

Principles of Mission Partnership in Eastern Synod



Background

For several years now, the URC has sought to find a fair way of allocating stipendiary ministerial resources. We are facing a situation where there are fewer stipendiary ministers in pastoral charge within the denomination. The number of churches has not fallen at the same rate but the numbers of members within each church has gone down significantly.

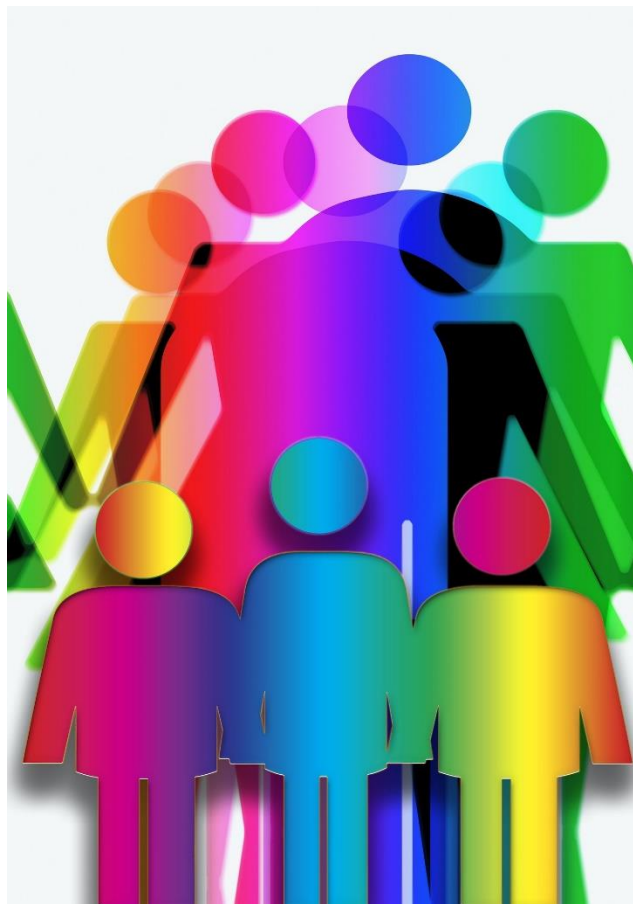
The Synod Moderators, using the target number of ministers per Synod agreed by the denominational Ministries Committee have worked together to ensure that those Synods who are “over-scoped” i.e., have more ministers than the target number, do not add any new vacancies to the denominational Vacancy List until they are at or close to the target number. The number of ministers per Synod that is worked towards varies greatly from Southern at 40 to Scotland at 13. Our target is 28. All of these are currently expected to be reduced by 2 each by the end of 2024.

This is why Eastern Synod is currently experiencing a fairly high number of churches without ministry but does not have any pastorates on the vacancy list. Due to some unexpected movement of ministers, we will be able to



declare at least two vacancies over the next year but that still leaves many churches working hard on their mission and discipleship without ministerial oversight. If we want to find ways to offer ministry to all our churches, then it became clear that we needed to explore new ways of doing this.

The process of exploration began a few years ago but increased in momentum as Paul Whittle moved to be Moderator of the National Synod of Scotland. Paul Ellis and Cecil White as then present and past Convenors of Pastoral Committee, visited most of the Area Partnerships to talk about preferred options to look at in more depth. Overwhelmingly the majority of those who expressed an opinion warmed to the model used by East Midlands Synod. A small task group was set up to take this further – Paul Ellis, Jo Patel, Rick Mearkle, Liz Caswell and the Moderator, Lythan Nevard. Some of the group visited East Midlands to talk to those involved there.



The group set up visits over the summer of 2022 to most of the Area Partnership Pastoral Advisors and as many folk as they were able to invite to join in, to have conversations about what might work in Eastern Synod. These discussions were formed into a series of principles, both Biblical and structural, which were shared with and agreed by Synod Pastoral Committee as the way forward. A presentation was made at October Synod with further opportunities for reflection and discussion with the Moderator at as many Area Partnerships as possible over the winter of 2022 before coming to a decision at March Synod 2023 in terms of adopting the Principles of Mission Partnership as the way forward.

Although the principles have been developed out of necessity, we believe that they are an opportunity for us to be serious about whole life discipleship and mission, reminding people that the URC believes in the priesthood of all believers – that we all have a ministry that we can build together.

Biblical principles

Mission and Discipleship

At the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his disciples to "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:16-20). We are called to **be** disciples and to **make** disciples. To be involved in worship, study and prayer and in mission.

How can we ensure that every member of every church is encouraged to be a disciple and to make disciples?

Working together

Ministry is a calling for all of us. As the statement at the beginning of the service of induction for a minister affirms: **all** Christians are called to be ministers of God's love.

“Christians share, through their baptism, in the ministry of Christ, and all Christians are called to be ministers of God's love.”

1 Corinthians 12 – Paul's amazing description of the church as the body of Christ, reminds us all that we are all called and all needed. We all have resources and gifts to offer to enable us as a church to be disciples and to make disciples.



Sharing together

Acts 2:43-47 describes the new community of Christians sharing their resources and worshipping and eating together “with glad and generous hearts” We are called to share our resources as well. The Mission Partnership model looks to this happening not just in one church but across a Partnership together. Pooling resources and encouraging each other in our various contexts and mission.

Inadequacy is enough

In the version of the Feeding of the 5,000 from John, Andrew notes “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” (John 6:9). Jesus blesses the food which is shared and multiplied. When we share our resources, even if we feel we do not have much, they can be shared, blessed and multiplied.

Principles of Mission Partnership

The principles are just that – principles. Pastoral Committee sees these principles as a way of working together that has flexibility at its core so that they can be worked through at a local level in a way that makes sense for each area with its diverse needs such as theology, geography, and membership.

1: Mission Partnerships rather than joint Pastorates

Ministers will be called to a Mission Partnership of usually 3-4 churches. The East Midlands model we are adapting uses Resource Church and Resourced Churches,

with 50% of the scoping with the Resource Church and activity with the Resourced Churches on a need or project basis. Our initial thoughts were to revise the language to Hub Church and Partner Churches, which may apply in some cases, but on reflection it is likely that many of our Mission Partnerships will be a coming together of Partner Churches to adapt these principles to best meet their needs and situation.



The emphasis is much less on what percentage of a minister a church has but rather a Mission Partnership working together to enable mission and discipleship in each community. All churches will need to look at what they need a Minister to help them with. This might be to develop certain projects or work out what God is calling them to be in the future. When a Minister of Word and Sacraments is involved in a project, the Mission Partnership will need to consider sustainability and succession planning as the Minister moves on to a different ministry focus within the partnership.

So, a Minister of Word and Sacraments will be called in a different way which is much more about targeting stipendiary ministry where it is most needed and can be most effective in a much more flexible way.

There are of course expenses involved in deploying ministers. Those related to Plan for Partnership will be calculated proportionally based on the existing Fair Share numbers and divided between the Mission Partnership. There will also need to be conversations about manses to accommodate ministers.

2: Teamwork is at the heart of Mission Partnerships

In order for the churches within the Mission Partnership to flourish, there will need to be an emphasis on teams working together.

A Minister of Word and Sacraments is just one resource that can be called on and is part of something bigger that is available within the whole Mission Partnership

The make-up of a team will vary according to local circumstances but could include

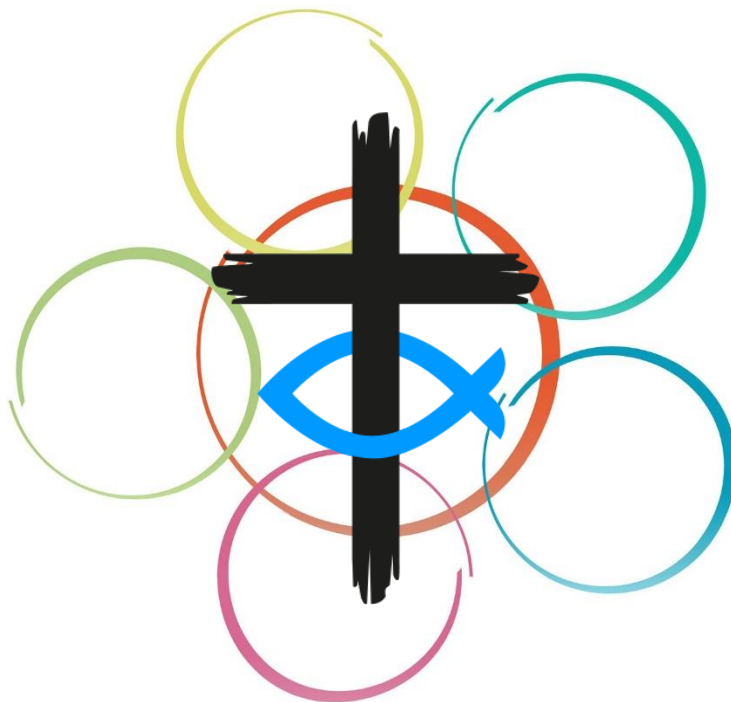
- Local Church Leaders;
- Elders; (already a team with the Minister but it maybe that some will have specific team roles)
- pastoral carers;
- mission/family workers;
- lay preachers;
- administrator/book-keeper

Reflecting, planning and praying together as a team is a source of great strength and innovation in worship and discipleship.

Worship planning can include most of those preaching in the Mission Partnership over a few months. Talking together about the Bible readings, perhaps even sharing worship across buildings, thanks to modern technology.

Bible Study and other discipleship courses can also run across the Partnership, either via Zoom or different people running the same study simultaneously.

Training can be given in understanding what it means to be a team and how a team can work together well.



3: Lowering the administrative load.

There are some burdens on a local church that can be shared across the Mission Partnership:

- *Safeguarding* – there could be one Safeguarding Officer for the Partnership
- *Finance* – a bookkeeper could be employed across the Partnership so that the Treasurer role is more one of oversight. This also could be one person across the Partnership
- *Ministry expenses* would be met by the Mission Partnership as a whole, with the Partnership agreeing how they should be allocated. It may be worth considering MandM contributions being handled this way as well.
- *Bookings or Maintenance* – could there be one person looking after hall bookings for the whole Partnership? Could there be a go to Maintenance person in the same way?
- *Meetings* – thought will need to be given to ensure that the number of meetings in a month is not overwhelming. e.g. There could be some Partnership Elders meetings with part of the meeting to discuss issues together and then breaking out into individual church groups

4: Including Local Ecumenical Projects

A key principle is that LEPs will be included within the Partnership irrespective of the denomination of the minister who currently serves them. How this will be implemented will vary depending on circumstances. The URC can only effect the deployment of

URC ministers and in each case arrangements made need to be different depending on which denomination is deploying.

At the moment LEPs tend to drift towards the denomination of the minister so it is hoped that Partnership working will enable them to still feel they have a role within the wider URC.

This will also allow for a smoother transition when the minister moves on in which case the URC minister for the Mission Partnership would offer oversight as with other Partner churches.

There are some exceptions to this:

- HAEBEA runs differently – although some of the principles laid out echo what happens in HAEBEA
- Multi denominational LEPs that seek ministry outside regular scoping – by advertisement across the denominations – Bar Hill; Southgate Bury St Edmonds; Cambourne; Bowthorpe, Norwich.

Although we would still hope to include them in a Partnership, the ministry there usually has more distinct boundaries to it.

5: Being organic and responsive

- This model will take its time to evolve and will need to look different in each area
- We will need to have flexible boundaries regarding Area Partnerships as it will make sense for some Partnerships to cut across the current shape of Area Partnerships. It may be that in the end the Mission Partnerships will replace Area Partnerships – but that is not part of the current decision.
- It may be that there are areas where this model cannot work e.g. HAEBEA and we will need to find ways of working this through.
- Consideration will need to be given to existing models of URC congregations to determine which will best allow partnership working to flourish, the declaring of vacancies and calling of stipendiary ministers to be effective and clear, and the sharing of resources to be equitable.

Creating Mission Partnerships can only happen with the involvement and the agreement of Church Meetings and Ministers of Word and Sacraments. That is why this document talks of principles rather than rules.

However, it is crucial that the Synod understands that the current way we allocate Ministry is unsustainable. It leads to some churches having to sustain vacancies for a long time which is not easy or acceptable.

