

# Paper A5

## The future of the General Assembly and the Assembly Executive

### Business Committee

#### Basic information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	John Bradbury, The General Secretary <a href="mailto:john.bradbury@urc.org.uk">john.bradbury@urc.org.uk</a>
<b>Action required</b>	Discussion and decision.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Resolution 12</b> <b>1. Assembly Executive agrees that General Assembly 2025 should be invited to consider the size and pattern of meetings of the General Assembly.</b> <b>Resolution 13</b> <b>2. Assembly Executive invites the Business Committee to bring more detailed proposals to the General Assembly for consideration based on the following options: ... [to be developed from the context of our conversations within Assembly Executive].</b>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	A Consultation Paper on the future of the General Assembly and the Assembly Executive.
<b>Main points</b>	
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	This is to initiate a consultation process, rather than being the product of one.

#### Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	
<b>External (eg ecumenical)</b>	None.

## Background

*It may help to read this paper in conjunction with Paper A4 on the future of governance, and to some extent the issues are related.*

In 2018 what had been Mission Council became the Assembly Executive, essentially filling a very similar function, but becoming a sub-set of the General Assembly and making its ability to act directly on behalf of the General Assembly clearer. Assembly moved from being once every two years to once every year, and the Assembly Executive meets once in person in between meetings of the Assembly, and once online in November to adopt the budget.

At the same time as we are needing to consider these questions of Governance and how we exercise charitable trusteeship (please see paper A4), the Business Committee believe it is also the right time to consider our structures in terms of the size and frequency of meeting of the General Assembly and the Assembly Executive. This is for a number of reasons:

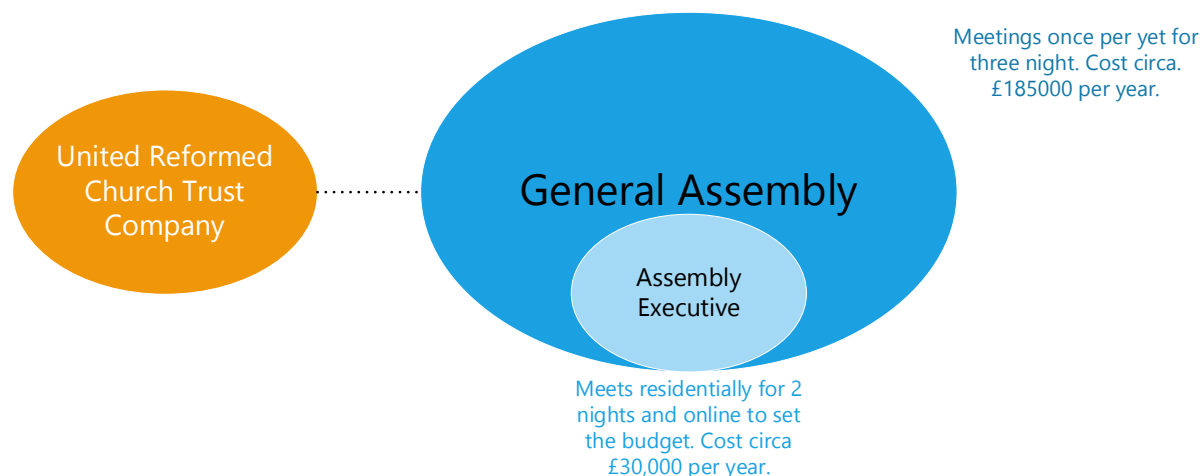
1. This was last considered by the General Assembly in 2018, and changes came into effect in 2020. We have now lived with those changes for some time.
2. The United Reformed Church continues to decline numerically. There is a danger that the General Assembly becomes disproportionately large for the size of church we actually are.
3. There is serious pressure on the budget of the General Assembly. Hospitality inflation has been running at very high levels in recent years, and the costs of Assembly and Assembly Executive have risen considerably. We expect to spend around £185,000 on General Assembly each year, and £30,000 on Assembly Executive. We expect these costs to continue to rise at a moment we need to make roughly 25% savings on the budget over a five-seven year period. The more we spend on meetings of the General Assembly, the less there is to spend on the work of the General Assembly (and to be realistic, the fewer potential redundancies we may be forced to make).
4. We have failed in our ambition to enable Assembly to work more creatively, particularly through meeting around tables. This is because our size precludes most venues that we could afford that would allow this.
5. It is noticed that General Assembly works best when its thinking about big picture questions of discernment. It provides a less effective space for the detailed scrutiny of policy and procedure.
6. We note that a number of Synods rarely fill all the spaces for members of the Assembly that are allocated to them.
7. It is very difficult in our current arrangements to handle conflicts of interest within the General Assembly itself. We were able to adopt a policy for the working of its committees, but not the Assembly itself. This needs resolution in some way.
8. We increasingly find the Hayes a difficult venue to work with in terms of administration prior to meetings.

9. The anticipated reduction in staff time necessary to service the General Assembly by moving to a single venue has been less than anticipated. A significant part of a full-time role was lost in anticipation of this, with the administration of the Assembly moving to the PA of the General Secretary. Such a significant proportion of the administration relates not so much to the venue, as to the members of the Assembly, that this has proved unrealistic. Additional administrative support has been necessary, whilst still leaving the General Secretary's PA role stretched. The true costs of Assembly, including staff time, are therefore considerably higher than reflected in the figures above.
10. There is a tension between the General Assembly discerning the overall strategic direction of the Assembly and its life, and the Assembly Executive adopting the budget (which is, in reality, the budget of the URC Trust as things stand). The discernment of vision, and the determination of the resources available to undertake our work are currently somewhat separated from one another.

It is also important that we do not lose sight of the reasons for the current arrangements and why we moved away from General Assembly every two years. That was because there was a tendency, whatever the technical position, to view Mission Council decisions to be of lesser authority to those of the General Assembly, even when it was acting entirely within its delegated authority. Whatever arrangement is found, needs to ensure that the authority of the decisions taken in the name of the General Assembly are always clear and unambiguous.

## Options for the future of the General Assembly

This diagram roughly represents the current arrangements of the General Assembly.



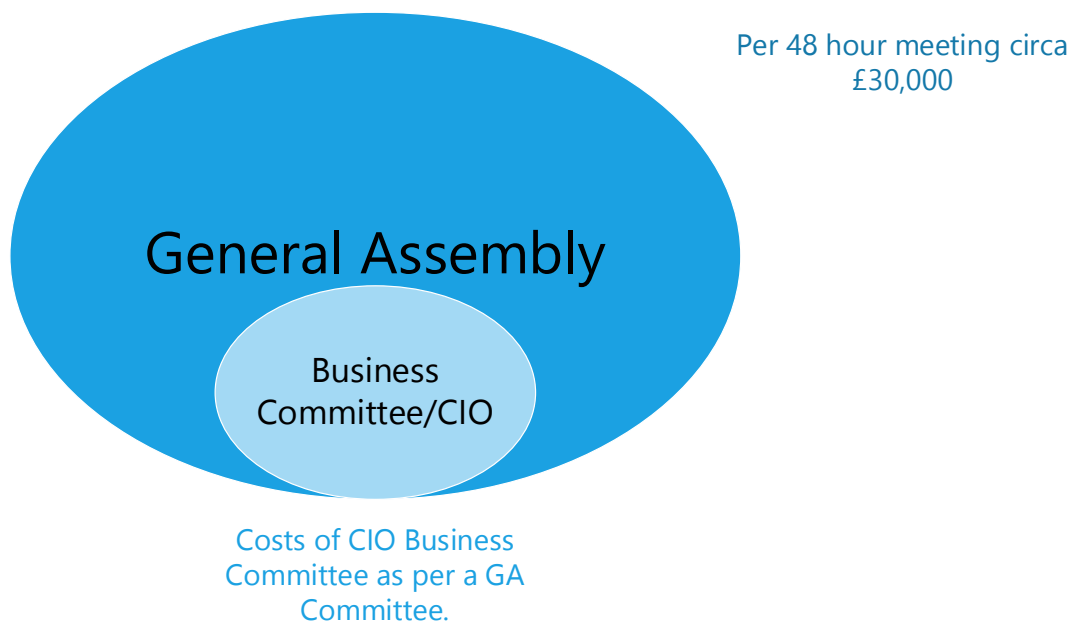
The relevant merits of this option are known, and the issues explored above. This diagram is primarily for comparison with those that follow.

## Option A

It would be possible for us to determine that a much smaller body serving as General Assembly might provide better scrutiny of detailed matters and be considerably more cost effective. It would allow for much closer integration of the Trustee responsibilities of a potential new CIO with the General Assembly and give a consistent place the authority

of the Assembly was always enacted from (rather than the slightly equivocal sense of the Assembly Executive).

This might be represented in this way:



Within option A there might be variations. Presuming that the size of the General Assembly was that roughly of the current Assembly Executive the pattern of meeting could be various:

1. One three-night meeting per year (estimated cost £45,000).
2. Two 48-hour meetings per year (estimated cost £60,000)
3. One 48-hour meeting per year (estimated cost £30,000) plus an online meeting(s).

Within the rough current size of the General Assembly, it would be possible to reconfigure the membership somewhat. For example, the proposed reduction of committees of the General Assembly would reduce the number of Committee Convenors. There is also a desire from the COO and Deputy General Secretaries to be in attendance, rather than full voting members (because of issues around perceived conflicts of interest). This might enable us to increase the number of under 26 representatives, and/or allow for representatives to be appointed in addition to Synod representatives to ensure diversity of representation. It would also envisage a significant reduction of international and ecumenical representatives to the General Assembly (and international representation has become more complex in the light of our net zero carbon ambitions).

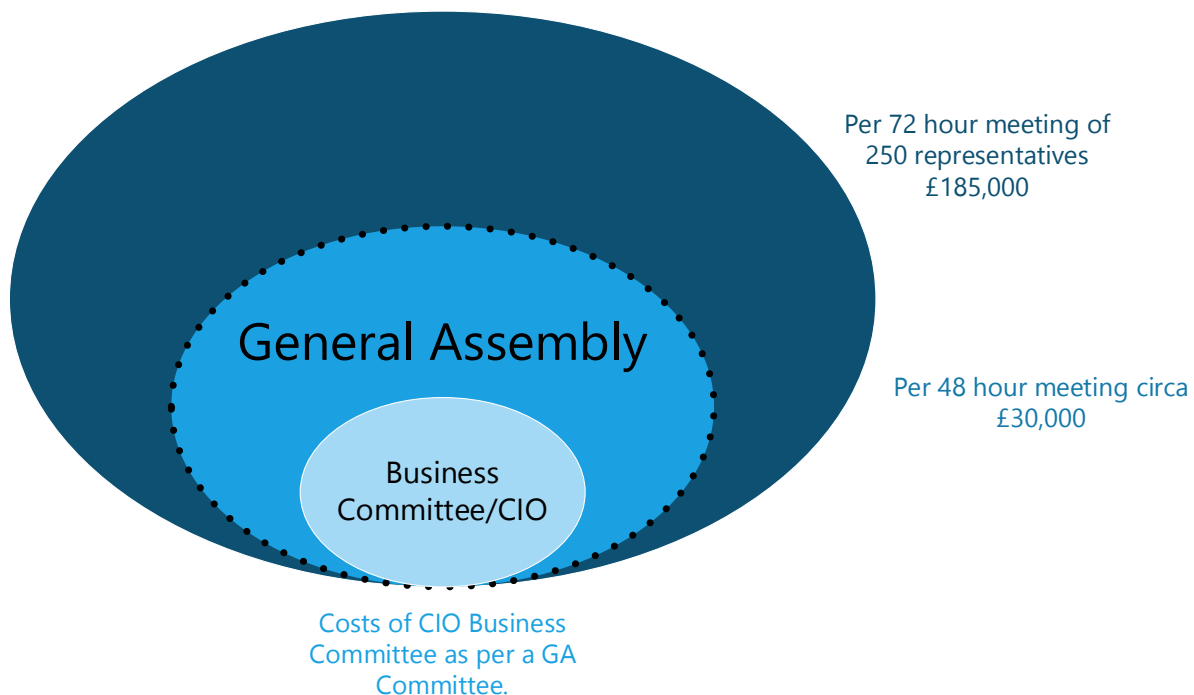
## Option B

It would be possible instead of reducing the size of the gathering that we think of as General Assembly, for it to meet considerably less frequently. This might have certain advantages. Whilst the precise frequency can be debated, if we determined, for the sake of an example, that it met every five years its function could become much more expressly the discernment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the strategic direction and priorities of the Church for a five-year period. The revision of our committee

structures is in part premised on the reality that the only area where we have real and ongoing ability to determine the priorities of the work of the General Assembly itself (rather than the resource mechanics of running a large charitable organisation, or the provision of ministry for its exercise within local churches and Synods) is in what is envisaged as being the Mission and Discipleship department (please see paper A2). Whilst the Church is called to be the fullness of the body of Christ at all times, it cannot make everything a priority at all times. This would allow us to determine what our key priorities were for a five-year period, thus giving a clear strategic lead for the work to be done within that period.

We might express this as once every five years having an enlarged, extraordinary General Assembly. In the intervening years, the Assembly being roughly the size of the current Assembly Executive (in essence as above). It would be important, for the sake of good governance, that they were the same constitutional entity with the same powers, but once every five years was enlarged, and its agenda primarily concerned with big-picture discernment about the future direction and strategic priorities of the United Reformed Church.

This might be represented in the following way:



This would obviously incur significant extra cost every five years for a much larger gathering but would allow a moment of a larger scale gathering to celebrate our common life together as a church and discern together our key priorities for the coming period of time. It would also give a much clearer structure within which to enable the determination of priorities which would drive the life of the Assembly and allow the ongoing meetings of the Assembly and the CIO Trustees to ensure that resources are being used in the delivery of the determined priorities.

These options are not meant to be exhaustive but are meant to stimulate discussion and conversation within the meeting of the Assembly Executive. The resolutions attached to this report are meant to authorise and steer further work, not effect and adopt change immediately. It is important to note that any changes would be to the *Structure* and therefore require to be considered by Synods before they could take effect. Even if we

took a decision as quickly as General Assembly July 2025, it would not be possible to fully adopt the resolution until July 2026 and so no change would be possible until July 2027.