

Caring for the environment, the marginalised, small churches

1. **Zoom Etiquette:** Members of Synod Together joined the meeting via Zoom. The Synod Clerk clarified the etiquette for taking part in the meeting and the voting procedure.
2. **Welcome and Constitution of Synod Together:** The Synod Moderator welcomed all who had joined the meeting. She duly constituted the Synod meeting. The Synod Clerk explained that votes would be counted on this occasion by means of the technology being used. He also explained that for the item on Ministers' pensions, it had been clarified by the Charity Commission that ministers ie those with an interest, could nevertheless participate in discussions and decision making.
3. **Opening Worship** was led by Revd Alex Mabbs. The reading was John 2: 13 - 22 and the hymn was "One day, one day" <https://youtu.be/aJ45Tk4ZgEo>
<https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/communion/communion-service-2016/>
Alex was warmly thanked for this introduction to the theme of the meeting.
4. **Minutes of the meeting held on 10th October 2020:** The minutes were agreed to be an accurate record of the meeting and were duly signed by the Moderator.
5. **Pastoralia:** The roll of Synod Together was tabled by the Synod Clerk including the names of 89 ministers, 152 lay members and 95 retired ministers. Apologies had been received from 16 members of Synod Together (9 ordained and 7 lay).

Synod Clerk reminded the meeting of those church members who had been bereaved or died in recent months.

Since the last meeting the following ministers had had close family members die.

Bernard Fidler, Lesley Charlton, Sally Willett, Jo Patterson, Russell Furley-Smith and Martin Belgrove.

Also the following retired ministers who had died

Revd Ann Cole

Revd Peter Mackintosh

and Revd Amanda Harper

The Synod Clerk led the meeting in prayer giving thanks for their ministries, commending them to God and praying for the bereaved.

6. **Synod changes** Since the last meeting the following changes of personnel had taken place or were about to take place within the Synod.

Ministerial movements

Left or leaving:

Revd John Gordon to Northern Synod

Revd Alex Mabbs to Northern Synod

Revd George Watt to Thames North Synod

Retirement:

Revd David Bedford

Revd Graham Dadd

Revd Derrick Dzandu-Hedidor East Croydon URC

Revd Ernest Yu Trinity Wimbledon

Arrived:

Revd Prince Brown-Engmann to volunteer prison chaplaincy and associate minister at Geddes Place

Revd David Pickering to Emmanuel West Wickham and Elmers End Free Church

7. Jubilee Ministers:

25 years: Fiona Thomas, SPI Lewis, Bob Street, George Kalu

30 years: Roy Cole, Marina Jeffrey-Watson, John Braund

35 years: Peter Elliot, Andrew Fairchild

40 years: Margaret Juhasz, May Segain

50 years: Brian Stone

60 years: Jack Beeson

65 years: Donald Finnan

8. Synod Committee Reports

The Moderator explained that Papers A-D were for information not for debate.

- i. Synod Council [Paper A] The paper had been circulated in advance of the meeting. The Moderator thanked George Watt for his convenership of Synod Council and wished him well as he moved to Thames North.
- ii. Synod Ministries [Paper B] The paper had been circulated prior to the meeting.
- iii. Synod Children's and Youth work [Paper C] The paper had been circulated prior to the meeting. Tom Hackett reported that Marie Jackson had joined the group.
- iv. Synod Church Building Fund Panel [Paper D] The paper had been circulated prior to the meeting.

There being no questions, all reports were received.

9. Finance Matters and URC Ministers' Retirement Fund [Paper E]: The report on the Retired Ministers' Pension Fund had been circulated prior to the meeting. More generally Mr John Denison, Synod Treasurer, spoke to the following items

M&M: He thanked all churches for their M&M contributions in 2020 and their commitments for 2021. He appreciated that 2021 might be even more difficult than 2020.

Church Accounts: He asked all churches to submit their 2020 accounts as soon as possible - even unaudited drafts would be helpful as church accounts were the starting point for calculating M&M contributions and therefore, 2019 accounts would not give a true picture.

Church Treasurers: He noted that many churches were struggling to find treasurers and encouraged them to contact Synod Office for advice. He also encouraged all treasurers but especially those new to the role to enrol with the Association of Church Accountants and Treasurers (ACAT) which provided training and seminars and very helpful advice on keeping accounts. (to register the following details will be required - User name: URC, Password Tavistock)

Synod staff: He expressed his thanks for the remarkable work being done from home by Catherine Kingdom and Opuene Charles and asked for patience if they were not able to respond to queries as soon as wished.

With regard to Paper E John made the following comments

Three things to bear in mind during our discussions:

- "1. We are here to look at the deficit in the Ministers Defined Pension scheme and how to settle it. Not any alternative pension plans. That is a possible discussion for the future.
2. The present estimated deficit result from the increasingly onerous requirements of the Pension Regulator towards these schemes.

3. The calculated deficit is NOT the result of mistakes made by the trustees of the pension scheme. Any suggestion that they are is completely wrong. Under the regulations at the time of the 2018 actuarial valuation the estimated deficit was £3.8 million.”

The cause of the revaluation of the pension scheme following the 2018 actuary’s valuation was adequately set out in Paper E.

Today’s discussion was to look at Southern Synod’s response to the need to contribute towards eliminating the expected deficit to the satisfaction of the Pension Regulator.

The Integrated Risk Management (IRM) group had tried to work closely with the thirteen synods to establish a route to eliminate the deficit within the time frame established by the Regulator, 2031. This has been a difficult path for the IRM group and the synods which had been working on it over the last two years.

The two funding streams to eliminate the deficit, as difficult as they appear, were he believed to be the best way forward.

He warned that Southern’s participation may, as stated in pages 3 and 4 of his report, result in a realignment of the Synod’s mission priorities. This, however, was not a foregone conclusion but it was important to realise it could happen.

John Ellis as a member of Synod Council spoke of déjà vu as this was not a new situation but emphasised that what was before Synod was a moral and a pastoral situation and that all lay members should bear in mind their commitment to care for their ministers whilst in service and into retirement. The URC as a denomination had the resources to meet these needs provided this was a priority. He endorsed the Synod’s willingness to play a full part in addressing the deficit.

In answer to questions it was clarified that:

- the nature of the current pension fund was not what was currently being debated,
- that reference to the trustees was to Synod Trustees,
- that the central URC’s reserves contribution (as opposed to Synods) was still to be determined
- that the amount of Southern Synod’s contribution would depend on other Synods. This would be brought back to Synod. No precise figures were available at the moment but what was being sought was an endorsement of the Synod Trustees pursuing further discussions.
- In the case of the proceeds of redundant church buildings sometimes being re-invested in another project, John Denison agreed that in these circumstances he felt that those funds needed to be ringfenced and would argue in the further discussions that it would not form part of the 50% contribution
- David Bedford asked what debate there had been nationally about the assets of the Retired Ministers’ Housing Society and felt that these assets be brought into play. John Denison understood that this had not yet been considered but would bring it up in the discussions.

The following Resolution was passed by a significant majority in spite of difficulties experienced by some voters in registering votes:

Synod Together endorses the position of the Trustees and the Synod Council with a view to participating in meeting the deficit in the Ministers’ Pension Fund.

10. There was a short break

11. **Presentation of Lundie Memorial Award:** Tom Hackett, the Synod Children’s and Youth Development Officer, advised the meeting that Noah Boyce from Christ Church Westgate URC had been nominated by his minister for his contribution to online worship at his church and had subsequently received the award. A video of the presentation by Tom to Noah was shown.

Tom advised that anyone interested in nominating should go to <https://urc.org.uk/news-from-the-lundie-memorial-award>

12. **Supporting Small Churches:** Martin Hayward, Synod Mission Officer, talked firstly of resilience. He felt that resilience could be a mark of a small church (rather than failing). Smaller churches faced many difficulties in finding resources to carry out their mission. He planned to create a “small church network” within the Synod which could look at research and others’ experience and reconsider what it is to be church. Churches could survive by finding a few things and doing them well. On Saturday 11th September the network would be launched from 10.30 to 2.30pm. To register contact missionofficer@urcsouthern.org.uk.
13. **Racial Justice Advocacy:** The Moderator welcomed Sharon Henriques from Kingston URC and Janet Layne from Charlton URC who had agreed to serve as Co-ordinators of Racial Justice in the Synod. Janet described how historically a concept of white superiority had arisen which today persisted in education, employment, society generally and even in our churches. Mission Council had agreed on a need to be “anti-racist”. Sharon talked of disproportionality within churches and unseen barriers to inclusivity and described measures taken at her own church. She hoped that every church would appoint a racial justice advocate. She and Janet would support this network. Over the next 12 months she and Janet offered to attend church services to inspire this. John Bunker asked that details of the presentation be circulated. Cliff Elmore asked about the technical side of adding subtitles to make meetings accessible to those with hearing difficulties. The Moderator recommended reference to Mark Rigby of the Tech Team for advice.
14. **London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC):** Revd Andy Twilley, Synod Training Officer, talked about how the lockdown had revealed new ways of what a church could look like. He recommended a course run by LICC which had already been piloted by ten churches in the Synod all of which had benefitted and discovered what it means to be missional churches. Another group was to planned to start in the autumn and a vision event was to be held in the next month or so to get churches on board. He encouraged churches to engage with the vision event with a view to being part of the next group of churches. To register interest contact training@urcsouthern.org.uk
15. **Discussion Item:** Revd Alex Mabbs introduced the topic of care for creation. During the last 5 years he had met with churches wishing to address the care of God’s creation in a positive and practical way. He recommended Eco-Church and offered to visit churches during the remaining time he had within the Synod. The meeting was invited to discuss the following questions in Breakout Rooms

The Eco Church scheme audits five areas of Church life: Worship, Buildings, Land, Community Engagement, and Lifestyle of members. In which areas do you think your Church is strongest and weakest? What could you make a priority for action in 2021?

How do you think the Synod can support Church members and Churches to reduce carbon emissions and care for Creation?

Feedback from the breakout rooms:

Experience varied between churches and their varying type of buildings and locations. Difficulty of getting all members rather than an enthusiastic few to engage. The need to listen to young people and their concerns.

Individuals needed to take action as well as groups. Decisions should not be market based. A framework for taking action would be helpful. Some energy saving devices were not as efficient as advertised. Alex commented that this was true and that it was very complicated to establish the facts but even little things could help.

Small things included bio-degradable packaging and products – start small.

It was not all that difficult to get silver award. Getting everyone on board had been a challenge. A Kent based company Alpha 311 offered wind powered turbines as an alternative source of energy. Advice from Synod would be appreciated. Enthusiasm could be infectious. A garden made from recycled materials.

Churches needed guidance.

Retired Ministers Housing currently did not approve solar panels and Synod was asked to make enquiries about this.

A change to manse guidelines would be welcome eg a charging point for electric cars

Technical help with insulation, solar panels would be helpful. Consideration to holding more meetings remotely.

Recommended Carbon-neutral suppliers of gas and electricity. A Synod wide audit of energy consumption might result in a group tariff.

Don't re-invent the wheel. A list of churches which had already done projects would be helpful.

16. Any Other business:

- i. **Mission Council** was to meet the following week and prayers for those attending were asked for. Papers were available on the URC website particularly Paper A1.
- ii. **General Assembly 2021:** 9 – 12 July will be held on line. Those who had been due to attend in 2020 were invited to attend in 2021 but there might be a few places available and adjustments required to ensure proper representation.
- iii. **Thanks** were expressed to the URC for the online services and resources available during the lockdown.
- iv. **Synod Together 9th October 2021:** Synod Clerk reminded the meeting that Synod Together had a well established pattern of meeting on the 2nd Saturdays of March and October. He hoped that the October 2021 meeting might be an in person meeting.

17. Closing of Synod Together:

The Moderator expressed her thanks to the technical team and Lauren, her PA, and all who had contributed to the meeting. She closed the Synod Together meeting noting that the next meeting would take place on Saturday 9th October 2021 (venue to be announced) or at such other time as may be deemed necessary.

She gave a blessing to bring the meeting to a close.