

Paper E2

Affirmative action towards an anti-racist church

Equalities Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	General Assembly instructs the equalities committee to form a small group to: Resolution 15 1. Explore how the URC might implement a policy of 'affirmative action' to address the persistent underrepresentation of Black and ethnic minority people in Assembly-appointed posts (see table in appendix one). Resolution 16 2. Specifically explore the possibilities and practicalities of a recruitment policy which actively engages with, and addresses, the current racial imbalance in Assembly-appointed posts. Resolution 17 3. Explore the possibilities and practicalities, including any related costs, of an experience and skills development programme equipping participants for Assembly-appointed posts. Resolution 18 4. To bring recommendations arising from the work of the small group to General Assembly 2022.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To act on the commitment to becoming an actively anti-racist Church by addressing the racial imbalance in Assembly-appointed posts and other positions of influence in the URC.
Main points	The formation of a small group under the Equalities Committee remit to explore possibilities for practical action addressing the underrepresentation of people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds in senior positions in the Church. Equalities Committee to bring recommendations arising from the group's work to General Assembly 2022.

<p>Previous relevant documents</p>	<p>Mission Council Resolution G2, Nov 2020 – Towards being an anti-racist church – is the main document to which this paper directly responds.</p> <p>Previous relevant resolutions include:</p> <p>1994: Commitment to listen to the voices of people of different cultural backgrounds, and adoption of an Equal Opportunities Policy;</p> <p>2005: URC declared itself a Multicultural Church, welcoming all cultures and ethnicities in worship, witness and service;</p> <p>2012: Multicultural Church, Intercultural Habit – building on the earlier ‘Multicultural Church’ understanding.</p>
<p>Consultation has taken place with...</p>	<p>General Secretary, Deputy General Secretary (Mission), Mission Committee (convenor), URC Racial Justice Networks (Racial Justice Advocates; Cascades of Grace); Black URC ministers, the Synod Moderators, ecumenical partners including Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Churches Together in England, the Racial Justice Advocacy Forum, the Methodist Church.</p>

Summary of impact

<p>Financial</p>	<p>Any (small group meeting) costs will be covered by the Global and Intercultural Ministries budget</p>
<p>External (e.g. ecumenical)</p>	<p>The URC is represented in various ecumenical bodies where the topic of anti-racism and anti-racist initiatives and practices are high on the agenda for all members.</p>

In its nearly 50-year history, the United Reformed Church has only ever had white individuals serve in its General Secretariat. It has had only one person from an ethnic minority background as a Moderator of General Assembly. There has been only one person from an ethnic minority background serve as a Synod Moderator. The Synod Moderators gathering will soon revert to being a completely white space. This imbalance is mirrored in the convenorship of Assembly committees. What does this picture say about our Church? What message does it convey to black and ethnic minority members – and white members – of the URC? What does it say to wider society, to our global partners, and to the world, about who we are and how we operate?

Some people may ponder whether these dynamics are simply coincidence – the people who have been appointed through the Church’s appointment processes are the people whom God has equipped and called to serve; but why would God equip and call only white individuals? Why would the God who has repeatedly opened our eyes to issues of racial justice, equity and equality, prompting the URC to adopt numerous resolutions relating to racial justice, also choose for the URC to be distinctly monochrome in its leadership? By what rationale would the God who has inspired people of all cultures and colours to find belonging in the URC, who has inspired us to declare ourselves ‘a multicultural Church with an intercultural habit’, also say to our black and ethnic minority members ‘so far, but no farther’?

God undoubtedly calls and equips, but the processes which discern and appoint are undeniably human. Even with our best efforts we, and our processes, remain imperfect and fallible. Consciously and subconsciously, we recognise and replicate what we understand to be the norm. Systems, processes and groups established and populated by white people will almost certainly reproduce systems, processes and groups populated by white people – unless something actively intervenes to break the cycle. That intervention is what is being proposed here.

Mission Council Resolution G2, November 2020, committed the URC to journey from ‘not racist’ to being actively *anti-racist*. The resolution speaks of ‘identifying barriers within all parts of [the URC’s] life – including local, synod and Assembly structures, leadership and processes’. It goes on to task the Mission Committee to ‘explore and develop initiatives to address the barriers within our structures, theology and relationships, and to develop resources to equip and empower the United Reformed Church to begin the process of education and change in all parts of its life.’ The resolution was adopted with 100% support, and has been welcomed by a wide breadth of URC members. Even so, many voices – both black and ethnic minority and white voices – question, ‘Haven’t we been here before?’ and ‘Doesn’t this just repeat previous commitments which have not been acted upon?’ There is a real sense that this time, we **MUST** make it count!

The issue of underrepresentation of black and ethnic minority people in Assembly-appointed posts – commonly perceived as being positions of senior leadership and influence in our Church – is glaringly apparent. It has caused untold pain over many years for a significant part of our body. For many of our members, it casts a heavy shadow across our Church, and stands as a barrier to unhindered healthy relationships. It needs to be actively and courageously addressed. The measures proposed here represent a hugely important early step in living out our anti-racist commitment. It tells those who have been hurting for too long that their pain has been seen, and that we are serious about seeking to engender change.

This resolution proposes ‘affirmative action’. It requests the creation of a small group tasked with exploring practical measures to actively address the racial imbalance in Assembly-appointed posts. It requests attention, specifically addressing, but not limited to, recruitment policies and the development of a programme to equip participants, both ordained and lay, with the experience and skills needed for senior leadership roles – whether in the General Secretariat, Assembly appointments, or as Assembly committee convenors. What is being proposed will undoubtedly make some members feel uncomfortable, but that ‘discomfort’ needs to be held against the backdrop of pain with which others have been living for decades. This work is not just urgent, but overdue.

The United Reformed Church is not alone in its wrestling with these issues. We are part of various ecumenical bodies and we are engaging with partners from different Church traditions – all of whom sense that we are in a Kairos moment regarding racial injustice. We are working towards practical responses – to be made together and in our separate denominations – to effect the changes to which we believe the Church is called.

Whilst the URC’s work towards becoming an anti-racist Church was delegated to the Mission Committee, it seemed appropriate for consideration of the specific issues highlighted in this paper to be undertaken by the equalities committee. In practice, this work will undoubtedly involve consultation and collaboration across the breadth of our Church. This seems quite fitting, given the following assertion in the preamble of the

anti-racist Church resolution: this commitment is neither an initiative nor a project, but a pledge for our future existence as one body with many parts – valuing the presence and gifts of all our [members] equally, and affirming each individual as being equally made in the image of God.