

Assistant Clerk

Review of role – January 2024

1. This paper was prepared by the current post-holder, in consultation with the Clerk of the General Assembly.
2. The Assistant Clerk role was created by Mission Council, acting on behalf of the General Assembly in 2019, arising from the work of the General Assembly task group. The detailed report of the task group can be found in Paper N1 from the May 2019 meeting of Mission Council, with the relevant section concerning the future of the role of Clerk of General Assembly in paragraph 4. Paragraph 4.2 in particular describes the potentially (very) heavy workload of the Clerk, mindful that this ministry in the life of the denomination is a voluntary one. It highlights that this is among the most demanding of the voluntary ministries of the Church, and that the pattern of work from which the creation of the Assistant Clerk role arose was not sustainable. Paper N1 explored a variety of solutions settling on the creation of an Assistant Clerk post.
3. Paper N1 envisaged the possibility of creating a pool of people who would have sufficient experience of the role having served as Assistant Clerk 'for a year or two at a time'. While a commendable sentiment, this was never going to happen for at least two reasons: first, that this simply isn't how nominations in the United Reformed Church generally work, and second, because, as with the role of Clerk, there are not enough individuals with the gifts and graces to serve in either role in the denomination to create such a resource.
4. Ultimately, the decision was made to create the Assistant Clerk post to serve, in the first instance, for a three-year term from 1 January 2020. The original Role Description and Person Specification is appended to this paper. This initial appointment was extended twice, initially until General Assembly 2023 to encompass the search and appointment process for a successor to the current Clerk, and secondly until General Assembly 2024 to enable the current post-holder to continue to serve as Assistant Clerk until induction as Clerk, and so a review of the Assistant Clerk role could take place.
5. It would be fair to say that while the General Secretary is understood to serve officially as Deputy Clerk (although understandings are hazy about where this is stated!), in practice, the Assistant Clerk functions more in this way than as outlined in the original paperwork. This is particularly so in respect of the committee load where the Assistant Clerk is a full member of the Business Committee, the Complaints and Discipline Advisory Group, and the Law and Polity Advisory Group. It has been found that there is benefit to these groups, and to the general running of business, that this has been the case. The only 'committee' where attendance is on an *ad hoc* basis is the United Reformed Church Trust; this has been, in part, a result of capacity issues, and also because the constitution of URCT does not currently permit a different arrangement. While the relationship between the Clerk and Assistant Clerk since January 2020 has certainly not been one of a role share, it certainly has been

one of a strong colleague partnership between post-holders, each bringing distinctive, helpful and positive contributions to the totality of the task of the clerkship of the General Assembly and its committees. Thanks must be offered to the Revd Dr Michael Hopkins for his patience and willingness to share a substantial portion of his ministry as Clerk, and to support an at-times nervous apprentice.

6. It is recommended that the position of Assistant Clerk continue with a revised role description. Suggested changes to the detail are indicated in the document attached. Essentially, looking to the next season of this aspect of the support of the General Assembly in particular and the United Reformed Church in general, the following other changes are suggested:
 1. the term of office follow the same pattern as other nominations to voluntary roles in the URC made by the General Assembly or on its behalf
 2. the matter of who serves as Minutes Secretary for General Assembly and Assembly Executive has been resolved for the time being, hence the commentary about this is moot; ultimately, the Clerk and, by extension, the Assistant Clerk, are responsible for ensuring that minutes are recorded; how this is done and by whom is a detail that does not need to be included in the Assistant Clerk's role description
 3. to work with the Clerk progressing appeals and constitutional reviews up to and including the opportunity to serve as clerk at hearings of such should the Clerk not be available to do so on the Clerk's invitation to so serve
 4. to cover for the Clerk during holidays, sabbatical, sickness or other periods of absence.

Role Description

Role title	Assistant Clerk of General Assembly
Area / department	General Secretariat / General Assembly
Reporting to	The Clerk
Direct reports	Various volunteers at General Assembly and Assembly report to the Clerk and Assistant Clerk.
Location	The Assistant Clerk normally works from home.
Travel	Some travel in UK.
Working hours	Not fixed. These vary considerably over the year. Some periods can be very quiet, while others, eg in the days before meetings of the General Assembly or Assembly Executive, overseeing and preparing for an appeal, or attending and completing work for or from a committee, can be considerably busier.
Salary band	Voluntary role. Expenses for travel, subsistence, overnight accommodation if necessary incurred carrying out the business of this role shall be reimbursed in full by the central denomination.
Role summary: To assist the Clerk in being an efficient and impartial source of constitutional advice to the General Assembly, in particular to its Moderators; also, so far as reasonably possible, to others in the URC.	

Background:

Decisions about policy and the central work of the URC are made at an annual meeting called General Assembly. There are about 250 representatives, including lay persons, elders, and ministers. Committees are appointed to carry out the decisions of General Assembly.

Principal responsibilities and duties

Main duties

1. Attend all sessions of Assembly Executive and General Assembly as a member of those bodies.

2. To assist with the provision of advice on the preparation and presentation of business to General Assembly and Assembly Executive, and on procedures for dealing with this.
3. To assist in the production and authorization of the minutes of General Assembly and Assembly Executive.
4. ~~Work with the Law and Polity Advisory Group on issues of constitutional change as required.~~ Attend as a full member the Business Committee, the Complaints and Discipline Advisory Group, and the Law and Polity Advisory Group, with the particular remit to support the Clerk in the giving of constitutional and procedural advice where necessary. Be in attendance at URC Trust meetings as appropriate.
5. To assist in the drafting of constitutional documents as required.
6. Offer advice as required to staff and committees of the General Assembly when requested by the Clerk.
7. Offer independent advice on the constitution and procedures of the Church to all members when requested by the Clerk.
8. Act as secretary in certain appeals procedures on behalf of the Clerk, or assisting the Clerk, if required.

Working with committees and volunteers

This section lists the type and level of interaction that this role has with committees and other groups. It will vary from time to time, and as directed by the Assembly.

The Clerk is a member of the following:

1. The Law and Polity Advisory Group
2. CDAG, the Complaints and Discipline Advisory Group
3. The Business Committee
4. The United Reformed Church Trust
5. Task groups requiring the Clerk's help when business involves constitutional change
6. Other committees may call on the Clerk's advice and help from time to time.

The Assistant Clerk will be expected to be a member of the Law and Polity Advisory Group, ~~to attend other meetings once with the Clerk for familiarisation, and to attend some meetings in place of the Clerk.~~ the Complaints and Discipline Advisory Group, and the Business Committee. It may be possible for some of the committee work to be divided between the Clerk and Assistant Clerk; however, the benefits of membership of all should be retained. Attendance at the Business Committee and LPAAG should be considered a priority. There may be opportunities for the Assistant Clerk to serve alongside, or in place of, the Clerk on other task groups and, according to experience and interest and with the support of the Clerk, take on other pieces of work related to constitutional, legal and procedural matters.

The Assistant Clerk will be expected to clerk certain items of business at General Assembly and ~~Mission Council~~ Assembly Executive. ~~There is currently a Minutes Secretary, however if the Minutes Secretary were unavailable then the Assistant~~

~~Clerk would be expected to take the minutes. If the Minutes Secretary were to stand down in future, the Assistant Clerk may be expected to take the minutes routinely. The General Secretary is the permanent Deputy Clerk, and can cover the role in the unexpected absence of the Clerk and / or Assistant Clerk. This, however, should be understood as an option of last resort because of the risk of conflict between the priorities and responsibilities of the General Secretariat and the need for the councils of the United Reformed Church to access the constitutional and procedural advice they need to do their work. The role of Assistant Clerk is two-fold: to share the volunteer workload, and to provide a pool of people who have experienced the role.~~

Updated June 2019

Expected Standards

This section refers to the way in which the role is done, rather than the duties / responsibilities.

1. Promote a culture of open and effective communication to enable constructive relationships with colleagues and internal and external colleagues.
2. Actively foster an environment which nurtures equality and cherishes diversity.
3. Act in ways that protect their own and others' health, safety and security.
4. Work collaboratively to develop a service culture which fosters continuous improvement.
5. Take responsibility for their own personal development, and develop skills and knowledge to enable effective work performance.
6. Promote, monitor and maintain best practice in data protection principles and practice.
7. Specific role related standard: be attentive to boundaries – of process, office, time-limits and confidentiality – and foster an environment that respects these.

This role description reflects the overall scope and responsibilities of the role. However, it is not an exhaustive list, and the role-holder is expected to undertake any other reasonable duties that might be requested. All roles change or evolve over time in order to meet organisational or departmental needs, and this role description will therefore be subject to periodic review and change if required.

Person Specification

Role title: Assistant Clerk of General Assembly

Requirements	Essential	Desirable	Measurement
Education and qualifications	1. Member of the United Reformed Church		
Experience and knowledge	2. Thorough knowledge of the United Reformed Church, its structures and councils	Working with legal documents	
Skills and abilities	3. MS Office suite, specifically Outlook, Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Access (Intermediate level) 4. Excellent communication and interpersonal skills 5. Collaborative working 6. Accuracy and attention to detail 7. Confidentiality		
Other	8. Willing to travel within the UK 9. Flexible in attending meetings, events (eg weekends, residential) 10. Willing to work within the Christian ethos of the United Reformed Church.		