

General Assembly and Assembly Executive

# Frequently Asked Questions

by Michael Hopkins



*The*  
**United  
Reformed  
Church**

# A brief guide to Frequently Asked Questions

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## What is the General Assembly?

The General Assembly is a meeting normally held every year and lasting for four days in which ministers and other members (usually elders) of The United Reformed Church, together with a few ecumenical representatives, deliberate upon and make decisions concerning the whole work of the Church at home and abroad. The Basis of Union states that it 'shall embody the unity of The United Reformed Church and act as the central organ of its life and the final authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, in all matters of doctrine and order and in all other concerns of its common life.'

## Who attends the Assembly?

The Assembly has several categories of members. There are 208 members elected from the Synods. Each Synod sends sixteen representatives, being a mixture of ministers or Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs) and other members (usually elders) including two places which can only be filled by URC Youth aged representatives (aged 11-25). The convenors of the Assembly committees, two representatives from each resource centre for learning, one serving Chaplain to the Armed Forces, one representative of the Council for World Mission, the Moderator of Assembly, the Clerk, the General Secretary, the Deputy General Secretaries, the honorary Treasurer, the chair of the URC Trust, three representatives from URC Youth, a number of ecumenical representatives, the immediate past Moderators of the General Assembly, and four other former Moderators, are all also members of Assembly. There are also present, but not as members, are Church House and technical staff, and a small number of invited guests.

## Who are the people on the platform?

At times there will be different people on the platform, but generally the platform party will consist of the Moderator (some sessions will be chaired by a former Moderator), the Clerk (or the Assistant Clerk), the

General Secretary, and the convenor of the Business committee. The Moderator's chaplain and the minute taker are also in close proximity. When a report is being presented, or a resolution is being moved, those responsible for the report or the resolution will also be on the platform.

## The Moderator

We elect either a minister or an elder to serve as Moderator. During the Assembly, the Moderator will chair many sessions, although one of the former Moderators who is present as a member of the Assembly may be called to take the chair. The Moderator makes all the decisions about the conduct of business under the Standing Orders, chooses who will speak in debates, judges when it is appropriate to move from one part of the debate to the next, announces decisions, the results of votes, and when necessary, issues rulings on questions that may be posed. The decisions of the Moderator are final, and binding and it is forbidden to argue with the Moderator once this decision has been announced.

Each Assembly elects the Moderator for the next. A voting paper containing the names and churches of membership of those nominated by the Synods are given to members of Assembly and, usually on the second day, an election is held by secret ballot using a single transferable vote system. The name of the Moderator elect is then reported to the Assembly and, if present in the Assembly, they are welcomed.

## Other officers

- **The Clerk:** The Clerk is a permanent officer of the Assembly, elected by the Assembly and serving for several years. The Clerk is responsible for all questions of practice and procedure, for advising the Moderator on business, and for producing the minutes and the Record of Assembly. The Clerk advises on matters to do with the Standing Orders, and on the correct wording of resolutions. During the Assembly all matters of business are the Clerk's responsibility, and those with business which they wish to bring before the Assembly are strongly advised to discuss it with the Clerk first. The Clerk will advise on the wording of resolutions but will remain strictly neutral with regard to the content of business. From time to time bodies and groups which do not have the ability to bring business to the Assembly because they are not members, need to be heard. When this happens the Clerk formally acts on their behalf, but otherwise the Clerk only moves resolutions relating to the conduct

of business. There is an Assistant Clerk who works as directed by the Clerk.

- **The Convenor of the Business Committee:** Every day before the Assembly sits, the Business Committee meets to consider that day's business. It adjusts the agenda and attempts to allocate an appropriate amount of time for each debate. The work of this committee is the responsibility of the convenor, and while the Assembly is sitting the Convenor of the Business Committee is responsible for the timing of debates and speeches.
- **The Moderator's chaplain:** The Moderator appoints a Moderator's chaplain, and their role is to pray for the Moderator (including private prayer before each session) and lead such worship as the Moderator delegates to them.
- **The General Secretary:** Unlike those whose role is highly visible, the General Secretary does not appear to have a great deal to do during the Assembly. Most of the General Secretary's work is done before and after the Assembly, or behind the scenes. However, the General Secretary makes the first and last speeches in the Assembly, formally reporting that the Assembly has met and that it has completed its business. The General Secretary reports on any ministerial disciplinary cases that have been concluded, and formally moves the referral to Synods of any constitutional business. The General Secretary answers any questions relating to the general work of the Church not covered by a standing committee. In some years, the General Secretary will deliver a major speech, either as a report on a specific piece of work, or as an introduction to a new idea which is being thought about.

## How are decisions made?

The business of the Assembly is governed by the Standing Orders printed in the *Book of Reports* and published on the URC website.

## Where are speeches made and for how long?

Official and formal speeches are made from a lectern on the platform; all other speeches are made from the floor, where a number of microphones are available. For most of the time the rule is that speeches addressed to the whole Assembly may last no longer than five

minutes, although the Moderator may rule at any time that speeches be restricted to a specified number of minutes.

## Are there any rules about speaking?

All speeches are addressed to the Moderator, not to the Assembly, so speakers begin their speech 'Moderator', not 'Moderator, members of Assembly'. Some parts of the Assembly may be streamed on the internet, but members should restrict their speech to those physically present, and not address anyone beyond the hall. Speakers should immediately give their name and status. For most people that would mean something like, 'John Calvin, Geneva Synod', but could be 'John Wesley, ecumenical representative' or 'John Bradbury, General Secretary'. If speakers fail to give their name, they are likely to be interrupted either by cries of 'Name!' from other members of the Assembly, or by the Moderator asking them to state their name.

On the platform there is a set of lights: green, amber and red. When a speech begins the green light shows. After two minutes this will change to amber, and one minute later the light will change to red. The amber light indicates the speech should be drawing to a close. The red light means stop talking! However good a speaker's point is, speaking over the red light tends to lose the sympathy of the Assembly.

Assembly business can move very fast, so people who know that they want to contribute to a discussion should come and queue near to a microphone. When a long report is under discussion the Moderator will often invite comments on the report paragraph by paragraph and will move very quickly through those paragraphs where nobody has indicated a desire to speak.

## Is it all just reports and resolutions?

Most of the Assembly's time is taken up with decisions on the business of the Church, but every day begins with worship and Bible study. The report of the Moderators of Synods, the induction of the Moderators of Assembly, and the welcoming of newly appointed Church



House staff are important points in the Assembly, as is the Assembly Communion Service. During this service, the Assembly commemorates by name all ministers and missionaries who have died since the last meeting of the Assembly. If a former Moderator or Clerk who was not a Minister has died, their name will also be recorded. Other formal acts may take place, eg distinguished visitors will be welcomed and may be invited to address the Assembly.

## Can members of Assembly be told how to vote?

No. Those who represent Synods or committees may well know the views of their Synod or committee, but those bodies may not issue an instruction. Members of Assembly are expected to listen to the debate, to consider carefully all the points made, to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to vote as their conscience directs. Nobody has the right to tell Assembly members how to cast their vote although they may seek to persuade them!

## What are all the various bits of paper?

Before the Assembly, members receive a mailing containing instructions and documents, including the *Book of Reports*, information about those nominated to serve as Moderator, ballot slips, voting cards etc.

During the Assembly there will be extra papers given out each day.

The minutes of the previous day's business will be made available electronically. An Order Paper, which will contain any extra business, resolutions, or amendments, may be published as needed.

An information sheet of other notices may also be published. **It is forbidden to distribute any other documents without the consent of the General Secretary and the Business Committee Convener, and this consent is very rarely given.** There is a longstanding practice whereby URC Youth and other younger members of the Assembly produce a daily satirical newsletter with comments and jokes about the business. Please remember to check the website each evening and morning.

## Do members have to stay in for all business?

No. Assembly days are long, sometimes from 9am to 9.30pm, and although there will be breaks, members may choose to leave for a rest at any time.

It is regarded as rude to leave the hall before the conclusion of a debate in which one has spoken, but other than that members may come and go as they



please. The one exception to this is that on very rare occasions the assembly will meet in 'closed session'. When this happens non-members may not enter and any member leaving the Hall after the business has begun will not be readmitted.

## Can I take a photograph?

No, only the official photographers are allowed to take photographs during the Assembly.

## Where can I go for help?

At the reception desk on the first day, and then in the Assembly Office.

## What happens once the Assembly is over?

When the Assembly finishes, the work begins. Committees and working parties which have been given instructions start to work on those.

Newly appointed convenors and secretaries begin their work.

The officers of the Assembly prepare the final version of the minutes, known as the *Record of Assembly*, and this is distributed to every Assembly member, and is made widely available on the URC website.

The Moderator begins a series of visits to local United Reformed churches and Synods and to partner Churches at home and abroad.

The diary for invitations to the newly elected Moderator is opened.

Instructions will be given as to whom to write to.

Members of the Assembly are expected to report back to their Synods and local churches with the news from the Assembly. Highlights will be on the URC website. Some Synods will give guidance on this but generally, the Assembly round-up produced by the communications team, together with the daily minutes and the URC Youth newsletter are a good starting point for this exercise.

Please note: appointment to the Roll covers any General Assemblies and (for a sub set of people) Assembly Executive meetings within a URC year.

