General Assembly 2014 News round-up

THURSDAY 3 JULY

New moderator inducted
The Revd David Grosch-Miller was inducted as moderator of the United Reformed Church General Assembly, serving from 2014 to 2016. In the worship that followed, Mr Grosch-Miller's daughter, Susan Vieira da Silva, sang a hymn composed for Assembly by Carla Grosch-Miller, his wife and chaplain.

After being inducted into the role of Assembly moderator, the Revd David Grosch-Miller gave heartfelt thanks to the Revd Michael Jagessar, the outgoing moderator; to the Revd Leonora Jagessar-Visser’t Hooft, Dr Jagessar’s wife; and to Melanie Smith, Mr Jagessar’s chaplain.

Lively farewell from outgoing moderator
The Revd Michael Jagessar, the retiring moderator of General Assembly, gave his parting reflections in a passionate and lively speech. Asking “what would the church look like if all of us become humble learners?”, he called on those in the church who disagree theologically to listen more graciously to one another. He said: “When our personal and ideological preferences become greater than our passion for the gospel, we are skating on thin ice. For when we become wrapped up in self, we miss the opportunities knocking at our doors. He described his time as moderator as “filled with surprises, joys, frustrations, much learning, and mischievous moments”.

Churches in Wales report
The Revd Simon Walking, moderator of Wales Synod, marked the return of General Assembly to Cardiff by presenting a programme of reports and reflections on church and society in Wales. He urged Assembly to look beyond the stereotypes to discover the truth about the nation and the church in Wales today.

The Revd Sally Thomas offered snapshots of what churches are doing together in Wales by adapting a poem of Dylan Thomas, ending: “Rage, rage against all denying of God's light”. The Revd Aled Edwards OBE reported on political developments in Wales since devolution, including interfaith work. Revd Andy Hughes of the South Wales Baptist Association reported on how Welsh churches with a history of division are working together for pioneer ministry and community engagement.

FRIDAY 4 JULY

Future of the Church
General Assembly discussed the future of the United Reformed Church and passed three resolutions intended to affirm the URC’s identity as both united and Reformed; affirm its gift of conciliarity; and match a need – the lack of ministers – with the Reformed gift of eldership. It was agreed the Faith and Order committee should bring a proposal to the 2016 Assembly.

Westminster College
The Revd Neil Thorogood, principal of Westminster College, reported on a number of developments at the college: Modernising building work was completed on time and at a cost 3% over budget; the fundraising appeal, launched at Assembly in 2012, raised just over £7million – exceeding its target; and, the college is continuing to build on links with its partners in the Cambridge Theological Federation – the Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide and the Woolf Institute for Abrahamic Faiths. Mr Thorogood also noted the “vision, wisdom and tenacity” of the former principal of Westminster College, the Revd Dr Susan Durber, and the gifts of Prof Anthony Bottoms, who recently vacated his post as a chair of governors for the College, giving heartfelt thanks to both.

Synod resolutions
Two synod-brought resolutions were passed by Assembly: The first, brought by South Western, challenged congregations to increase contributions to the M&M fund by “at least 1%”. The other resolution, brought by the Synod of Scotland, asked the United Reformed Church to pray for those effected by the Scotland referendum; this was resolved by consensus, after which the Assembly chaplain prayed for the situation in Scotland.

In Brief
• Moderator John Ellis used his Assembly address to tackle three key themes: the importance of a relationship with God, of the need for Christians to work visibly together and need for a new evangelism.
• Sixteen visitors were warmly welcomed to General Assembly from a range of denominations and countries.
• Following a discussion on the marriage of same-sex couples, General Assembly decided to appoint a facilitation group to draw up a resolution on the issue, which would be debated later.
• Newly-ordained ministers and church-related community workers were introduced to Assembly by general secretary, the Revd Roberta Rominger. Some had been unintentionally left off the list and got introduced instead by their synod moderators!
• Ballots opened for the election of moderators of General Assembly 2016-2018. The three candidates for ministerial moderator were the Revd Martin Camroux, the Revd John Durrell and the Revd Kevin Watson. The candidate for the position of elder moderator was Alan Yates. The results would be announced later in the Assembly.
• The Revd Michael Hopkins was appointed as clerk of the United Reformed Church General Assembly.
• The United Reformed Church General Assembly applauded its jubilee ministers: One person celebrating 70 years of ordained ministry (the Revd Philip Eastman), 17 people celebrating 60 years, and 44 people celebrating 50 years.
SATURDAY 5 JULY

John Proctor appointed as general secretary

The Revd John Proctor was formally appointed as general secretary of the United Reformed Church. John trained for the ministry in Glasgow, where he served in a parish from 1981 to 1986, before he moved on to Westminster College in Cambridge – teaching the New Testament. He later held the position of vice-principal of Westminster College. Introducing his appointment, moderator the Revd David Grosch-Miller paid tribute to the enormous contribution the Revd Proctor has already made to the church through his 28 years of service at Westminster. His term of office will briefly overlap with that of the current general secretary, the Revd Rominger, who will formally step down from the role on 31 July 2014.

Assembly says farewell to Roberta Rominger

A “liturgy of letting go” was delivered by the Revd David Grosch-Miller, moderator of the General Assembly, for the farewell of the Revd Roberta Rominger, whose role as general secretary of the United Reformed Church formally comes to an end on 31 July 2014.

David gave a heartfelt speech saying: “Roberta, you have touched lives and changed them for the better. You have been a courageous and inspirational general secretary; you have given without reserve…you are a woman with rare gifts and abilities; there is no more inspirational speaker in the church than you.”

Roberta, said: “Ministry is all one, there are different spheres of service… I love the church with all my heart… it has been the most awesome and amazing privilege, thank you!”

Community Awards Project Winners

General Assembly announced the winners of this year’s Community Project Awards, which are sponsored by Congregational & General.

The overall winner, presented with a cheque for £3,500 and a wall plaque, was Glenorchy Work Club. Based at Glenorchy United Reformed Church in Exmouth, the Work Club provides specialist help to unemployed people in the area following the closure of Exmouth job centre. Three equal runners-up projects were: the Messy Church SEND project for children with special educational needs and disabilities, at Adeyfield Free Church in Hemel Hempstead; Chapelfield Grow your Own, growing organic vegetables to give away to local people in need, at Stand United Reformed Church in Manchester; and Hope Restored, a support project for homeless people, operating from Gloddaeth United Church in Llandudno.

SUNDAY 6 JULY

Resolution on marriage of same-sex couples

General Assembly passed a resolution inviting synods and local congregations to discuss whether they would wish a future meeting of the Assembly to authorise local church meetings to offer same-sex marriage services, and to report their views to the general secretary by 31 March 2015. The resolution recognised that:

“A clear majority of members of Assembly expressed the view that local congregations should be permitted to offer same-sex marriage to those who seek that opportunity. However, because our decision-making process is based on the seeking of full consensus, Assembly was unable to reach agreement.” Fuller information can be found on the URC website.

Assembly endorses inclusive language

The General Assembly of the United Reformed Church endorsed the consideration of inclusive and expansive language in worship. The resolution, which built on Assembly’s 1984 commitment to inclusive language, was passed by agreement once an amendment was made to give due consideration to the use of imagery, as well as words, in worship.