**URC 50th Anniversary Celebration**

**2nd October 2022**

We are gathered to give thanks to Almighty God for our coming together, 50 years ago, in one church, catholic and reformed; to rejoice in the leading of the Holy Spirit; and to pledge ourselves once again to our common Lord. The faith on which this unity rests, and which we now are firm, is this:

**We believe in one living and true God, creator, preserver and ruler of all things in heaven and earth, Father, Son and Holy Spirit: God alone we worship, and in God we put our trust.**

We believe that, out of infinite love for all people, God gave Jesus Christ our Lord, God’s eternal Son, who became human, lived on earth in perfect love and obedience, died upon the cross for our sins, rose again from the dead: and lives for ever more, Saviour, judge and king.

**We believe that, by the Holy Spirit, this glorious gospel is made effective so that through faith we receive the forgiveness of sins, newness of life as children of God, and strength in this present world to do his will.**

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, in heaven and on earth, where, by the same Spirit, the whole company of believers is made one Body of Christ: to worship God and serve in the kingdom of righteousness and love.

**We rejoice in the gift of eternal life, and believe that, in the fullness of time, God will renew and gather in one all things in Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.**

**Prayer of Confession**

God of all mercy and understanding, as the hymn fades from our lips

we remember with honest sadness the fading of the hopes we once had.

We are sorry that the Church is still divided, bereft that when once we thought to lead the way we now find ourselves left behind.

We wonder whether we misheard your call, failed in discerning the lessons of our times or were arrogant in thinking we could fulfil your mission.

Today we mourn the churches that have closed, the fellow pilgrims who have died, the projects, experiments and programmes that have fallen to dust.

Deliver us from the sins that tempted us; the narcissism that thought we were right, the cynicism that casts blame, the despair that gives in and gives up.

Forgive us, cheer us and renew us, gentle God.

Revive tired pilgrims’ limbs and stir once more the confident hope

that endures all things and rejoices always.

Assurance of Pardon

Let all the people hear these ancient and holy words:

God has blessed you and will keep you:

God makes His face to shine upon you and has mercy upon you;

God lifts up Her countenance upon you, and gives you peace. Amen.

**Luke 9. 57-10.9**

**Philippians 2.1-18**

This is a personal question, but is there anyone in the room who is under 50? I know for some people there are 10 years between being 49 and 50, – but is anyone under 50? You are younger than the URC! The rest of us know what it is like to reach 50!

We are celebrating turning 50 today as a church.

Because everyone is living longer 50 is the new 40.

There are two classic sayings about turning 40.

One is that you are now over the hill. The other is that life begins.

I want to use those two notions to share some thoughts with you as our denomination turns 50 this week.

That phrase, 'life begins at forty' is a 20th century one; prior to that it was more accurate to say 'death begins at forty' as most people didn't live much beyond that age. Which is why there is the flipside – you’re over the hill at 40 and as Charles Schulz said ‘Just remember, once you're over the hill you begin to pick up speed’.

* Age 50 is when you start using those number 10 candles on your birthday cake because they take up less space.
* When you're turning 50 and strangers ask how old you are, tell them you're 75 so they think you look wonderful for your age.
* When you turn 50, all that walking around the grocery store to get the things you missed on your list the first time counts as exercise.
* If you're really upset about turning 50, be thankful you're not counting it in dog years!

There are many reasons to celebrate and be thankful for the URC. Our openness, inclusivity, non-dogmatic nature. Our ecumenism, our focus on justice and peace issues and involvement in our communities. Most of the things to celebrate are things that sociologists suggest are reasons for our decline from being a denomination that started with 200,000 members in 1972 to one that has fewer than 40,000 now.

I did my Master’s degree in Christian Spirituality about predicting the future of religion in Britain. I had to read a lot of academic sociologists. I am still in therapy. One of them, Steve Bruce, wrote a book a few years back entitled ‘God is dead’ – the title tells you everything. He claims the more liberal denominations in Britain will be dead by 2030.

The epistemology (the essential nature and origin) of these denominations determines their fate he says. The denomination shares an open nature. They suppose that there is more than one truth or that the truth is broad and wide. No single embodiment of it can be treated as finally authoritative. Diffuse, tolerant and liberal belief systems are therefore difficult to sustain and reproduce. Lack of obedience to a central authority makes consensus on details of belief impossible, weakens individual commitment and reduces the need and the ability to evangelise to perpetuate the organisation. Strike a chord?

Bruce blames it all on the Reformation[[1]](#endnote-1) ... The Reformation was a challenge to the authority of the church and gave rise to both individualism and rationality.

‘*Individualism threatened the communal basis of religious belief, while rationality removed many of the purposes of religion and rendered many of its beliefs implausible’[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Are individualism and rationality sending us over the hill to oblivion?

The great ecumenical dream seems to be over. Sadly, we don’t seem to want to be ecumenical with the Pentecostal churches who have seen growth, particularly in other parts of the world. We have been trying to catch a new vision since the turn of the millennium and much effort is going into trying to help us find a greater sense of cohesion and identity and to be confident in what we are and what we can offer.

The pandemic has once again made many people re-assess their lives and also reconsider what is the point of church? Some have got out of the habit. Some having been lockdown have got used to their own company and don’t want to belong anymore. Some are still anxious. Some have lost faith. Conversely some have found faith. Some have realised that the pandemic has taught us that we need each other, that if you don’t make the effort to commit in community then don’t be surprised that there is no one there for you when you need them. Others have seen a new role for the church offering hope and practical help as one of the few groups left in society that exists for its non-members and has a unifying core belief.

Back in 2013 Sunday Assemblies sprang up which was dubbed by the media as Atheist Churches. It was packed with younger people who wanted church but without God. Nine years later they are floundering.

The temptation for Christians now is to be uncharitable about the whole Sunday Assembly endeavour: so you thought it was easy to get the benefits of religion without the religion? Ha! Not that easy now, is it?

And yet there is something admirable about the effort of will on the part of members to go through the motions of religion without the promise of eternal life at the end of it. I’ve never had much issue with unbelievers who go to church out of habit, or merely for the experience of being together. Like Pascal, I think that going through the motions of prayer is half the battle; your body prays even if your mind doesn’t assent. And while there is no community like the Body of Christ in the Church, we shouldn’t begrudge the poor unbelievers their share of human solidarity.

The interesting thing about the benefits of religion is that they accrue to those who do religion, not those who think it. Patricia Casey,[[3]](#endnote-3) Professor of Psychiatry at University College Dublin, has conducted several studies of the data on religious practice and done her own research, and found that the benefits of religion on mental health relate to practicing faith. So those terrifically irritating people who pronounce themselves “spiritual but not religious” derive no benefit to their mental health. Yet those who attend church regularly do receive the benefits, regardless of their belief.

One of the speakers at a conference I went to suggested the URC could find a niche in the church market – become like a Christ centric Quaker movement. You know what the Quakers stand for – peace and justice and inclusivity, even if they are little vague about what beliefs underpin those principles. The speaker thought that could be a direction of the URC – realising that it will never be all things to all people – but become more of a niche. The same speaker also suggested we may re congregationalise – in other words continue to dismantle the clumber some structures that were set up for a church of 200,000 that may no longer be appropriate and make our churches more independent, like the old congregational churches – regrouping around those churches that still have a mission and role to play. He suggested URCs in the provincial towns and suburbs, where the competition isn’t too great, had more chance of surviving.

There is a saying that middle age is when broadness of the mind and narrowness of the waist change places. Can we keep open to the Spirit and what the Spirit is telling the church?

Well that’s enough reflecting on where we are. You have had text and you have had some commentary.

We can’t go back.

The question is can life begin at 50?

There is a still lot of life in our churches. We can all share some good things that are happening. I don’t share Steve Bruce’s pessimism that we’ll all be dead by 2030. God knows what the future holds – but there is still life in our churches – because the people in them have the life of Christ.

What I celebrate about the URC are the numerous people that have walked alongside me in my journey of faith. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to members of United Reformed Churches who have helped me to find faith in Christ and go on in my faith in Christ and given me opportunities to live and give expression to that faith.

I think of Andrew my youth leader who gave up his Friday night to hold a youth club and who with his wife would invite those of us who wanted to go back to his house for further discussion. I could ask those big questions of God the universe and everything and work it out for myself – so crucial for those teenage years when you are trying to find your identity and what you are going to give your life for. For me it’s the most strategic ministry in the church – and it needs backing. If you don’t invest in your young , if you don’t constantly renew your leadership and let younger people take over, your organisation ossifies and dies.

I think of Beryl an eighty year old lady who baked me a chocolate cake on my first Sunday at university in Nottingham There I was away from home and wondering if I still wanted to go to church, and whether I still wanted to go to a United Reformed Church. I gave it a go and I went along to the student tea and found a welcome and a free chocolate cake to take back to my digs with me. I found a new family to nurture me and allow me to give something to them as well. They made me a church elder at the age of 22 – a bit of oxymoron – church elder at the age of 22!

I think of numerous ministers and other members who have annoyed me by challenging my beliefs and making me think through what I believed and how I behaved. I think of those who have inspired me by their simple prayerful life and openness to the Spirit. I thank God for the opportunity to offer my gifts and serve in various places, to make mistakes, to learn and grow.

I am ever so thankful for the people I know and share with in these churches of the Dursley Pastorate. You put up with me and some of my crazy ideas, my preaching politics – although I just believe I’m preaching the Bible folks- and they put themselves and their hard earned money into making dreams become reality. Money is important. We don’t believe it makes the world go round but it sure does make a difference. The chaos in the economy is evidence of that.

There is a cost and a commitment to be a thriving, full of life church – not just in time and talents but also in money. If you want your church to make a difference you have to back it. Thankyou for continuing to back this church.

Life can begin at 50. Every new day is a new day to re commit ourselves to Jesus Christ and his way, to recommit ourselves to working for the kingdom of God.

Gospel passage has people looking back and being distracted from following Jesus. Jesus has got exciting plans for them – there is a harvest waiting for them – but the workers are few. And one of the reasons the workers are few is that they are too distracted by other stuff or attending to the past.

*"I will follow you,"* the first person says, *"...wherever you go."*

Times may get hard – will you still go the way of Jesus?

The times are urgent. There is no time for those lengthy farewell parties with family and friends or even time to go through the lengthy funeral rites of the day. There is no less urgency in following Christ today than there was in Jesus' day.

The world is broken and can't fix itself. Hatred of one group of people for another is an urgent issue for our communities. Malnutrition does not wait as it advances on the multitudes of children whose lives are wasting away in hunger. The empty values of the world around us have created a vacuum in the lives of many people we know. People are seduced by stuff that will never satisfy them – dissatisfaction leads to insecurity, depression, division. There is too much screen time – whether social media internet or streaming TV. Billions of pounds are spent by companies trying to get you focussed on the screen and not focussed on meeting up and organising with other people.

There is a sense of urgency. The harvest is plentiful – but the workers – are few. Those who respond to the call will see the kingdom of God near

Jesus sends them out empty-handed. No purse, no bag, no sandals. Sheep in the midst of wolves. They just have to go in faith. Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' words this way: "Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment" (*The Message*).

The future of our church is perilous. What a good place to be in!

Jesus pushes them beyond their comfort zones and into the world, sent out to share peace and table fellowship, to cure the sick, to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Faith is always risky, always on the edge. It is never sensible. I came across a saying: ‘*Middle age is when you choose a cereal because of its fibre content, not the free toy’*. You can get to that point in life when you just want to do the cautious, sensible thing. In one sense you may lengthen your life but in another you may hasten your death.

Faith has to be put into action otherwise its dead. There are some gospel truths that only make sense in the homeless shelter, or at the food bank, or at a hospital bed, or in any one of the great number of places in the world where people cry out for mercy, for bread, for justice, for compassion. Perhaps this is why Jesus sends his followers into the mission field carrying only the message that the kingdom has come.

Going forward will not be easy. These are challenging times – but has it ever been different?

Paul lies in a prison cell waiting for the sentence of death for witnessing to Christ. He writes to the Philippians urging them to live a life ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ’ (v.27), and to ‘stand firm’ (v.27).

The language Paul uses is that of a Phalanx – the most formidable military device of antiquity. With shields together and spears out front, the soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder in files eight men deep. As long as they did not break rank, they were virtually invincible.

‘A Christ-like attitude is the key to this unity. Any disunity in the church would have detracted from Paul’s ‘joy’ (2:2). Disunity so often comes from ‘selfish ambition and vain conceit’ (v.3a). The key for Paul here in Philippians is to consider others better than ourselves (v.3b), to look not only to our own interests, ‘but also to the interests of others’ (v.4).

In other words, Paul says that we are to have the same attitude as Jesus. Paul hopes the church will shine like stars in the universe as they hold out the word of life?

We think of those who have gone before us in the faith, like Paul, and imagine them urging us to stand firm and contend for the gospel. So they can rejoice and be glad. So we can continue to rejoice and be glad. I want to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the URC and– not sure I’ll be here for the one hundredth though!

All this is in God’s hands. God knows what the future holds whether we are over the hill or whether new life can begin. All we can do is follow – follow in the way of Jesus – respond with faithfulness, recommitment, resilience, standing firm and contending for the gospel – not the URC – but contending for the glorious gospel which we serve.

Let life begin.

**Intercessions**

We bring to God the needs of the Church, our world, and those we love.

Eternal One,

we thank you for all that is good in our world,

for its beauty and abundance,

for the acts of loving kindness which touch us and make a difference.

Yet in our praises we also bring to you, O Most High, our pain.

We pray for the Church this day,

for where we meet in secret for fear of the authorities,

for where people long for baptism but do so in secret or abroad,

for where it’s dangerous to witness to your love,

for these places, O God, we ask your blessing.

We pray too for places where the Church is met with indifference,

where we’re feeble and failing,

where our witness is no longer heard,

and where we’re preparing to close,

for these places, O God, we ask your blessing.

We pray, Lord Jesus, for our world,

at war and preparing for war,

where creation groans with eager longing for a redemption long denied,

where the temperatures and seas rise,

and where the poorest will be hit the hardest.

We pray for those who suffer from the cruel economic systems we perpetuate,

for those worried about how they will pay their bills this winter,

for those whose pensions and wages don’t rise with inflation.

We pray, Holy Spirit,

for your presence in the midst of our lives,

that as we rejoice and grieve,

you hold us, inspire us and change us.

We pray, in particular for your healing presence amongst those we love and worry about and name now in the silence of our hearts….

Holy God, source and Creator of all things,

love made flesh in Jesus Christ,

and known among us through the Holy Spirit,

gather us together in your loving arms

that we may grow in visible communion

and so witness to unity in the world.

Where your people are broken, may love mend.

When hatred shouts in the world, let love bring peace with justice.

As creation groans, may redemption come to all the earth.

Come with your divine love, and enter our hearts.

Move your Church, and move the world,

to reconciliation and unity. Amen.

Come, people of God, come to the feast of jubilee; come in freedom, come in peace, come as children of God, all welcome, each fed, unity restored, debts forgiven, and your ransom paid.

*Introduction*

As we gather, in this place, in this year, and at this table,

we celebrate that in Jesus, God was born among us,

that he proclaimed a time of jubilee, a year of the Lord’s favour,

and gave his life for us and for all who wait for redemption.

On the third day he rose to new life

and now, on each day of every year,

he is present with us through the Holy Spirit.

In the presence of the Apostles and the Saints,

of our forebears in the faith,

and with all Christians, with whom we are one body,

we come to celebrate this feast of abundant life.

*The Thanksgiving*

Lift up your hearts! **We lift them to the Lord!**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give thanks and praise.**

We give thanks to you, O God,

because this beautiful Earth belongs to you,

and you made us to live in freedom,

one church, one people, one world.

Thank you for this time of jubilee,

for joyful celebration and faithful return,

for your summons to justice and the restoring of our hope.

Thank you for this bread and this wine,

for memories made vivid of Exodus and freedom,

of death and sacrifice, of revelation and renewal.

With all your people, in earth and heaven, we join to sing your praise

We praise you for Jesus Christ,

bread of life and true vine,

his body given for us and his blood poured out.

On the night when he was betrayed,

he took bread, gave thanks, broke it,

and gave it to them saying,

‘Take eat: this is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.’

And he took the cup after supper, saying,

‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’

Let us proclaim the mystery of faith:

**Christ has died: Christ is risen: Christ will come again.**

Remembering the life and teaching,

the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus,

and confident in his sacrifice made once for all,

we rejoice that he is present with us,

and that we can walk the way with him.

Send now your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,

us your people, and all creation,

that Jesus may be truly present and the jubilee he proclaimed be made real along us.

May the bread that we break be for us the communion of the body of Christ.

May the cup that we bless be the communion of the blood of Christ.

May we continue to be made one with you and with each other,

and may our unity give you glory,

God who is one in three, a community of love, now and forever, Amen.

Let joy ring out! May unity be made! May creation be made new!

*The Lamb of God*

Lamb of God, you take away,

the sins of the world.

In your mercy come and heal us;

Lord hear our prayer.

Take away our sins, forgive us,

Lamb of God restore, redeem us,

grant us peace, Lord, in your mercy

Lord hear our prayer.

*Post Communion Prayer*

Loving God, You have fed us generously at this table,

we have remembered Jesus and rejoiced that He is with us today.

We are ready now to follow Him,

and to be Your people in the world.

May Your Holy Spirit show us the way,

make us holy, and fill us with love. Amen.

**Blessing**

May you continue to be a sign of unity,

that the world may believe,

and creation rejoice.

The blessing of the Creator,

who makes this year holy, be with you.

The blessing of the Christ, the Anointed One

who proclaimed the Lord’s favour, be with you.

The blessing of the Holy Spirit,

poured out on all creation, be with you,

now and always, Amen.

1. Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: from Cathedrals to Cults*, OUP, Oxford, 1996 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: from Cathedrals to Cults*, OUP, Oxford, 1996, p230 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://catholicherald.co.uk/im-not-surprised-the-secular-sunday-assembly-didnt-work-out/ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)