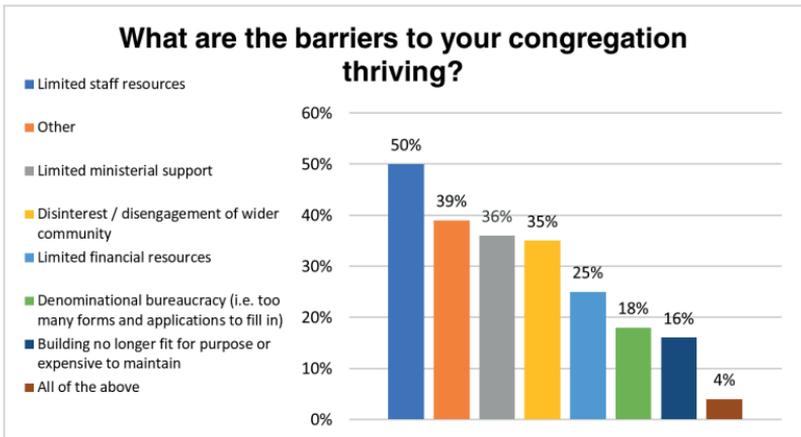
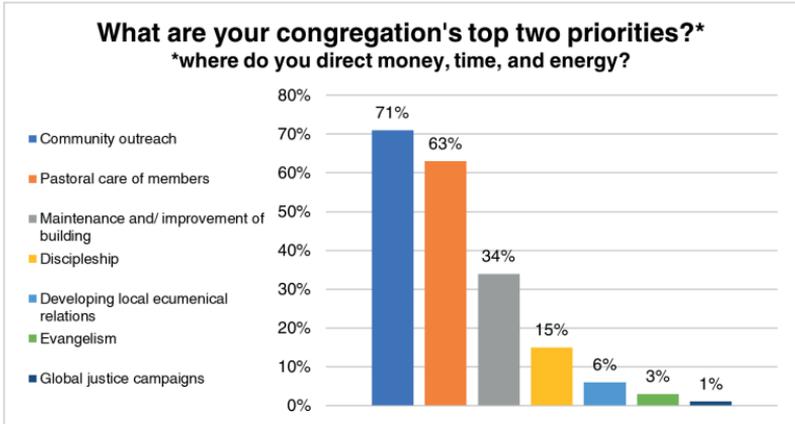
In the end, the future of the URC depends, we believe, on the way the denomination chooses to prioritise and properly

resource local congregational life, discipleship, and holistic mission. Therein lies the promise of flourishing.



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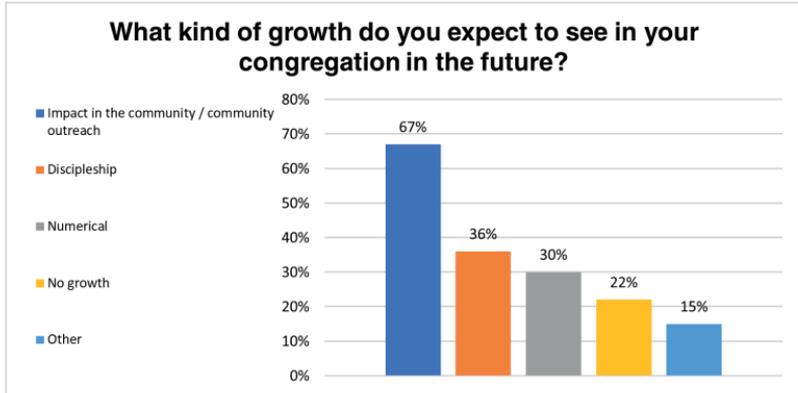
# Appendix 1: Insights from the online survey



NB: We did not specify if “staff” in the “Limited staff resources” option referred to paid staff only or to volunteers as well, though we intended the latter.

“Other” representative responses include:

- Apathy of congregation
- Individualism of church members
- Getting people to pray
- Spiritual immaturity of membership – lack of disciple-making members
- Covid and future lack of ministry
- Struggling to get back to 100% post-Covid
- Complete lack of ministerial support
- VERY VERY little ministerial leadership
- Our minister is fantastic but has too many churches to care for.
- Lack of response from Synod
- No interest by Synod
- Reluctance of URC to provide financial support for re-development of church building for increased community use/involvement
- Lack of ideas on how to thrive
- Lack of volunteers with time and commitment
- Legal compliance demands



*NB: A few respondents took issue with word “expect” in the question we posed, suggesting instead “hope” or “pray”. The term “expect”, however, was chosen advisedly, inviting respondents to give answers that were based on concrete strategic priorities and intentional efforts rather than aspirational.*

“Other” responses included:

- Reducing numbers
- Decrease in congregation
- We have been given the gift of becoming a multi-cultural church: we need to work on how to make full use of that gift.
- Hope always for growth but not realistic with no leadership or involvement of stipendiary local ministry although some support from retired ministry
- Aging congregation who will run out of steam
- We have a thriving toddler group and two families have recently come to breakfast worship which is a new venture.
- Difficult to say; elderly congregation who come on a Sunday
- No growth within our congregation as we have no children/ young people who attend and the majority of our small

congregation are 70+. Nonetheless we have 3 very well attended outreach projects currently running.

- Our Church building is a community hub in the village.
- We are striving for greater community contact.
- Growing in love and support for one another
- I do wish to see numerical growth first before we could even offer something to wider community.
- No growth; elderly congregation unable to commit
- Online presence; more ethnic diversity
- We are looking at amalgamation with other URC churches in the area to release resources.
- Leaving a legacy through support of a pioneer ministry

In the final item of the survey, which invited respondents to “provide any additional comments you have related to the questions above”, we received comments such as:

- Limited numbers and aging congregation makes it difficult to do as much as we would like. COVID definitely took its toll. There is ambition for greater discipleship and witness.
- We have been 6 years without a Minister. We would like to expand with children but do not have the people of the right age and ability to do this. The URC need to help churches more who are without Ministers. Make ministerial training more convenient by providing training nearer home for those with full-time jobs.
- We are actively engaged in outreach and involvement in our community. Our numbers are small but growing – with young families with children and an increasingly multicultural church. Average congregation before Covid was under 20, now it’s around 30. But with 20 members we have been in ministerial vacancy for five years and do not see much prospect of calling a minister anytime soon (though we have very good oversight from an Interim Moderator, who has

given us a considerable amount of his time). We have also had very helpful and consistent support from our Synod (even if they can't give us a minister!).

- A very few people do all the tasks. With ever increasing responsibilities and training needed for safeguarding, health and safety risk assessments, secretary, finance, DBS requirements, Eco, property repairs etc., leading worship and caring for pastorate it's not surprising that there is little time or enthusiasm for arranging extra ventures. 1 sheet of A4 checklist for some jobs such as Safeguarding coordinator and health and safety's responsibilities would be helpful.
- Struggling with finding our mission in a rural community that wants church for hatch, match and dispatch but little else.
- Our building is used by the community so it would be heart-breaking for the church to close, but with an elderly congregation and limited resources from the leadership team, I think we are just keeping the church afloat until the money runs out or the leadership team stand down as they have already been serving for 10 years plus.
- We need to make our church and our faith appealing to the next generation. A building they can feel welcomed. A place where they can learn about our faith in Jesus and experience Christian values.
- We feel we can have more impact in a more socially deprived community.
- Our future is exciting as we complete our programme of redevelopment to bring our church into a community hub.
- Our congregation is mostly over 70. No Minister for nearly 10 years. Lay preachers and retired ministers provide biblical teaching. Lack of pastoral and caring support from Synod. We are a Fairtrade church, eco-friendly and care about our locality and its people, and indeed the whole planet.

Thus we financially and physically support both local and international charities.

- Following our Vision Day in September we started a discipleship programme and will review our progress in January when, as a result of our increased confidence to talk to one another about our faith, we intend to start some community outreach programmes and plan church building alterations to match the new needs as they arise.
- Too much pressure placed on too few Elders to do everything. Not enough ministers to cement pastorate together. Too many initiatives that hit a dead end because no volunteers to follow through as too busy with all the red tape. Our focus as Elders should be on worship provision, pastoral care and furtherance of God's kingdom through spreading the Gospel.



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## Appendix 2: URC church closures and deprivation between 2013 and 2022

## Introduction

**This question we sought to answer in this exercise was whether URC churches have been closing in deprived areas more so than in less deprived areas.**

To answer this question, we made use of geographical data on the location of URC churches, both currently still open and closed, between 2013 and 2022. We compared this to data on deprivation collected by the National Statistical Offices of England, Scotland and Wales.

Each of the constituent nations reports and measures deprivation using their own distinct Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD): IMD for England, WIMD for Wales and SIMD for Scotland. While IMD methodologies may be conceptually similar, separate indices of deprivation have been developed overtime to acknowledge the differences between countries. According to the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (2020), the IMD data across nations is generally noncomparable.

The data used for both England and Wales is collected at the Lower Layer Super Output Level (LSOA). Data for Scotland is collected per Data Zones, an equivalent to LSOAs. LSOAs and Data Zones are nested within Local Authorities (LA), which are then ranked based on the average IMD of their constituent LSOAs and Data Zones. England has 317 LAs, Wales has 22 and Scotland has 32. Of Scotland's LAs, three have an identical ranking; these have been regrouped to form a total of 30.

The chosen level of analysis for this exercise is at the Local Authority level. Data collected at the LSOA level is too granular to allow for meaningful comparison, as attenders to a particular URC church will almost systematically come

from outside of the church's LSOA (the few streets that are immediately adjacent to the church) but more rarely from outside the church's Local Authority. Therefore, despite the loss of precision caused by using an averaged measure of deprivation, an analysis at the level of Local Authority provides greater validity with regards to the expected socio-economic profile of the people attending URC churches in a particular locality.

To allow for some level of comparison across the three nations despite the inherent differences in measures of deprivation and ranking, the ranked Local Authorities and Council Areas are divided into five quintiles:

	<b>England</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>Scotland</b>
Q1	1/317 to 63/317	1/22 to 4/22	1/30 to 6/30
Q2	64/317 to 127/317	5/22 to 9/22	7/30 to 12/30
Q3	128/317 to 190/317	10/22 to 13/22	13/30 to 18/30
Q4	191/317 to 254/317	14/22 to 18/22	19/30 to 24/30
Q5	255/317 to 317/317	19/22 to 22/22	25/30 to 30/30

Closed and extant URC churches are coded in quintiles depending on the ranking of their Local Authority within their respective nations.

Q1 corresponds to the 20% most deprived Local Authorities of each nation respective to their own measures of deprivation. Q5 corresponds to the 20% least deprived, i.e., most affluent, areas of each respective nation. All intermediate quintiles correspond to sections of 20%.

For ease of understanding, the quintiles are qualified and referred to as follows:

Q1	Very deprived
Q2	Deprived
Q3	Neither affluent nor deprived
Q4	Affluent
Q5	Very affluent

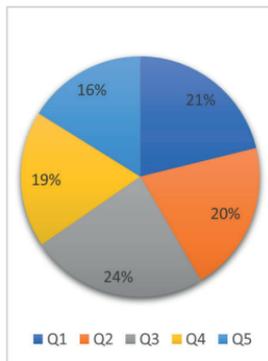
The four URC churches in the Crown dependencies of the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey have been omitted from the report. The Crown dependencies produce their own statistics, and no data on deprivation is available.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics concerning the 2022 composition of the URC with regard to the level of deprivation of the location of its churches reveal stark differences between England, Wales and Scotland.

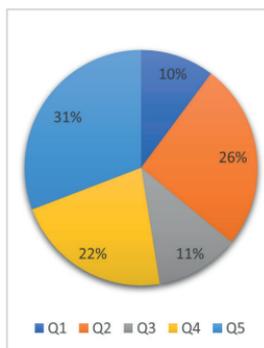
Insofar as the three nations can be compared, the difference between Wales and Scotland stands out the most. Whereas Scottish URC churches are mostly located in very deprived and deprived (51.2%) areas, Welsh URC churches are mostly located in very affluent to affluent areas (52.6%). In England, the URC's presence is very balanced across areas with different levels of deprivation, with only a slightly reduced presence in the most affluent areas.

Comparative table showing the location of existing URC churches in Great Britain in relation to the quintile deprivation of their Local Authority area



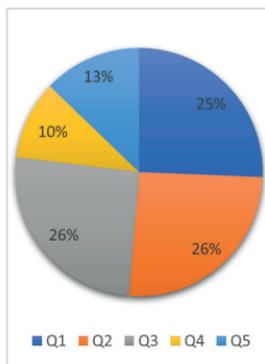
### England

Engld.	Churches	%
Q1	234	21.2%
Q2	225	20.4%
Q3	264	23.9%
Q4	203	18.4%
Q5	179	16.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1105</b>	<b>100%</b>



### Wales

Wales	Churches	%
Q1	8	10.3%
Q2	20	25.6%
Q3	9	11.5%
Q4	17	21.8%
Q5	24	30.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>100%</b>



### Scotland

Scotld.	Churches	%
Q1	10	25.6%
Q2	10	25.6%
Q3	10	25.6%
Q4	4	10.3%
Q5	5	12.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>

The difference in numbers of churches is also very important. With 1105 churches in England, the remaining URC churches located in either Wales or Scotland account jointly for less than 10% of the total.

### Table comparing the location of URC churches in deprived areas in the three nations between 2013 and 2022

		England	Wales	Scotland	Total
2013	No of churches	1308	102	49	1459
	No in Q1+Q2	554	40	25	619
	% in Q1+Q2	42.3%	39.2%	51.0%	42.4%
2022	No of churches	1105	78	39	1222
	No in Q1+Q2	459	28	20	507
	% in Q1+Q2	41.5%	35.9%	51.3%	41.5%

Closed 2013-22	No of churches lost	203	24	10	237
	% of total lost	15.5%	23.5%	20.4%	16.2%
	No lost in Q1+Q2	95	12	5	112
	% lost in Q1+Q2	46.8%	50.0%	50.0%	47.3%

Comparison between 2013 and 2022 reveal that there appears to be no significant tendency for URC churches to close more in deprived areas than in affluent ones.

### England

The URC has lost 15.5% of its English churches since 2013. Of the lost churches, 46.8% were in deprived and very deprived areas. Given that currently 41.5% of English URC churches are in Q1 and Q2 areas, compared to 42.3% in 2013, this means English URC churches closed in deprived areas as well as affluent areas in proportion to its geographic composition. Churches in deprived areas have only been closing slightly – and not significantly – more than in less deprived areas.

### Wales

The URC has lost nearly a quarter (23.5%) of its Welsh churches since 2013. Of the lost churches, half (50.0%) were in deprived and very deprived areas. Given that currently only 35.9% of Welsh URC churches are in Q1 and Q2 areas, compared to 39.2% in 2013, this means Welsh URC churches have closed somewhat more in deprived areas than in affluent areas.

## Scotland

The URC has lost a fifth (20.4%) of its Scottish churches since 2013. Of the lost churches, half (50.0%) were in deprived and very deprived areas. However, currently 51.3% of Scottish URC churches are in Q1 and Q2 areas, compared to 51.0% in 2013. Despite more churches closing in deprived areas in Scotland between 2013 and 2022, given the pre-existing prevalence of URC churches in deprived areas in Scotland, URC churches closed in both deprived and more affluent areas in a way that is proportional to its distribution in Scotland.

## Summary

If, unlike in England, URC churches in Wales and Scotland seem to have closed more in deprived areas than in affluent areas, the discrepancy is much larger for Wales than for Scotland. In Wales, the geographical composition of the URC seems to have shifted somewhat towards more affluent areas, however this was already the case in 2013. In Scotland, the greater loss of churches in more deprived areas did not translate into a significant change in distribution because the URC was already more present in deprived areas in 2013.

Overall, and as far as the three nations can be compared, the proportion of URC churches in very deprived and deprived areas across Great Britain has not varied much, from 42.4% in 2013 to 41.5%. This is a drop of less than 1%. In Wales and Scotland, the URC has lost more churches in deprived and very deprived areas than in areas ranked 'neither affluent not deprived' to 'very affluent'. However only in Wales does the difference appear to significantly affect the overall distribution of URC churches across different areas of affluence.

Even then, the distribution of Welsh URC churches in deprived and very deprived areas between 2013 and 2022 only represents a drop of 3.3% on the scale of Wales, from 39.2% in 2013 to 35.9% in 2022. In denomination-wide terms and for a total of 1222 churches in 2022, the loss represents only a very small and insignificant proportion of its churches.



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I am grateful to the United Reformed Church for first suggesting the research partnership that sits behind this report. Special thanks go to Dr John Bradbury, the General Secretary of the URC, as well as the steering group of the project and the wider Church Life Review group. Their openness, even courage, to engage in this research, knowing it would inevitably throw up uncomfortable truths alongside encouraging findings, is commendable. I am grateful for their practical help and support during the various stages of the research.

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