

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH ~ SYNOD OF SCOTLAND

STRUCTURES GROUP REPORT FOR SYNOD IN MARCH 2006 THROUGH PPS

Section 2

The meetings of Synod

Purpose of this paper

- To outline the structure of Synod in light of the five principles agreed by the March 2005 synod and further decisions of the September 2005 synod
- To provide a structure on the assumption that General Assembly will decide that there be one council between the Church Meeting and the General Assembly and that the Council will be the synods (however labelled). *At the end of this paper there is an indication of how this structure could be adapted should General Assembly decide that Area Councils should continue. Whilst there is discussion about the shape and number of synods, it is being assumed here that the discussion will not alter the shape of the Synod of Scotland, either by dividing it into more than one synod or indeed by ignoring the national status and border of the synod.)*
- To further discussion through PPS and committee officers
- To provide the basis of a paper to be taken to synod in March 2006 for discussion and suggested improvements, this discussion to inform proposals to be brought to the September Synod 2006

The Synod

- 1) assumptions:
 - a) that the Synod will continue with similar functions as those contained presently in the Manual for both synods and Area/ District Councils (see CTV Report to Assembly).
 - b) That in Scotland the Synod meeting is a significant place of belonging particularly in light of the pattern of residential meetings experienced both in the former CUS and in the former Mid Scotland District. One might even suggest that the move from St Andrews to meeting in Tulliallan (which had a generally very positive feedback) has shown that this sense of belonging is not merely 'nostalgic' but also forward looking and greater than habit.
 - c) That closeness and a sense of belonging and relating to one another between congregations is less a matter of distance and more a matter of heart.
- 2) "this we can do"
 - a) We are a small synod with a great activity
 - b) We are able to be flexible
 - c) We are able to contribute to the life of Scotland in ways which are not characteristic of the majority Christian community in Scotland
 - d) We are free to be a catalyst ecumenically
 - e) We must not over-stretch ourselves lest we become exhausted

- f) Therefore let's affirm a "this-we-can-do" atmosphere (of course for 'this' read 'these' – for there will always be variety in how we are and what we prioritise around the nation.)
- 3) People and community
- a) We are called to be the community of sisters and brothers in Christ
 - b) We are less an organisation and more a community (though this does not excuse inefficiencies, carelessness etc)
 - c) Thus the concentration is on building trust and developing relationships

Synod meetings:

These need to build a sense of community, belonging, identity and therefore of purpose (driven-ness/ calling) of women, men, children and young people called together in this small part of the church catholic. The synod gathering should be rich in worship, in theological awareness that what we do and how we are together is our attempt to demonstrate what God is like (as in all our church gatherings).

The primary instrument of mission is the local church. The synod's primary purpose will be to serve the mission imperatives of the local congregation. (Both the words local church and local congregation tend to create a relatively uniform image: we need to be aware of the growing variety of expressions of church life and find ways of developing and affirming these.)

At the same time the Synod of Scotland has the particular responsibilities of relating to the nation of Scotland and speaking to this nation. This is a particular focus in which all congregations need to act collectively.

Synod agenda is dictated by church meetings, individual members of synod, our national context, concerns for justice and dignity, synod committees and General Assembly particularly. Whilst it is the responsibility of PPS to balance the range and amount of issues on the agenda of a particular meeting of synod it has proved beneficial and creative to have a Synod Planning group focusing on 'atmosphere', timing, worship, social matters, the 'roundedness' of the agenda etc. which are vital for developing a sense of community. (*The Synod Planning Group is also exploring the standing orders of Synod to discover ways in which these might be amended to promote a variety of approaches to decision making. It is likely that the group will bring recommendation through PPS to amend the current standing orders of synod.*)

The Synod does not only gather (or even primarily gather) for business. The engagement with one another, the sense of belonging to a larger family, the exploration of Bible and theology in our contemporary culture and the sense of belonging to the world church are/ should be essential components of the Synod meeting.

PPS and Synod Planning need always to be alert to the quality of meetings that are arranged.

Timing and frequency of synod meetings

Currently the Synod meets twice per year, on the second Saturday of March and (latterly) in mid-September.

The March meeting is designed on roughly the same Saturday in each synod to ‘fit in’ with the current timetable of Mission Council and General Assembly. It is often the synod with which the Assembly consults on constitutional issues. It is in effect the cut off date for Synod to agree resolutions for General Assembly.

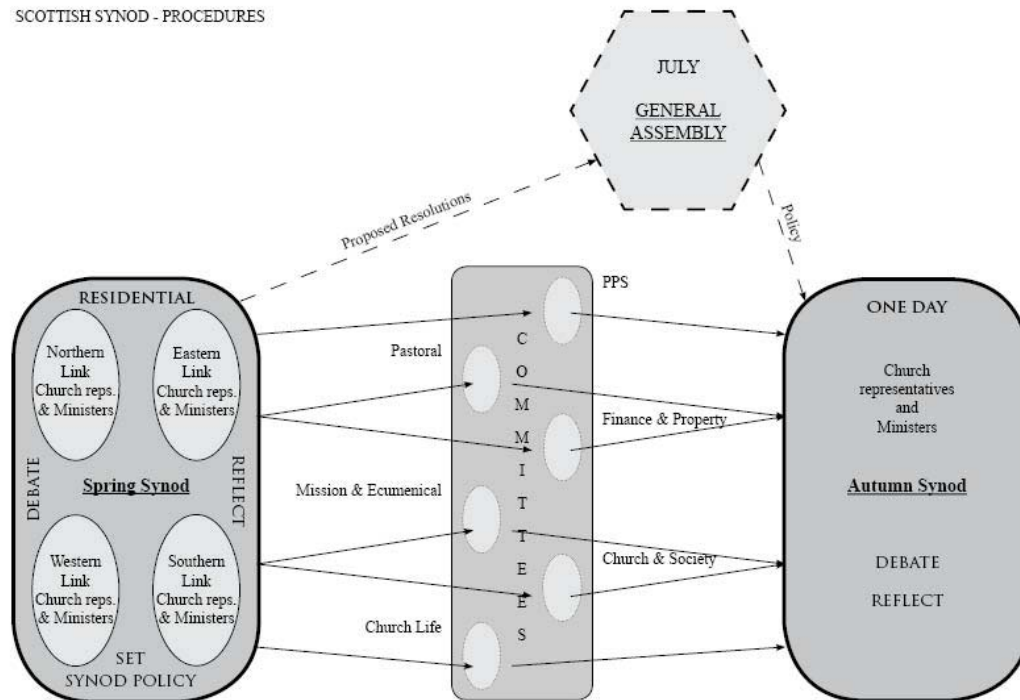
The September meeting (though earlier in the autumn than in any other Synod, yet more suited to the Scottish pattern of holidays) is the occasion for greater reflection, for receiving from the General Assembly and for making policy decisions to be worked on by the Synod through the year. The residential nature of this Synod is highly significant.

The synod will need to take decisions. But there is considerable opportunity to use other methods for decision-making/ debating to replace the traditional process of merely putting resolutions. In order to help the church reach toward the ‘mind and heart of God’ the consensus approach to discussion could be introduced by amending standing orders (this is on the Synod Planning Group agenda).

We have a dilemma in working out the best way of timing meetings. Within Scotland the Structures Group would suggest that having the residential synod in September is not necessarily helpful. If synod is to be a church meeting which looks forward, then to meet at the beginning of what is generally *felt* to be the ‘church year’ (as opposed to Advent) is not the best time. Because we are a conciliar church, relying on generous volunteers giving their time and ‘paid’ staff (ministers and lay) who have heavy schedules it takes time for decisions to be enacted. Decisions often mean task groups/ getting people together ‘to do’/ getting things into diaries etc. (E.g. the reality of the intentional church process resolutions agreed in September 2005 was that it needed to be worked on by PPS, when PPS meeting in October identified people ‘to do’, these people had to be asked, responses had to be waited for and then a date for getting going had to be found convenient to all – thus a September meeting results in a ‘task group’ meeting in mid-December – no one is at fault, it is the reality. We can’t ask people to drop commitments already undertaken!)

Thinking about a forward looking synod would suggest that this is perhaps best in spring (but avoiding Easter holidays) perhaps second weekend in March (allowing us to ‘fit in’ with Mission Council and getting things to Assembly) or perhaps April. This would allow time to ‘get things started’ before the summer holidays, allow people who often have less of a heavy schedule (because of the prolonged holiday period) in the summer to do some planning and preparing, so that things can happen at the start of the ‘church year’ in late August/ September.

If we only had the one synod gathering a year (and there were no Area Councils) there might be too great a distance between the synod as an organisation and the church meeting. To have two synods a year would ensure a greater ownership of synod by churches and would ensure that significant decisions (e.g. affecting policy/ strategy/ mission and outreach) that had to be made within the year needn’t wait and wouldn’t just be taken by a committee. Additionally there is enough business already for two meetings. It might also allow opportunity for ‘checking out’ that what was to be done in the ‘new year’ was being done and if not why not! It would give church meetings more authority over the work synod is undertaking for them and in their name.



When could this one day Synod be? Perhaps late October or very early November would be useful (again remembering that October holidays are not on the same dates in every part of Scotland). October would be better as it would be before the clocks go back for people travelling (the weekend the clocks go back would have the advantage of giving people an extra hour's rest after being at the synod meeting).

The problem arises in the relationship between Synod and General Assembly. This is partly because we do not know the result of the debate concerning the frequency of General Assemblies. Assuming General Assembly met in July, albeit every other year, the autumn meeting of synod would need to deal with matters sent it by General Assembly. This could be prepared for by committees as we know what the matters will be by May when the book of reports is published or at Assembly at the latest. It relies on the synod (particularly its representatives) being alert. (Synod could be helped in this by having a PPS very soon after General Assembly, so that the necessary work could be done by late October).

The pattern of a residential spring Synod and a one day autumn Synod would appear to be the most helpful for a forward looking synod which intends to move on. This pattern could only be introduced in 2007 at the earliest.

A question: if Assembly met every other year would there be reason to suggest that in the year when Assembly meets there be two one day synods rather than one one day synod and a residential synod? We need not stick to thinking that the pattern of synod meetings has to be the same every year, but we do need to communicate well in advance when synod is to meet. However, the Structures Group believes that an annual residential Synod is essential for a sense of belonging together, particularly if Area Councils are to discontinue.

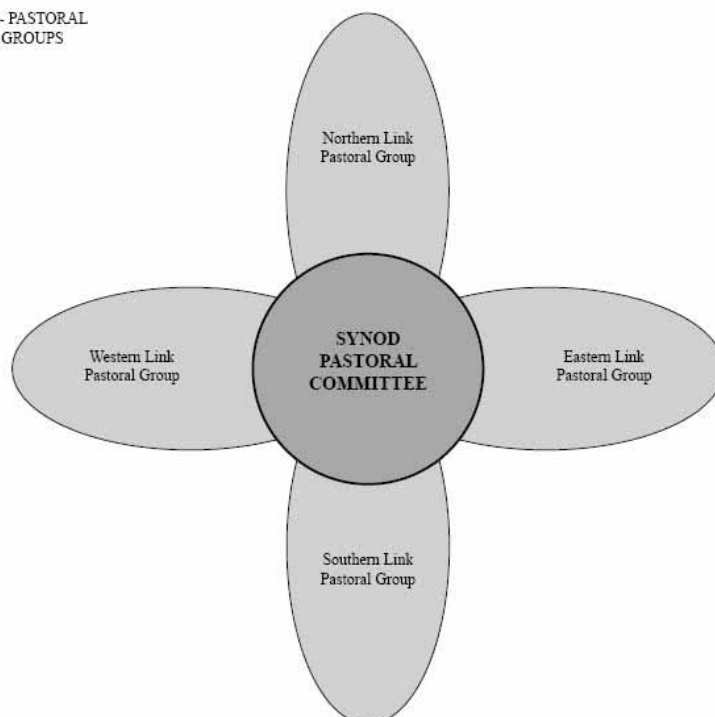
The Structures Group notes that the membership of synod as laid down in the Manual allows for one lay representative from churches with below 200 members and two from churches with over 200 members. The Synod Clerk has been asked to write to the General Secretary to ascertain whether it would be within the Synod's remit to change this so that every congregation has two lay representatives in addition to the ministerial constituency of synod.

‘Local’ pastoral care and oversight and relationships

This issue is key. It lies in part in the realm of another key principle (communication) but in itself is central to making the community of congregations which are the Synod work and feel themselves to be in charge of how we are synod and how we are using resources/ people/ energy, responding to vision and speaking to nation.

The paper on committees speaks of a synod pastoral committee but designed to work with an ‘adjusted constituency’ in various regions of Scotland as *Link Pastoral Groups*. The Link Pastoral Groups would be appointed by the nominations group of Synod from a list of people nominated by local churches in that region, plus the synod moderator and with the freedom to consult with others as and when necessary. The aim would be that each Link Pastoral Group would have someone from each congregation on the Group, but this would need to be advised by the Nominations Group as it seeks to maintain balance, confidentiality and skills on the Link Pastoral Groups. Decisions about scoping, deployment, new mission projects etc would be made by the synod pastoral committee. The Link Pastoral Groups would be there for oversight, pastoral care, to make recommendations to the Synod pastoral committee and to be pro-active in enabling a sense of belonging within the region. If there is to be a discontinuation of Area Councils the Link Pastoral Groups would need to look to and advise the Synod Pastoral Committee in order to implement policy. The Synod Pastoral Committee will of course be answerable to the Synod as the overseeing Council.

SCOTTISH SYNOD - PASTORAL COMMITTEE/LINK GROUPS



Representatives of the four Links across Scotland should meet together during the residential synod for the following reasons:

- To give synod representatives from the same Link the opportunity to meet and know each other more intimately
- To have a place in synod where ‘grass roots’ representatives might develop ideas and demands pertinent from their contexts
- To give representatives to synod the opportunity to ‘practice speaking’ in larger gatherings and therefore prepare for speaking in synod itself (currently a remarkably small proportion of synod actually speak in plenary)
- There would be an arena where ideas might come from the people and thus open up synod and allow greater ownership of the whole show!

(Time could be a factor, but it would be important to achieve.) There is greater detail in the committees section of this report.

If Area Councils continue

We don’t yet know whether or not Assembly will remove Area Councils from the structure of the United Reformed Church. This paper is based on the assumption that Area Councils will be removed. If however Area Councils are not removed and are to continue then there is nothing to prevent the above model operating – the difference is that the Link meetings would be Area Councils, the pastoral groups would operate much as pastoral committees operate currently and it would be for each Area/ Link to decide if there were to be other meetings or structures within the Area/ Link.

Recommended Links:

Northern Link	Southern Link	Eastern Link	Western Link
Thurso	Airdrie Park	Augustine United	Greenock East
Montrose	Cumbernauld	Saughtonhall	Greenock West
Kirkwall	Coatbridge	Bathgate	Port Glasgow
St Nicholas, Aberdeen	Annan	Duke Street	Oakshaw Trinity
Fraserburgh	Dumfries	Livingston	Helensburgh
Nairn	Carluke	Ecumenical	Dumbarton
	Wishaw	Portobello	Morison,
	Hamilton	Granton United	Clydebank
	Avonbridge	Morningside United	Essenside
	Falkirk Grahamston	Galashiels	Drumchapel
	Falkirk Pleasance	Newburgh	Drumchapel
	Stonehouse	Dunning	Part’ship
	E Kilbride Righead	Selkirk	Shawlands
	E Kilbride East	Tweedbank	Pollokshields
	Mains	Coaltown	Giffnock
	Rutherglen	Dunfermline	Priesthill
		Dundee	Mosspark United
			Barrhead
			Beith
			Stewarton