

# Paper

deficits, and the risk from maintaining an Assembly structure requiring the service of more than 500 volunteers.

The appointed Church Life Review Group (CLRG) will not be able to solve through their work every problem in the United Reformed Church.

We believe that it is the local church that is the locus of mission, bringing the Good News of Jesus to our neighbours, through word and deed. Therefore, it is incumbent on the wider structures of the denomination to enable the local congregation to engage in worship, mission and fellowship. In other words, the structures of the denomination must empower the flourishing of local churches; the structures are not here (at least primarily) to serve the institution.

However, we recognise that charity law and the Structures of the United Reformed Church place an onus on each local church to be properly constituted and compliant with a number of requirements. For some of these areas, we are proposing some ways to meet the compliance requirements through reducing the administrative and managerial





growth and pastorate size (the number of churches in the pastorate), this does not equate to causation.

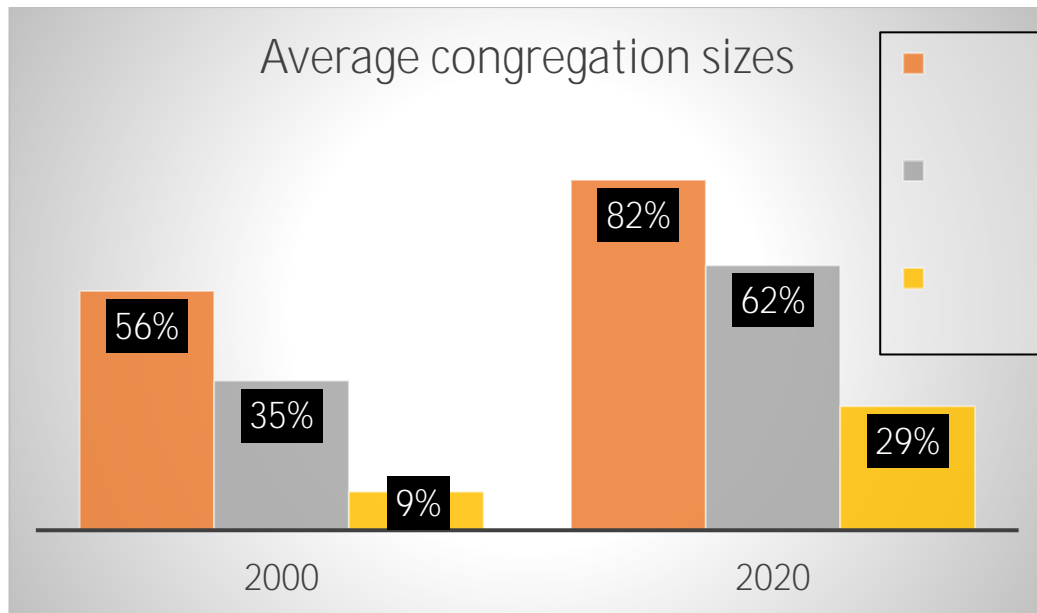
### **Demographically aging congregations**

- 3.8 Our denomination does not collect data about the age of our congregations' members, other than for under-25s in various age bands, and we do not

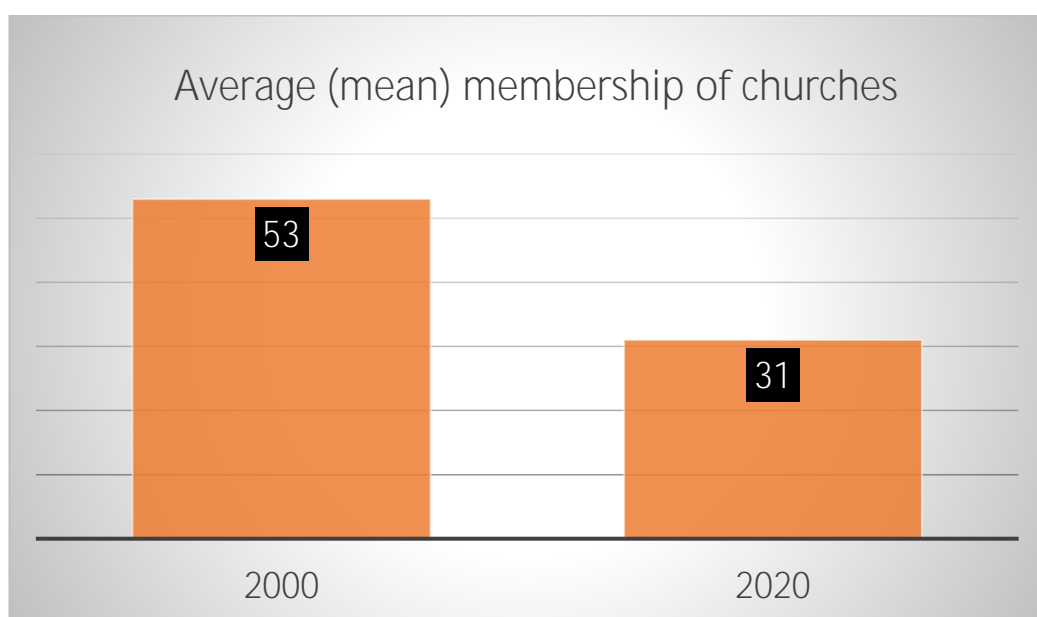
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- 3.14 Clearly, if all of this activity is left to the same two, three or a small handful of people, there is no capacity to do everything.
- 3.15 We know some churches that have “forever” been made up of half a dozen members, even if not the same half a dozen – some will have died or moved away and been replaced by others joining the church, so there is no net movement in membership size. Such small churches can play a disproportionately positive part in their local community, especially in rural areas when, pro rata to the local population, more of the community are in church than in more urban areas. Small is not the same as bad or useless.
- 3.16 We have made anecdotal observations that in the most part, smaller churches tend to be less engaged in outreach and intentionally seeking to grow their



3.19 We more typically measure a church’s size by the membership roll. This decreased in the same period from 53 members per church on average to just 31, down over 40%! The number of churches with six or fewer members has gone from 5% in 2000 to 10% (125) in 2021. Almost a quarter of local churches (23%, 289 churches) recorded 12 or fewer members in the same year. Although these very small churches with six or fewer who have committed to the privileges and responsibilities of Church Membership may be able to fulfil the legal and URC governance requirements, serious questions about their ability to be congregations offering quality worship and growing disciples must be asked. Undoubtedly, some will be doing this at least as well as much larger churches, and most, if not all, would say that they are doing their best. We believe the time has come to start to ask these questions and be ready to put in place strategies and mechanisms that will enable all our congregations to give demonstrably positive answers to them.













from churches to serve the denomination on our committees. Any church that lives in isolation from the wider church is not fulfilling this Mark/Spark.

- 4.10 The Church Life Review Group offers an eleventh Mark of Viability/Spark of Vitality. **Churches must be open to responding to the Gospel** – and we would argue that this is so central that it ought to be at the top of the list. In this, we respect the theological diversity of the United Reformed Church. Yet a church can only be made up of those already committed to living as disciples or followers of Christ, and those seeking to understand Christ's call on their life who may not yet be committed to following Him. We expect people to be changed in the light of meeting with Jesus. This does not presume a theological uniformity by any means – far from it. Christ meets us all where we are and as we are, but loves us too much to let us remain the same. Ever so, there is no mould into which an imperfect Christian is poured from which a perfected one emerges. We will retain a great diversity, even as we are being made more like Christ.
- 4.11 A church that is not actively seeking to help people develop and deepen their knowledge of God, and is not encouraging and challenging its members to

- 4.14 The first question to face is whether there is something that can be done to supplement and strengthen the struggling congregation. Are there people in a

congregation, Church Y. This has the same effect as ending the separate identity and existence of Church X, but it transfers its assets to the enlarged Church Y. Again, it may pastorally be better to regard this as a completely new Church Z, the sum of the parts of Church X and Church Y with their differing charisms and attributes. This does rely on the members of Church Y who must be willing to let go of their current identity so that it is a merger, not a takeover.

- 4.19 Fourthly, the Synod may decide to close the church, under the same function in the Structure. This can be done without the consent of the local church meeting (although potentially might be subject to a Constitutional Review process if there is a question over whether the Synod reached their decision and acted properly in achieving this end). The Synod would then assume control of the assets of the closed church.
- 4.20 Fifthly, the Synod may decide that the local church should become a Mission Project of the Synod. This terminates the status of the congregation as a local church and re-creates it as a Mission Project. Such changes must be presented to General Assembly and accepted by them. The 1992 General Assembly approved the creation of Mission Projects for causes that were not suitable (at that stage) to become “full” local churches of the denomination. Under the paragraph 2.(4)A(ii) of the Structure, the Synod may decide upon the establishment of new causes and the recognition of mission projects. The 1992 approval of this type of cause gives the Synod the responsibility to see that Mission Projects have suitable oversight a





- 4.28 Monies involved in operating the Mission Project are the responsibility of the Synod. The Synod should operate designated funds for that Mission Project, and as the Synod ultimately controls the Mission Project, even if its operations are delegated to a local committee, the Mission Project, and thus its funds, are part of the Synod's work.

## Partnering with stronger churches





- 4.55 This option is effectively making the congregation a “Local Arrangements” Mission Project, where the leadership is lay with only minimal input and oversight from an ordained minister (and if Authorised Elders are given permission to preside at the sacraments the ordained presence may be nil). Pulpit supply, the councils of the church, day-to-day management of property and finance all come from within the membership.
- 4.56 However, General Assembly resolved that Mission Projects are the responsibility of the Synod, with operational oversight from an appointed committee. No local gathering, however constituted, can be part of the United

# Appendix A

United Reformed Church

- c) The Church Meeting must be held at least once a quarter and it is our expectation that this is honoured in LEPs where partner denominations may not have the same emphasis on members' meetings.
- d) The Church Meeting is responsible for the functions laid out in paragraph 2.(1) of The Structure, including the election of Elders and officers of that local church.

#### **A4. Financial governance**

- a) The role of Treasurer is not defined within the Structure. The Elders' Meeting (acting together in council) are the body responsible for, "the general oversight of all the financial responsibilities of the Local Church" (Structure 2.(2)(x)) and the Church Meeting has the responsibility to "adopt financial reports" and shares in the same general oversight for the financial responsibilities, acting on the recommendation from the Elders' Meeting.
- b) Subject to proper reporting, especially to the Elders' Meeting so that they can fulfil their responsibilities as charity trustees, it is not necessary the Treasurer to be a serving Elder of the local church, or even (strictly) a member of the United Reformed Church. If a local church is not able to identify and appoint a competent person to manage their local accounts (which may be a person serving as Treasurer at another URC congregation, especially in a Joint Pastorate or Group of Churches), serious concern about the viability/sustainability of that congregation must be an issue to be addressed.
- c) Banks will normally require at least two signatories for an account, and these must be members of the Elders' Meeting or other local Trustee body for the church who have the authority to permit payment against the charitable funds. So that the Elders may exercise proper control of the church's finances, the URC expectation is that at least two signatories will be appointed and appropriate mandates given at the bank that payments can only be authorised by at least two signatories. This arrangement should also be followed for online banking – one person to raise the transaction and a second to authorise it. (Best practice is that there should

- c) The Church Safeguarding Co-ordinator must be sufficiently competent to do exactly that – co-ordinate safeguarding matters for the local church. This does not negate the responsibility of Church and Elders' Meetings to ensure that proper standards are maintained, but the CSC must have the confidence of the local church to lead them well in matters regarding safeguarding of children and adults at risk.
- d) Under Resolution 48 (Paper T5) of General Assembly 2021, many categories of office holder, worker and employee will be required to undertake safeguarding training at either the Foundation, Intermediate or Advanced levels. Anyone who is unwilling to undertake training at the appropriate level will thus be in breach of General Assembly policy and will not be a suitable person to hold the role/position to which they may have been appointed.
- e) Similarly, Resolution 49 (Paper T6) of Assembly 2021 updated the matrix showing the appropriate level of DBS disclosure required for a variety of office holders and employees. Other than where specified in that matrix, disclosures in Scotland are dealt with under the PVG scheme in line with the safeguarding procedures for the National Synod of Scotland. Anyone not complying with the policy on disclosures is liable to be removed from their position, and may become subject to criminal investigation.

### **A6. Upholding legal and governance requirements**

- a) Any church that is unable to fulfil its legal obligations as a charitable body must be deemed unsustainable. If, in consultation with the Synod responsible and with the Synod's support as appropriate, they cannot take action to meet those legal obligations within a short and agreed timescale, the Synod will need to initiate a conversation with the church to encourage it to consider the question of the church resolving to close or to merge with another local church. If the church cannot make that decision by itself, the Synod will need to exercise its responsibilities under paragraph 2.(4)A(iii)



# Appendix B

## Charity law requirements

### **B1. A general guide**

The following is a general guide to legal requirements and is not intended to be definitive or exhaustive nor constitute formal legal advice. This document does not cover the legal frameworks for the Crown Dependencies of the Islands of Guernsey and Jersey or the Isle of Man, although the applicable laws are the same in principle at least as those in England, Scotland and Wales where the overwhelming majority of our churches are established (that is, currently every one of our churches except for four between these three islands).

churches regarding meetings in the Structure and Rules of Procedure. We suggest that some further work is done on what a Model Governing Document for all of our churches might look like).

- iii) CC suggests asking prospective Trustees to sign a declaration that they are eligible (not disqualified) prior to appointment; it is an offence to act as a trustee when disqualified unless the CC has given a waiver for the individual.
- iv) Charities must fulfil legal duties regarding DBS checks for Trustees where the charity works with children or adults at risk.

**b) Requirements for Charity Trustee meetings**

- i) When and how meetings will be held normally set out in the Governing Document, and those stipulated, a-6(igh)-5(BT/F3I 570.7fnBTgh)-5(BT0 0 (yekd)-3( )

