

Equalities Committee

Encouraging equality, cherishing diversity

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Anne E Lewitt: aelewitt@gmail.com
Action required	For information and discussion
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	This report provides an overview of the work of the Equalities Committee in the period from July 2018 to April 2020.
Main points	To promote equalities within the whole life of the URC, and to challenge practices which lead to exclusion and are not representative of the diversity within the denomination.
Previous relevant documents	www.urchurch.org.uk/equalities
Consultation has taken place with...	Nominations Committee; URC Youth Executive; General Assembly committees through linked observers; Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries.

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Ecumenical

1. Purpose and remit

- 1.1 The Equalities Committee encourages and supports the development of equalities in every part of the United Reformed Church. Its remit is to remind the URC that equality is enshrined in its theology, life and work and, where necessary, to challenge the practice of the URC to that end. This includes promoting the URC's contribution to equality within the wider life of society.
- 1.2 This is a very wide remit, and to fulfil it the Equalities Committee collaborates with other committees, groups and individuals, both within and beyond the URC, and attempts to share ideas and best practice.
- 1.3 We were encouraged by the response of members at the 2018 General Assembly, where numbers wanting to speak to our resolutions, and wanting to speak to us afterwards, suggested that there is a deep concern within the URC around issues of equality and diversity. This concern has been reflected in contacts from members of local churches since, but at all levels within the church it needs to be translated into further action. As a committee, we are determined to find ways to facilitate this.



2. Committee membership and modes of meeting

- 2.1 As well as meeting via Lifesize when the Covid-19 lockdown made this necessary, the committee has been pleased to welcome individual members to contribute to meetings virtually when they could not attend in person. It is hoped that this can be expanded to open committee membership to some who have previously been excluded.
- 2.2 Two members of the committee left at the end of their term of service, and two more (both of whom had joined since 2018) had to resign during their tenure. We were also sad to bid farewell to the Revd Dr Michael Jagessar, who, as Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries, was a much-valued member. We have recently welcomed one new member, and another has agreed to stand for a second term.
- 2.3 At the 2020 Youth Assembly, a new URC Youth Equality and Diversity Representative was elected, and we were glad to welcome them as a member of the committee. Since their input is of considerable importance to our work and they are still attending college, we are looking at arranging meetings in ways that are more accessible to them, by choosing appropriate times or by virtual attendance.

3. Response to Resolution 24 from General Assembly 2018

- 3.1 The General Assembly in 2018 asked us to seek ways of supporting the work of the Nominations Committee to encourage diversity in appointments, and to further equalities within the life and nature of the whole Church. The Convenor of Nominations attended one of our meetings to discuss how this could take place. This was useful, and while there are no easy answers, the two committees will remain in close contact as we continue to grapple with the challenge. It will be helpful if awareness is raised throughout the whole church of the existence of Assembly committees and the vacancies on them.
- 3.2 Making the jump from serving in a local church to serving a synod or Assembly committee is a big step, which may need both encouragement and continuing support. However, diversity and equality are not just a challenge for wider church committees, and it is clear that many local church elderships are not fully representative of the congregations they serve.
- 3.3 The United Reformed Church is a diverse church, and this is something we need to celebrate! That diversity is both visible and invisible; it includes protected characteristics such as (but not limited to) age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and (dis)ability, but also other characteristics, including geographical location and theological perspective. The URC is also a Church that takes decisions by conciliar processes, so it is very important that all decision-making bodies are representative of our diversity – and seen to be so.
- 3.3 We have been very encouraged by reports from Youth Assembly and the Youth Executive of higher levels of awareness and diversity amongst their membership, and the positive steps they are taking to maintain this. We hope that their understanding and experience can be widely shared.

4. The URC – a Breastfeeding-friendly Church

- 4.1 We have been drafting a policy for adoption by local congregations to encourage a clear and supportive welcome for breastfeeding parents and their children. It is intended that this will integrate with work being done by the Children's and Youth Work team.

5. Questions about future ministry to churches in vacancy

- 5.1 When a church is in vacancy, conversations are held about the ministry appropriate in that situation. Questions may be asked of a church in order to clarify – for all those involved in the process – what the congregation feel about future ministry. Concerns have been expressed that questions intended to protect ministers, particularly, but not exclusively those with same-sex partners, might in fact close down options for both churches and ministers. Answering a question about a hypothetical situation is different from meeting and getting to know a real person. We have had conversations with several synod moderators, as well as interested groups and individuals, and accept that at present we must rely on the care and sensitivity of those tasked with asking the questions. However, for as long as such questions need to be asked, we must consider whether we are as equal and inclusive a church as we could be.

6. Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care

- 6.1 We hope to make the Church of Scotland booklet, *Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care*, available to all congregations as a hard copy rather than just a suggested download. Whilst this publication is a couple of years old, its specific church perspective and concern for pastoral care make it particularly helpful. At a time when awareness of diversity in gender is growing and is frequently highlighted by the media, not always helpfully, we believe that this booklet's format of personal stories with questions for discussion makes it a valuable resource for the URC, and we commend it to you.

7. Bullying and Harassment

- 7.1 With others, including the URC's Safeguarding Advisor, we have updated the advice on 'Responding to allegations of bullying and harassment', which is now available as an appendix to *Good Practice 5*, and also linked from the Equalities page of the URC website.