

Paper E1

Report of ongoing work

Equalities Committee

Basic information

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Action required	For information and discussion.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To share with General Assembly a summary of the committee's work since it last reported in 2020.
Main points	To promote a culture of inclusion and equalities within the life of the URC and to challenge practices which are exclusive of the diversity within the denomination.
Previous relevant documents	urc.org.uk/our-work/equalities.html
Consultation has taken place with...	Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries (Mission), other General Assembly committees through linked observers; URC Youth Executive.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

1. Purpose and remit

- 1.1 The Equalities Committee exists to encourage and facilitate the development of equalities throughout the United Reformed Church. It has a very wide remit: to remind the URC that equality is enshrined in its theology, life and work; and also, where necessary, to challenge the practice of the URC to that end. Further, the committee also aims to promote the URC's contribution to equality in the wider life of society.
- 1.2 With such a remit, it is essential for the Equalities Committee to collaborate with other committees, groups and individuals, both within and beyond the URC, in order to share ideas and best practice, and to support positive initiatives.

- 1.3 We continue to be encouraged by the evidence that issues of equality and diversity are taken seriously by many within the URC. We have, however, also been concerned to hear of instances where it seems that equality is not being actively pursued or understood, and we seek ways to develop greater awareness in these circumstances.

2. Committee membership and meetings

- 2.1 Having been interested in the potential of virtual meetings, or meetings where some members are able to be present and contribute virtually, our committee meetings this year have allowed us to experience this more fully. All have been held as scheduled online, and members have been able to attend from home. We are experimenting with meeting at different times during the week, to make it possible for people with different needs and availability to be present and contribute.
- 2.2 The committee has been strengthened by the addition of four new members this year, allowing us to benefit from a greater range of experience and perspective. This also makes it possible to liaise with more committees and other parts of the church's structure and work.

3. Online meetings and inclusion

- 3.1 Conducting meetings online – whether committee meetings, huge meetings of General Assembly and Mission Council, or small meetings of local church elders – has been a feature for many this year. It seems that this will continue, as virtual, or partially virtual meetings will still provide advantages for some, in terms of travel, health, or other personal circumstances. Similar points could be made about worship, although the committee has not looked explicitly at that.
- 3.2 As we have all grappled with the practicalities, and gradually worked out some best practice, it has become clear that there are issues of equal access and opportunity which are implicit not just in the fact that a meeting is online, but also in the details of its conduct. Barriers to inclusion are different in an online context, and different considerations and techniques are required. The committee has considered this at every meeting this year and held an extra meeting specially to look at some concerns. We considered producing guidelines, but felt that with many already around, that wouldn't be helpful at present.
- 3.3 As with any other equalities issue, it is vital to be aware of who is being (or feeling) excluded, and why. This may only become apparent with experience. Over the months it is obvious that some people have felt excluded, or much less comfortable, as meetings have moved online. Conversely, others have been enabled to join in with things they were unable to before. As we move on now to a new stage, it is vital that we continue to ask, 'who is uncomfortable, and who is feeling excluded – and what can we do about it'? Else we risk leaving certain groups of people behind.

4. Diverse gender identities and pastoral care

- 4.1 Issues of gender identity continue to be a source of great concern for the committee, as it is clear that more understanding and affirmation of trans people, within the church and beyond it, is long overdue. Copies of the booklet 'Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care', produced originally by the Church of

Scotland, have been obtained to send to all serving ministers and CRCWs. This mailing was delayed by the temporary closure of Church House, but should be complete before General Assembly. We hope that the format of the booklet will encourage and enable conversations within local congregations, with an emphasis on pastoral care.

5. Diversity within the church's committee structure

- 5.1 The General assembly in 2018 asked us to seek ways to support the work of the nominations committee to encourage diversity in appointments, and to further equalities within the life of the church. A member of our committee now attends meetings of the nominations committee, but this issue remains a continuing challenge, which has only been exacerbated by the nature of the committee structure, which appears to us to be unsustainable due to the number of committee members required. This situation has been deeply frustrating to those attempting to enable greater diversity, but hopefully it will be improved following the General Secretary's review. Meanwhile, we will continue to work with the nominations committee to do what we can.

6. Collaborative working

- 6.1 We were pleased to see the Children's and Youth Work inclusive infant feeding policy approved, having ourselves been involved in initiating some of the work – an example of useful and productive collaboration. We were also particularly happy to see that department's work on 'Marks of an inclusive, intercultural and intergenerational church', as it ties in so closely with our concerns.

7. Supporting the URC's commitment to anti-racism

- 7.1 Having seen and commented on the anti-racism resolution from Mission Committee which went to Mission Council in November 2020, we were pleased to see it passed. We spent some time discussing the points raised in the paper, and hoped that further work would arise from it. We do, however, have concerns that the words may not be followed by adequate action, and have heard of racist attitudes that are alive and well within the URC. As part of our commitment to anti-racism we bring a resolution which we hope will lead to the URC taking affirmative action in addressing the underrepresentation of black and ethnic minority people who serve the church in Assembly-appointed posts.