

# Ministry With

## Introduction

Why have we chosen this theme for our sabbatical?

A number of factors have combined together to make this a useful time for this reflection.

Firstly, this is the last sabbatical for both of us before retirement. It is a moment to reflect on ministry and how it has changed over the years. Together we have 68 years of experience of ministry in the United Reformed Church. Nicola was ordained in August 1987. Russell was ordained in July 1989. 68 years living with ministry in the United Reformed Church. Nicola was ordained into a joint pastorate in Mersey Synod. Russell was ordained into a single pastorate in Eastern Synod. Throughout those 68 years combined years we have noticed ministry changing, as the church has changed. Now Nicola is Secretary for Ministries, Russell is scoped partly as a minister of a local church in South London and partly as Synod Clerk of Southern Synod. Ministry is very different from a practical point of view and feels very different than it did in the late 1980's. This sabbatical, our last before retirement, gives us a unique opportunity to reflect on some of those changes and to think about how ministry might be shaped in the future.

Secondly, we both read a book soon after publication which challenged us to reflect on ministry but neither of us had time to do so until this sabbatical. Samuel Wells published *The Nazareth Manifesto*<sup>1</sup> in 2015. In it he argues that “*with* is the most important word in the theology”<sup>2</sup>. If ministry was shaped by the principle that ‘with’ is the most important in the church’s vocabulary, what would ministry look like? This is a pertinent question because of another factor in our choice of subject.

Thirdly, throughout our combined 68 years of ministry in the United Reformed Church there have been discussions about the deployment of ministry and particularly the deployment of Stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacrament. These discussions currently suggest that “the deployment of ministers is broken”<sup>3</sup> and the church faces a deployment crisis. Whilst some of the statistics for the decline in the number of Stipendiary Ministers of Word and Sacraments is undeniable, we wonder whether the perception of the crisis is rightly framed and whether potential solutions to this crisis are seeking to address the real issues. If ministry was framed by the understanding of ‘with’ being paramount, would the ‘crisis’ be perceived differently? Again, the sabbatical gives us a unique opportunity to reflect on this important matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wiley Blackwell 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wiley Blackwell 2015) p.11 our italics

<sup>3</sup> attributed to Revd Dr John Bradbury, General Secretary of the United Reformed Church in a report on the Church Life Review update from URC Assembly Executive in Digest (News from the United Reformed Church) with February 2022 Reform magazine

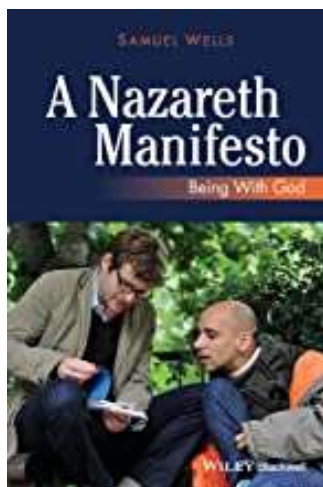
Fourthly, it is worth noting that our sabbatical was due to be held in 2021. It became very clear to us, as early as mid 2020, that that would not be possible. In March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic due to the Covid-19 virus. We went into the first of a number of lockdowns and life changed dramatically overnight. Life in churches inevitably changed too. Worship reverted very quickly to being online and ministers had to learn new sets of skills and had to adapt as to how to fulfil their responsibilities safely but faithfully. Whilst this sabbatical is not, primarily, a reflection on ministry during the pandemic, the experience of the last two years inevitably is drawn upon when the notion of lockdown, social distancing and shielding had a profound impact on any understanding of being 'with'.

What is offered here is not definitive. But we are grateful to the generosity of the United Reformed Church for giving us this unique opportunity to explore, together, Ministry With.

Nicola and Russell Furley-Smith  
September 2022

## Ministry With

### 'With'



As stated above, Samuel Wells published *The Nazareth Manifesto*<sup>4</sup> in 2015. In it he argues that “*with* is the most important word in theology”<sup>5</sup>.

He presents his argument most simply in reflecting on the challenge presented by encountering a ‘homeless’ person in a city centre.<sup>6</sup> What might you do following such an encounter? He suggests there are four options:

Option One: you decide that homelessness is a terrible problem and so you go away and form an organisation that will deal with homelessness. You will form a board of people like yourself who are determined to do something about it. Wells defines this

approach as Working For.

Option Two: you get a group of people together to work on the issue. The group will include homeless people, but also local business, the local authority and other charities, perhaps other churches to work with you. Wells defines this approach as Working With.

Option Three: you go up to the homeless person, perhaps buy them a cup of coffee, and you sit down with them and engage them in conversation about whatever topics are in the news at that day, in order to discover more about them and to allow them to find out about you. Wells defines this approach as Being With.

Option Four: you go home and to blog about homelessness, telling people that too many people use the wrong language about homeless people. They shouldn’t refer to the ‘homeless’ but as individuals with their own stories. Wells defines this option as Being For.

Well’s argument is that Option Three (Being With) is the most authentic, Christlike approach and the one that should shape the life and mission of the Church and, thus, the ministry of the Church.

His concern about Option One and Option Four (both options involving ‘for’ rather than ‘with’) is that you never have to actually talk with a homeless person. You think you already know the answer and you understand the homeless person only by what they lack: ‘a home’. You can fix it through your contacts, understanding etc. His concern about Option One in particular is that in Working For you actively solve it simply by creating an organisation that seeks to solve a perceived problem but does not engage with those whose problem you think you need to solve. With Option Four, in Being For you seek to fix the

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wiley Blackwell 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wiley Blackwell 2015) p.11 our italics

<sup>6</sup> Sam Wells, *Being With* video on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2Zci7KBXms>

problem of homelessness primarily by ensuring the whole of society knows your understanding of the issue of homelessness. But your understanding may not be relevant to the 'homeless' person you encountered. His concern about Option Two (Working With) is that your approach still assumes you know what the problem is and that the person you met has a problem that needs solving by you. So, he concludes:

*“Being with is the only approach that puts the homeless person at the centre of the story and doesn’t assume that the homeless person is a problem that either I or they need to fix. It looks into the mystery of the reality of that person’s life and cherishes that person’s life for its assets, what is good about it, where the skills are, where the flourishing life is and doesn’t start with its deficits – that that person simply doesn’t have a home.”<sup>7</sup>*

Wells reflects on the life and ministry of Jesus. He highlights the fact that Jesus spent one week of his life in Jerusalem (Holy Week) Working For people; he spent 3 years (according to the Synoptic Gospels) Working With in Galilee with his disciples and other followers; and he spent the rest of his Being With in Nazareth before the start of his public ministry. So he concludes that if ministry is to be truly incarnational and mission is to be truly incarnational it needs to have the same shape as Jesus’ life. It needs to be 90% being with, not just as a means to fixing things but to recognise that all of our life as citizens of heaven is preparing to be with God and with one another forever. Our job as Christians is to imitate the life of heaven and the way we do that is the way we go about being with one another. This means we need to review all of our mission and not to assess the things we do for people, the way we try to fix other people’s lives or the solutions we try to find but to focus on whether we are generating the right kind of contexts in which real human connection can be made.

Wells suggests that the paradox and perhaps the tragedy of so much of Christian mission and ministry is that we are trying to solve the wrong problem.

*“We get into our heads that the human predicament is about limitation – that we die, that we get sick, that we have disabilities, we are short of food and so on. The human problem is not limitation. The human problem is isolation – isolation from one another and from God”.<sup>8</sup>*

Wells suggests that if the human problem were limitation, then the solution would be in the laboratory to end the limitation on food, wealth and, ultimately, life. It would be in further research. It would be in expensive new technologies. But limitation is not the problem and trying to solve the problem of limitation only exacerbates the real problem which is human isolation. “We become fantastic at being able to talk to people in Australia but we lose the art of communicating with our next door neighbour.”<sup>9</sup> For Wells, that encapsulates the problem. “We think we want to solve all the world’s problems by working for. We miss the fact that the answer to life, the universe and everything is being with.”<sup>10</sup>

He concludes by suggesting that the mission of the church is to imitate the life of heaven. In heaven, “there will be no problems to fix. There will be no point in working with and

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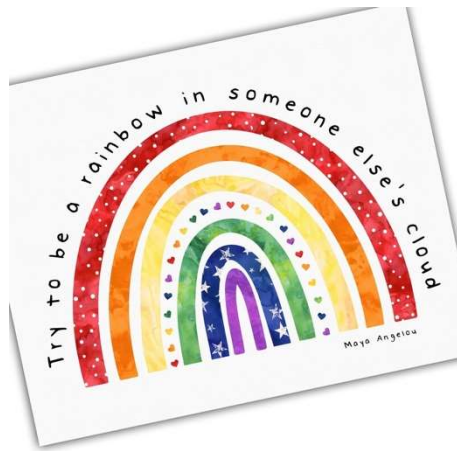
<sup>7</sup> ibid 3 min 36 secs

<sup>8</sup> ibid 10 min 45 secs

<sup>9</sup> ibid 11 min 40 secs

<sup>10</sup> ibid 11 min 51 secs

working for. It will be all be being with ...being with God. That's what ministry is about. That's what mission is about. That's what discipleship is about. And in the end that's what forever will be about."<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Ibid 11 min 59 secs

## Ministry With

### 'Characteristics of Being With'

In Nazareth Manifesto, Wells outlines 8 characteristics of Being With which reflect what a ministry of Being With would look like. For Wells, each characteristic is rooted in the life of the Trinity and embodied in the life of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Presence**

'Being With' is all about presence. Presence means being in the same physical space as the person with whom you are engaging.

#### **Attention**

Presence is not enough though. You can be in the same space as someone but not engage with them positively. Attention transforms presence from 'showing up' to 'focused interaction'. It requires concentration, memory, emotion, alertness and a full engagement with the other person that is not distracted by other concerns or influences.

#### **Mystery**

This rests on distinguishing between viewing a situation or a person as a problem, which needs to be solved using skills acquired elsewhere, and a mystery, which is unique, can't be fixed or broken down into its constituent parts, is not fully apparent to an outsider, but can only be entered, explored, and appreciated. Treating, for example, death as a problem risks wasting energies pursuing solutions, many of which take one away from a person's presence and divert attention elsewhere - thereby missing the call to be with someone as they enter a great mystery.

#### **Delight**

This is the recognition of abundance where conventional engagement is inclined only to see deficit. Delight rejects the template of how things should be and opens itself to surprise and humour and subversion and playfulness. Delight is glad to take time where conventional engagement is overshadowed by urgency.

#### **Participation**

Participation names the way being with is indispensable and unsubstitutable. It diverts attention from what is done to ensuring the right balance of who does it. Of the hundred reasons to bypass being with, efficiency is near the top of the list. Participation says there's no justification for leaving someone behind, and it queries whether our hurry to get somewhere is rooted in our reluctance truly to engage with the person with whom we are travelling.

#### **Partnership**

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<sup>12</sup> Wells outlines the 8 characteristics most fully in A Nazareth Manifesto (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015 chapters 8 and 9 pp.125-168)

To supplement participation, partnership considers how respective gifts can, when appropriately harnessed, together enable a team to reach a common goal. Partnership sees how the gifts of the "needy" person, habitually obscured by the working-for impulse to be helpful on one's own terms, can make unique contributions to common projects. In this sense it comes within the territory of working with, and it indicates how closely working with and being with sometimes resemble one another.

### **Enjoyment**

The dimension that encapsulates and epitomizes all the previous ones is *enjoyment*. This rests on Augustine's distinction between what we use, which runs out and is a means to some further end, and what we enjoy, which is of value for its own sake and is an end in itself. Being with, simply put, is enjoying people whom the world, having no use for, is inclined to discard.

### **Glory**

Finally, glory names the purpose of all things: the opening words of John's Gospel ("the Word became flesh ... and we have seen his glory"; 1:14) demonstrate that the epitome of glory, and the originating purpose and final goal of all things, is God being with us in Christ.

## Ministry With

### 'With in Ministry'

Samuel Wells reflects on the implications of 'with' in terms of ministry most clearly in *Incarnational Ministry*<sup>13</sup>, in particular, the chapter entitled 'Being with the Called'<sup>14</sup>. Wells uses his characteristics of being with to assess the work of public ministry.

Significantly, Wells begins his analysis by recognising that "... all are called. All are called to discipleship; all are called to ministry; all are called to mission."<sup>15</sup> So he sees '**participation**' as being paramount in ministry. Everyone is invited to participate in ministry as an expression of their response to discipleship. However, whilst all are called, "not all are called to the same expression of discipleship, the same form of ministry, the same field of mission."<sup>16</sup> Discernment is therefore paramount as disciples must be wise to the ministry God is calling them to undertake. Consequently, participation in ministry inevitably involves '**partnership**': "disciples never forget for a moment that their calling is always a partnership between themselves and God, and between themselves and one another."<sup>17</sup> Being with in



ministry requires discernment, is a life-long adventure and must be flexible enough to respond to unforeseen circumstances. In being with people, those involved in ministry need to be "**present** to them at such crucial turning points in their lives"<sup>18</sup> as such presence is an incarnate statement that 'God is in this place'. Such presence necessitates **attention** as the person exercising ministry in any particular context needs to be attentive to the context and story of those with whom they are present and needs to be wise to where the person is in terms of their response to the gospel call. In the context of ministry, **mystery**

"knows that calling is less a career than the renunciation of a career; that it's seldom wisely entered by those who have perfect assurance of what they are doing; that by definition it can only be pursued by disciples who pray daily to be clothed with power from on high; and yet it's a service that brings perfect freedom."<sup>19</sup> Mystery also recognises that setback and hardship, aside from simply being disappointing and sometimes distressing, "are the richest source of insight into God and the ways of God"<sup>20</sup>. This is where mystery coalesces with **delight**, for delight sees the abundance and not the deficit<sup>21</sup>: for delight "the key counsel is, Strive to be what only you can be"<sup>22</sup>. The ministry of being with assumes abundance: "it expects to find that the Holy Spirit has given God's people everything they need to worship, befriend, and follow, and thus perceives that the experience of scarcity is more likely to be due to the church's wilful or indolent neglect of what's been given than the lack of sufficient

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2017)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* pp.114-132

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p.114

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* p.115

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* p.117

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* p.126

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* p.127

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*



generosity or provision in the giver". Whilst mystery listens to the joys of the things that a person does for their own sake, delight pursues the skills of an individual that give blessing to others or to a community. **Enjoyment** is derived from recognising those skills and attending to others, helping them move from discipleship into their own ministry and/or mission.<sup>23</sup> **Glory** is given to God when gifts, given by God, are turned into offerings of service which find fulfilment in being taken into God's story.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, Wells says the ministry of being with is the: "...constant cherishing of, and invitation to others to share in, the amazing sharing in God's habitation and dwelling - the experience of glory. And that's to be done not by claiming an entitlement or earning a reward, not by demanding justice or achieving a goal, but by gratefully, eagerly, and joyfully employing the gifts one has been given in the story one has been cast in. The parable of the talents becomes the daily psalm of being with the called: "These are not the gifts you asked for or the circumstances you imagined; the cards in your hand were not dealt by you, the other players in the game are not the ones you guessed they would be; but given this context, given your story, given, most of all, God's story, and given the way you've been made, how are you going to enjoy the what, the who, and the where that lie before you? This is how things are: but how are you being called to respond? Which way lies the glory?"<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> ibid pp.128-129

<sup>24</sup> ibid p.130

<sup>25</sup> ibid pp.131-132

## Presence

On 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 Russell sent the following email to all members and friends of Purley URC for whom there was an email contact:

Dear members and friends of Purley United Reformed Church

This is an email I never thought I would have to send.

As a newsreader said on Tuesday, 'unprecedented is an over-used word but not under current circumstances'.

I am contacting you to inform you that the Elders, acting as Trustees, following guidance from the United Reformed Church (both Church House and Synod) have taken the decision to temporarily suspend all public worship with immediate effect. In other words, there will be a suspension of Sunday morning worship, Sunday evening gatherings and Food for Thought.

We have also agreed to temporarily suspend all church organised or church related gatherings and meetings. In other words, there will be a suspension of coffee mornings, Friday lunches, Thursday Playtime etc. Church Committees will also not meet unless that can be organised remotely. Again, this follows advice from the denomination.

For those for whom I have an email contact, I will send worship material for you to use at home this coming Sunday and subsequent Sundays. The URC, centrally, is currently producing material to assist churches to worship remotely.

Please, please be assured that none of these decisions were taken lightly. However, the advice given most recently was very clear. Churches have to suspend worship and meetings....

With love and prayers

Russell  
(On behalf of the Elders/Trustees of Purley United Reformed Church)

Presence, in other words, suddenly became problematic, in the extreme. Things taken for granted for the whole of our ministry were suddenly impossible. Yet, the email was deliberately worded: we were closing the premises, not the church. Hence the message also said:

You will have many questions about what happens next. So do I. At this point, though, the Elders can assure you that we will continue to 'be church' even though we cannot meet physically for a while. We will discover new ways of being church. I urge you all to keep in regular contact with one another. We will continue to support one another through what will be undoubtedly very challenging time...

The life of PURC is changing as is the life of our world. We will need to be strong and faithful, remembering that we are made in love, for love, to love. We will continue Living the Love of God, but in a different way from the way we have been used to.

As I say on too few occasions, it is a joy and privilege to be minister of Purley United Reformed Church. That is even truer now as, together, we rise to meet the coming challenges in faith, hope and love.

The church is the people not a building. So church life continued, albeit in a very different form. Whilst physical presence became challenging, but not impossible, presence was experienced through online presence, prayerful presence and the rediscovery of the power of a telephone conversation rather than an impersonal email.

So here are a few random thoughts about the importance and practice of presence:

- Presence doesn't always have to be physical. During the pandemic 'living the love of God' (Purley URC's mission strapline) meant reducing physical presence to a bare minimum in order to keep people safe. Alternative methods of presence proved invaluable.
- Physical presence does enable a greater degree of engagement though; reading people's body language is not so easy on a 'zoom' call as it is in person;
- Physical presence is clearly more beneficial in resolving difficult situations rather than seeking to deal with the issue by email. For example, in February, a garden fence at the manse 'came down' during storms. There was some uncertainty about whether the fence was the responsibility of the manse or our neighbours. Emails were exchanged but brought little response. It was only when there was face-to-face engagement between those 'looking after' the manse on behalf of the church and our neighbours that the issue was suitably resolved and a useful relationship was forged. This would not have happened with a physical meeting;
- Whilst the church is the people, not a building, we need to be mindful of the importance of sacred spaces and thin places. For many people, their 'thin place' is the building they usually gather in on a Sunday morning. Many people were grateful when recording of services was clearly taking place in their 'sacred space';
- Sacred spaces can even be important for those who claim no allegiance to a particular faith. We are aware that a tiny chapel on a cliff top in North-West Corfu is a 'sacred space' for many people who regularly claim "not to be religious". However, they feel this is a place that takes them into a different realm (although they cannot name what that different realm is) and, for many, it has become a place of pilgrimage as they remember loved ones who holidayed with them their and they remember them by adding their names to an ad hoc cairn that has been built over the years;



- Similarly, it was the wish of Russell's mother that her ashes (she died in January 2021) be scattered in her favourite part of the Scottish Highlands. This summer, with the rest of the family, we were able to carry out her wish. Although she never lived there, it was the place she felt 'at peace', having holidayed there so many times. Location is important for people and we do well to recognise those places where people can particularly be aware of the presence of God;



- Minister's, whether in local pastorates or in other roles (such as Secretary for Ministries) cannot be omni-present. People do not expect them to be and recognise the need for Minister's to have 'time off'. What people do expect is that Minister's will be fully engaged when they are 'present'. This means that Minister's need to:
  - manage their work/life balance carefully and sensibly;
  - plan ahead as much as possible;
  - make space in the diary for emergencies;
  - be flexible to needs as they arise;
  - keep abreast of possibilities and challenges (like all Ministers, we wish we had followed more closely the possibilities that modern technology was already providing to ensure that a move to 'church online' was not as fraught as it was).

## Attention

Presence, on its own, can be welcome but, in isolation, can seem very passive. An ecumenical colleague, reflecting on Sam Wells's work, suggested that "If all God was offering was a promise to show up" that would not amount to good news for anyone. Of course, Wells is not suggesting 'presence' is the end of 'being with'; indeed, it is only the initial step towards 'being with'. Ministry is more than simply 'showing up'. What sort of presence should we be seeking? Teachers and preachers alike, amongst others, will be familiar with pupils and congregants being present in class or listening to a sermon, but their engagement with the teaching or with worship may be negligible or non-existent. Sam Wells suggests the next step requires attention. Attention is "the practice of loving study, of noticing and remembering minute particulars, of engaging the senses to register and cherish unique and characteristic qualities, of digesting and savouring and dwelling upon appearance, gesture, texture, and tenderness."<sup>26</sup> It is: "eager, intent, sharp, poised, alert".

The importance of attention alongside presence suggests one obvious issue with 'zoom' meetings. Attention in online meetings and worship was often less than 100%. One minister reflected that one of her church members 'enjoyed listening' at home to the online worship offered by her church as she could do the ironing at the same time. Whilst there is clearly a theological principle which suggests that it is helpful to worship God whilst doing household chores, there is surely a need for closer attention to be paid at least once a week to God that does not involve ironing. Being neglectful of the fine detail that attention offers can often have dire consequences. Russell was aware that his passport expired in March 2023. He saw no need to seek a new passport until after the sabbatical. Unfortunately, changes in rules from some countries following Brexit, meant that the same passport was only valid for 12 months from the date of issue. This date meant the passport effectively expired in July 2022! With a planned trip overseas in mid August this led to a frantic last minute effort to get a new passport, with a suggested waiting time of over 10 weeks, which would have been too late for the planned trip. After a few anxious days, time spent seeking an emergency in person appointment rather than using the postal renewal – and a significant extra cost for the emergency service – a new passport was issued and collected in time for travel. If only Russell had paid attention to the new guidelines this stressful time could have been avoided!

Ministry has always involved attention. When people are telling you 'their story' it is important they know this is the only thing that matters in that particular moment. Over the years ministry has changed, though. Attention now also has to be paid to a longer and longer list of compliance issues. All of them, individually are valuable. Everyone knows the importance of keeping safe children, young adults and adults at risk – and those who work with them. However, there is a grave danger that such compliance matters become the primary focus of time and energy rather than tools within the toolbox of the ministry and mission of the church. Paying attention to the 'business' of running a local church or a denomination (eg. finance, maintenance of buildings, lettings) must not detract from the primary focus of 'living God's love'. This is, perhaps, where more support, advice and

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wiley Blackwell 2015) pp.126-7

expertise, needs to be offered by the wider church. But already over-worked offices at both Synod and General Assembly level will need to be properly resourced to provide the ability to enable local churches to pay attention to those things which are at the heart of their ministry and mission, such as worship, all age learning, community engagement and outreach.

## Mystery

Mystery rests on distinguishing between viewing a situation or a person as a problem, which needs to be solved using skills acquired elsewhere, and a mystery, which is unique, can't be fixed or broken down into its constituent parts, is not fully apparent to an outsider, but can only be entered, explored, and appreciated. Mystery teaches us that being with is to be enjoyed simply for its own sake.

Since December 2021, we have been living with mystery. Anorexia, the fifth person in our immediate family, arrived out of the blue with Ross when he came home from university for the Christmas break. At first Anorexia was a quiet presence and we did not notice the small changes that were happening to our family. Christmas came and went, and Ross returned to university with his new best friend. Visits became more frequent than they had been and, to be supportive in his recovery, we allowed the small changes to be made. By Easter, Ross and 'A' were back, this time living semi-permanently at home, taking over meals with their idiosyncrasies – nothing cooked in oil or butter or spread of any kind, half portion sizes if that, no carbs, excessive exercise, only water to drink. No eating out. Sniping, accusations, hateful comments (no, I really did make a mistake in buying full fat lacto milk – it wasn't deliberate!).

How Ross, our kind, intelligent, funny child had allowed this inner bully to demean, scold, nag and control him so that it fed him lies remains a mystery. He is half his safe body weight. Simply put, you do not want this inner person (or entity, consciousness, monster) in your life. If you met this... thing, you wouldn't want to spend five minutes with it. Social media, kindly meant comments about looking good having lost weight, unkind comments about being fat, relentless bullying at school, have had a lot to do with it. Yet, for people with eating disorders, the person, the voice is with them 24 hours a day (even in their dreams) reminding them to be fat and ugly is to be a useless, worthless, unlovable human being.

At first, we viewed 'A' as a problem. Ross had had a problem friend before (interestingly also with a name beginning with 'A') and the behaviour he was exhibiting with allowing 'A' to control him was not much different. We listened when he wanted to talk. We asked few questions. We made changes in our diet, foregoing some of our favourite foods, all in the name of support. We stopped eating out. Our conversations were dominated by the topic of food. Shopping became a chore spending twice as much time waiting for Ross to inspect the contents of each item. We did not realise that our support was making 'A' stronger. We were feeding 'A' whilst watching the fading away of our precious child. In Scotland, having scattered the ashes of Russell's mother, we were fearful the next time we had a family gathering would be at Ross' funeral.

We know we are being with Ross on his road to restoration<sup>27</sup>. He is making progress, slowly but surely. Distancing from A's voice is an essential part of Ross' recovery. We have learned to distinguish between listening to Ross and listening to 'A'. We are learning not to look out of the corner of our eye at mealtimes to monitor what Ross is doing with his food. We are also learning not to get angry. Like any bully, the voice acts bigger and stronger than it really

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<sup>27</sup> He has professional help from the Maudsley Hospital

is. It may seem all-powerful; it is not. It may seem to drown out everything else, but the healthy part is always there and can be heard when someone listens for it. We have started to challenge some of Ross' disordered thoughts and behaviour and, in turn, Ross is able to tell us when we are inadvertently reinforcing 'A' without intending to. It is a work in progress which we have entered, are exploring and appreciating. We don't have all the answers.

The Bible often transforms what may seem like problems for people of the faith into an intriguing mystery. Deutero-Isaiah describes how, in captivity in Babylonia, Israel realises to its astonishment, that it is closer to God in exile than it had even been in the promised land. Deutero-Isaiah faced the task of giving new hope and encouragement to the exiles, who were on the verge of despair, feeling either that God had forsaken them entirely or that God's power had been broken by the superior gods of the Babylonians. To these disheartened people, Deutero-Isaiah calls out, *'Here is your God!'*<sup>28</sup> He assures them that God has not forsaken the exiled people; neither has God been defeated by the Babylonians or any other foreign power. God is the supreme ruler of the universe, and all the nations of the earth are subject to him: *'Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales.'*<sup>29</sup> And again, *'Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.'*<sup>30</sup> God is the creator of the heavens and the earth. Whatever exists is dependent on him. He alone has the power to create and is the only presence whose purpose can be discerned in the course of history: *'He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. . . . He brings princes to nought and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.'*<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps we need to make that same transition to recognise that struggle and setbacks are invitations to go deeper into the heart of God.

The notion of a journey is one we use as we participate in story of Ross' road to recovery. And the idea of journeying is nothing new in terms of our discipleship (the Gospels are arranged as a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and Acts as a journey from Jerusalem to Rome. Journeying is a metaphor for life in general and the life of faith in particular as participants learn more about themselves as they travel than they do when they actually arrive.

Too often, the pressure is on us as ministers to provide all the answers – theological and others for which we received little or no training (eg.GDPR). Being with mystery asks us to journey. There is no hurry because the arrival time is in God's hands alone. We can't hurry it up. We can't alter it. *'any proximate sense of achievement we seek is from our own vanity and not for God's majesty'*<sup>32</sup>.

This has to implication for us and the church. Firstly, our best and most impressive efforts cannot bring the kingdom; our rubbish efforts cannot frustrate the kingdom either. Because

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<sup>28</sup> Isaiah 40 v.9

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 40 v.15

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 40 v.17

<sup>31</sup> Isaiah 40 v.22

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Wells Incarnational Ministry Being With the Church p.86



this is God's story in which we play a small part when we are drawn into the mystery and feeling out of our depth, unworthy and humbled. The first business of the church is *'to lead people into this companionship with God, conscious of the privilege of being there, the grace of what brought them there, the joy of the fellowship they find there, and the longing to draw others there too'*<sup>33</sup>. In other words, how you relate to one another becomes much more important to where it gets to. Whilst the world wants to get things done quickly and then move on. It rarely takes time to cherish or evaluate or learn or reflect on its mistakes. Being countercultural, the church needs to take time to repair and restore and be renewed instead of lurching from one programme to another and another. Pausing draws us deeper into the mystery of God.



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<sup>33</sup> Ibid p.87

## Delight



Delight sees the abundance and not the deficit<sup>34</sup>: for delight “the key counsel is, strive to be what only you can be”. The ministry of being with assumes abundance: “it expects to find that the Holy Spirit has given God's people everything they need to worship, befriend, and follow, and thus perceives that the experience of scarcity is more likely to be due to the church's wilful or indolent neglect of what's been given than the lack of

sufficient generosity or provision in the giver”. Whilst mystery listens to the joys of the things that a person does for their own sake, delight pursues the skills of an individual that give blessing to others or to a community. In other words, ministry and mission are not primarily about pursuing your own gifts but more about using those gifts to identify, encourage and foster gifts in others so that all may be blessed.

Yet, as we see a decline in the number of members and adherents and thus a decline in people resources, we focus all too often on our limitations instead of the God-given opportunities. Our Synod deployment strategies often talk of ministry in terms of stipendiary ministry without reference to the other grace-filled ministries within the church - non-stipendiary ministers and CRCWs, Elders, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers and Locally Recognised Worship Leaders not to mention the plethora of unsung ‘heroes’ within the local who have no specific titles. We have slumped by and large into the scarcity mindset. Yet the URC has always been known as a generous church – a small church with a big heart<sup>35</sup>. Its members and friends truly want to serve God, yet the fear of scarcity is present and this is where we find ourselves.

Another way of looking at this phenomenon is in terms of a scarcity mentality versus an abundance mindset. Scarcity mentality refers to people seeing life as a finite pie, so that if one person takes a big piece, that leaves less for everyone else. Most people, particularly in the corporate world (although the church is not immune from this view when it comes to ministry and deployment), have been conditioned to have a scarcity mentality. Just think of ‘toilet-roll gate’ at the start of the covid pandemic as people emptied the shelves of toilet rolls of all things, stockpiling as if Armageddon was just around the corner. It's no wonder when resources are limited short-term thinking becomes the norm. A scarcity mentality is what keeps many of us from achieving our goals. An abundance mindset refers to the paradigm that there is plenty out there for everybody.

As Christians, we live in the ever-present tension of two competing stories. The first is the story our culture promotes. It is one of scarcity. In this story, there is never enough money, resources, time, or love to go around. The other story is the one God tells in Scripture. It is a

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<sup>34</sup> Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2017) p.127

<sup>35</sup> Michael Jagessar

story of an abundant Creator who gives more than enough for life, love, purpose, and enjoyment in this world.

The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. The creation story in Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity. God fills the world with life in all its fullness as he blesses every created thing to be fruitful and multiply, an outpouring of the abundance of God's creative spirit. The story tells how well the world is ordered: *it is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good*. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says I've got to have a mini sabbatical. And so, creation ends with the sabbath.

Psalms 104, the longest creation poem, is a commentary on Genesis 1. For 23 verses the psalmist surveys creation and names it all: the heavens and the earth, the waters and springs and streams and mountains and trees and birds and wild goats and oil and bread and people and lions. In verse 24 the psalmist is filled with awe and praise for God and God's creation. But the psalm makes clear that we don't need to worry. God is utterly, utterly reliable. The fruitfulness of the world is guaranteed. If you give your breath the world will live; if you ever stop breathing, the world will die.

In Psalm 150 the psalmist enthusiastically praises God's goodness by stating simply Praise Yahweh, praise Yahweh with lute, praise Yahweh with trumpet, praise, praise, praise. Together, these three scriptures proclaim that God's force of life is loose in the world. Genesis 1 affirms generosity and denies scarcity. Psalm 104 celebrates the buoyancy of creation and rejects anxiety. Psalm 150 enacts abandoning oneself to God and letting go of the need to have anything under control<sup>36</sup>.

Later in Genesis, God blesses Abraham and Sarah with the promise of family, land and status<sup>37</sup>. They are to be a blessing. Blessing is the force of well-being active in the world. For Abraham and Sarah faith is an awareness that creation is the gift that keeps on giving. That awareness dominates Genesis until chapter 47 when Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land. As a result Pharaoh gets ready to administer, control and monopolise the food supply and, in doing so, introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone says, *There's not enough. Let's get everything*.

Pharaoh is afraid that there just aren't enough good things to go around. He ruthlessly tries to have everything. He hires Joseph to manage the monopoly and, when the crops fail and the ordinary people run out of food, and the people come to Joseph for help, he says on behalf of Pharaoh, "What's your collateral?" They give up their land for food, and then, the next year, they give up their cattle. By the third year of the famine, they have no collateral but themselves. And that's how the children of Israel become slaves - through an economic transaction. The notion of scarcity has been introduced into biblical faith.

The story of the abundance of creation is not to be deterred. In captivity, the people multiply to such an extent that Pharaoh demands two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, kill all newborn Hebrew babies. They don't, and the Israelites continue to multiply. Creation really

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<sup>36</sup> The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity, Walter Bruggeman, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/>

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 12

is the gift that gives on giving so much so that, by the end of Exodus, when Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron to leave Egypt, the future of the Israelites is not in the hands of the one who monopolises the world's resources but in the hands of those who trust in God's abundance. They trust and, in the wilderness, receive the gift of manna. Where do we put our trust?

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us within the church. The story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. Yet our words and our actions often belie this principle as we entrench ourselves in the model of scarcity. Our repetitive cry is:

- Not enough stipendiary ministers
- Constrained by compliance issues
- Aging congregations
- Etc. etc.

So how can we live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for? How can we make the shift from a scarcity to an abundance mindset?

There is a Buddhist saying is 'what you think you become, what you feel you attract, what you imagine, you create. It is so true. Mindset is seen as a critical component of success in business, sports and life in general. There is also quantitative research to back this up: On Japan's Okinawa Island, nicknamed the "island of longevity", locals refuse to die. Residents suffer from low levels of heart disease, cancer and dementia, and Okinawans' robust social life and strong sense of ikigai (a unique purpose in life) often keeps them alive and healthy past the age of 100 such is their mindset.

So what is our unique purpose? We were so sure in 1972 that the URC was to be the instrument of organic union as part of the emerging ecumenical movement. And, for a while, it was. But what about now? If we are not sure about why we are here now, restructuring Assembly Committees and Church House will not give us a new sense of purpose but merely serve to 'reorder the deckchairs on the titanic'. Purpose always comes first.

Mark's feeding of the multitudes might give us a clue here. As an example of abundance, he introduces a new purpose coming into being through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, find a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread - four decisive verbs of purpose. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all.

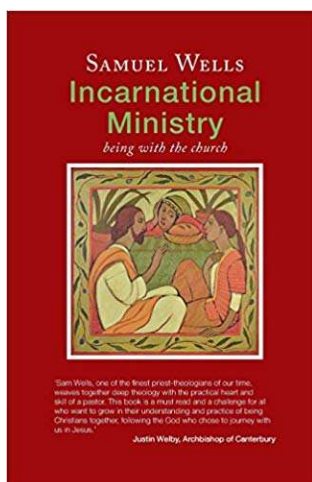
- TAKE...what we have. Strive to be what you can be by focussing on what we have and what gives us delight. Focus on opportunities not limitations.
- BLESS...what we have been given by God. Incorporate gratitude and thankfulness into what we do. According to Oprah Winfrey, "If you look at what you have in life,

you'll always have more. If you look at what you don't have in life, you'll never have enough."

- BREAK...rekindle the mindset of opportunity not limitation. An abundance mindset allows you to see more in your life: more options, more choices, and more resources.
- GIVE... expect to find that the Holy Spirit has given us, God's people, everything we need to worship, befriend and follow.



## Participation



Participation names the way being with is indispensable and not substitutable. It diverts attention from what is done to ensuring the right balance of who does it. Of the hundred reasons to bypass being with, efficiency is near the top of the list. Participation says there's no justification for leaving someone behind, and it queries whether our hurry to get somewhere is rooted in our reluctance truly to engage with the person with whom we are travelling.

The United Reformed Church affirms that Christian ministry is the ministry 'of the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it'<sup>38</sup>. This is part of who we are stemming back to the Reformation. Indeed, we 'would be hard pressed to think of ourselves back to a time before the priesthood of all believers became the unchallenged truism that it is for us today'<sup>39</sup> All are called. All are called to discipleship; all are called to ministry; all are called to mission<sup>40</sup>.

Wells sees participation as being paramount in ministry. It is the first thing to say about our calling. Everyone is invited to participate in ministry as an expression of their response to discipleship. However, whilst all are called, "not all are called to the same expression of discipleship, the same form of ministry, the same field of mission."<sup>41</sup> Discernment is therefore paramount as disciples must be wise to the ministry God is calling them to undertake.

The Basis of Union lists seven fundamental qualifications for ministry:

- 1) A total commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and a growing experience of shared life in the Spirit so that the worship and service of God becomes the central and controlling passion.
- 2) A growing familiarity with and understanding of the Bible and the Christian tradition, especially - but not exclusively - in its Reformed development, constantly extended and enriched by wide reading and by a study.
- 3) An informed and passionate involvement in the issues of the contemporary world.
- 4) Because we live in a society which is mobile and pluriform, the Church must be as varied and as open in the context in which it ministers. We need, therefore, not one style of ministry, but many.
- 5) It follows therefore that collaboration and team-work will be needed.



<sup>38</sup> Basis of Union paragraph 19.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.urc.org.uk/images/FOAC/Celebrating-the-Reformation-v2.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Wells Incarnation Ministry being with the church page 114

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p.114

- 6) The Church is a community of persons of very different ages and at different stages in their discipleship, seeking to share good news with others. The arts of interpersonal communication are fundamental to its life to help others to exercise their gifts also.
- 7) We need to recognise that we are lifelong learners who recognise that their initial training can be only a small beginning and who remain to the end eager to strive for deeper discipleship.

As a denomination we have adopted a plethora of programmes to encourage the priesthood of all believers: the Equipping the Saints, Five Marks of Mission, Vision 4 Life, Vision 2020, What is the Spirit saying to the Churches and Walking the Way - Living the Life of Jesus today - to name but a few and it is right and proper to evaluate and re-evaluate where we believe God is calling us to as the whole people of God.



Through initiatives and programmes we have sought to make people more active members of the Church focused outwards into the world – from disciples to apostles listening out for prophetic voices. Diversification and multiplication of ministries are part of the ecclesial landscape. Gearing the church up to the challenges of new engagement and witness to the gospel in the world is of course exactly what we ought to be working hard at. Too often in my experience mission means focus on innovation, restructure and rationalising of resources. The result is that our energy is often dissipated and lethargy takes over and we preach a message of scarcity.



But all is not lost. We are, of course, richly blessed that our reformed heritage has allowed us to implement ministry which is not restricted to simply ministry of ordained clergy. We have, in no particular order, the Ministry of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers, Transitional Ministers, Special Category Ministers doing pioneering work, Fresh Expressions of Ministry, ministry of Elders and Authorised Elders, Lay Preachers and Church Secretaries. We have Synod Training Officers, Mission Officers, Discipleship Enablers, Safeguarding Officers and so forth. We are richly blessed with the variety of servant leadership.

Ministry is about building up the church. At the joint meeting of Ministries, Education and Learning and Children's and Youth Work Committees I listened intently that ministry is people-shaped. I would challenge that – it is always God-shaped. What must matter is that, as disciples, we must never forget that our calling is always a partnership between ourselves and God, and between ourselves and one another.

Of course, discipleship must always be at the heart of our calling but it is very seldom the limit of that calling. Put differently, our calling to be God's companion is always the subtext of our vocation to ministry within the church. It also means that no one calling is higher than another. Ministry is not simply subservient and preparatory to mission. Mission is not simply a subsequent step and the recruitment ground to ministry. It is a genuine partnership: building up the church and encountering God in the world, both grounded in walking God's way – living the life of Jesus today.

The future of Christian ministry is one that strives for the integration of the whole people of God, that does not play one off against the other, and that does not exalt one ministry by diminishing the other. Whilst the world may be preoccupied with the individual and the all-pervading culture of self-interest, collaborative ministry is an imperative of the gospel.

The apostle Paul writes: 'we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another (Romans 12.5 NRSV). Paul appeals to the metaphor of the body to encourage members of the young church at Rome to work together. He wants to help them so that, in the community Jesus, each person has a part to play and each has different gifts and graces not in proportion to the amount of faith they may have but acknowledging that the gifts are diverse and distributed among the many members of the church. From the apostle's point of view cooperation, a team approach to ministry and mission, is a fundamental feature in the kingdom of God. What does this mean for the United Reformed Church?

1. Firstly, build on what we have.
  - Elders. What a rich resource we have at the heart of what it means to be the United Reformed Church! The *Basis of Union* says (paragraph 22) says all that is necessary about the ministry of Elders: that Elders are called to 'share with Ministers in the pastoral oversight and leadership of local churches'. The challenge for us is to take what it says more seriously. Eldership is, of course, a ministry of the local church and authority for the election and ordination of Elders rests with the congregation in church meeting. However, ordination is a representative act carried out by the local church on behalf of the whole Church. So perhaps the practical guidance on Safer Election of Elders might assist to help churches discern what the Spirit is saying in terms of election, preparation, ordination and development. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard an elder say I was handpicked by the minister! Or they had no preparation and didn't know what they were letting themselves in for! Similarly, the effectiveness of the ministry of Elder is sometimes held back because the Elders' meeting acquires a whole range of tasks which, however important, do not need to be performed by the Elders. I have written Marks of Ministry of Eldership (in anticipation of Assembly Executive in November) which incorporates what is needed from an Elder as an individual and from the Eldership as a whole. Elders meetings tend to be effective when they are relatively small and focussed on their core responsibilities of providing pastoral oversight and leadership including Trusteeship.
  - Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers. The ending of TLS left the denomination with a gap in provision of an adequate course for worship leading and lay preaching. In 2021 Mission Council affirmed that there was a need for locally based, locally trained



worship leaders to serve in their local context (one Church, multi-Church pastorate or mission partnership) as evidenced at the Enquirer's Event in October and at the end of February where we have several people wishing to engage with Worship Leading but not Lay Preaching. This ministry would be synod based and accredited, and participants would become Locally Recognised Worship Leaders. People who feel a call to wider service in the synod would be encouraged to offer themselves as a more itinerant preaching resource and trained to become an Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher. This ministry would remain the formally accredited ministry within the URC with training offered through our Resource Centres for Learning, encouraging lay training alongside ministerial training.

- SCM/Pioneer/Fresh Expression ministries. All ministry is special but some ministry requires specialist skills. Collaboration needs to happen across committees and task groups and embedding teams so that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing. The result is a new ministry of Lay Pioneering which was endorsed by General Assembly run by the Newbegin HUB based at Lodge Road URC, Birmingham with the course run by the Church Mission Society. The exciting piece of the jigsaw here is that this has been done in collaboration with the Congregational Federation. To date I understand 10 people have signed up to the new course.
- Synod directed ministry. Many of our Synods are exploring percentages of 'other ministries' to go alongside the full-time stipendiary post. These tend to be using ministers' gifts in a variety of churches such as mission enabling or transitional ministry or with non-congregational engagement with the world i.e. Town Centre Chaplaincy. One of my colleagues recently spoke about ministers as Gypsies – General Practitioners to local churches with specialist skills. Perhaps we need to look at how we can nurture those specialist passions?
- Ministers of Word and Sacraments and CRCWs. Enquirer's Events attract a good number of enquirers for all accredited ministries: NSM Model 4 is a growing ministry but as yet the one person who came forward for NS CRCW did not meet the required standards of the English Standards Board. More work needs to be done on promotion vocations. But this is not simply the role of ministries but of all involved in the life of the church.

## 2. And secondly, develop new but accredited ministries

If 'not all are called to the same expression of discipleship, the same form of ministry, the same field of mission...' then we need to encourage members to truly live the life of Jesus today and not to become entrenched or limited in the small areas of activity where they feel at home. We need to challenge them to flourish further when often we are simply glad that someone reliably doing a small task that's needed. Part of leadership in ministry is developing leadership of others. We need to see vocation in terms of discipleship.

So what if we developed some new accredited ministries? And start where there is need in the Synods. To date I have had preliminary discussion with some individuals and Synod about

- children's and youth/families workers
- Elders in Local Leadership

And what about a new take on Eldership with companion Elders who move from their 'home church' to assist in a church which is struggling to find leadership.

To do this we need to foster a more integrative approach to the theology and practice of ministry.

The key is starting small. This is not merely trying to plug gaps but genuinely and intentionally trying to find out what God is calling his Church to do and the mission he is asking us to fulfil.

Consequently, participation in ministry inevitably involves 'partnership': "disciples never forget for a moment that their calling is always a partnership between themselves and God, and between themselves and one another."<sup>42</sup> Being with in ministry requires discernment, is a life-long adventure and must be flexible enough to respond to unforeseen circumstances. In being with people, those involved in ministry need to be "present to them at such crucial turning points in their lives" as such presence is an incarnate statement that 'God is in this place'<sup>43</sup>.



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<sup>42</sup> Ibid p.115

<sup>43</sup> Ibid p.115

## Partnership

Partnership compliments and expands on participation. "The emphasis of participation is on recognising the centrality of with, the anticipation of the eschatological involvement of all in the new creation before God. Partnership explores the nature of that with somewhat further, noting variegations and complementarities."<sup>44</sup> Put simply, participation can merely be about communal engagement, whilst partnership takes that engagement to a new level by encouraging teamwork. Partnership is "the recognition that each party brings different and vital qualities to the table."<sup>45</sup>

One important aspect of the life of Purley United Reformed Church provides a useful insight into partnership and the opportunities, joys and delights partnership can offer.

Since the mid-1960s, the word "Partnership" has had special significance in Purley URC, as this congregation is part of what we believe to be a unique five-way linking of local churches in the reformed tradition:-

- Czech Republic – Českobratrské církve evangelické - CCE, Ostrava
- Germany - Petruskirche, Dessau (Evangelische Landeskirche Anhalts)
- Germany - Gedächtniskirche, Speyer (Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz - EKP)
- United Kingdom – Purley United Reformed Church - URC)
- United States of America - Immanuel Congregational Church, Hartford, Connecticut (United Churches of Christ -UCC)

The Partnership has been an important part of Purley URC's life for well over 50 years, giving opportunities for members and friends of the congregation to learn at first hand about the lives of fellow Christians in other countries and to understand more about the challenges they face in their local situations – challenges which are often very similar, especially on societal issues. It is also notable for the depth, breadth and diversity of personal friendships which have developed, sometimes over multiple generations of the same family; it provides many openings for dialogue and the sharing of experiences across national boundaries that do much to break down stereotypes and prejudices, and helps us all to gain a better understanding of the world in which we live.

The Partnership has its roots in contacts begun after the Second World War at grass roots level and aimed at opening channels for reconciliation between local congregations in England and the Palatinate (Federal Republic of Germany). The first visit of three young people from Shelley Road Worthing to Wolfstein in the Palatine took place in August 1949.

1957 saw the establishment of A "Communion of Pulpit and Lord's Table" between the then Congregational Church in England Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz. Arising indirectly out of that, our first link, with the Gedächtniskirche in Speyer, started in 1967.

Also in 1967, Revd Cyril Franks, then minister in Purley, undertook an exchange of pulpits with Revd Bob Edwards of Immanuel Congregational Church, Hartford, Connecticut. This

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<sup>44</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wiley Blackwell 2015) pp.135

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

brought an American link into the Partnership: this three-way conference was held in Purley in 1971.

In the meantime, links had been established after the partition of Germany between churches in the former Federal Republic (West Germany) and Democratic Republic (East Germany). This led to connections with the Petruskirche, Dessau and, indirectly, the Ostrava congregation of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren. Early contacts with these two churches was mainly limited by the political situation to exchanges of letters between individuals, although a number of people from Purley paid private visits to both East Germany and Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and the 1980s. All that changed, however, after the momentous events of autumn 1989.

July/August 1992 saw an undoubted high point in the Partnership story: a two-week conference in Purley, attended by about 120 visitors, of whom nearly half came from Dessau and Ostrava. It was covered by the BBC for 'Songs of Praise', and the broadcast later that year generated a remarkable number of letters and comments, including some from as far away as Australia.

Since the early 1980s Purley has also maintained an informal link with Woodvale Presbyterian Church, Belfast. This has enabled people to gain insights into the Northern Ireland situation which are of great value to the Partnership as a whole, and a few Woodvale members have been regular participants in conferences. Mainly, however, contacts have been through correspondence and bilateral annual visits, and more recently through a developing friendship between young people in each congregation.

In 2016, at the conference in Ostrava, the five churches signed a 'Declaration of an International Church Partnership' which underpins all that takes place, whether within each individual congregation or collectively.<sup>46</sup> It commits us all to

- Shared worship on the last Sunday in January, prepared in turn by each church. We all use the same elements of worship – a reading, a letter (in the spirit of an epistle, and including faith-based reflections on the situation in that congregation) and prayers of intercession.

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<sup>46</sup> Our Partnership Commitment

We honour the legacy of those whose original vision it was to achieve post-war reconciliation and mutual understanding made possible by the Partnership. To sustain this treasure, we commit ourselves anew:

1. to uphold the purposes of our International Partnership in a changing world
2. to nurture together the development of our International Partnership in ways that ensure its relevance to present and future generations
3. to explore together, theologically, spiritually and personally, what it means to be committed to one another in Partnership and what it means to be committed to the tasks of reconciliation and peace
4. to promote our International Partnership within each congregation as a relationship that all are involved in, not just the few
5. to be part of God's ministry of reconciliation.

"May they all be one..." - John 17 v.21

- Prayers for peace on the first Sunday in September, again prepared in turn by each church. This date was chosen to mark the anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War and to remind us all of the Partnership's origins in the reconciliation in Europe which followed that war. (The candle lit at the start of morning worship in Purley is a reminder of that: the first candle used was a gift from Dessau – significantly, in 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall.)
- Mutual support by prayer for all our congregations and for individuals within them.
- A three-yearly conference, hosted in turn by each congregation.
- Informal small-scale visits (e.g. special occasions, holidays, business trips, youth meetings). These happen on an intermittent basis, and visitors try to ensure that their stay in the partner congregation includes a Sunday, so helping them to meet a wide range of members and friends.
- Regular sharing of greetings, planning calendars, newsletters and ad hoc news of individuals, including links between websites.

The cycle of conferences which began in 1971 has continued to be the main Partnership event. They usually last for about ten days during school summer holidays, and are planned and hosted in turn by each of the five congregations. The programme generally includes talks and discussions, worship and Bible studies, social events and outings: participants stay with families from the host church. Many visitors also use the opportunity to add on some holiday in the host country as well!

Purley's last 'home' conference was in 2007: the theme was *"Living faith, growing community: what it means to be people of faith in our multi-cultural world"*. Dessau were unable to invite the partner churches in 2019: instead, they had been planning a conference for 2020 when Covid intervened. The partnership was maintained, even though physical gatherings have been impossible for the last couple of years. Partnership Zoom gatherings have proved popular and enable those unable to travel to events pre-pandemic to feel fully engaged in the relationship. Purley had been, in line with the three-yearly schedule, to host an event in 2022. But the continuing pandemic forced us to re-think plans, and we are now looking towards 2023 as the year for a potential event.

The International Partnership has provided us, as a family, with the opportunity to travel, make valued friendships across the world and feel connected to the World Church in a way that hadn't been possible before.

Perhaps the International Partnership can show a way forward for congregations in this country to feel more connected. Certainly, Partnership has proved to be at the forefront for many in Purley of 'living God's love' in a meaningful and life changing way.



*From small beginnings grow strong bonds of friendship, peace and reconciliation.*

## Enjoyment

By the time we came to write this, we have a combined ministry of 68 years. It's the only thing either of us has ever done although there have been one or two opportunities to do other things. Not all of ministry has been plain sailing: there have been frustrations, confrontations, disappointments, sadnesses and tears. But the negative memories of our ministries are far outweighed by the enjoyment ministry has brought us.

Wells explains 'being with' is about enjoying people whom the world, having no use for, is inclined to discard. To enjoy people is to understand and appreciate their story - what makes them unique and special and precious in God's sight. It's to share in the way God sees them. To enjoy people is to be present with them as they discover the part they are to play in God's story.

Enjoyment describes the way one helps a person move from discipleship into ministry and/or mission. The danger for ministers is that we are too busy: services to prepare, people to visit, endless Zoom meetings to set up and convene, not to mention the compliance issues and policies we need to get our heads around. All this may detract from the enjoyment of being with in its truest sense. So below we list 10 times in our ministry to date where we have experienced true enjoyment by getting to know the people involved. If we're not putting our gift of ministry to work, we're not enjoying ourselves.

- Rehearsing from July through to December with all ages for the Christmas nativity service which became an all singing, all dancing (literally) retelling of the nativity story;
- Working ecumenically and taking risks to grow new churches such as the West Thamesmead with its annual service of joint membership with the Methodist Chair and Bishop of Woolwich; and St. Michael's, New Cross where there is now a CRCW project;
- Introducing the Easter Labyrinth at Wallington URC which attracted members of the community to participate and two schools to bring groups of young people to experience the Easter story – I always got a gasp at the sight of 6 inch nails and a pause when flowers of resurrection were inserted into the cross ready for Easter Sunday;
- Collaborating with the Presbyterian Church of Korea to build greater links by introducing a CWM mission partner to Southern Synod and building on the work already begun in Kingston and New Malden;
- What I do now – writing policies and processes for old and new ministries. This is a strange one because, for the most part I am not directly involved in the story of individuals or churches who use these processes but I like to think that my 35 years in ministry gives me an understanding of where people are coming from and where God is leading them to.



- The last Sunday before the start of the sabbatical, the church celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of a church member. She was joined by her family for worship and a celebration afterwards in the church hall. It was a truly joyous occasion as, together, we celebrated a long and remarkable life. It happened to be Pentecost. God's Spirit was with us in the enjoyment;
- Having been minister of the same pastorate for a significant length of time has meant that I have been part of people's journey's over time. I have journeyed alongside them through university, graduation, first job, engagement, wedding, births and baptisms, family funerals, illness and so much more. It is truly one of the great privileges of ministry to make this journey with others;
- Another 'stand out' moment was helping plan and deliver a gathering of 40 young people from Purley's International Partnership Churches in 2018. We all began as strangers yet we finished the week as good friends, singing 'All you need is love';
- In a previous pastorate I helped establish a discussion group without any agenda. We gathered fortnightly and we talked about anything the group wanted to talk about. People were sceptical it would work. Participants found it an invaluable forum for reflecting on how God was present in their lives and our world.
- Whilst the 'conciliar' approach to Church government may drive us mad on occasions as it can mean the diary is full of meetings, the way the denomination seeks to discern the mind of Christ through God's people coming together in the councils of the Church is one of the prime reasons we remain committed to the fulfilling our calling to ministry within the United Reformed Church.



God's enjoyment of us isn't a static thing. It's a dynamic power, in which the spirit, gives us energy, joy and vigour for discipleship.

## Glory

Glory is given to God when gifts, given by God, are turned into offerings of service which find fulfilment in being taken into God's story.

Glory is interwoven throughout the biblical story and forms the origin, content, and goal of the entire cosmic narrative. God's glory is the magnificence, worth, loveliness, and grandeur of his many perfections. God communicates his glory through his creation, his image-bearers, his providence, and his acts of redemption.

Of course, glory is virtually impossible to define. In a sense, it is the magnificence, worth, loveliness, and grandeur of God's many perfections. More often, glory communicates God's special presence, as in the pillars of glory and of fire<sup>47</sup> or the glory that filled the tabernacle<sup>48</sup>.

The primary Hebrew term for glory is kabod meaning 'weight' or 'heaviness' meaning honorable, exalted or revered. It became a technical term for God's manifest presence.

The primary Greek term for glory is doxa. Doxa in secular Greek referred to an opinion, conjecture, praise or fame. In the New Testament it referred to the majesty of especially his power, judgment, and salvation.

It is also helpful to notice that the glory of God is sometimes used in the Bible as an adjective, sometimes a noun, and sometimes a verb. God is glorious (adjective), reveals his glory (noun), and is to be glorified (verb).

God's intrinsic glory is by nature something that belongs to God and God alone independent of his works. God's extrinsic glory is his intrinsic glory partially communicated in his works of creation, providence, redemption, and consummation.

The fact that we, who are limited and flawed, can glimpse God's glory, enter into it and enjoy it is because of his gift of grace. We respond by glorifying him by daily reflecting upon and inhabiting of that grace, cherishing it and inviting others to share in also the experience of glory. And all of this contributes to his glory, as God in is exhibited, known, rejoiced in, and prized.

Thin places have always been important to us. They are places of energy where the veil between this world and the eternal world is thin; where we can walk in two worlds – the worlds are fused together, knitted loosely where the differences can be discerned or tightly where the two worlds become one.

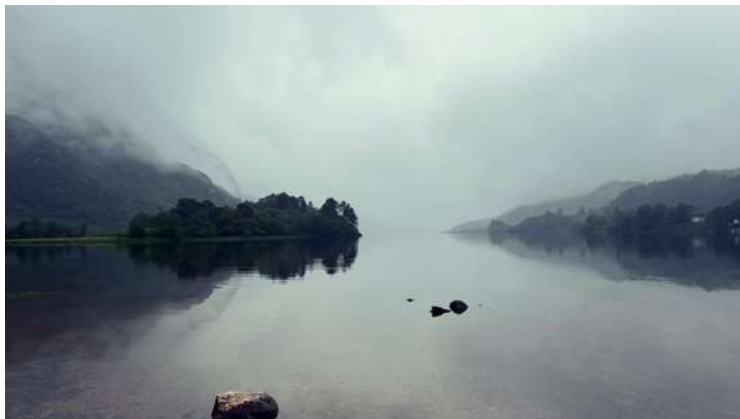
Below are just some of the thin places where we have experienced God's glory during our sabbatical study.

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<sup>47</sup> Exodus 13v.21-22

<sup>48</sup> Exodus 40v.34-38







## How might ministry be shaped for the future if it was shaped with the principle that ‘with’ is the most important word in the church’s vocabulary?

We asked the above question in our introduction. Much of our current thinking has already been expressed elsewhere in this paper, but particularly in the section

on Delight. The challenge is

- to be ‘with’ those in our churches so that we can identify and nurture the gifts in them and equip them for ministry for the future;
- to reinforce the view that is often stated but often forgotten that there is no ‘wider church’ without the local manifestation of the church; the role of the councils of the church beyond the local church (ie General Assembly and Synod) and those who work at such a level is always to consider how their work and role supports local congregations. Church House and Synod offices have to be ‘with’ their churches and this may help those in local churches to recognise that those in the ‘wider church’ are ‘with’ them in what they are doing locally;
- to think more creatively and collaboratively with Church House departments, within Synod Offices and in the relationship between General Assembly and Synod to enable the resources for those ministries to be released and realised to the local church.
- to enable the church (particularly at General Assembly) to take more risks; instead of micromanaging the work of the committees tasked with work.

Context in ministry is all important – what is needed from ministry in a rural area will be different in an urban context which will be different from a suburban context. No one size of ministry fits all. It needs to be a mixed economy, not just when speaking of stipendiary ministers but of the plethora of ministries both lay and ordained/commissioned which already exist and those which have yet to be discovered. However, the purpose of this section is not to critique previous work on ministry in the future. Any policy for the deployment of ministry needs to be flexible enough to recognise that diversity is key.

It is not, as some people used to say, that we don’t have enough ministers to go around because we can’t afford them<sup>49</sup>. Like most of the mainstream denominations there are now fewer serving stipendiary ministers available to us, and these numbers will fall dramatically in the next eight years, so that by 2026 it is anticipated there will be 264 full-time stipendiary equivalents reduced from 309 in 2022. Yet when we talk of deploying ministers and the ‘deployment crisis’, we all too often refer to deploying stipendiary ministry without valuing other ministries and drawing them all into the great deployment jigsaw: Church Related Community Workers, non-stipendiary ministers, retired ministers, Synod Local Church Leaders, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneers, Elders and Authorised Elders (Lay Presidency at the Sacraments). At this stage we have not mentioned Special Category Ministers because they are trained as Ministers of Word and

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<sup>49</sup> GA 2021 removed the 2012 link between ministry and deployment

Sacraments who serve for up to 10 years (5 years renewable) in special posts. It is the posts that are 'special' (ie. ministers not in pastoral charge) rather than those serving in the posts. However, Special Category posts can play a crucial role in helping the church reach those places where it is not currently present (see below).

The other main issue for ministry is that we have too many buildings. The number of the churches has not declined at the same rate as the number of ministers or members! It is salutary to read that 30% of our churches have 12 members or less. Of course, statistics don't tell the whole story. We count church members for deployment purposes yet, at present, we omit many members eg. in LEPS (about 8000) as we only count URC members not members of the church.

Some 'mission projects' (West Thamesmead Community Church served by 1 FTE) do not have membership in the URC sense.

The third part of the 'jigsaw' is whether the formula for deploying Ministers of Word and Sacraments (MWS) is broken or not? If we have less buildings and therefore less congregations to care for, what would the figures look like? The URC Treasurer has agreed to work with Ministries to bring a review of the formula to General Assembly 2023. However, the following statistics also make for interesting reading:

- in 1995 there were 813 FTE for 1784 churches. A minister serves 2.2 churches with an average congregation being 57 members; 125 members per minister;
- in 2020 there were 364 FTE for 1331 churches. A minister serves 3.7 churches with an average congregation of 32; 118 members per minister.
- in 2022 it is hoped there will be 309 FTE for 1259 churches. A minister will serve 4.1 churches with an average congregation of 30; 121 members per minister.

Therefore, the ratio of ministers to members has changed less dramatically than the ratio of ministers to congregations. Indeed, over the last 25 years, the trend has been that ministers are 'looking after' slightly fewer church members on average than their predecessors and the number remains fairly static. It is the number of congregations which becomes the issue and crisis comes when stipendiary ministers are being expected to minister to multiple congregations.

We offer the following as suggestions of what is needed to shaped ministry for the future. It is not intended that this is a definitive list. It is also acknowledged that some of the suggestions have other implications, not least financial ones:

- A redefining/re-envisioning of the purpose of the United Reformed Church. Formed in an act of ecumenical union in 1972, ecumenism has always been at the top of all agendas. Interestingly, in 2022, in its introduction, the URC website defines the URC as an intercultural Church and a pioneer in ordaining women<sup>50</sup>. There is no mention of the ecumenical DNA in our roots. If we are no longer a denomination striving for

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<sup>50</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/who-we-are/what-is-the-urc/>

organic union with other denominations, then we need to re-envision what God intends us to be;

- A clear definition of what makes a church a church. The Church Life Review has already embarked on a piece of work about the viability of congregations. Much of what it says makes good sense when looking at the issue of the viability and vitality of congregations. However, the Church Life Review cannot do this work in isolation;
- And connected with above, there is the need for work to be done on oversight ministry in a model based on Base Ecclesial Communities. Many of our churches already operate partly within this structure. It is also what we have experienced during our conversation with the Greek Orthodox Church in small villages. But there is no clear definition;
- A clear definition of what a mission project is and how it is to be supported by the Synod/GA (work already being undertaken in Southern Synod will be useful in this context) ;
- As ministers (MWS and CRCWs) often bear the brunt of ensuring their churches are compliant) for missional discipleship, would there be scope in employing Synod Compliance Officers? The difficulty as we have seen with CYDOs and Safeguarding Officers is the relationship between Church House and Synod employees;
- Because the denomination focussed on organic union, it has never intentionally church planted. Would now be the time to look again at the SCM programme to be more strategic in intent to see where new ministries ought to be placed – either Synod supported or GA supported. A review of the SCM programme is being undertaken on behalf of the Church Life Review;
- A review of LMMR. Many of the recommendations in the Church Life Review paper should be outcomes of a good LMMR. A review of LMMR will be undertaken by Ministries Committee as it falls under the work of the Secretary for Ministries. It is clear that Synods have struggled with LMMR partly because evaluating missional opportunities are often subjective on the part of those leading the review and partly because it is a very 'people hungry' process.

The above are needed to inform what ministry is needed for the next season.

In the meantime, Ministries will continue to work with the Education and Learning and Children's and Youth Work Committees in developing new ministries which are accredited and accountable to the denomination. Work has already begun on:

- Elders in Local Leadership
- Children's and Youth/Families Workers

Further work needs to be done with Education and Learning and the Resource Centres for Learning on training needs for ministry including what stipendiary pioneering ministry might look like.

Being with in ministry requires discernment. It is a life-long adventure and must be flexible enough to respond to unforeseen circumstances. In being with people, those of us involved in ministry need to be present to them at such crucial turning points in their lives. And part of a denomination which fully equips us/resources us for God's future ministry.

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