

Mission Council

Report on the work of Mission Council, 2018-20

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	General Secretary: john.proctor@urc.org.uk
Action required	Partly for information; partly for decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 1 General Assembly gives final approval to the proposal that: There shall be one Moderator of General Assembly, serving for one year. This Moderator may be a minister (of word and sacraments or CRCW) or an elder. Each Synod may nominate one minister and one elder each year, but only one Moderator will be elected. Resolution 2 General Assembly gives final approval to the proposal that: The name of Mission Council shall be changed to Assembly Executive. Other resolutions come in appendices.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To report on the work of Mission Council in the last two years.
Main points	There are many. Most of those that require Assembly decision appear in the various appendices.
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council papers from November 2018, May and November 2019 and March 2020, available on the URC website.
Consultation has taken place with...	The committees and synods of the Church.

Summary of Impact

Financial	The first resolution above would involve a modest saving on the costs of Assembly and on Moderatorial expenses.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The Methodist Church and Church of England are represented on Mission Council, and thus contribute helpfully to its work.

Introduction

1. Mission Council oversees, prepares and sifts business between meetings of Assembly. It tries to keep a proper focus on the Church's main concerns, so that all our work will further the mission of the gospel. It also carries delegated power to deal on Assembly's behalf with matters that require prompt attention.
2. Mission Council must often deal with detail and practicalities, so that specific matters may progress without undue delay. It also attends to overview and vision, so that the presentation of business at Assembly may enable Assembly 'to take a more comprehensive view of the activity and policy of the Church'. In order for Mission Council to be alert to the needs, concerns, opportunities and hopes of the whole body of the URC, people from the synods of the Church make up most of its membership.
3. Mission Council meets in the autumn and spring, for 48 hours each time. It was thus due to meet four times since the last meeting of Assembly. However, the March 2020 meeting was cancelled, when the Covid-19 situation became critical.
4. Preparatory papers for these four meetings of Mission Council are available on the URC website. For two meetings there are confirmed minutes. For the third there are draft minutes, which Mission Council has not yet confirmed.
5. When the meeting in March 2020 was cancelled, members of Mission Council were consulted by email to suggest that a number of decisions could be taken by the Officers of Assembly. A formal record of the actions then taken by the Officers on Mission Council's behalf is available on the website.

General Assembly and Mission Council

6. Mission Council addressed several matters that were either considered at a previous Assembly or that relate directly to the business of this 2020 Assembly, as follows.
7. The 2018 Assembly received a lengthy commissioned report from its Task Group on General Assembly and took various decisions about arrangements for Assembly in the period 2020 to 2030. Some of these decisions required changes to the Structure of the URC and they were therefore referred to Synods, none of which objected. Mission Council then confirmed these changes in May 2019 as decisions of the Church. These changes were as follows:
 - 7.1 Each Synod will have the same number of representatives to Assembly (and for the moment this figure will be 16).
 - 7.2 A Synod may include its Moderator in its overall representation, if it wishes to. There will not be additional places designated for Synod Moderators.
 - 7.3 Among a Synod's representation, no more than two thirds (no more than 10 out of 16) are to be elders or lay, and no more than two thirds are to be ministers of word and sacraments or CRCWs.
 - 7.4 The Convenor of the Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee is no longer identified as a member of Assembly.

8. Mission Council in May 2019 also agreed two further changes that would affect the Structure of the URC. These have since been referred to Synods, none of which objected. They will require final approval at General Assembly if they are to become decisions of the Church. The following resolutions are therefore brought:

**8.1 General Assembly gives final approval to the proposal that:
There shall be one Moderator of General Assembly, serving for one year. This Moderator may be a minister (of word and sacraments or CRCW) or an elder. Each Synod may nominate one minister and one elder each year, but only one Moderator will be elected.**

**8.2 General Assembly gives final approval to the proposal that:
The name of Mission Council shall be changed to Assembly Executive.**

The main reasons for these two proposals are listed in the May 2019 Mission Council reports, Paper N1, sections 1.5 and 2.12-13 respectively, on pp72-76.

9. In November 2019 Mission Council reviewed its own membership, last fixed at the 2014 Assembly. Acting on behalf of General Assembly, Mission Council decided that its membership shall be, from Assembly 2020 forward:

1. Moderator(s) of Assembly
2. Moderator(s)-elect of Assembly
3. Immediate past Moderator(s)
4. General Secretary
5. Deputy General Secretaries
6. Clerk and Assistant Clerk
7. Treasurer and Deputy Treasurer
8. Convenors of all Assembly standing committees, except the Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee
9. Four further representatives of each Synod, normally from among that Synod's representatives to the immediately preceding General Assembly.
10. Three representatives of URC Youth
11. Chair of the United Reformed Church Trust.

With the exception of those in categories 5 (the Deputy General Secretaries) and 10 (youth representatives), all the above shall be members of the United Reformed Church.

The Legal Adviser and the Convenor of the Law and Polity Advisory Group shall be in attendance with the right to speak at all times, but not to use consensus cards or to vote.

The three Deputy General Secretaries, who are members of Mission Council, are expected to attend, and they may direct other staff members to attend, with the right to speak (except during the decision stage of the consensus process) but not to use consensus cards or to vote, when the business so requires. These other staff members should therefore only expect to be at Mission Council where this has been negotiated and agreed in advance.

Up to two ecumenical representatives may attend with the right to speak (except during the decision stage of the consensus process) but not to use consensus cards or to vote.

Also present shall be the Moderators'/Moderator's Chaplain(s), the Secretary of the Nominations Committee, and the Minute Secretary. These may participate in group sessions, and may speak during plenary sessions with the consent of the Moderator.

From time to time, there may be visitors and/or observers present by prior arrangement with the General Secretary. They shall not have the right to speak or participate in any way during plenary or group sessions, unless with the explicit consent of the Moderator.

All references to the Mission Council shall be taken as referring to the Assembly Executive or another successor body unless and until the General Assembly decides otherwise.

10. As support for the work of Assembly and Mission Council, Mission Council determined that the work of the Mission Council Advisory Group and that of the Assembly Arrangements Committee would be merged from July 2020 in a Business Committee, whose Convenor will replace the Convenor of Assembly Arrangements as an Officer of General Assembly. The proposed make-up of the Business Committee is detailed in the Nominations report.
11. Pursuant to Resolution 7 of the 2016 Assembly, on the marriage of same sex couples in Scotland, England and Wales, Mission Council agreed a response to new marriage law in Jersey. Our Church has now responded to legislation on this matter in all the jurisdictions where we serve.
12. Resolution 5 of the 2018 Assembly agreed an addition to the promises made by our elders at ordination and induction. This was referred to synods and to congregations, and an appendix to this report returns it to Assembly for formal consideration and potentially for final approval.

Projects and tasks

13. A number of major projects and tasks have been considered at Mission Council, often more than once as work evolved from one stage to another. Several of these pieces of work are included elsewhere in the Assembly reports, so they need just a mention here rather than lengthy exposition. They all, however, claimed time and care in Mission Council, which was concerned to develop them as wisely and effectively as possible.
14. Mission Council received regular reports on *Walking the Way*, with its focus on missional discipleship. An account of this work, its vision and its progress, is appended to the report of the Mission Committee – although it bridges, in both intent and organisation, the work of Mission and of Discipleship.
15. A major review of our work among children and young people (Paper B2, November 2018) led on to a five-year strategy, which is already well under way.
16. The Safeguarding Advisory Group brought forward in November 2018 a Learning Report, following the Past Case Review that had begun in 2015. This led on to a five-year Safeguarding Strategic Plan (November 2019) and the publication of an updated safeguarding manual for the Church, *Good Practice 5*, in January 2020. A public apology to survivors of abuse in our Church was issued by the General Secretary and Head of Communications in November 2018, as follows:

The United Reformed Church offers a heartfelt apology to survivors of abuse and to their families, supporters and communities.

We acknowledge the past failures of the United Reformed Church and the courage of survivors, some of whom disclosed exceptionally difficult, life-changing experiences of abuse as part of the past case review. Any harm and abuse inflicted by people we trusted is, and will remain, a deep source of grief and shame to the Church.

The Church calls on anyone who serves our congregations, synods, institutions and offices to continue taking significant steps to support and protect children, young people and adults from suffering and experiencing any form of abuse.

17. The Finance Committee consulted Mission Council about its oversight and support of the Church's pension funds and commitments amid changing regulatory expectations.
18. MIND, the Ministerial Incapacity and Discipline Advisory Group, has given much care and effort to a thorough revision of our Ministerial Disciplinary Policy, and has consulted Mission Council on the principles and emerging content of the new draft. A lengthy set of proposals comes as an appendix to this paper. These would have been considered in full by Mission Council in March 2020, had that meeting gone ahead. In the event Mission Council has not discussed the detail of the proposals. However, its members do support the bringing of this material to Assembly by the Clerk and General Secretary.
19. The Mission Committee presented to Mission Council sobering and weighty reflections arising from a Council for World Mission project on the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade in various parts of the world. Mission Council supported continuing work on this matter, in order that the Church as a whole may be able to consider necessary steps towards new hope and healing.
20. The Ministries Committee led a lengthy discussion at Mission Council about proposals for pastoral supervision for the Church's ministers.

Arrangements in Church life

21. Mission Council made a number of changes to arrangements that shape the life of the Church in one way or another. Some of the detail is as follows.
22. The Finance Committee consulted Mission Council about the Church's investment policies, and in May 2019 Mission Council asked those who steward our central funds to disinvest from companies where more than 10% of the turnover depends on fossil fuels. Our investment managers have made this change.
23. In similar vein, the Mission Committee brought new recommendations about the Church's environmental policy, which now aspires to reduce carbon emissions to net zero well before 2050, and calls on Government to do the same.
24. Several measures were approved that shape the work of our ministers:
 - 24.1 The introduction of a new pattern (Model 4) of non-stipendiary ministry of word and sacraments, with a strong local focus (H2, November 2018).

- 24.2 A decision that our ministers should not, unless certain factors apply, be concurrently on the ministerial roll of another church, in Britain or elsewhere (H2, November 2019).
- 24.3 A revised version of the 'Marks of Ministry' that we seek in our ministers of word and sacraments. This is now printed at the start of Section K in our Manual.
- 24.4 A related matter – Mission Council recalled the Guidelines for the Conduct of Lay Preachers that the Church had approved in 2012, and these are restated in Paper H1, May 2019.
25. The Law and Polity Advisory Group was directed to review the intersecting responsibilities of Synods and their Trust Companies in dealing with property matters according to the Schedules to the URC Acts of Parliament. The Church wishes to learn from the Synods about good practice they have developed and about problems they have encountered. This work of review is well under way.
26. Under the convenorship of Alan Yates, with staffing leadership by Jane Baird and Sandi Hallam-Jones, new clarity and consistency has been brought to the management of risk in our Church. New policy documents have been prepared and new practice is already being implemented.
27. Mission Council was due to discuss in March 2020 a five-year financial plan for *Reform* magazine. In the event, the Officers of Assembly approved a one-year arrangement for 2021, to allow longer-term plans to be properly considered when the councils of the Church are able to meet again.
28. The URC contributed substantially to the Greenbelt Christian arts and music festival from 2016 to 2018. Mission Council heard reports on this work and agreed that we would contribute as a Greenbelt Associate to the festivals of 2019 to 2021 (although the 2020 festival has since been cancelled).
29. There was a conference in November 2019 between representatives of the URC and the Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz, to mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Mission Council welcomed and supported a declaration from the conference of our two Churches' joint commitment to work to overcome new 'walls' of division and mistrust, and agreed to commend this to a number of ecumenical partners.
30. Terms of Reference were drawn up or revised for several committees and working groups that manage and co-ordinate various aspects of our Church's life.

- 30.1 Accreditations (CRCW and SCM) Sub-Committee – bringing together two specialist sub-committees of the Ministries Comm (Paper H1, Nov 2019)
- 30.2 Church House Management Group (Z1, November 2018)
- 30.3 Human Resources Advisory Group (O1, November 2018)
- 30.4 Pensions Committee (formerly Pensions Exec) (G2, March 2020)
- 30.5 Pilots Sub-Comm, of the Children's & Youth Work Comm (B1, Nov 2019)

- 30.6 Safeguarding Advisory Group (R1, March 2020)
- 30.7 Synods' Safeguarding Practice Group (R2, March 2020)
- 30.8 Walking the Way Steering Group (I2, November 2018)
- 30.9 Worship Reference Group (M1, November 2019)

People and posts

31. A number of changes in Assembly appointed staff at Church House were agreed or noted by Mission Council, in every case after due process.
32. At Church House, John Bradbury was appointed as our next General Secretary, to start in June 2020 and work for three months alongside John Proctor, who retires in August. This appointment is for an initial term of seven years, with the possibility of a further term or terms of up to seven years each.
33. Richard Church retires as Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship) in July 2020, and the vacancy has not at present been filled.
34. Andy Jackson became Head of Communications in November 2018, taking up work previously done by Gill Nichol.
35. Nicola Furley-Smith arrived as Secretary for Ministries when Craig Bowman returned to local ministry in November 2019. Two further appointments post-date the preparation of papers for the March 2020 meeting of Mission Council: Michael Jagessar, our Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries, moved on in February 2020 to work for CWM's European Region, and was succeeded in April by Karen Campbell; Fiona Thomas will step down as Secretary for Education and Learning in August 2020, to be succeeded in September by Jenny Mills.
36. Those ministerial appointments at Church House mentioned in the paragraph above have an initial term of not more than seven years, with the possibility of a further term or terms of not more than five years each.
37. Several Synod Moderators moved on in these years, and names to succeed them were duly agreed. Andrew Mills left North Western Synod in January 2019 for local pastoral ministry, and Brian Jolly began as Moderator in January 2020, to serve for five years. In the East Midlands Peter Meek retired in December 2019, with Geoffrey Clarke succeeding him in May 2020 for an initial seven-year tenure.

In Yorkshire Kevin Watson retires in June 2020, and Jamie Kissack will take over in July, also for seven years. Names are being sought for Southern Synod, after Nicola Furley-Smith's move to Church House, and for Thames North, where Andrew Prasad will retire in February 2021.
38. A further five-year period of Moderatorial tenure was agreed for Ruth Whitehead in South Western Synod, extending her ministry there to June 2025.
39. At Westminster College, Cambridge, Jonathan Soyars arrived to teach New Testament in summer 2019, in the post that Tan Yak-Hwee had left a year earlier.

Neil Thorogood will return to pastoral ministry in the summer of 2020, and Samantha White will then move into the post of Principal.

40. A new voluntary post was created – Assistant Clerk of General Assembly – to support the Clerk, and to create a small pool of people who understand more of the role before Michael Hopkins completes his tenure in 2024. Sarah Moore has taken up this post for three years from January 2020.
41. Various nominations to committee and representative roles were agreed by Mission Council on behalf of Assembly, and are reported by the Nominations Committee in this Book of Reports.

Properties

42. The General Assembly in 2018 heard of the extensive refurbishment in 2017 of our central office building in London. There was at that stage one major piece of builders' snagging to sort out – damp in the lower ground floor. After careful work in the winter of 2018-19, we retook possession of the lower ground floor at Easter 2019 and it has served us very well indeed.
43. The General Assembly in 2018 noted that the URC Trust was in close discussion with a potential purchaser of our Windermere building, which had closed a year earlier. A sale was concluded shortly after that Assembly, releasing more than £800k, to be made available by the Education and Learning Committee as a Discipleship Development Fund. Plans for the deployment of the Fund are now being put in hand, so that the Centre's former role as a place of learning and welcome for all the Church's people may be handed on in new opportunities.

Leadership, worship and admin

44. Throughout these two years Mission Council has been wisely and carefully led by the Moderators of General Assembly, Derek Estill and Nigel Uden, supported pastorally and in worship by their chaplains, David Coaker and Elaine Colechin. All four have contributed consistently and very creditably to the fellowship and work of the Council.
45. Mission Council was led in Bible study at its three meetings by Susan Durber, Neil Thorogood and Alison Gray, and members valued their input very much indeed.
46. Administration for our meetings has been handled by Helen Munt, who served as PA to the General Secretary until April 2020. Her care, thoroughness and warmth have been an immense support to everyone on Mission Council.
47. Finally, Mission Council was delighted to extend congratulations to David Cornick, who served as our General Secretary from 2001 to 2008 and then as General Secretary of Churches Together in England until his retirement in 2018. David was awarded the Lambeth Cross for Ecumenism by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2019 for his 'outstanding sustained contribution to the development of ecumenical life and witness in England'.

Mission Council: appendix

Assembly 2018 Resolution 5: report on responses

Responses to General Assembly 2018 Resolution 5 –
New Ordination Promises for Elders

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Dr John Bradbury john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 3 General Assembly gives final approval to its resolution to add a further question to Schedule B [of the Basis of Union] for elders as follows: 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.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To inform Assembly of the responses from Synods and Local Church Meetings to the consultation on the proposed new ordination promise for Elders, in order that Assembly may consider giving final approval to this addition.
Main points	The response was overwhelmingly positive.
Previous documents	General Assembly 2018 Resolution 5.
Consultation has taken place with...	Local Churches and Synods.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The proposed changes will raise the profile of our commitment to the unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church through making this integral to the ministry of Elders.

1. From the approximately 1350 local congregations of the United Reformed Church, 187 churches responded to the consultation on the proposed change to the ordination promises for Elders accepted by the General Assembly in 2018. Many more congregations may well have considered this, but as not responding to the consultation is in effect to agree with the proposed change, many may not have felt the need to write formally to the General Secretary to express this.
2. Of the 187 Church Meetings to respond formally, only 32 opposed the change or expressed reservations. Of these, about three-quarters of the reservations expressed were about the promise to 'cherish love towards all other churches'. This promise mirrors one that Ministers make at ordination. The concern is whether 'all other churches' is too ill defined, and might include groups who call themselves churches which we might not consider such.
3. The General Secretary and the Secretary for Ecumenical Relations have prepared a paper which sets out the position of the United Reformed Church regarding how we understand the statement and our relationships with other churches. This is appended to this report and we believe allays the fears expressed by the few churches expressing reservations.
4. A tiny number of churches objected on what might be termed 'congregationalist' grounds, that Elders only serve the local church. But from the inception of the URC, it has been the constitutional practice that Elders serve the wider councils of the Church, and through the Synod all congregations are represented in the wider councils of the Church. Whilst not every Elder will personally serve in this way, this is nonetheless an expression of how the URC lives together, and the way we form the family of the Church. We would invite congregations who responded in that way to understand the promise in the light of these foundational commitments we made to one another at the formation of the denomination.
5. The proposed changes have been viewed positively by the overwhelming majority of churches who responded. None of the Synods and only a tiny number of Church Meetings objected, and we hope their objection is met in the statement below. A constitutional change only falls if more than one third of Synods or Local Churches object. This piece of business is therefore returned to the Assembly, where its final approval and adoption may be considered.

Appendix: Response from the General Secretary and Secretary for Ecumenical Relations to questions raised in the consultation:

A response to concerns about the new form of elders' promises

1. This response specifically considers the proposal that the commitment made by elders should include 'love towards all other churches'.
2. A first point to note is that the words have been in the ordination and induction promises for URC ministers for several decades, and therefore are not new.

Elders already commit to share with the minister in the oversight and leadership of the local church. Part of that oversight and leadership is the way we relate to other churches.

3. What do we mean by 'all other churches'? The simple answer is 'all those groups that we would recognise as churches'. If we recognise another group as really being a church, then part of our commitment and witness as URC is that we do all we can to love them and build bridges with them. If we don't recognise another group as really being a church, we wouldn't have the same commitment to them.
4. So, the churches with which we are linked in national and international fellowships of churches, such as Churches Together in England, are our main partners. We ought to cherish love towards them, even though not all of them are from our tradition and would not do everything in a way we would ourselves.
5. There are some groups which do not belong to Churches Together or anything like that, but we would still recognise as genuine churches – churches who understand God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who expect to discover and discern God's word in the Bible, who love Jesus and seek to live by his commands. It would be hoped that URC ministers and elders could cherish love towards these fellowships too.
6. Then there are other groups that would not fit well into a fellowship like Churches Together in England, and probably would not want to belong, like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. These groups surely have some good people among them, but they would answer some big questions, like, 'Who is Jesus?' or 'How do we know God?' in ways that don't really reflect the faith that has carried the Church through 2000 years. In general, we would not expect to find ways of working with them, and they probably would not want to work with us anyway.
7. As we think about this broader view of church, and think about groups that might not fall under that category, it is also helpful to look at the full wording of the promise. In particular, notice how the promise refers to *the one holy, catholic and apostolic church*.

Q: *Do you promise as an elder of the United Reformed Church to seek its wellbeing, 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?*

8. Those groups which would profess a very different faith to our own may not see themselves as being part of a larger Christian family – *the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church* – and so would not for us fall under what we would define as church. The promise is specifically referring to churches which could feel part of *the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church*.
9. Finally, when we respond to the question, we do so *by the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit*. We are therefore not relying on our own discernment, gifts and strength but on those of the trinitarian God.

John Proctor and Philip Brooks – November 2018