

# Standing Orders of General Assembly of the United Reformed Church

## 1. The agenda of the Assembly

- 1.1 At its meetings the Assembly shall consider reports and draft motions prepared by its committees which include the Mission Council or by synods, and motions and amendments of which due notice has been given submitted by individual members of the Assembly.
- 1.2 For the good ordering of General Assembly's time, the Moderators for that Assembly, in consultation with the General Secretary and the Clerk, shall group the draft motions into three Groups which shall determine the manner in which the Assembly shall consider them: A – en bloc, B – majority voting, and C – consensus. All matters covered by paragraphs three(1) and (2) of the Structure of the United Reformed Church shall be placed in Group B. In the case of any other matter the Moderator may rule at any time that a motion be taken from group B and placed in group C. At the same time the grouping of draft motions is published any matters already known to be urgent under Standing Order 2.3 shall also be published, with reasons given.
- 1.3 The motions in group A shall be taken en bloc, following Standing Order 2.
- 1.4 The motions in group B shall be determined by majority vote, following Standing Order 3.
- 1.5 The motions in group C shall be considered by consensus decision making process, following Standing Order 4.
- 1.6 Standing Orders 5 to 15 shall apply at all times, regardless of the mode of decision-making in use.
- 1.7 The Assembly arrangements committee shall prepare before each meeting of the Assembly a draft order of business, and submit it to the Assembly as early as convenient in the programme.
- 1.8 Motions arising from a report which have been duly seconded and submitted by individual members of Assembly under Standing Order 3.2 shall be taken at a point in the business determined by the Moderator on the advice of the Convenor of the Assembly arrangements committee.
- 1.9 If notice has been given of two or more motions on the same subject, or two or more amendments to the same motion, these shall be taken in the order decided by the Moderator on the advice of the Clerk.
- 1.10 The Convenor of the Assembly arrangements committee may, during the meeting of the Assembly, propose that the order of business be changed.

### 2. En bloc business

- 2.1 The proposal from the Moderators of items of business to be taken en bloc should be notified to Assembly members in advance of their meeting.
- 2.2 Notice in writing to the effect that one or more of the motions included in group A should be considered separately may be given to the General Secretary by the close of business on the first day of the meeting of the Assembly. If such notice, which must be signed by at least six members of the Assembly, is duly received, then the motion(s) in question shall be removed from group A. It shall be for the Moderators, in consultation with the General Secretary and the Clerk, to determine in which of groups B and C any such separated motions should be placed.
- 2.3 When the single motion to approve en bloc business is before the Assembly, the vote shall be taken immediately, the motion being determined by a majority of the votes of members of the Assembly present and voting as indicated by a show of voting cards.

### 3. Majority voting

- 3.1 A report presented to the Assembly by a committee or synod, under Standing Order 1.1, shall be received for debate, unless notice has been duly given under Standing Order 5.4 of a motion to refer back to that committee or synod the whole or part of the report and its attached motion(s). Such a motion for reference back shall be debated and voted upon before the relevant report is itself debated. To carry such a motion two-thirds of the votes cast must be given in its favour. When a report has been received for debate, and before any motions consequent upon it are proposed, any member may speak to a matter arising from the report which is not the subject of a motion.
- 3.2 During the meeting of the Assembly and on the report of a committee, notice (including the names of proposer and seconder) shall be given to the Clerk of any new motions which arise from the material of the report, and of any amendments which affect the substance of motions already presented. The Moderator shall decide whether such motion or amendment requires to be circulated in writing to members before it is discussed by the Assembly. During the course of the debate a new motion or amendment may be stated orally without supporting speech in order to ascertain whether a member is willing to second it.
- 3.3 No motion or amendment shall be spoken to by its proposer, debated, or put to the Assembly unless it is known that there is a seconder. The only exception to this are motions presented on behalf of a committee, of which printed notice has been given.
- 3.4 A seconder may second without speaking and, by declaring the intention of doing so, reserve the right of speaking until a later period in the debate.
- 3.5 An amendment shall be either to omit words or to insert words or to do both, but no amendment shall be in order which has the effect of introducing an irrelevant proposal or of negating the motion. The Moderator may rule that a proposed amendment should be treated as an alternative motion under Standing Order 3.10.
- 3.6 If an amendment is carried, the motion as amended shall take the place of the original motion and shall become the substantive motion upon which any further amendment may

be moved. If an amendment is rejected, a further amendment with a different outcome may be moved.

- 3.7 An amendment which has been moved and seconded shall be disposed of before any further amendment may be moved, but notice may be given of intention to move a further amendment should the one before the Assembly be rejected.
- 3.8 The mover may, with the concurrence of the seconder and the consent of the Assembly, alter the motion or amendment proposed.
- 3.9 A motion or amendment may be withdrawn by the proposer with the concurrence of the seconder and the consent of the Assembly. Any such consent shall be signified without discussion. It shall not be in order for any member to speak upon it after the proposer has asked permission to withdraw unless such permission shall have been refused.
- 3.10 Alternative (but not directly negative) motions may be moved and seconded in competition with a motion before the Assembly. It shall be for the Moderator, on the advice of the Clerk, to rule when motions shall be considered as alternatives under the Terms of this Standing Order.
  - 3.10.1 When such draft alternative motions have been received by the General Secretary, the Moderators may ask the General Secretary to convene a meeting (physical or electronic) of the proposers, to ascertain if it may be possible to agree on a single draft motion to put before the Assembly, or to clarify the areas of disagreement.
  - 3.10.2 If the Assembly has alternative motions before it, each proposer shall be given the opportunity to present their motion in an order decided by the Moderator.
  - 3.10.3 After any amendments duly moved under Standing Orders 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7 have been dealt with and debate on the alternative motions has ended, the movers shall reply to the debate in reverse order to that in which they spoke initially. The first vote shall be a vote in favour of each of the motions, put in the order in which they were proposed, the result not being announced for one until it is announced for all. If any of them obtains a majority of those voting, it becomes the sole motion before the Assembly. If none of them does so, the motion having the fewest votes is discarded. Should the lowest two be equal, the Moderator gives a casting vote. The voting process is repeated until one motion achieves a majority of those voting.
  - 3.10.4 Once a sole motion remains, further discussion is permissible and votes for and against that motion shall be taken in the normal way and in accordance with Standing Order 7.
- 3.11 In the course of the business any member may move that the question under consideration be not put. This motion takes precedence over every motion before the Assembly. As soon as the member has given reasons for proposing it and it has been seconded and the proposer of the motion or amendment under consideration has been allowed opportunity to comment on the reasons put forward, the vote upon it shall be

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taken, unless it appears to the Moderator that an unfair use is being made of this rule. Should the motion be carried, the business shall immediately end and the Assembly shall proceed to the next business.

- 3.12 In the course of any discussion, any member may move that the question be now put. This is sometimes described as “the closure motion”. If the Moderator senses that there is a wish or need to close a debate, the Moderator may ask whether any member wishes so to move; the Moderator may not simply declare a debate closed. Provided that it appears to the Moderator that the motion is a fair use of this rule, the vote shall be taken upon it immediately it has been seconded. When an amendment is under discussion, this motion shall apply only to that amendment. To carry this motion, two-thirds of the votes cast must be given in its favour. The mover of the original motion or amendment, as the case may be, retains the right of reply before the vote is taken on the motion or amendment.
- 3.13 During the course of a debate on a motion any member may move that decision on this motion be deferred to the next Assembly. This rule does not apply to debates on amendments since the Assembly needs to decide the final form of a motion before it can responsibly vote on deferral. The motion then takes precedence over other business. As soon as the member has given reasons for proposing it and it has been seconded and the proposer of the motion under consideration has been allowed opportunity to comment on the reasons put forward, the vote upon it shall be taken, unless it appears to the Moderator that an unfair use is being made of this rule or that deferral would have the effect of annulling the motion. To carry this motion, two-thirds of the votes cast must be given in its favour. At the discretion of the Moderator, the General Secretary may be instructed by a further motion, duly seconded, to refer the matter for consideration by other councils and/or by one or more committees of the Assembly. The General Secretary shall provide for the deferred motion to be presented again at the next Meeting of the General Assembly.
- 3.14 The motions described in Standing Orders 3.11, 3.12 and 3.13 above are exceptions to Standing Order 3.3, in that they may be moved and spoken to without the proposer having first obtained and announced the consent of a seconder. They must, however, be seconded before being put to the vote. Precedence as between motions under 3.11, 3.12, and 3.13 is determined by the fact that after one of them is before the Assembly no other motion can be moved until that one has been dealt with.
- 3.15 Motions before the Assembly under Standing Order 3 shall be determined by a majority of the votes of members of the Assembly present and voting as indicated by a show of voting cards, except:
  - 3.15.1 if the Assembly decides before the vote that a paper ballot be the method of voting, or
  - 3.15.2 if the show of cards indicates a very close vote, and the Moderator decides, or a member of Assembly proposes and the Assembly agrees, that a paper ballot shall be the method of voting.

## 4. Consensus decision making<sup>1</sup>

- 4.1 Those motions in group C shall be determined using this Standing Order.
- 4.2 The first stage of the consensus decision making procedure is the information session. At the start of this session, if the Moderator judges that the matter before the Assembly is urgent, requiring decision during the current meeting of the Assembly, the Moderator shall inform the Assembly that this is the case and advise that if following the consensus procedures results in continuing disagreement it may be necessary to move to a majority decision under Standing Order 4.4.4. During the information session, members of Assembly may ask questions only to seek clarification or further information.
- 4.3 Once the Moderator decides that the information session has ended, the Assembly moves into the discussion session, in which the substance of the matter may be discussed.
- 4.3.1 The methods used may include prayer, buzz groups, group discussions, speeches to the whole Assembly, time for thinking during a break, etc. The Moderator may invite Assembly to indicate opinions by the use of coloured cards at this stage, and shall ensure that the full ranges of voices are given opportunity to contribute.
- 4.3.2 Minor changes of wording may be agreed as the discussion proceeds. If a proposed change is, in the opinion of the Moderator upon the advice of the Clerk, a major change, then a proposer and seconder are required.
- 4.4 When the Moderator senses that the Assembly may be ready to reach a decision, the Moderator shall state that Assembly is moving into the decision session, and shall check whether the Assembly is nearing consensus. If during the decision session substantially new material or proposals emerge, the Moderator may rule that the Assembly shall return to the discussion session.
- 4.4.1 If there is unanimous support for, or rejection of, the proposal it is declared passed or rejected by consensus.
- 4.4.2 If there is strong, but not unanimous, support, the Moderator shall ask if those who do not support the proposal as their first option are nonetheless prepared to accept the proposal. If so, the issue is declared resolved by consensus.
- 4.4.3 Where some members of Assembly indicate an unwillingness to accept a proposal there shall be further discussion and then the Moderator shall seek to ascertain that they accept that they have been heard and agree to live with the outcome, by asking if they are prepared to have the issue declared passed, recognising disagreement. Subject to Standing Order 9.3, a member may ask to have their dissent recorded in the minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on consensus decision making, and its ethos, detailed methodology, and practice, can be found in the book *The Church Guide for Making Decisions Together* by Terence Corkin and Julia Kuhn Wallace, Abingdon Press (2 May 2017), ISBN 978-1501838071. These Standing Orders remain the definitive guide for United Reformed Church purposes.

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- 4.4.4 If there is continuing disagreement, the Assembly may, at the discretion of the Moderator, look for further possibilities including but not limited to:
- 4.4.4.1 adjourning the discussion to another time or place, perhaps with more work before reconsideration;
  - 4.4.4.2 asking a named person to continue to work on the issue with relevant people until the next Assembly;
  - 4.4.4.3 referring the issue to another council or group to deal with;
  - 4.4.4.4 deciding the issue is unnecessary/inappropriate to continue dealing with;
  - 4.4.4.5 declaring that there are diverse views which Christians may hold with equal integrity;
  - 4.4.4.6 if the issue has previously been notified as urgent, moving to majority decision;
  - 4.4.4.7 in the event of urgency not previously notified, moving to majority decision; in that event, the Moderator shall give reasons, and test the mind of Assembly in forming that judgement.
- 4.5 The Assembly and Moderator may be assisted by a facilitation group, which shall be appointed at the beginning of each Assembly by the Assembly.
- 4.6 Coloured cards are not essential in consensus decision making but they can be helpful. Orange cards, held at the request of the Moderator, indicate warmth towards a point of view or approval of a proposal. Blue cards, held at the request of the Moderator, indicate coolness about what has been heard or the need for greater clarity or disapproval of a proposal.

## 5. Presentation of business

- 5.1 All reports of committees, together with the draft motions arising therefrom, shall be delivered to the General Secretary by a date to be determined, so that they may be printed and circulated to members in time for consideration before the date of the Assembly meeting.
- 5.2 A synod may deliver to the General Secretary not less than twelve weeks before the commencement of the meeting of the Assembly notice in writing of a motion for consideration at the Assembly. This notice shall include the names of those appointed to propose and second the motion at the Assembly.
- 5.3 A local church wishing to put forward a motion for consideration by the General Assembly shall submit the motion to its synod for consideration and, if the synod so decides, transmission to the Assembly, at such time as will enable the synod to comply with Standing Order 3.2 above.
- 5.4 A member of the Assembly may deliver to the General Secretary not less than 21 days before the date of the meeting of the Assembly a notice in writing of a motion (which notice must include the name of a seconder) to be included in the Assembly agenda. If the subject matter of such a notice of motion appears to the General Secretary to be an infringement of the rights of a synod through which the matter could properly have been raised, the General Secretary shall inform the member accordingly and bring the matter

before the Assembly arrangements committee which shall advise the Assembly as to the procedure to be followed.

- 5.5 Proposals for amendments to the Basis and Structure of the URC, which may be made by the Mission Council or a committee of the General Assembly or a synod, shall be in the hands of the General Secretary not later than 12 weeks before the opening of the Assembly. The General Secretary, in addition to the normal advice to members of the Assembly, shall, as quickly as possible, inform all Synod Clerks of the proposed amendment.
- 5.6 It shall not be in order, whether in en bloc business, majority voting, or consensus decision-making, to move a motion or amendment which:
- 5.6.1 contravenes any part of the Basis of Union, or
  - 5.6.2 involves the Church in expenditure without prior consideration by the appropriate committee, or
  - 5.6.3 pre-empts discussion of a matter to be considered later in the agenda, or
  - 5.6.4 amends or reverses a decision reached by the Assembly at its preceding two meetings unless the Moderator, Clerk and General Secretary together decide that changed circumstances or new evidence justify earlier reconsideration of the matter, or
  - 5.6.5 is not related to the report of a committee and has not been the subject of 21 days' notice under Standing Order 5.4, or
  - 5.6.6 simply reaffirms existing work.

The decision of the Moderator (in the case of 5.6.1, 5.6.2, 5.6.3, 5.6.5, and 5.6.6) and of the Moderator with the Clerk and the General Secretary (in the case of 5.6.4) on the application of this Standing Order shall be final.

## 6. Timing of speeches and of other business

- 6.1 Save by prior agreement of the Officers of the Assembly, speeches made in the presentation of reports concerning past work of Assembly committees which are to be open to question, comment or discussion shall not exceed five minutes.
- 6.2 The Assembly may meet in parallel sessions to consider the past work of Assembly committees for questions and comments. Any draft motions arising therefrom must be dealt with in a plenary session of the Assembly.
- 6.3 Save by the prior agreement of the Officers of the Assembly, speeches made in support of the motions from any Assembly committee, including the Mission Council, or from any synod shall not in aggregate exceed 45 minutes, nor shall speeches in support of any particular committee or synod motion exceed ten minutes, (eg a committee with three motions may not exceed 30 minutes). The proposers of any other motion of which due notice has been given shall be allowed an aggregate of ten minutes, unless a longer period be recommended by the Officers of the Assembly or determined by the Moderator.
- 6.4 Each subsequent speaker in any debate shall be allowed five minutes unless the Moderator shall determine otherwise; it shall, in particular, be open to the Moderator to determine that all speeches in a debate or from a particular point in a debate shall be of not more than a different specified number of minutes.

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- 6.5 When a speech is made on behalf of a committee, it shall be so stated. Otherwise a speaker shall begin by giving name and accreditation to the Assembly.
- 6.6 Secretaries of committees and members of staff who are not members of Assembly may speak on the report of a committee for which they have responsibility at the request of the Convenor concerned. They may speak on other reports with the consent of the Moderator.
- 6.7 In each debate under Standing Order 3, whether on a motion or on an amendment, and in each decision session in debates under Standing Order 4, no one shall address the Assembly more than once without the permission of the Moderator, except that at the close of each debate the proposer of the motion or the amendment, as the case may be, shall have the right to reply, but must strictly confine the reply to answering previous speakers and must not introduce new matters. Such reply shall close the debate on the motion or the amendment.
- 6.8 The foregoing Standing Order (6.7) shall not prevent the asking or answering of a question which arises from the matter before the Assembly or from a speech made in the debate upon it.
- 6.9 An invited speaker, whether speaking to a draft motion or not, may address the Assembly for such period of time as may be agreed by the Assembly arrangements committee.

## 7. Voting

- 7.1 Voting on any motion whose effect is to alter, add to, modify or supersede the Basis, the Structure and any other form or expression of the polity and doctrinal formulations of the United Reformed Church, is governed by paragraph 3(1) and (2) of the Structure.
- 7.2 To provide for voting in the case of a paper ballot, and to assist in taking a count of votes when the Moderator decides this is necessary, the Assembly arrangements committee shall appoint tellers for each Assembly.
- 7.3 Any electronic voting system approved by the Assembly arrangements committee shall be deemed to meet the requirements of these Standing Orders.

## 8. Questions

- 8.1 A member may, if two days' notice in writing has been given to the General Secretary, ask the Moderator or the Convenor of any committee any question on any matter relating to the business of the Assembly to which no reference is made in any report before the Assembly.
- 8.2 A member may, when given opportunity by the Moderator, ask the presenter of any report before the Assembly a question seeking additional information or explanation relating to matters contained within the report.
- 8.3 Questions asked under Standing Orders 8.1 and 8.2 shall be put and answered without discussion.

## 9. Points of order, personal explanations, dissent

- 9.1 A member shall have the right to rise and call attention to a point of order, and immediately on this being done any other member addressing the Assembly shall cease speaking until the Moderator has determined the question of order. The decision on any point of order rests entirely with the Moderator. Any member calling to order unnecessarily is liable to censure of the Assembly.
- 9.2 A member feeling that some material part of a former speech by such member at the same meeting has been misunderstood or is being grossly misinterpreted by a later speaker may rise and request the Moderator's permission to make a personal explanation. If the Moderator so permits, a member so rising shall be entitled to be heard forthwith.
- 9.3 The right to record in the minutes a dissent from any decision of the Assembly shall only be granted to a member by the Moderator if the reason stated, either verbally at the time or later in writing, appears to the Moderator to fall within the provisions of paragraph 10 of the Basis of Union.
- 9.4 The decision of the Moderator on a point of order, or on the admissibility of a personal explanation, or on the right to have a dissent recorded, shall not be open to discussion.

## 10. Admission of public and press

- 10.1 Members of the public and representatives of the press shall be admitted to the Assembly unless the Assembly otherwise decides, and they shall occupy such places as are assigned to them.

## 11. Circulation of documents

- 11.1 Only documents authorised by the General Secretary in consultation with the Convener of the Assembly arrangements committee may be distributed within the building in which the Assembly is meeting.

## 12. Closed session

- 12.1 A closed session is one in which the business is highly sensitive. Only members of Assembly, the Legal Adviser, and any technical or venue staff required to enable Assembly to meet safely may be present. Neither content nor process may be divulged to non-members, save specific information authorised by the Moderator in consultation with the Clerk and the Legal Adviser. No social media in any form may be used during a closed session, nor to report upon such closed session. Any live streaming must be switched off. Minutes will be taken, but these will be held *in retentis* by the Clerk, and shall not be made available to non-members.
- 12.2 A closed session may be called for at any time in any decision-making mode, and voted upon by the Assembly, requiring a simple majority. This motion takes precedence over every motion before the Assembly. As soon as the member has given reasons for proposing it and it has been seconded, and the proposer of the motion or amendment under consideration has been allowed opportunity to comment on the reasons put

forward, the vote upon it shall be taken, unless it appears to the Moderator that an unfair use is being made of this rule. Should the motion be carried the business shall immediately pause while non-members leave the room.

- 12.3 If a matter is known to be highly sensitive in advance, then the Assembly Officers, consulting the Legal Adviser if necessary, may announce in advance that a certain piece of business will be conducted in a closed session giving their reasons.
- 12.4 Where possible a closed session will begin after a break, in which event everyone must leave the hall. Once the hall is empty, only those entitled to be present shall be admitted. Members of Assembly may leave the hall during a closed session, but if they do so they may not be re-admitted.

### **13. Use of electronic devices and communications during the course of debate**

- 13.1 Although many meetings take place in wi-fi enabled rooms, and many attending will have access to systems of electronic communication and to social media sites during business sessions, their primary responsibility is to attend to the business and participate in the decision making. Those present must refrain both from posting on social media sites during business sessions and from commenting upon partially completed business. It is the responsibility of the communications committee's staff to make official announcements. This restriction is only in place when in session; those attending are free to join in the online debates during breaks and after the close of business in respect of business that the Assembly has completed. All electronic devices must be silent when a meeting is in session.
- 13.2 Everything written and shared on social media sites at any time is the sole responsibility of the author, and is subject to the same defamation laws as any other form of written communication.

### **14. Record of the Assembly**

- 14.1 A record of attendance at the meetings of the Assembly shall be kept in such a manner as the Assembly arrangements committee may determine.
- 14.2 The draft minutes of each day's proceedings shall be made available in an appropriate form normally on the following day. They shall, after any necessary correction, be approved at the opening of a subsequent session. Concerning the minutes of the closing day of the Assembly the Clerk shall submit a motion approving their insertion in the full minutes of the Assembly after review and any necessary correction by the Officers of the Assembly. Before such a motion is voted upon, any member may ask to have read out the written minute on any particular item.
- 14.3 A signed copy of the minutes shall be preserved in the custody of the General Secretary as the official record of the Assembly's proceedings.
- 14.4 As soon as possible after the Assembly meeting ends, the substance of the minutes together with any other relevant papers shall be published as a "Record of Assembly" and a copy sent to every member of the Assembly, each synod and Local Church.

## 15. Suspension and amendment of Standing Orders

- 15.1 In any case of urgency or upon proposal of a motion of which due notice has been given, any one or more of the Standing Orders may be suspended at any meeting, provided that three-fourths of the members of the Assembly present and voting shall so decide.
- 15.2 Motions to amend the Standing Orders shall be referred to the Clerk of the Assembly for report before being voted on by the Assembly (or, in case of urgency, by the Mission Council). The Clerk of the Assembly may from time to time suggest amendments.

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## Flow Chart to guide the use of Standing Order 4 – consensus decision making

**NB – this flowchart is only for exploration and is not definitive. The words always take precedence.**

