

THEME: A time to Plough, a time to Sow, a time to Grow and a time for Harvest

- 1. Health and Safety Notices:** At 10.30am, Wendy Hopkins, the Church Secretary, welcomed everyone to Reigate Park United Reformed Church and gave health and safety notices.
- 2. Welcome and Constitution of Synod Together:** In the absence of a Moderator, Revd Russell Furley-Smith, as Convener of Synod Council, chaired the meeting. He welcomed all who were in attendance and duly constituted the Synod Together meeting.
- 3. Pastoralia:** In June the former Moderator, Revd Bridget Banks, had taken early retirement on the grounds of ill health. She was thanked for her ministry and wished well for her retirement. The deaths of Revd Alex Mabbs, Revd Alwyn Knight, Revd Malcolm Hill and Revd Roy Bones were noted with sadness. Russell also referred to the death of Mr Ralph Bradshaw who had faithfully served the Synod in many capacities over the years. Russell remembered them in prayer. Pastoral concern was expressed for Revd Nadene Snyman and Revd Memona Shabaz. Revd Martin Knight was welcomed after a period of illness. The newly appointed Safeguarding Officer, Natalie van Camp, was welcomed. Revd Peter Scotland had recently celebrated his 90th birthday.
- 4. Opening Worship:** Opening worship was led by Revd Sue Knight, rejoicing in the turning of the seasons and welcoming autumn. The bible passage was Galatians 6:7b to 10. Revd Siobhan Antoniou continued with an address on the theme of thanksgiving, growing and serving. Russell expressed the wish that the meeting reflect this theme as a time to give thanks and lay the ground for harvest.
- 5. Minutes of Synod Together 8th March 2025:** The minutes were found to be an accurate record and were duly signed by Russell.
- 6. Matters Arising not dealt with elsewhere on the agenda:** En bloc decision making had been used at the previous meeting (all reports being taken as read without discussion). The next meeting of Synod Council would take a decision as to how a report might be taken out of the "en bloc" decision making. Paul Woods from Burgess Hill, expressed the view that there had been little time to read and absorb the papers for this meeting. He regretted the en bloc process and the timing of papers being sent out. Russell reminded the meeting of the particularly hard time the office staff were experiencing during a time without a Moderator and asked for understanding. The Synod Clerk noted that many of the papers referred to meetings which had only taken place in September or very recently and would have been difficult to circulate earlier.
- 7. Synod Roll and apologies for absence:** The roll of Synod Together was tabled by Revd Martin Hayward, the Synod Clerk, including the names of 194 members comprising 61 ministers and CRCWs, 109 Synod Reps, 24 Co-opted Members and a

total of 78 non-voting members. Apologies had been received from 36 members of Synod Together.

- 8. The appointment of tellers:** The following were elected as tellers – Revd Martin Knight, Mrs Deirdre Harrison and Mr Tom Hackett. Conflict of Interest: A policy was being developed by General Assembly to deal with potential conflicts of interest. Russell asked for speakers to make clear if they had a potential conflict of interest.

A time to plough

- 9. Presentations: Church Life [Paper A]** A special General Assembly was to take place in November to consider the proposals which had resulted from the Church Life Review Process. Synods were being asked to consider proposals and support the funding required. A film describing the aims of the Review - i.e. how best to support local churches - was shown.

To implement the recommendations of the Review, it would be necessary to create a fund to which Synods would contribute in line with what they could afford. The Synod Treasurer, John Denison, advised that he had been a member of the Church Life Finance Working Group looking at how to resource the Church Life Fund. The group had considered how much would be required on an annual basis and then how to find that amount. The working group had looked at three possible annual funding scenarios. £1.0 million, £2.5 million and £4.0 million. Considering the three workstreams it was realised that £1.0 million and £2.5 million scenarios would not be sufficient to provide any meaningful funding so the preferred option was an annual fund of £4.0 million. How is it to be raised and from which synods? Having investigated this the working group came up with four contribution groupings: high, medium, low and minimum. Southern as would be expected came in the “High” grouping.

The project has a projected lifespan of 10 years with a review after 3 years. Any unutilised funds at the end of the 10 years would be returned to Synods in proportion to their giving.

Southern Synod, as a ‘high’ contributor, was being asked to contribute £550,000 per annum for the first 3 years. John Denison advised that this was affordable for Southern Synod. Russell added that this contribution would not impact the current Synod Strategic Mission Fund.

Jo Patterson, the Synod Mission and Discipleship Officer, spoke of the joy she derived from encountering different people in the course of her job. She invited everyone to discuss with their neighbour something which gave them joy. Form filling and compliance was a necessary responsibility of being church but if the proposals of the Review were adopted, then energy could then be released to do other things. What was important was that each church should comply with its own situation and context, giving the examples of the large and thriving church in Saltaire and the small in membership church at Camberwell Green, both in their own way recognising ways of fulfilling needs within their communities.

Jo reminded us that Mission could mean looking after our own discipleship and joy and that would in turn be an attraction to others. She invited people to have a conversation about what gives them joy within their church.

It was important to talk of the joy which knowing Jesus could bring. Churches needed to look for fresh opportunities to evangelise. She invited people to talk to someone they didn’t know about the joy they found in their church. So although this might be a little uncomfortable, this was what we needed to practise.

John Denison reminded the meeting that since 2020 Southern Synod had already made grants and loans totalling £10.8 million to churches in Southern Synod and the denomination.

The Trust had already taken a decision to support the Church Life Fund and The Synod was asked to endorse these decisions.

Bernard Taylor of Pagham URC and Roger Johnstone of Christ Church Sevenoaks were advised that the contributions to the Fund would come from Synods, not local churches (although there was nothing to prevent local churches from doing so if they wanted to). Reference was made to the Ministers' Pension Fund which had benefitted from generous funding from Synods.

The following resolutions were put

Resolution:

Synod Together endorses the Synod Trust's resolutions passed on 11th September 2025 listed below.

Subject to the General Assembly agreeing to establish a Church Life Fund at its meeting in November 2025:

- 1. The United Reformed Church (Southern Synod) Trust Ltd endorses the proposal to establish a Church Life Fund.*
- 2. The United Reformed Church (Southern Synod) Trust Ltd agrees to a contribution of £550,000 per annum over an initial 3-year period, to be reviewed thereafter with a view to further contributions.*
- 3. The United Reformed Church (Southern Synod) Trust Ltd instructs the Officers of the Synod to communicate to the Church Life Review Steering Group the level of contribution recommended by 31 October 2025.*

The resolution was carried with 60 votes in favour, no objections and no abstentions.

- 10. Synod Structure Review [Paper B]** (Taken after the lunch break) Mrs Sue Eardley, Secretary to the Synod Ministries Committee, introduced the paper which outlined a review of Synod Structures particularly in the light of the agreed Synod strategy to renew, re-imagine and re-order. The Review Group was to comprise the Synod Clerk, Sue Eardley and Revd Keith Morrison and further volunteers would be welcome. The process was to involve an information gathering exercise including consultation with local churches, interviews with key people and engagement with Synod committees - all with a view to recommend changes, where they were needed, to the structures of the Synod to enable the local church to flourish and thrive.

John Ellis highlighted the size of the Synod's growing balance sheet, currently £34 million. The Synod was in need of a strategy to use this resource. He regretted that the paper did not contain a timetable for giving consideration to this.

John Bunker from Emmanuel, Worthing endorsed John Ellis' comments stressing the need to use some of the Synod's resources for the benefit of local churches.

- 11. Conversation Starters Coasters:** Mr Tom Hackett, the Synod Children and Youth Development Officer, introduced a new resource which might be used to encourage and enable people to have conversations about faith. Each attendee had been provided with a bag containing coasters which might be used with all ages in different situations in church life. Attendees were invited to discuss how they might use the coasters in their own context.

There was an interval for lunch.

- 12. Synod Fun Day:** Revd Ruth Armstrong described plans for a Synod Fun Day on Saturday 20th June 2026 at the Hop Farm, Tunbridge Wells. It was hoped that it would be a day of worship, fun and fellowship for all ages. Cost was envisaged as being £5 per head. Ruth particularly asked for volunteers to help plan and organise the event and requested everyone to spread the word and encourage attendance.

13. Welcomes and farewells:

The Synod Clerk advised that Revd Helen Higgin-Bottom was to retire at the end of the month, and she was formally greeted by Russell and thanked for her service. On behalf of South London Synod Area, Alistair Wilson introduced Revd Maurice Omorojie who had recently been ordained and inducted 25% at Cheam and 75% Synod Directed Work.

Revd Anne Lewitt, on behalf of Surrey and Sussex Synod Area, presented Revd Sue Knight recently ordained as Non-Stipendiary (Local) Minister at Reigate Park Church. Certificates of ordination were presented by Russell to both Sue and Maurice.

The Synod Clerk introduced Natalie van Camp, new Safeguarding Officer. Deirdre Harrison introduced Martin Leonard who had received accreditation as an Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher.

Revds Ken Lynch, Barry Carter, Bryan Shirley, and Robert White were congratulated on the 50th anniversary of their ordination.

Revds Roger Jones and Reggie Mudenda were congratulated on celebrating 25 years of ordination.

- 14. General Assembly Changes:** The Synod Clerk drew attention to the General Assembly Digest which had been distributed with Synod papers. He noted that in the past it had been possible to balance the number of representatives who were chosen because of the office they held along with other representatives evenly spread across the Synod Areas. As the allocation of representatives for General Assembly 2026 has been reduced from 16 to 12 per Synod, revised criteria for choosing representatives would have to be applied.

- 15. In search of a new Moderator:** Russell, as Synod Council Convenor, had outlined a timetable for seeking a new Moderator following the early retirement on health grounds of Revd Bridget Banks. This had been described in the Synod Council report. Once advertised, ministers were open to apply but also it was open to anyone to make a nomination. Nicola Martin, Deirdre Harrison and Russell would represent the Synod on the selection panel. Anyone with views as to the expectations of our next Moderator should address their views to Russell at convenor@urcsouthern.org.uk

A Time to Sow

- 16. Synod Children's and Youth Work Committee Report [Paper C]:** Tom Hackett introduced the report which had been prepared by the Committee Convenor, Graham Purdye drawing attention to
- recent Lundie awards.
 - The Children and Youth Friendly Church Award made to Marsh Green church.
 - The new Synod Youth Representative who was Tawonga Mtika.
 - Zeerak Shabaz who had represented the Synod for the previous two years
 - Training and networking opportunities.

17. **Synod Council Report [Paper D]:** Russell spoke to the report. In addition to 4.1 Russell was able to announce that Gillian Jones would start in December 2025 as administrator for Surrey and Sussex Synod Area.

18. **Synod Ministries Committee Report [Paper E]:** Mr Simon Loveitt, Committee Convenor, spoke to the report. The Deployment Sub-Group was now being re-shaped. A very successful Visionary Companions Day had been held the previous month.

A Guidelines paper had been prepared to bring practice on presiding at the sacraments within the Synod into line with national guidelines. John Ellis and several others expressed concerns with the guidelines. Views were expressed regarding the emphasis on having a minister of word and sacrament preside whenever possible, the changes which would impact Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, the expectations of those who had undertaken Synod lay preaching courses and Sacraments training, the extra level of record keeping which would be required. Revd Lesley Charlton drew attention to the fact that ecumenically who should preside at the sacraments was a big issue and not one to be dismissed lightly. The comments would be taken on board by the next meeting of Ministries Committee although it was stressed that the guidelines were those of the denomination and therefore allowed little room for deviation. The Guidelines would be brought to the next Synod Together meeting in March 2026.

19. **Synod Property Committee Report:** No report

20. **Synod Finance Committee Report [Papers F1-2]:** Mr John Denison, Synod Treasurer, presented the Committee's report F1 which was accompanied by a summary of the accounts for the financial year ending 31st December 2024. Anyone wishing to see the fuller version could apply to Synod Office. He reminded the meeting that the current financial status of the Synod was entirely due to the sale of church buildings. Were it not for the sale of buildings, the Synod would have to draw on its reserves to continue to serve local churches. While the balance sheet total stood at £35.1 million within that total were unrestricted funds which included the Manse Fund (£13.0 million) and the General Purposes Fund (£20.7 million) used to meet Synod expenditure including deficits in the annual accounts. Revd Carol Clack expressed dismay that given the reserves of the Synod, it remained hard to access funding for local churches. John responded with a reminder that the Buildings and Mission Funds were prepared to provide funding - it only needed to be asked for. John provided details of the General Purposes Fund, which operates as the synods funding account.

Paper F2 addressed the proposed budget for 2026. The income forecast was a conservative one. Proposed expenditure allowed for a continuation of the Mission and Building Funds and provision for refurbishment of the Synod Office. This produced a projected deficit of £2 million pounds (but this assumed no sale of buildings.) In response to a question John advised that there were currently 132 church buildings in the Synod. The budget was approved with one abstention.

John thanked the Synod Office staff and Synod Area Treasurers who contributed such a lot to the financial ordering of the Synod. Russell thanked John for all that he did in his role as Synod Treasurer.

21. **Thank yous and date of next meeting:** The Synod Clerk thanked the team at Reigate Park for their hospitality, the current technical team, and all those who

had contributed to the meeting in different ways. He was grateful to Lauren King his PA for her assistance. He also thanked, in their absence, Richard Westbrook, Neil Percival and Martin Hayes, of The Temple URC, St Mary Cray, who had been responsible for so much technical support at past Synods and who had now 'retired' from their role.

Martin reported that the next meeting was due to take place on Saturday 14th March 2026 at Christ Church Petts Wood.

22. Closing Worship: Using Ecclesiastes 3: 1-4 on the theme of Seasons, Martin noted the dramatic changes experienced in the cycle of life. He quoted from Mike Riddell "*The alternative to painful change is a comfortable death*". So, change was inevitable, change for churches and individuals and he was no exception. He advised the meeting of his intention to retire at the end of March 2026. Russell expressed his appreciation of Martin's service as Synod Clerk which would continue over the next few months. The meeting concluded by singing "The love of God comes close".

23. Closing of Synod Together meeting: At 3.15 pm Russell closed the Synod Together meeting noting that the next meeting would take place on Saturday 14th March 2026 or at such other time as may be deemed necessary.

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