

General Assembly: Parallel sessions

The United Reformed Church General Assembly divided into parallel sessions on the evening of Saturday 7 July, to hear and discuss reports from its committees. The following reports cover some of those sessions.

Children's and youth work

Mr Alan Yates, Immediate-past Moderator, presided over the parallel session for the URC's finance and children's and youth work (CYW) committees.

The CYW committee provided a short presentation to members of Assembly on its work, including an update on the current review of the Church's youth and children's work and its emerging themes, new resources the committee had produced, recent training, and collaborations with youth organisations. The URC's Youth Assembly Moderator and its two Moderators-elect then provided a short update on the Youth Executive's work, successes and concerns, including record high attendance at the 2018 Youth Assembly, consultation on whether the age limit for Youth Assembly should be lowered, and the possibility of a URC Youth band.

Comments from members of Assembly included: concerns about staffing and the committee's budget, a potential gap in resources for under sevens, and concerns that the CYW review had not sufficiently consulted Scottish denominational contacts. Dr Sam Richards, Head of CYW Development, thanked members for their concern and offered reassurance. The Revd Jenny Mills, convenor of the CYW committee, said: 'There is no plan to reduce staff; we would like to see [our] work build,' but she noted that the review needed to conclude first so that resources including staff could be effectively deployed.

Finance

On behalf of the URC finance committee, Ian Hardie, Treasurer, gave a short introduction to the report, using 2 Corinthians 8 to outline the biblical basis for the committee's work. Mr Hardie noted that an addendum to the finance report had been produced, containing an outline of the URC accounts. He then drew attention to paragraph eight of the report, which concerned the lay staff pension scheme, confirming that the target of capital sums totalling £3.4m by 30 June 2018 had been met, to address the deficit in the fund. The committee hopes to report to Mission Council about the state of the URC ministers' pension fund in November.

Members of Assembly asked questions about the URC ministers' pension fund: is it risky to still be supporting a direct benefit pension scheme? Could such a scheme withstand financial shock? Is it viable in the long term? Responding to these concerns, Mr Hardie reiterated that the committee are 'servants of what Assembly wants' and noted that Assembly 'wants us to maintain a direct benefit scheme for as long as we can'. He said: 'At the minute, we're confident that we are able to keep going,' but reassured Assembly that the committee, working alongside the pensions regulator, had been planning what it would do if there was a 'disaster'. Mr Hardie outlined how they 'would turn to the wider resources of the URC family' in this event. Questions were also raised about the detail within the URC accounts, how the church building fund is used, whether the committee should be 'influenced by the values of the Gospel, not by what businesses are doing', and about the last paragraph of the report which referenced using 'proceeds from the eventual disposal of the Windermere Centre' for establishing a discipleship development fund. As it was not within the

finance committee's remit to answer the latter question, a representative from the URC's education and learning committee, who happened to be present, explained that the fine detail in relation to this had not yet been confirmed but that at the moment, the education and learning committee plan to use the 'interest only', not the proceeds, of the centre's disposal.

Education and learning

The Revd Kevin Watson, Immediate-past Moderator, chaired the parallel session for the URC's education and learning and Assembly arrangements committees.

The Revd Professor Neil Messer, convenor of the education and learning committee, drew attention to the work done by the committee to create a discipleship development strategy, which will be completed for Mission Council in May 2019. He also reported on the work being done to make the lay training programme Stepwise available from late September 2018. Three appointments had been made recently: Dr Anne Hewling as Instructional Designer, Marion Brown as the Stepwise Programme Assistant and the Revd David Salsbury as Stepwise Programme Manager. These appointments will become active in the next few months.

Mr Messer, and the Secretary for Education and Learning, the Revd Fiona Thomas answered questions from the floor which were largely about Stepwise, including: the role of synods in the delivery of the programme; the phased implementation of the programme between 2018 and 2020; how lay preachers can become Assembly-accredited; the arrangements for mentoring; and the flexibility of the delivery of the programme.

Addressing concerns about how Stepwise will be intergenerational, Ms Thomas assured Assembly members that the materials and resources are being designed with the experience and help of the Children's and Youth Work team. She confirmed that although Stepwise is the responsibility of the education and learning committee it is being designed by representatives from across the whole Church.

Assembly arrangements committee

The Revd James Breslin, convenor of the assembly arrangements committee, explained some of the practical arrangements that went into arranging General Assembly. He said the committee had a budget of £230,000 to arrange the Assembly, the planning of which began well in advance. For the 2020 Assembly, Mr Breslin invited members to put forward suggestions for guest speakers, through their synod moderators.

Questions from the floor touched on the process by which Assembly members were appointed; and how young people can become more involved or be kept informed about the decisions made at Assembly. Mr Breslin explained that the process of appointing members of Assembly differed from synod to synod; and Youth Assembly was highlighted as a means for young people to become more involved with the life of the Church. Mr Breslin added that volunteers were needed for the next Assembly but he was as yet unsure of the number. Members were assured that one of the benefits of Assembly being held annually, and at a regular venue, would be the reduction in the number of volunteers required.