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| <b>Previous relevant documents</b>          | Review of ecumenical relations, November 2011 Mission Council.<br>A Flexible Framework for Local Unity in Mission (and the accompanying Toolkit), Churches Together in England.   |
| <b>Consultation has taken place with...</b> | Mission Committee; Faith and Order Committee; Ministries Committee; Ecumenical Reference Group; Synod Moderators; the Clerk to General Assembly; members of the Law and Polity Group; Methodist/URC Liaison Group; Baptist, Church of England and Methodist National Ecumenical Officers. |

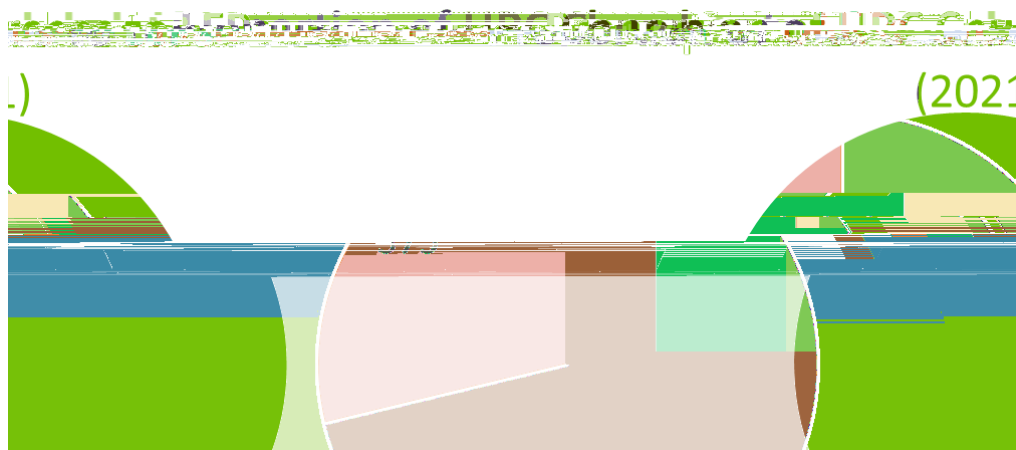
## Summary of impact

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| <b>Financial</b>                | None.  |
| <b>External (eg ecumenical)</b> | If the resolutions are adopted, this will demonstrate our continued commitment to ecumenical co-operation at a local level. The report has received positive affirmation from ecumenical partners. |

## 1. Introduction

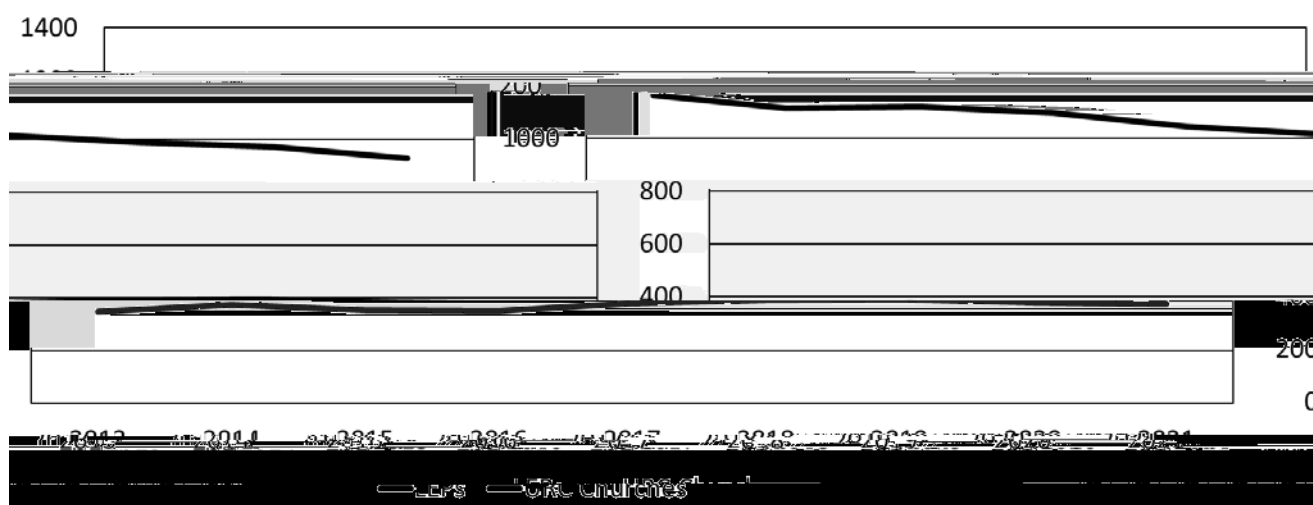
- 1.1 The 50th anniversary of the formation of the United Reformed Church invites the question as to whether this should be a moment to celebrate or lament. The coming together of the Presbyterian and Congregational churches was seen as the start of a process of further unions. We were not expected to be in existence 50 years later.
- 1.2 This ecumenical fervour was not confined to the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. The URC's first General Assembly was held at Westminster Methodist Central Hall in the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Michael Ramsey), and the inaugural service took place at Westminster Abbey.
- 1.3 The URC was brought into existence by Act of Parliament, which was only passed at the end of a hotly debated session in June 1972. The prominent Conservative MP and Roman Catholic Norman St John Stevas, who eventually became Leader of the House of Commons in Margaret Thatcher's time, summed up the ecumenical hope embodied in the formation of the URC: 'This must be seen as part of a wider move for Christian unity, not only of Congregationalists and Presbyterians coming together, but of Methodists and Anglicans... and Roman Catholics... We are moving into a new era... This is a small stone, admittedly, but a stone of great importance in a new edifice. Let those who are committed to the Christian religion get on with the work of unity to which they are commanded by their Founder.'<sup>1</sup>
- 1.4 At the time of union, Arthur Macarthur, former Presbyterian Church of England General Secretary and first URC General Secretary (joint), sounded a note of caution. He warned that without the much-anticipated move to a





An analysis of the URC annual returns for the period 2013 to 2021 reveals that, in contrast to the 20% decline in the number of purely URC local churches, over the same period the number of LEPs grew by 8%.

## Decline in URC Churches versus LEPs



- 3.4 Given that LEPs make up such a large proportion of our churches, why do they not feel to be the *heartbeat* of the denomination?
- 3.5 One of the factors is the way we count the URC element of membership in LEPs. Historically, the URC has only recorded a proportion of *ecumenical* or *joint* members in the annual count. In many cases, churches only count the *residual* URC membership, meaning those URC members registered at the inception of the LEP, and who identify solely as URC.
- 3.6 In an established LEP, joint members will usually represent the largest proportion (if not all) of its membership roll. It is an ecumenical principle that joint members are regarded as full members of all the participating denominations. Our

Methodist and Baptist colleagues include **all** joint members in their annual statistics, as opposed to the URC situation where, at best, only a proportion are included and, at worst, none.

- 3.8 This leads to a substantial undercount of the size and relevance to the denomination of our LEPs. At the last available count, we recorded that the average number of members per URC local church was 35, whereas the average per LEPs was just 21. By comparison, the Methodist Church (our closest LEP ecumenical partner) record LEP average membership as 47. 33.8



- 4.6 Although developed by Churches Together in England and its member churches, *Flexible Framework* is a model of ecumenical working that can be applied beyond the English borders. While local approaches to ecumenism are contextual, *Flexible Framework* has the potential to facilitate initiatives in Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands.
- 4.7 There is a further means of ecumenical co-operation introduced by URC Ministries in 2021, which brought in a change to the system of providing certificates of limited service. It is now possible for a minister of another denomination to take a 50% or less appointment in a Synod without that post being counted against their deployment figures. The ecumenical sharing of ministry brings the advantage of deployment taking place in more localised areas. As the overall number of ministers reduces in all denominations (this an issue shared by all our ecumenical partners, and is not limited to the URC), we face the situation that ministers are stretched across wider geographical areas. If ministry could be scoped ecumenically, this would allow for more local concentration, as happens in the ecumenical county of Cumbria.

## 5. Summary

- 5.1 In our 50th anniversary year, there will be the inevitable questions about whether we have failed in our ecumenical endeavours. To an extent, this is an unfair critique. Not only did we achieve a successful union between Congregationalists and Presbyterians, but in 1981 the Churches of Christ joined the URC, followed by, at the turn of the millennium, the Congregational Church in Scotland. As can be seen by the endorsement of ecumenical partners at our inception in 1972, the dream of full structural unity was not limited to the Presbyterians and Congregationalists. If there is a failure, then it is a collective one across the wider church.
- 5.2 While full

## References

1. Hansard  
<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1972/jun/21/united-reformed-church-bill-lords-by> (21 June 1972)
2. A future for the URC? Free to Believe Briefing  
[www.freetobelieve.org.uk/uploads/3/4/5/7/34574639/briefing\\_2017-10\\_final\\_for\\_website%5b6420%5d.pdf](http://www.freetobelieve.org.uk/uploads/3/4/5/7/34574639/briefing_2017-10_final_for_website%5b6420%5d.pdf) (Winter 2017)
3. Review of ecumenical rela -0.02 Tw >>7r.72/1f ecuR04 Tc -0.00-27.34 -D2 0 Td [ Td [e5(