

MINUTES

MINUTES of the meeting of **WESSEX SYNOD** on Saturday, 14th October 2023, held at Richmond Hill St Andrew's URC, 8 St Stephen's Road, Bournemouth, BH2 6JJ.

The Clerk welcomed members to the meeting and constituted the meeting. At the 50th Anniversary service candles were placed by each Synod on a Map, and each Synod took away a candle from another Synod. The Clerk showed the candle from the North Western Synod which she had received and placed this on the table in front of Synod.

23S30 The Clerk brought Resolution 1:

RESOLUTION 1

Synod Meeting agrees for The Revd Josh Thomas and The Revd Mike Thomason to be the Chairs of Synod Meetings until a new Moderator of Wessex Synod is inducted.

Resolution 1 was agreed unanimously.

Peter Clark and members of the Synod's South West Pastoral Committee led opening devotions, beginning with the Iona hymn "All are welcome" and remembering the conflict in Palestine and Israel and asking for God's guidance of the Synod meeting in prayer. The Bible reading was Matthew 16:18-19.

Attendance

25	URC Ministers and CRCWs
43	Church representatives
1	Ministers of other denominations
0	Retired Ministers/CRCWs
0	Ordinands
13	Others holding Synod appointments
13	Visitors
95	Total

23S31 Welcome to Ecumenical visitors and new members of Synod: The Chair mentioned the apologies of the Right Reverends Karen Gorham, Bishop of Sherborne, and Debbie Sellin, Bishop of Southampton. The Chair welcomed Revd Simon Gray, the Regional Minister (South and East) and Operations Lead, Southern Counties Baptist Association. The Chair read the following statement received from Pasteur Charles Klagba, of the Eglise Protestante Unie de France (Nord Normandie Region):

"Warm greetings in the name of our God. Peace and grace of Jesus Christ be with you.

I would like to thank you for your invitation to attend the Synod.

My profound desire is to be part of your synod, the occasion for all participants to dream together the dream of God as we continue to be partners with Him.

Unfortunately, I will not be able to be with you.

My greetings to all the members of the synod on behalf of our Region and the President Reverend Olivier FILHOL.

I wish you a fruitful synod under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. May God bless you."

The Chair welcomed anyone for whom this was their first meeting of Synod.

23S34 Pastoral News: The Chair directed members of Synod to the Update on Ordinands, Ministerial and Church Changes included in the Synod Papers:

- i. The Chair commented on the closure of Woodley Airfield Church (UMCE) not included in the Synod papers. Synod notes the closure of Hedge End URC reported in the papers.
- ii. The Chair welcomed the recognition of Sheilagh Courtnege as a Synod Recognised Worship Leader, and Brian Harley received her certificate on her behalf in her absence.
- iii. The Chair referred Synod to the inductions of Gill Bailey ordained and inducted to Christ Church Milton, Portsmouth, on 15th August; Hee-Gon Moon (Methodist), welcomed to Christchurch Thame on 20th August; and Jeongsook Kim (Methodist), welcomed to Christ Church Woodley, on 1st September.
- iv. The Chair reminded Synod of those Ministers celebrating their 60th Jubilee: Revds J. Charles Brock and Arnold Christopher Mellor. Their names had not been included in the Synod papers but are recorded here in these Minutes. Certificates celebrating their Jubilee have been produced and will be presented.

The Chair led Synod in a moment's silence and then led in prayer remembering the deaths of the Revds Chris Copley, Emily Browne, Margaret Tilley, Peter Leonard Southcombe and Richard Johnson Wiggins. An obituary to Revd Emily Browne will appear in the papers for the next Synod meeting.

23S32 Apologies: The Clerk reported that Apologies were received from

12	URC Ministers
19	Church Representatives
4	Ministers of other denominations
2	Ordinands
26	Retired Ministers
12	Others
75	Total

23S33 Minutes of the last meeting: The Clerk advised that there had not been any notice of amendments to be made to the Minutes of the last meeting, and the Minutes of the meeting published in the Synod papers were agreed with unanimity.

No matters arising from the Minutes were identified as not included in the agenda for this meeting.

The Clerk reported that there were no changes to the Order of business to be advised.

23S35 Synod Executive: The Clerk presented the report. The Clerk drew the attention of Synod to:

- i. The appointment of Task Groups by Synod Exec that Synod had requested. These included the Big Day Out Task Group; the group that had put together the Synod Profile and documents for the advertisement for the Synod Moderator, the Clerk thanking those involved in the Interview Process; the Synod Communications Strategy Task Group, the Clerk asking anyone wishing to volunteer to join the group to contact Graham Hoslett or speak to Graham or Blair Crawford at the meeting; and the Ministry and Mission Task Group to contact the clerk.
- ii. The section in the report on Nominations. The Clerk stated that it is a continual struggle to fill vacancies on Synod committees, and that it is vital the Exec has representation from

each of the areas of the Synod. The Clerk asked members of Synod to contact the DSOs or the Clerk for further information about the work of Synod Exec and for suggestions of nominees for the Synod Exec or any of the vacancies in the report to be sent to clerk@urcwessex.org.uk

The Clerk then explained that prior to the pandemic it had been normal to hold Area Gatherings, which had included a session offering feedback from General Assembly. The Clerk asked the following questions of Synod:

Area Gatherings & General Assembly Feedback:

- How often do you want to meet?
- Do you want to meet online?
- How often do you want to meet in person?
- How do you wish to receive information about General Assembly?

The following comments were made from the floor of Synod:

- a) The Area Gatherings were formed following the dissolution of District Councils. The Area Gatherings had been well attended to begin with as the Gatherings were to discuss the churches' concerns and worries. Interest in the gatherings had faltered when the workshops were introduced.
- b) Training events had been good, but is there value in yet another evening meeting? However, relevant training events are welcome even on an evening.
- c) Churches near each other should car-share to Synod events and meetings which affords opportunity for good conversations.
- d) Some people don't finish work until the late afternoon and a 7pm start does not allow for a meal and sufficient rest.
- e) On-line platforms such as Zoom work well for information and training but less well for fellowship. The question of online or in-person formats depends on what we want from such Gatherings.
- f) The best attendance at former District meetings and the Area Gatherings tended to be at a really good tea party, with fellowship, conversation and food, especially where the host church showed real interest in hosting the event and offering hospitality. Good hosting leads to a better atmosphere and experience. However, such hospitality can lead to leftovers! There has to be a reason for meeting.
- g) Another member found Zoom meetings can be very impersonal. Area Gatherings with a training element would perhaps be welcome.
- h) Ray Stanyon wished to remind Synod that churches and church officers do not need to wait for an Area Gathering of any kind to talk and share fellowship together.

The Clerk thanked Synod for the comments received. These will be discussed at the Synod Exec meeting in November with the intention that the discussion will inform possible Area Gatherings that may take place in 2024 and 2025.

The Clerk introduced David North, the Synod Treasurer. David North reminded Synod that the Ministry and Mission (MAM) fund reflects the principle that all churches contribute to the central payment of ministerial and denominational costs.

In relation to MAM the Clerk then asked:

- What does MAM mean to you?
- What does it cover?

Responses offered included:

- i) Stipends.
- j) The spreading of the gospel.
- k) Training, Church House – maybe MAM isn't apportioned across the churches in the Synod quite as it should be, and the new Group will sort this out.
- l) Extra costs in terms of ministerial benefits and pensions.

- m) In Local Ecumenical Projects (LEPs) MAM can be paid to and then received from the partner denomination, the congregation not always being aware of what the URC element represents.
- n) Romilly Micklem thanked those churches that have responded to the MAM letter recently sent, but advised that nearly one half of churches still needed to respond. Romilly Micklem asked Synod to remember that MAM is a direct indicative of the relationship between local churches and the central church and that the Trust does not receive any benefit directly from MAM.
- o) It is a conundrum. Sympathy should be extended to those who will be serving on the Group.
- p) The smaller churches may not see the reason for contributing to MAM if they do not receive SM and don't understand what else other than Stipendiary ministry MAM pays for.

The Clerk asked Synod to remember that:

- q) The Ministry and Mission monies from churches in Wessex Synod are not received into Wessex Synod funds.
- r) The Synod is tasked with how the formula for these offers is calculated. MAM contributions are at present calculated as: cost of a minister multiplied by scoping, plus a contribution per member (on a scale based on membership).
- s) Ministry across the Synod's churches is changing and there have been concerns from churches about this formula considering the number and deployment of stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacraments and the pressure to find a 'fairer' way of funding MAM has been growing.

The Clerk stated that the MAM Task Group will be convened by the Synod Treasurer, will be supported by Ray Dunnett from the Trust, and the Clerk expressed the thanks of Synod to the Trust for their support with MAM. The Group will also include representatives from the Synod from each of the SPC areas.

The new formula will need to be brought for agreement to one of the Spring 2024 meetings of Synod.

The Group will also seek to draw up a Job Description for the Synod MAM Secretary role.

Further comments from the floor of Synod:

- t) There might be value in ensuring representation on the MAM Task Group from smaller and not just large churches.
- u) The new formula to be applied will still need to deliver the same amount of money. Churches should be encouraged to regard their contribution to MAM as a joy not a burden.
- v) The fact that the current formula includes a church membership element can act as a disincentive to the growth of the church. The level of local church Reserve, and matters of Income and Expenditure, is not currently included in the calculation of MAM.

The Clerk informed Synod of the forthcoming appointment of Reverend Doctor Michael Hopkins as Wessex Synod Moderator, and informed Synod that the Moderator will be inducted at a Service to be held at 3pm on Saturday, 23rd March 2024, at London Street URC, London Street, Basingstoke, RG21 7NU.

The Chair reminded Synod that Michael Hopkins' new book "Pastoral Care in Practice, An Introduction and Guide" is available from purchase from Michael Hopkins.

23S36 Big Day Out: David Downing addressed Synod about the Synod Big Day Out '24, an advert for which is in the Synod Papers, to be held from 10am to 5pm on 4th May 2024 at Hollycombe Steam in the Country. The day is open to all church groups, user groups, and community links.

Ticket Price Adults £8, Children £5, and will comprise a range of things for people of all ages to participate in, to worship together, celebrate together, explore together, craft together and be inspired together with community at the core of the day. David Downing stressed that the pricing has been considered at length, and it was felt good to keep the pricing simple. There will be the chance to pay an extra amount of £2.50 per person to have unlimited access to the rides. The Day in 2022 had been very good, and Synod was encouraged to attend. The Hollycombe price is much greater, and the ticket prices are subsidised by Synod.

Questions and comments were invited:

- i. Is it more than just a subsidised trip to a Theme Park? Could a few people write a sentence (from different age-groups) including short testimonials? David Downing responded that further publicity will be coming out.
- ii. Is this just for those currently in the close-knit church community, or for wider contacts? David Downing reminded Synod the Big day Out '24 is for all.
- iii. The Booking is by a QR code – is there opportunity to book in any other way? David Downing assured Synod alternative methods of booking will be available through the Synod website and an email will be sent out from the Synod Office on Monday, 16th October 2023.
- iv. Will we have exclusive use of the site? David Downing stated that should members of the public arrive the site staff will allow them entry but they will be paying the full site price. The site are not advertising the site as open on 4th May on their website.
- v. There are volunteering opportunities available, especially for folk from local churches. Anyone wanting to volunteer in any capacity for the day should email the Clerk.
- vi. David Downing added that the site catering will be different from 2022. The restaurant has now been refurbished and will be open.

23S37 General Assembly Feedback & Discussions: The Clerk reminded Synod that we send 16 representatives to Assembly, at least two under 25, and a maximum of seven being Ministers of Word and Sacraments or CRCW.

Synod broke into three groups for Feedback and Discussion, these led by Clive Snashall, Tim Clarke, David North, Jill Abrahams, Glyn Millington and Linda Jackson.

The Chair asked for members to return at 12.45pm. The Clerk asked for any comments at the group meetings that members wished recorded in the Synod Minutes to be noted and brought back to the meeting for inclusion (Appendix A).

When Synod re-convened the Chair assured Synod any noted comments would be appended to the Minutes but invited any immediate response from the groups:

- i. Has an Assembly digest been produced? The Clerk advised the link to the Digest is in the Synod papers. The think tank Theos report included in the Church Life Review Group report to Assembly can be found at www.urch.org.uk/clrg.

Synod broke for lunch, during which a Safeguarding Surgery was available in the Rainbow Room with Sharon Barr. The Chair stated that sadly the Buildings Surgery was unable to take place, but that any concerns or questions relating to church buildings or manses should be emailed to Graham Barber (at po-s@urcwessex.org.uk).

23S38 Wessex Trust: Romilly Micklem presented the report, commenting that:

- i. Church Property Committees and Finance Committees need to remember to ask permission from the Trust for any changes to the fabric of buildings or any works other than repair, especially for those seeking grants from the Trust. The Trust does not have a written policy for retrospective grant funding, but it is general practise for grant-funders to refuse retrospective applications.
- ii. The Accounts are now available on the Charity Commission website.
- iii. Letters inviting the MAM contributions were sent to church treasurers in July 2023, a further email to those having not yet responded being sent last week. As of 13th October 2023, 61 of the 110 churches in the Synod have responded, these offers representing approximately 66% of the total MAM offer of Wessex Synod. Romilly Micklem suggested that MAM can either be regarded as a tax or burden by churches or as a joyful giving and as part of their outreach as the people of Jesus.
- iv. Wessex Synod is privileged of having a more advantaged share of financial resource than many Synods in the URC. This year a contribution of £135,000 is the subject of the Resolution being recommended to the Synod, which is an increase on the contribution made in 2022. Romilly Micklem suggested the possibility that the Church Life Review Group appointed by General Assembly may make a recommendation in the future regarding the fairer sharing of resources which would see an end to the existing Synod Resource Sharing process.

Questions and comments were invited on the report, bearing in mind the workshop that would be following:

- a) Regarding permissions and grant applications, clarification was sought over those emergency repairs that might require immediate action but that might also properly be regarded as the subject of a grant application. Romilly Micklem reminded Synod of the word “usually” and the word “normally” and sought to give assurance that the Trust was not wanting to disqualify all and every request for assistance after the event. However, Romilly Micklem reminded Synod of the importance of advising Synod Property Officers as a matter of urgency in such an eventuality.
- b) The report in the Synod papers states: “Climate Emergency (‘Net Zero’) Grant Funding”, that “the Trust has made some grants under the ‘Net Zero’ scheme I announced in the Spring to support projects that move members’ churches of the Synod closer to the URC’s goal of ‘net zero’ carbon emissions by 2030.” Clarification was sought over how many of the grants awarded reported in total are part of this scheme and how successful is the scheme? Romilly Micklem replied that it is difficult at this point to project the benefits from the solar panel installations and improvements to buildings insulation, as it would take time for the benefits to be quantified.
- c) The report included Resolution 2, over which clarification was sought: Did the wording “up to” admit the possibility that the Synod could pass the Resolution but itself instruct that less than £135,000 be granted? Romilly Micklem responded that the wording “up to” indicated that the Trust had been asked to grant up to the figure stated as part of the Inter-Synod Resource Sharing process, rather than a recognition that Synod could agree to the grant whilst choosing to give less.

There being no further matters of clarification or discussion of the report, Romilly Micklem brought Resolution 2:

RESOLUTION 2

Wessex Synod approves a grant of up to £135,000 from the General Fund of the Wessex Trust to support the URC's Inter-Synod Resource Sharing for 2024.

This was agreed unanimously.

23SE29 Ministries & Learning: Tony Brett brought the report. Tony Brett thanked Sarah Hall for putting the report together. Tony Brett highlighted the following:

- i. The Deployment of Ministers of Word and Sacraments in the report is the big issue at the moment, and the report indicates the position of the conversation in each of the SPC areas. The summaries of the progress on deployment made by the Synod Pastoral Committees included in the report indicate:
 - a) In the SPC(NW) a consultation letter has been sent to church secretaries, the report including thanks to those that have responded. Tony Brett requested that any that haven't replied to the letter to please do so.
 - b) In the SPC(SW), consideration that ministers in the clusters are working more and more by way of Synod appointed ministers.
- ii. The paper from the Mission Development Group regarding Mission criteria indicates that stipendiary ministerial deployment going forward will quite probably be more about mission and not just members.
- iii. SPCs have each met a couple of times since the last Synod. Each member of each SPC has several link churches and are expected to contact church secretaries and ministers.
- iv. Lay Preaching – Tony Brett drew the attention of Synod to the reference in the report to the nomination of Scott Wheeler as the Synod Lay Preaching Advocate.
- v. Tony Brett stated the huge thanks from the Ministries and Learning Committee on behalf of Synod to the Development Support Officers for all the love and care they show to churches.
- vi. The Synod Spirituality Group needs more volunteers – any volunteers are invited to speak with Alison Toplas.
- vii. Tony Brett stated the thanks of the Ministries and Learning Committee to everyone who exercises ministry in the churches in the Synod and in the Synod, whether that be ministers, CRCWs, elders, lay preachers and worship leaders.

Matters of clarification and questions on the report were invited, the following comments made:

- a) The summary of the progress made in the SPC(NE) seems at odds with that stated by the SPC(SW) in terms of support for those churches “with solid lay leadership”. Tony Brett invited Lucy Brierley to respond on behalf of the SPC(NE), Lucy Brierley explaining that each of the SPCs had been encouraged by M&L to express the situation and progress made in each of the areas separately, whose situations are presently diverse.
- b) What will the process be in the future for unfreezing the current ‘moratorium’ on movement of ministers? Response was made that once the Synod target for deployment is reached it would be possible for vacancies to be declared, but that meetings would be taking place between the SPCs under the facilitation of Ministries and Learning to discuss these. There are some movements of ministers out of pastoral charge in the Synod that can be planned, such as retirements, but others are more of a surprise. Ministries and Learning have agreed that as movements of ministers out of pastoral charge in local pastorates occur each SPC will make the case for each vacancy to be declared to Ministries and Learning once the possibility of such declaration arises.

- c) The Synod is currently below the target for ministerial deployment within the Synod, which number is based on the Ministers available for deployment. The question of deployment remains a difficult, sensitive process, and it is necessary to move forward sensitively and carefully.

23E30 Resolution from Synod Representative: The Chair invited Graeme Panting to bring Resolution 3, proposed by Graeme Panting and seconded by Alistair Knox:

RESOLUTION 3

"I raise that, as an important integral part of Synod, we request leaders, or an appointed scribe, or volunteer to report back from workshop groups, with any suggestions and recommendations made for follow-up."

The proposer and seconder addressed Synod.

The Chair invited any matters for clarification:

- a) What time implication would Resolution 3 imply for the work of Synod, and what would be the impact on the general business of Synod? The Clerk responded that the timing indicated in the Synod agenda for workshops is more for the direction of the workshop leaders in their timing. It might prove difficult to state the time necessary for report of workshop matters to the Synod in the agenda and including such feedback in the Minutes might be troublesome.
- b) This might need to be more carefully thought out.
- c) One member indicated they generally make their own notes for their own use to bring back from committees and meetings. Could perhaps the leader of each workshop produce an A4 sheet by way of report and response in the workshop for the benefit of Synod? The proposer responded this might need not be an official review.
- d) Workshops are for the attendees, and any feedback from them can be superficial.

The Chair invited Synod to indicate whether it was ready to move to a vote using the consensus cards, and then called for a vote.

27 Voting Members were in favour, 36 against. The Resolution was lost.

The Clerk commented that where possible there would be attempt made in the Minutes to include feedback from feedback groups. The Clerk invited those attending the workshops to make any notes made available to the Minute Secretary for these to be appended to the Minutes.

23E31 Workshops: Three workshops were offered, Wessex Finances (Appendix B), led by Romilly Micklem and David North; Schools Work: Making a difference, led by Ruth White and Karen Tweed; Starting and Improving Social Media in your Church, led by Noah Brierley and Justin Brierley.

The Chair asked Synod to reassemble at 15.50.

Synod reassembled at 15.50.

23E32 Remaindered Business: There was none

23E33 Thank You: The Chair thanked the Workshop Leaders for their contributions, Deborah Walker in the Synod Office for her hard work in the administration for the meeting, the General Assembly 2024 representatives from Synod who had offered feedback, and thanked Richmond Hill St. Andrew's URC, Bournemouth, for their hosting of Synod, and Peter Hansford and the catering team, and for arranging the audio facility.

Andy Hall led Synod in a closing act of worship. Following all the talk and all the business, he invited members of Synod simply to meet with God, leading Synod in worship playing on the guitar and reading and offering a reflection on 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Andy Hall led Synod in praying for those who came to Synod discouraged, saddened, struggling or burdened.

The business was finished, and Synod was adjourned at 16.13 to meet again online on 20th February 2024, or at such other time and place as may be necessary.

Appendix A

Notes Received from Feedback on General Assembly Group Discussions:

1. Difficult for some LEPs to keep URC identity
 - “Denominational layers” where things are done differently, ie. Safeguarding Policies
 - Treasures of our own denominational history, ie. agreement to work as united.
 - Uncomfortable local context/situation.
 - Able to welcome people from other faiths and denominations, other nationalities and creeds.
 - Be comfortable explaining the URC and beliefs. More information needed to show differences between denominations.
 - Label URC doesn’t help. Need to say the whole title “United Reformed” (by who/why/what/where?).
2. Buildings, meetings, Bureaucracy, Synod, more of a community centre than Church.
3. Never accept that life long learners/always will keep learning/we do not know it all/“If we rely on God, he will supply all we need”.
4. Commit to the Kingdom of God.
 - Not just Sunday morning.
 - Outreach opportunities ie. for families.
 - Consider those who come to activities a (sic) part of the Church.
 - Meet people where they are.
 - Not about bums on seats.

Appendix B

Notes from Workshop on Wessex Finances

About 20 people participated in the workshop on Wessex Finances. A wide range of topics were covered, including:

Q: Why are we relatively well off compared to many other Synods?

A: Partly good stewardship by our trustees, partly historical (we inherited a lot of funds from our predecessor denominations owing to the way in which regional funds were passed on when the URC was formed)

Q: What is the difference between the Synod and the Trust?

A: The Trust can be thought of as a legal entity and a group of people (the Trustees) who look after the Synod's money

Q: Where does all the money go?

A: The Synod's policies cost money to implement; the biggest items being those involving employment of staff (Children and Youth Development officers, DSOs, Safeguarding, ...)

Q: What would happen if a local church / pair of churches wanted to consolidate/sell some buildings?

A: If there was a good and forward-looking plan for the future then the proceeds from that sale might well be made available to the local church. If there was only a desire to cover a deficit for a few more years, less so. The Trust has a responsibility to steward resources including church and manse buildings appropriately.