

# COUNCIL FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE AND WITNESS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Council for Congregational Life and Witness has met on two occasions since last year's General Assembly.
2. The report details:
  - (a) How the council has approached fulfilling its General Assembly remit during the interruption to all aspects of church life due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
  - (b) Main emphases and initiatives in accompanying congregations during the pandemic and lockdowns since June 2020.
  - (c) The programme delivered by Presbyterian Women.
  - (d) The framework for going forward from September 2021.
  - (e) Readjusted programme and priorities.
  - (f) Council learning from the pandemic period.
  - (g) Provision of support for the work of the council.
  - (h) From past to future: Transition rather than transformation.
3. Appendix: Report and recommendations of the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee received and adopted at its meeting of 5 May 2021

### **Doing things differently. Doing different things**

4. Throughout the period of the Covid-19 pandemic the normal operations and ministry of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness have given way to a wider and more general role in supporting congregations and their members during this season of disruption.
5. The stop start nature of changing public health restrictions has caused major disruption to the life and witness of congregations. A further unanticipated and prolonged lockdown after Christmas, from which we are only just beginning to emerge, brought hopes of a resumption of more normal patterns of church life in early 2021 crashing down.
6. The council has set itself to be as nimble and agile as possible in responding to a very fluid situation to offer accompaniment, encouragement and support to congregations on their journey through

trying times. While congregations have faced the challenge of struggling to gain any momentum in their life, the council's challenge has been different. Constantly having to do things differently due to restrictions on meeting, staff furloughing and home working, and having to put any semblance of normal activity on hold so as to do different things, has created a relentless intensity to the work.

7. Throughout, the council has been proactive in listening and responding to what it hears of the diverse challenges faced by congregations. Despite the limitations of restrictions on in-person meetings, the council has maintained its regular pattern and number of meetings of full council and General Assembly committee meetings, often undertaken on Microsoft Teams. Panels have been called only where absolutely necessary to transact urgent matters of business. This has enabled members of each of these bodies to be kept up to date with latest initiatives and to shape the council's priorities through regular opportunities provided for feedback and discussion. More informal feedback via the digital programme of webinars, podcasts, digital conversations and presbytery *Fanning the Flame* events has supplemented and nuanced both listening and response.
8. In practice this has led to the council working in two to three month bursts of focused messaging and activity, picking up and seeking to develop and communicate on particular themes in a variety of ways to address emerging congregational needs for support.

### **Accompanying congregations during the pandemic and lockdowns**

9. From the last report of the council prepared for the General Assembly scheduled to meet in June 2020 to the present, main emphases, initiatives and activities have included the following:
  10. June to August 2020
    - Continuation of the *These Three Remain* initiative commenced in March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic. Animating, amplifying and making accessible the denominational story of the journey of congregations and their members through lockdown via blogs, podcasts, *Tides*, *Let's Pray* and *In This Moment* prayers;
    - Release of downloadable *Unprecedented* Zoom Bible studies specifically designed for use in digital gatherings;
    - *Blended* children's and youth ministry ideas shared via the PCI website;
    - Release of family prayer resource via the PCI website;
    - Release of *Proximity 3: Habits of a Lifetime* in print resource;
    - Creation of the *Redefined* section on the PCI website sharing stories of congregations approaching aspects of their life and witness differently in response to pandemic restrictions;
    - In this phase there was an emphasis on gradually moving beyond initial response to the pandemic into more regular resourcing,

equipping and preparing for an anticipated emergence from lockdown restrictions in September 2021. This improvement in the situation did not transpire as the spike in Covid-19 cases led to the resumption of restrictions.

#### 11. September to December 2020

- Transition from *These Three Remain* initiative to *Refined* branding to encourage a gradual shift of thinking from response mode to a receptivity to discernment and learning;
- Continuation of the core digital programme of podcasts, webinars, blogs, *Tides* and social media;
- Release of *Prism* Bible studies and *Open to God: Leading out of Lockdown* resource for leadership teams;
- Release of *Refined Digital Conference* and global mission worker *Digital Dispatches*;
- Gathering of formal and informal feedback to shape the next phase of resourcing congregations in the post-Christmas period.

#### 12. January to May 2021

- Emphasis on responding to feedback from the full meeting of the council in November 2020 and meetings of the Congregational Life and Witness committees in January 2021;
- The continuation of the core digital framework of podcasts, webinars, blogs, *Tides* and social media was also supplemented until Easter by a programme of small scale digital conversations hosted by staff with a focus on creating conversation among congregational leaders to encourage and envision in a particularly difficult period of ministry;
- Working in conjunction with the Moderator on the *For Now* initiative to provide every congregation with a simple means of reconnecting with families in their congregation;
- Working in conjunction with the Moderator on the *Sinking?* initiative to provide the church with some simple evangelistic material in digital format that they could encourage members to share;
- Working in conjunction with the Moderator on the *Fanning the Flame* initiative offering every presbytery in Northern Ireland a digital event in the month of May 2021 to which leaders in congregations under their care could be invited to participate to consider the challenges and opportunities of the return to more regular patterns of church life as lockdown restrictions eased. Events for presbyteries with congregations in the Republic of Ireland followed during the month of June to better coincide with the timing of the lifting of restrictions in that jurisdiction;
- Release of *Whole* digital Bible study material offering a framework for exploring a Christian perspective on well-being and *Encounters with Jesus* material for families;

- Provision of 5,000 free resources for congregational use with young people entitled *Shaken*, which offered an age-appropriate Christian perspective on mental wellbeing (funding from the Education Authority NI);
  - Provision of 5,000 free resources for congregational use with children and families entitled *Jesus and Emotions*, which offered an age-appropriate Christian perspective on mental wellbeing (funding from the Education Authority NI);
  - Provision of a free *Youth App* for use in retaining effective contact with young people during the pandemic and beyond (funding from the Education Authority NI);
  - Partnering with the Presbyterian Children's Society to publicise grant funding available to congregations to enable Covid-19 response, and in particular the opportunity to purchase digital devices for families who needed such equipment for home schooling and to access online digital ministry;
  - The commissioning of a piece of research into congregational children's and youth ministry across the Presbyterian Church in Ireland scheduled to take place in 2022 (funding from the Education Authority NI);
  - Update to *Refined* section of the PCI website including ideas for being together again for children's ministry and youth ministry.
13. June to August 2021
- During the summer months, a scaled back digital programme continued to carry the main emphases of the *Fanning the Flame* initiative, encouraging congregations and their members to be getting ready, getting together and making preparations for getting restarted;
  - An experiment in creating shorter, sharable social media content on the main themes of the *Fanning the Flame* initiative was piloted with a view to offering congregations some simple ways of sharing crucial messages with their members in preparation for the resumption of more normal patterns of church life;
  - From August the council also publicised and encouraged the potential of a number of possibilities for staff engagement with individual congregations as they began to assess and adjust to where they find themselves and consider future rhythms of life and witness.
14. Throughout this period and as of time of writing, circumstances continue to dictate that the council works within the confines of the General Council decision that 'for the foreseeable future councils and departments will have to be focused primarily on meeting key essentials.'
15. In practical terms this means working with realistic expectations in present circumstances. Members of the General Assembly should

therefore understand that the council's overall output is much more streamlined than usual and appreciate that any activities undertaken have to be safe for anyone participating or involved in delivery. Wisdom about sustainability needs to be carefully applied in what remains a situation with few certainties, resulting in a consequent inability to plan ahead with any confidence in assuring delivery.

16. All of the council's ministries have to carefully observe up to date public health advice and operate within the limits of a now reduced staff team many of whom have been working reduced hours during the period of the Government Job Retention Scheme, often from home to comply with government advice. Activities cannot be restarted which may prove difficult to sustain if the future public health situation deteriorates and subsequent restrictions are quickly re-imposed. Therefore the focus for now continues to be on keeping delivery simple and grounded in response to immediate, presenting, congregational needs. For the present, output still needs to be deliverable digitally, or by download, and with a careful eye to budget.

### **Presbyterian Women**

17. The work of *Presbyterian Women* has continued under difficult circumstances ably guided and overseen by the PW Panel. The annual theme and home and overseas projects for 2020 have been extended for a further year. The *Wider World* magazine is being provided in shorter format as permitted by the General Council's denominational magazine policy in response to Covid-19. Ongoing use of social media and a webinar in February 2021 has been successful in harnessing digital mediums to encourage members. The *Annual Meeting and Celebration*, usually held in May, will be replaced by a pre-recorded digital conference in September 2021. Under General Council instruction and the guidance of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness, the PW Panel will continue to take lead responsibility in shaping an appropriate response to the situation in support of PW groups and the wider work of resourcing other forms of women's ministry in congregations in the autumn and until the period of the pandemic passes.

### **Framework for going forward from September 2021**

18. As the impact of both the length and depth of the pandemic continues to disrupt normal patterns of being together in church life at all levels, planning a coherent council programme for the period from September onwards remains all but impossible.
19. Under normal circumstances, the remit of the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee involves overseeing budget and encouraging greater coordination of the council's remit, messaging and resourcing of congregations. Undertaking its key role in shaping overall council programming, at its meeting on 5 May 2021 the committee received a

paper and adopted its recommendations for a flexible, interim plan for the period September 2021 to February 2022.

20. This framework is intended to shape the work of the Congregational Life and Witness Committees and other council panels during this period. The basic principles adopted are as follows:
  - That the primary focus of the council from September 2021 to February 2022 will be the continuation of the programme of accompaniment for congregations in their journey out of lockdown and enabling denominational learning from the pandemic, rather than the return to a more regular pattern of programmes, events and resource production.
  - The adoption of only short term planning up until February 2022.
  - A balance of realism about the challenges that lie ahead with a built in flexibility allowing the nimble development and delivery of a range of small scale, specifically targeted initiatives should changing circumstances allow and demand.
  - A review of the situation in January 2022, or before if appropriate, to assess and schedule a set of priorities for the period March to August 2022.
21. So as to give members of the General Assembly a full understanding of the deliberations and fine balances involved in the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee's shaping of the framework for the council's work from September 2021 to February 2022, the full report and specific recommendations as received and adopted at its meeting of 5 May 2021 is reproduced as an appendix to the report. It also offers more detail on how the council will address some previously identified short and medium term priority pieces of work while navigating current circumstances.

### **Readjusted programme and priorities**

22. With the principle of the primary focus of the council from September 2021 to February 2022 established as being the continuation of the programme of accompaniment for congregations in their journey out of lockdown and enabling denominational learning from the pandemic, rather than the return to a more regular pattern of programmes and events, meetings of the Programme, Finance and Co-ordination Committee, Congregational Life Committee and Congregational Witness Committee, as well as the full meeting of the Council in June 2021, have sought to piece together an outline vision for the months ahead.
23. As a first significant step back into in-person events whenever that becomes practicable, under the working title of *Coming Back: Going Forward*, the council has adopted the priority of future gatherings delivered either regionally or in each presbytery. Their focus would be on facilitating reflection on the challenges faced by congregations as they resume more regular rhythms of church life, as well as opportunities

that are opening up to reimagine ministry and mission for the future. A resolution encouraging presbyteries and congregations to publicise and participate in these events is provided for the consideration of the Assembly. It is also anticipated that in-person events for youth groups and a specific investment in the support and development of leaders may also assume early importance as a greater degree of normality expands the scope for further council initiatives.

24. A particular focus on helping congregations in what seems likely to be an ongoing task of reconnecting with core and fringe members, those who previously attended organisations and activities, as well as their local communities, will also be sought to be addressed in a variety of ways.

### **Accompanying congregations and denominational learning**

25. The Congregational Life and Witness Committees have given consideration to the presenting needs of congregations for accompaniment and support as they emerge from lockdown restrictions as well as offering preliminary observations on areas for denominational learning which seem to be emerging as important.
26. In accompanying congregations in aspects of congregational life in their journey out of lockdown the following priorities were identified by the Congregational Life Committee.
  - Re-engaging with members and those who previously attended church activities, but especially with families with young children and young people.
  - Understanding why families with young children have not returned to worship. This may be due to stress, lack of provision of specific ministry for children, loss of the habit of coming, or a failure to appreciate the importance of the rhythm of public worship. The restoration of a simple model of Sunday morning children's ministry may be key to encouraging return.
  - The sharing of stories of what can be done and has been done by congregations as restrictions gradually ease.
27. In seeking to enable denominational learning from the pandemic in aspects of congregational life, the following key questions were identified:
  - As we emerge from the pandemic, how can we create realistic spaces in congregations in which leaders can facilitate conversation about what we have learned and reassessment of core congregational activities and programmes?
  - What have we learned about the central place of worship in the life of the church throughout this time and how can we continue to develop this in a way that meaningfully engages all ages?
  - What have we learned about utilising a wider range of means and people in the area of pastoral contact to connect with members and offer them effective pastoral care?

- What have we learned about both the potential and limitations of using digital ministry for worship, prayer, discipleship and leadership meetings?
  - What have we learned about the interaction of parents as primary disciplers alongside congregational children's and youth programming, and what does a healthy and effective rhythm of congregational life to support and develop that partnership look like?
28. Neither of these lists of priorities or questions in the area of developing congregational life can be considered definitive or exhaustive. They represent a snapshot of reflections at a particular stage on what is an ongoing journey which is far from over. Other priorities and perspectives will no doubt emerge and the council will continue to seek to listen and respond to future developments.
29. In accompanying congregations in aspects of congregational witness in their journey out of lockdown the following priorities were identified by the Congregational Witness Committee:
- The need to encourage and resource one-to-one witness by envisioning, encouraging and equipping members to share their faith by providing frameworks and a language to do so effectively. Encouragingly, there has been creativity shown in one-to-one witness by many church organisations during the pandemic and there is opportunity to harness and build upon that momentum.
  - The possibility of the church positioning itself to speak effectively and at an appropriate level of engagement into what is anticipated to be a longer term mental health crisis, especially among young people.
  - The possibility of reconnecting with fringe members as we emerge from lockdown restrictions with a sharper evangelistic edge.
30. In seeking to enable denominational learning from the pandemic in aspects of congregational witness, the following key questions were identified:
- How do we witness effectively to those who are housebound because of age or ill health?
  - How can we build a sustainable model of meeting practical community needs by drawing on what we learned from activities and initiatives undertaken during lockdown, alongside a process of community listening, to discern newly identified emerging needs?
  - How can we harness digital media for outreach that increase accessibility and allow an easier point of entry to encountering the gospel for some people, while not losing the primary place of deep in-person relationships in bearing effective witness?

- What has the pandemic experience taught us about the balance between equipping members for witness in their everyday and church-based evangelism courses and activities? What specific areas might equipping members for everyday witness demand in the aftermath of the pandemic?
  - As global disciples, how can we grow our interest and involvement in what God is doing in other parts of the world through the shared experience of what has been a global pandemic?
31. As in the area of congregational life above, neither of these lists of priorities or questions in the area of developing congregational witness can be considered definitive or exhaustive. They too represent a snapshot of reflections at a particular stage on what is an ongoing journey which is still unfolding. Other priorities and perspectives will no doubt emerge and the council will continue to seek to be alert to them and their implications for the mission of the church and its members.

### **Council learning**

32. It is important that in the future development of its General Assembly remit, the council also sets itself to learn from the experience of the period of the pandemic. Mirroring what has happened in congregational life, its routines and regular approaches to ministry have been disrupted and deconstructed.
33. The inability to easily recommence and simply restore previous programmes and events is disorientating, but it should be seen as a God-given moment to take stock of what is delivered and how.
34. Positive developments have already seen a growing ability to harness the potential of the added value of a digital platform of podcasts and webinars. Future programming may develop directly around these advances. Equally, the expertise gathered may be assimilated into programmes that were previously delivered entirely in-person, so that they now adopt a more hybrid approach to engaging with congregations and their members. The greater reach of digital ministry also makes it possible to begin to envisage new ways of effectively engaging with congregations who have often found themselves marginalised from physical events and gatherings by geographical location. Similarly, members who for a variety of reasons could often not commit to attend in-person gatherings, may also be able to be offered future training and resourcing in digital form. This could be a hugely significant gain.
35. The increasingly effective harnessing of social media to communicate with congregations and provide short, sharable content that they can pass on to their members has also been a positive development. This was a matter considered at the full meeting of the council in June 2021. A resolution is provided for the consideration of the Assembly intended to both encourage the council to develop this medium of communication and congregations in particular to maximise the potential of sharing the content created with their members.

36. Despite gains in the areas of digital ministry and social media, the council's work particularly suffers from the loss of in-person contact with congregations and their members. This has been, and continues to represent, a huge deficit. As opportunities open up, the restoration of meeting with and gathering congregations and their members remains a priority.

### **Provision of support for the work of the council**

37. The council and its staff are grateful to all who work in support services roles in Assembly Buildings for their work during the pandemic. The IT Department's enabling of home working ensured the council's ministry was able to continue in periods in which public health restrictions meant that staff were unable to work in the office. The relationship between the council and members of the Creative Production Department has been crucial in creating and developing digital engagement with congregations in a season in which there was no other alternative. The Financial Secretary's Department has provided wise and prudent advice in times of budgetary uncertainty, and the Personnel Department has created processes necessary to manage staffing arrangements in a season of massive disruption.
38. Nevertheless, the council has experienced the acceleration of some significant challenges that were of concern before the pandemic. It will be important to acknowledge those realities, learn from the lessons they further highlighted and move as quickly as possible to address them going forward.
39. In terms of budget and United Appeal allocation, there is a need to ensure that the General Assembly remit given to the council to support and enable the development of the life and witness of congregations as the bedrock of denominational life and witness, receives adequate future financial support within the overall allocation of the Appeal. This is particularly the case as the Council for Congregational Life and Witness has very limited reserves compared to other councils of the General Assembly and some of these have been further depleted in the provision of resources made free to congregations during the pandemic.
40. The move to a digital programme highlighted the challenge of the capacity of the IT department which was stretched in terms of ability to offer adequate support to key elements of the council's activities. Going forward, it will be important to ensure that the congregation-facing remit of the council does not suffer as a result of an imbalance of provision of such support to other ministries of the Church, particularly those based outside of Assembly Buildings.
41. The biggest impediment to the council's work remains inadequate channels of communication to congregations and their members. To quote from the council's report to the 2020 General Assembly,

*Inadequate channels of communication with congregations remains the single, largest, issue restricting the effectiveness of the council's work. Council welcome significant developments in the area of social media which have opened up its work to a wider audience. The promise of a revamped website, which will be easier to navigate for users, is also eagerly awaited. However, for the moment, the primary channel for all communication is through the minister. This fails to serve the needs of the council, ministers, congregations, members or the wider life of the denomination.*

*The council has done all that it can to circumnavigate these restrictions... however, council remains disappointed by the lack of progress in addressing the issue of communication. It strongly urges the General Council to address this matter without further delay, taking the necessary steps required to put in place mediums of communication which are fit for purpose as quickly as possible.*

42. Some further and interim progress has been made to provide a subscription based means of keeping members up to date with latest resources, programmes and upcoming events. Nevertheless, this area needs further urgent and adequate attention. Doing so will benefit the work of all the Councils and more importantly the support and development of all aspects of congregational life, witness and participation in the wider ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.
43. Resolutions on the matters of the Council budget, provision of adequate support for its remit and encouraging congregations and their members to subscribe to the new E-quip ezine are appended to the report.

### **From past to future: Transition rather than transformation**

44. There has been a plethora of comment surrounding the pandemic and its likely impact on the future of the church, its life and witness. Those commentators, less shaped by the hype of the current moment and more steeped in the history of the church and who grasp the dynamics of both denominational and congregational change, recognise that church life is rarely transformed in an instant. Rather it tends to transition one or two significant steps at a time to gradually more fully become the body God wants it to be. That will be true for both local congregations as they come to express the life and witness of Christ in the post-pandemic world, and for the Council for Congregational Life and Witness as it is refashioned by its experience of both the challenges and opportunities brought to light by its journey through the period of the pandemic.
45. Already for the council there has been both progress and pain in that transitioning. Progress in adjusting to a completely different set of realities has only been possible due to the extraordinary creativity and flexibility of the staff team. Encouraged by so many in the wider church, they have set about their task of envisioning, equipping and enabling congregations and their members for local ministry and mission

in the strangest of times with dedication and determination despite working in circumstances which no one would choose. However, there has been pain experienced too, particularly in the loss of colleagues to redundancy. Their friendship and contribution to the work of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, some for decades, continues to be deeply valued and missed. Significant work lies ahead in finding ways to readjust to the deficit of the loss of their experience and efficiency.

46. There has been much that has been wearying, debilitating and troubling in this period for congregations, members, the council and its staff. However, against this shared experience of the pandemic, we look heavenward eager to grasp God's plans for the future. In the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

<sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

## APPENDIX

### **Report and recommendations of the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee received and adopted at its meeting of 5 May 2021**

#### **Council Programming Priorities – September 2021 to February 2022**

##### **1. Background and summary to the paper**

- 1.1 Given that many unknowns remain about what church life will look like until the end of 2021 and on into the early part of 2022, it continues to be difficult to plan with any certainty the kind of activities that the council delivers in a normal church year.
- 1.2 Under these unusual circumstances, the crucial question is what should be envisaged by way of a framework to give shape and general direction to effectively fulfilling the council's General Assembly remit of supporting the development of the life and witness of congregations in the next season?
- 1.3 The following proposals suggest such a way forward for the period September 2021 to February 2022. They recommend that the primary focus be a continuation of the emphasis of accompanying congregations in their journey out of lockdown and enabling denominational learning. They also make practical suggestions about the areas of in-person programmes and events, resource development, particular pieces of work requiring attention, the application of learning from the period of the pandemic to future council activities and staff development.

- 1.4 Throughout, a realistic flexibility is assumed with some margin to allow for a number of small-scale initiatives to be developed and delivered nimbly in response to emerging needs or as changing circumstances might permit. This facilitates the council in a potentially important role of giving a lead to the wider church in modelling the gradual return of the kind of gatherings that will build confidence that it is possible to be together again safely and in increasing numbers when the time is right and circumstances allow.
  - 1.5 The proposals envisage that circumstances as they relate to the continuing journey of wider society and the church out of pandemic restrictions be examined again by the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee in early January 2022 or earlier if appropriate with a view to assessing and scheduling a suitable set of priorities for the period March to August 2022.
  - 1.6 If adopted, this proposal and its recommendations will determine the agendas of the Congregational Life Committee, Congregational Witness Committee, Children's, Youth and Family Panel and Women's Ministry Panel from September 2021 to August 2022. Some detail of what those agendas might contain is also included below. The broad principles will also apply to the work of Presbyterian Women, for example the circumstances under which in-person gatherings should resume.
- 2. Primary focus September 2021 to February 2022: Continuing the accompaniment of congregations in their journey out of lockdown and enabling denominational learning**
- 2.1 Continued accompaniment of congregations in their journey out of lockdown**
    - 2.1.1 The journey of congregations out of lockdown and into a post-pandemic world for ministry and mission might be expected to continue for some time.
    - 2.1.2 An initial phase will raise many practical presenting issues arising from ongoing restrictions e.g. how to set up and programme effectively for socially distanced children's ministry; how to continue to encourage and energise leaders working under still unfamiliar circumstances; how to navigate leadership tensions in kirk sessions; how to reconnect with the local community for mission and outreach; how to respond pastorally to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across different ages and groups in the congregation?

2.1.3 A further phase will raise many questions about what might need to change in a variety of areas of church life; How to enable good endings to long standing ministries; how to develop models of viable and effective digital ministry or outreach; how to reconnect with those who are slow to re-engage with church etc.

2.1.4 Since March 2020, the council has sought to engage with and respond to presenting issues from congregations through its digital programme of blogs, podcasts, webinars, digital conversations and the Fanning the Flame presbytery initiative. The provision of ongoing support to accompany congregations as they gradually resume more regular patterns of church life and witness is the immediate priority. Going forward, it is envisaged that this will be delivered digitally, but also in person by staff working with individual congregations, through the provision of small scale events or through presbytery events, as gradual easing of restrictions allow.

## 2.2 Enabling denominational learning

2.2.1 The pandemic and its impact on church life has brought many questions, challenges and opportunities to light. There are lessons to be learned and learning to be embedded for a wide variety of particular settings for ministry and mission e.g. what does a healthy and effective rhythm of congregational life look like; what we are learning about the place of digital ministry or outreach alongside in-person gatherings and encounters; what have we learned about the central place of worship in congregational life through the pandemic experience; what have we learned about discipleship through the pandemic experience; what have we learned about the interaction of parents as primary disciplers and congregational children's and youth programming?

2.2.2 Again it is envisaged that a continuation of elements of digital and, if and when possible, in-person work could provide an effective platform for this priority.

### Recommendations

- That continued accompaniment of congregations in their journey out of lockdown be a primary focus of council work in the period September 2021 to February 2022.
- That enabling denominational learning be a primary focus of council work in the period September 2021 to February 2022.

### 3. Recommending in-person programmes and events

3.1 Challenges to staging in-person programmes and events might be expected to continue into 2022. For now and the foreseeable future, unanswerable practical questions include:

- What will be the positive impact of the vaccination programme on easing restrictions?
- What will it mean in practice for society to ‘learn to live with’ Covid-19 in the medium term?
- What events, other than worship, Bible study and prayer, will be allowed in the church sector in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland?
- What numbers will be allowed to gather indoors?
- What will be the impact of ongoing social distancing in reducing capacity on venues and its impact on the quality of event participation and interaction?
- What will be the impact of the continued need for wearing of facing coverings on willingness to participate in in-person gatherings and on the quality of interaction?
- What will be the capacity and ability of congregations to make their premises available for council use?
- What impact might the re-imposition of restrictions due to a future spike in infections have on events which had been planned and publicised?

3.2 There are a number of other considerations with which the council need to reckon. Again, these are largely unquantifiable for now. They include:

- The period required to give congregations time and space to prioritise re-establishing ministry among members and mission to their local community before encouraging participation in extra-congregational activity.
- The appetite and confidence of potential participants in coming to events beyond their own congregation.
- The risk and desirability of staging non-essential events beyond the local congregation in a situation where they may still represent a risk to public health.
- The impact of a reduced staff team on the ability to deliver programmes and events.

3.3 Additionally, events and programmes need a lead-in time which allows for planning, publicity and potential participants to sign up. It will not be possible to simply contract that lead-in time for most programmes and events.

- 3.4 Nevertheless, the council can also play a crucial role in taking a lead in gradually modelling the return of the kind of gatherings that show that it is possible to safely be together in larger numbers when the time is right and circumstances allow.

#### Recommendations

- That it be envisaged that in-person programmes and events in the next season of council activity will be severely curtailed, have to be assessed on an ongoing basis in terms of developing circumstances and in terms of what is deliverable with a shorter lead-in time.
- That existing programmes which rely on bringing groups together on a recurring basis should not be delivered in the period September 2021 to February 2022.
- That it will be important to assess which areas of church life, as it emerges from the pandemic, most require, or will benefit from, the return of well-managed and delivered in-person gatherings.
- Taking into account all of the factors identified above and any changes in circumstances surrounding the pandemic, that the council keep under consideration the possibility of staging a limited number of small-scale, in-person events for priority groups in the period September 2021 to February 2022. Initial events should maximise the possibilities of the capacity and safety of the space available in Assembly Buildings, Belfast, but exploration of regional possibilities should also be considered.

## 4. Resource development

### 4.1 Resources available in response to the pandemic

- 4.1.1 Since March 2020 significant Bible study resources have been produced, including *Prism*, *Unprecedented* and *Whole*, each of which enable congregations and their members to reflect upon the application of God's Word to aspects of their experience of the pandemic. Ten thousand resources for children and young people have also been made available free to congregations. A resource for leaders entitled *Opening up to God: Leading out of Lockdown* is also available, along with overstock of the *For Now* material provided in January 2021.
- 4.1.2 A substantial amount of pandemic specific material already exists. Therefore, it is not envisaged that any further major resources in this area be prioritised by the council.

## 4.2 Future resource priorities

4.2.1 Through its committees and panels during 2019/20, the council took stock of existing resources and identified the priorities for the next phase of resource production. This culminated in a set of priorities discussed and approved at a meeting of full council on 21 January 2020. These priorities became the content of the council's Report to the 2020 General Assembly, which was received by the General Assembly Standing Committee at its meeting of 19 February 2021.

4.2.2 It is recommended that in autumn 2021 the Congregational Life and Witness Committees and Children's, Youth and Family and Women's Ministry Panels revisit these priorities to determine which anticipated resources should take precedence and whether alternative or additional needs for resources have emerged during the hiatus caused by the pandemic.

## 4.3 Resources nearing completion

4.3.1 Major long-standing priorities to produce new resources on baptism and the Lord's Supper require the completion of video content and the approval of new vows for the sacraments which will come before the October 2021 General Assembly for approval to be completed.

4.3.2 A soft entry evangelistic resource for use with those in later life is in the process of content being finalised and moving to design stage.

4.3.3 An evangelistic and discipleship pathway resource, helping congregations to assess the role and value of regular activities, as well as identifying significant gaps in their ministry and mission, is ready to move to design stage. It would benefit from some reworking to take account of changed circumstances and the positive opportunity for a fuller consideration of streamlining and focusing of congregational activity as a result of the experience of Covid-19 restrictions.

## 4.4 Stocktake of existing resources

4.4.1 Work could be usefully undertaken to survey present resources asking if some need to be phased out, refreshed, updated or replaced with recommendations brought to the appropriate committee or panel.

**Recommendations**

- That no further major resources in response to the experience of the pandemic be prioritised.
- That in autumn 2021, the Congregational Life and Witness Committees and Children's, Youth and Family and Women's Ministry Panels revisit these priorities to determine which anticipated resources should take precedence and whether alternative or additional needs for resources have emerged during the hiatus caused by the pandemic.
- That resources in progress and nearing completion be progressed as a priority.
- That a survey of present resources be undertaken with recommendations as to which need to be phased out, refreshed, updated or replaced, be brought to the appropriate committee or panel.

**5. Particular pieces of work needing attention**

- 5.1 The following particular pieces of work which require prioritisation.
- 5.2 A decision will need to be taken in due course about what circumstances allow a reopening of the Fresh Light counselling ministry, presently suspended due to restrictions arising from Covid-19. This will also require careful consideration of other factors such as the need for venues in which to meet and the capacity of both staff and volunteers.
- 5.3 The formation of a new Marriage Panel has been approved by the General Assembly Standing Committee. Progress needs to be made to put in place arrangements for a smooth transition for this replacement for the Remarriage Panel.
- 5.4 At its last meeting, the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee gave permission to explore the development of a centrally facilitated apprenticeship model for congregations as a replacement for the present PCI Intern Scheme.
- 5.5 General Assembly Standing Committee has approved the development of a General Assembly Under-30 delegate programme as a replacement for the previous Youth Assembly model.
- 5.6 It will be helpful to explore alternatives to the present format of any council programmes or events which involve residential elements in light of possible difficulties that might arise in future delivery in the aftermath of the pandemic.

- 5.7 The implications of a potential reduction in council staffing levels on capacity for programming will need to be carefully examined.
- 5.8 Circumstances arising from the pandemic forced the council to adopt a digital programme which comprised new ventures such as webinars, podcasts, digital conferencing and training, as well as expanded production of video and downloadable resources. There was also a significant increase in members signing up for the electronic Tides devotional and for PCI social media in general. The provision of a youth ministry app also represents expansion in a new direction.
- 5.9 It is unclear how engagement with this increase in digital ministry was a direct result of the inability to gather in-person, or how much of its impact will be long lasting as more normal patterns of church life return. Nevertheless, there is significant expertise and experience upon which the council can build to expand the reach of its work, especially, but not exclusively, to both younger generations and more geographically isolated congregations.
- 5.10 It might be envisaged that the next season of council activity will be conducted in a hybrid of in-person and digital formats. The council's existing programmes and events might be helpfully revisited with a view to asking which might be enhanced by digital content in future.

#### Recommendations

- That a decision be taken in due course about what circumstances allow a re-opening of the Fresh Light counselling.
- That arrangements for the commencement of the work of a new Marriage Panel be put in place for launch at the General Assembly in 2022.
- That the development of a centrally facilitated apprenticeship model for congregations as a replacement for the present PCI Intern scheme be explored.
- That arrangements for the development of a General Assembly Under-30 delegate programme as a replacement for the previous Youth Assembly model be put in place in anticipation of its launch at the General Assembly in 2022.
- That alternatives to the present format of any council programmes or events which involve residential elements, in light of possible difficulties that might arise in future delivery in the aftermath of the pandemic, be explored.
- That the implications of a potential reduction in council staffing levels on capacity for programming be carefully examined. That the council's experience of providing digital ministry during the pandemic be explored with a view to how future programming might be enhanced by digital content.

**6. Continuing to support and develop the staff team to adapt to changing roles and realities**

- 6.1 Much has changed for the council staff team since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020. Furloughing, home working, a move to delivering and administering digital programming and the need to take responsibility for areas of work beyond previous areas of experience and expertise have both reaped reward and taken their toll.
- 6.2 Looking forward, some staff have had additional areas of responsibility added to their job descriptions, others will need to be trained to take on specific new aspects of work should anticipated redundancies proceed. Established systems and ways of doing things will have to change if as much of the council's capacity as possible to serve congregations is to be preserved with downsizing.
- 6.3 It should be anticipated that time will need to be taken and training and support provided to enable a good transition to new working arrangements.

Recommendations

- That margin be preserved and a budget ringfenced to enable the continued support and development of the staff team to adapt to changing roles and realities.

**7. Review of the developing situation, opportunities and priorities from March 2022**

Recommendations

- That the Programme, Finance and Coordination Committee be provided with a paper in early January 2022, or before if changing circumstances deem appropriate, detailing, assessing and scheduling a suitable set of priorities for the period March to August 2022 based on the developing situation and information available at that time.