

URC 2018 General Assembly Matters referred to Synods for consideration

This year's meeting of General Assembly referred several matters to synods for their consideration before they return to a central council of the Church for final decision. This was because each of them would imply a change to the Structure of the United Reformed Church. They will return to a central council unless at least a third of the synods ask that the matter should not be proceeded with.

The relevant Assembly resolutions, with some background notes, are set out below.

1. RESOLUTIONS ABOUT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

1.1 Timetable

The deadline for responses from Synods for these resolutions is 31st March 2019 and Synod Council suggests Synod Together deals with them at this October 2018 meeting.

1.2 Context

Assembly spent a considerable amount of time on a report from a review group about Assembly. In response to many comments, this recommended a return to annual Assemblies after a decade of biennial ones. To make this possible without needing more Ministry and Mission (M&M) giving to fund it, the group proposed a series of measures to reduce the cost of Assembly. At the same time, it took the opportunity to suggest a number of changes to the composition of the Assembly.

All the recommendations accepted by the Assembly can be read on the URC website but four of them would require amendments to the Structure and therefore were referred to Synods.

Change no.1

To make the number of synod representatives equal – to be, for the present, sixteen for each synod.

Assembly favoured making the Assembly smaller as one cost reduction measure and accepted the Review Group's suggestion that the reduced total number of Synod representatives should no longer be shared out on the basis of the different memberships of the 13 synods but equally. As the Southern Synod is the largest, this pair of changes would have a particularly marked effect on us. Our allocation would fall from 32 to 16. So, we would be looking for 16 reps every year rather than 32 reps once every two years.

Change no. 2

To introduce some flexibility to the 50-50 ministerial/lay divide – requiring at least a third of each synod's representation to be ministerial (this term includes CRCWs) and at least a third to be elders or lay.

Especially if there are fewer reps per Synod, it is desirable that all places are taken up. Requiring there to be an exactly equal split between the number of ministers and lay reps has sometimes meant one or more places in one category or the other have been left unfilled. This proposal is intended to avoid wasted places while still ensuring the Assembly cannot become overwhelmingly ministers or overwhelmingly elders.

Current version of Section 2. (6)(a):

The General Assembly ... shall consist of:

(a) Such number of representatives of synods (ministerial and lay in equal numbers) as the General Assembly shall from time to time determine. These numbers shall be calculated proportionately to the total membership of each synod, as recorded in the year book of the United Reformed Church (at present this calculation shall be such as to produce a total of synod representatives not exceeding 250).

Proposed new version of Section 2. (6)(a):

The General Assembly ... shall consist of:

(a) Such number of representatives of synods as the General Assembly shall from time to time determine. (At present this number shall be 16 per synod, to produce a total of 208 synod representatives). Within each synod's representation, at least one third shall be ministerial and at least one third elders or lay;

Change no. 3

To include the synod moderators in the synod figures above, if their synods so wish, rather than giving them a place in Assembly in their own right.

There is no intention to change the normal practice of the Synod Moderators being members of Assembly. However, there have been instances when a Moderator has been on the verge of retirement, or on sabbatical, or ill and their place has then either been left vacant or not been filled by the most relevant person. This change is intended to give synods flexibility to deal sensitively and well with unusual circumstances.

Current version of Section 2. (6) (c and d):

The General Assembly ... shall consist of:

(c) The Moderators of the General Assembly and of the synods, and such other officers of the General Assembly as the General Assembly shall from time to time determine (The Assembly has determined that the Clerk of Assembly and the General Secretary shall be members of Assembly);
(d) Where the Moderator of synod is an officer of the Assembly, the synod concerned shall appoint a substitute as its representative;

Proposed new version of Section 2. (6) (c and d):

The General Assembly ... shall consist of:

**(c) As above, without the words 'and of the synods';
(d) To be dropped.**

Comment: Because Synod Moderators would no longer be automatically members of Assembly they do not need to be mentioned in (c) and the substitution arrangement in (d) is no longer relevant.

There will need to be some relabelling of paragraphs if (d) disappears. This does not need to be voted on. It will be sorted out once the substance of any changes has been agreed.

Change no. 4 To excuse the Convenor of Pastoral Reference and Welfare from membership of Assembly.

The role of the Convenor of the Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee at Assembly itself, given that most of the Committee's work is confidential, is almost always minimal. In a smaller and less expensive Assembly, this was felt to be one seat that was not essential.

Current version of Section 2. (6)(e):

The General Assembly ... shall consist of:

(e) The convenor of each of the standing committees of the General Assembly;

Proposed new version of Section 2. (6)(e):

The General Assembly ... shall consist of:

(e) The convenor of each of the standing committees of the General Assembly, apart from the Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee;

2. RESOLUTION ABOUT THE PROMISES MADE BY ELDERS

2.1 Timetable

Synods are asked to offer any comment they wish to make by the end of 2019. The proposal has also been referred to local churches. Synod Council therefore recommends that churches discuss this proposal if they wish over the next six months and Synod Together will take a view at its March 2019 meeting.

2.2 Context

Elders have always had a crucial and central role in the life of local congregation and the wider Church. With fewer ministers than previously, in many places Elders are more likely to be the public face of the local church to the wider community and the main link between a congregation and the wider Councils of the United Reformed Church and ecumenically. Assembly therefore welcomed a proposal to include an additional mandatory affirmation in the services for the Ordination and Induction of Elders which echoes the existing promise made by ministers.

General Assembly resolved to make the following addition to Schedule B of the Basis of Union, which sets out the promises to made by elders of the Church:

Question and Response:

Question and Answer:

Q. Do you promise as an elder of the United Reformed Church to seek its well-being, unity and peace, to cherish love towards all other churches and to endeavour always so far as you are able to build up the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?

A. By the grace of God I do, and all these things I profess and promise in the power of the Holy Spirit.

ADDITIONAL COMMENT:

This Matter has also been referred from General Assembly for consideration by Church Meetings. Assembly wanted to involve Church Meetings on this occasion because this resolution concerns the promises made by elders, and eldership is primarily an office in the local church. People in local churches have wisdom to share on this matter and a right to be heard.

The General Secretary has written to all Church Secretaries directly about this and responses from Church Meetings are requested by December 2019, to allow the matter to come back to General Assembly in 2020.

If your Church Meeting wishes to resist this proposal, then you should pass a resolution that the matter "be not proceeded with" and notify the General Secretary by the date indicated. If more than a third of Church Meetings reply in that vein, the matter will fall; otherwise it will proceed to Assembly in 2020, to be considered there. Further, whether you resist the proposal or support it, if you have comments to draw to Assembly's attention, you may send these to me and I shall pass them on.

If your local church is an LEP – a Local Ecumenical Project, please interpret 'Church Meeting' to refer to the nearest equivalent gathering that you have. Even if your congregation does not have elders as such, your people are still entitled to comment on this proposal.

3. RESOLUTION ABOUT THE UPPER AGE LIMIT FOR URC YOUTH

3.1 Timetable

Although the deadline for comments is not until the end of 2019, Synod Council suspects that this proposal will not need extended reflection and suggests that Southern Synod expresses its view at this October 2018 meeting.

3.2 Context

Long ago Assembly fixed the upper age limit for URC Youth as 'aged 25 or under'. The existing reference to '26' in clause 2. (4)(A)(x) of the Structure is a drafting error and the purpose of this recommendation is to correct it.

If the changes proposed to General Assembly (see above) are carried through, these will also require the deletion of the bracketed section of this clause, i.e. '(ministerial and lay in equal numbers)'.

Present version:

to appoint from time to time such number of representatives to the General Assembly (ministerial and lay in equal numbers) as the General Assembly shall determine. This shall include, when possible, at least two representatives aged 26 or under. As far as possible all appointments shall be made in rotation from Local Churches;

Proposed change:

To change '26' to '25'.

Derrick Dzandu-Hedidor
Synod Clerk
September 2018