

Paper A4

The future of General Assembly and Assembly Executive

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd John Bradbury john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	<p>If during a period of consensus process working on the issues, Assembly is minded to adopt one of the models proposed, then the following resolution would be put:</p> <p>Resolution 7 General Assembly instructs the Business Committee to bring back proposed amendments to the Structure of the United Reformed Church which would enable the Assembly Executive to adopt changes to the General Assembly and Assembly Executive as proposed in model X.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To facilitate more effective discernment of the vocation, vision and strategy of the United Reformed Church through a more effective General Assembly, ensuring effective governance and compliance with the appropriate legislative frameworks.
Main points	
Previous relevant documents	Assembly Executive February 2025 Papers A4 and A5.
Consultation has taken place with...	The Assembly Executive in February 2025.

Summary of impact

Financial	A significant reduction in the expenditure on the General Assembly.
External (eg ecumenical)	Would see a reduction in the numbers of ecumenical and international members of Assembly and Assembly Executive, in line with a total reduction in the size of the Assembly.

Background

Assembly Executive in February 2025 had a fairly open and wide-ranging discussion about the future size and shape of the General Assembly. It passed a resolution asking that proposals be brought to General Assembly July 2025 to consider the size and pattern of the Assembly. It also considered a separate paper about governance, and moving towards the funds of the General Assembly being registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation. This would take on the functions of the existing Trust company but become more closely aligned in membership with the Assembly itself. It asked for further work on this. This paper primarily concerns the work on the size of the General Assembly, but does so in a way that would enable, rather than make more difficult, the move towards the Trustees of a CIO responsible for the funds and charitable activity of the United Reformed Church being formed largely from a small sub-set of the General Assembly.

To stimulate discussion and discernment, two broad approaches were put to the Assembly Executive. Firstly, to reduce the size of the Assembly to roughly that of the Assembly Executive (the basic building blocks of which are four representatives per Synod). This would then have had an executive formed of something akin to the Business Committee which could in time become the trustees of a CIO. The second option was to significantly reduce the frequency of the General Assembly (to every five years), Assembly becoming the place we discerned the priorities and strategy of the Church for a five year period, a smaller meeting of the Assembly (more like the Assembly Executive) then meeting once or twice a year.

These options were discussed in groups, and each group was invited to feed back. Whilst no overall consensus emerged as to a favoured option, there were certain key themes which were clear.

- There was widespread acknowledgement that we cannot maintain the current size and expenditure of the Assembly and its Executive, although no clear picture emerged of a favoured size.
- There was a desire to see a focus on more effective meeting formats, which would necessitate a smaller sized so that Assembly could always meet around tables.
- There was a desire for the Assembly to primarily concern itself with the discernment of the 'big picture' of the life of the United Reformed Church and not be as concerned with the details of governance and policies.
- There was almost universal agreement that Assembly meeting every five years would be unhelpful, although some recognition that larger gatherings of the wider community of the United Reformed Church were appreciated and could be good spaces for creative thinking. We have not pursued this option given the feedback – though it does perhaps cause us to think what other 'large event' options might be welcomed throughout the church.
- There was a very keen desire to keep strong youth representation in any new arrangement.
- There was concern that a significant reduction in the number of Synod representatives (the paper had suggested the possibility of moving to the Assembly becoming the size of the current Assembly Executive, meaning there would be four per Synod) might potentially widen the perceived 'gap' between the Synods and the Assembly.
- There was strong agreement for the need for good governance, and a warmth to exploring a CIO trustee model which was much more closely related to the General Assembly than the current Trust arrangements.

- There was concern that in having formalised the ability of the Business Committee to act on behalf of the Assembly in an emergency (a role originally fulfilled by the Officers, but only in custom and practice, not formal delegation) we were in danger of being perceived to have created an executive of the executive, and that this would be better avoided.

Out of the discussion at Assembly Executive one concrete suggestion was made which the Business Committee found helpful: that a significantly reduced Assembly meeting twice a year for 48 hours each time (rather than once per year for 72 hours). This would then also replace the current Assembly Executive. This has become Option B in this paper.

What this paper does is present two options for consideration and works through in detail what the membership might look like. If Assembly is minded to adopt one of these models (potentially amended in the course of discussion), Assembly would then be invited to instruct that detailed proposals for the necessary constitutional amendments be prepared, and brought back to a meeting of the Assembly Executive for adoption.

The current make-up of the General Assembly and the Assembly Executive

It is helpful to remind ourselves of the current makeup of the General Assembly and Assembly Executive. What is indicated below is the makeup before recent, and proposed, changes to the committee structure as that makes for a more helpful comparison.

Synod Representatives	208
(16 from each Synod, two being Youth Representatives)	
Officers of the General Assembly	5
Standing Committee Convenors	10
RCL staff and students	6
Trust Company Convenor	1
International Representatives	5
Military Chaplains	1
Immediate Past Moderators	1
College of Past Moderators	4
URC Youth	3
Ecumenical Representatives	5
Council for World Mission	1
GA staff	3
(currently the Deputy General Secretaries and the COO)	
Total	253

This represents a total spend on the General Assembly of around £130,000 pa – for a 72 hour Assembly where we have sole use of the Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick. This is rising fast, as hospitality inflation remains high.

The Current Assembly Executive is made up as follows:

Synod Representatives	52
(Four per Synod, including Synod Moderators)	
Officers of the GA	5
Committee Convenors	10
Trust Convenor	1
URC Youth	3

Ecumenical	2
Moderator Elect	1
GA staff	3
Total	76

The current cost of an Assembly Executive meeting for 48 hours is roughly £25,000 – again, rising fast because of hospitality inflation.

General principles

It is important to hold before ourselves that the primary task of the General Assembly is discernment. We wait upon God, as we worship, engage with scripture, and are encountered by the Holy Spirit. We are discerning how we believe the General Assembly most faithfully fulfils the functions it has, as set down in the *Structure* of the United Reformed Church. Whilst the Assembly is also a moment of connectedness of the communities which make up the United Reformed Church, its task is primarily a theological one, not a social one.

Taking this overall principle in mind, some key principles emerge from the consultation at Assembly Executive, in no particular order:

- Broad representation from across the United Reformed Church.
- Representation which reflects our diversity, and our commitment to diversity.
- Discernment in which the voice of young people is clearly heard.
- To be joined in discernment and decision making by international and ecumenical members of Assembly.
- A need to be financially prudent in a moment when it is necessary to ‘right-size’ what we spend on central operations, over and against what we spend supporting local ministry.
- The ability to engage with one another constructively and well, which requires the ability to meet with space to engage in groups as well as in plenary – around tables is ideal for good consultative working.
- To prioritise the high-level discernment of the vocation of the life of the United Reformed Church at any one time, over the nitty-gritty of operationalising our priorities in policies and budgets.

We believe that the two options we place before the Assembly for consideration respond to these broad principles, the balance of which of the principles is more dominant shifts somewhat in each case, but we believe both embody something of all of them. A further general principle is that each option shows where a CIO Trustee body might sit in relationship to the Councils of the Church. This is not something we are being asked to determine in detail at the moment, but something we must keep in mind given the continued exploration of forming a CIO to hold the funds of the Assembly and be responsible for its charitable activities.

Option A – A somewhat reduced size of Assembly with a significantly smaller Executive body.

This option would propose an Assembly which would meet once a year, for 72 hours. Its composition would be:

Synod Representatives (Eight from each Synod, one being youth representatives)	104
Officers of the General Assembly	5
Standing Committee Convenors	6

RCL staff and students	2
Trust Company Convenor	1
International and Ecumenical Representatives	4
Chaplains	1
Moderator Elect	1
College of Past Moderators	2
URC Youth	2
Diversity Representatives	5
Total	133

Notes:

- It is anticipated that the College Connective would determine one staff member and one student to represent the RCLs as a whole.
- We have already been reducing the number of international members who need to use long-haul travel because of our net-zero commitments. This brings together the categories of international and ecumenical and allows for four members to be nominated by the Faith in Action Committee. It would allow for CWM representation to be within this, when appropriate.
- It is suggested that the Ministries Committee nominate one chaplain working in a secular context, rather than this always being a military chaplain, as at present. We have far fewer military chaplains than we have had and the voice of chaplaincy from various contexts would enrich our discernment together.
- It is anticipated that with the overall reduction in the size of Assembly, it is appropriate to reduce the representation of former Moderators of Assembly to two. It would be important to recognise, particularly regarding parallel sessions, the right of the Assembly to appoint someone who is not a current or former Moderator of the Assembly from among its membership, to Moderate a parallel session.
- It is anticipated that the current encouragement of the General Assembly to Synods to send one representative who is a member of an ethnically minoritised community to the Assembly, would continue. However, recognising that some Synods, given the demographic makeup of their congregations, struggle with this it introduces a category of diversity representation. This role would be nominated by the Faith and Action Committee each year to bring better diversity of overall representation, once Synods have nominated their representatives. It would be anticipated that such representatives then relate directly to the Synod they are in in terms of preparatory meetings and reporting back, so they are fully integrated into Synod representation.
- The anticipated cost of an Assembly this size would be around £55,000.

A much smaller Executive body would be appointed from the membership of the General Assembly. It is envisaged that this would meet once per year for an in-person 48-hour meeting and otherwise conduct its business via videoconferencing. It would replace the existing Business Committee. It is anticipated that its role would be to ensure good governance, and the adoption of appropriate policies which give effect to the strategic decisions, which would still be the responsibility of the Assembly. It would be able to take decisions on behalf of the Assembly when required, between meetings of the Assembly. It would assist the Assembly to discern well, set priorities and determine strategy – but those functions would remain core to the life of the Assembly.

The Executive would be for detailed, ‘nitty-gritty’ outworking of determining policies and procedures. In time, it could become the Trustee body of the CIO that had responsibility for the funds of the Assembly and its charitable activities.

The anticipated makeup of the Assembly Executive would be:

Synod Representatives	13
The Convenors of the three core Programme Committees	3
The Convenor of the Safeguarding Committee	1
Officers of the General Assembly	5
Deputy Treasurer	1
Assistant Clerk	1
Youth Representatives	2
Total	25

Notes:

- It is anticipated that a very careful process would be needed to determine the Synod representatives. For example, Synods could each be asked to nominate a number of ministers and elders. They might be asked to consider particular skills-sets in doing so. The Nominations Committee might then be asked to put together a slate of Synod representatives which included three or four Synod Moderators (who could be nominated by the Moderators meeting) and then an appropriately balanced slate of other Synod nominees from those nominated to ensure appropriate balance of Elder/Minister, gender and ethnic diversity. This would be to model how many international ecumenical organisations might appoint a council: nominations are sought, a Nominations Committee draws together a slate of names to be nominated that ensure appropriate balance and diversity, and the Assembly is then asked to appoint that slate. Such a process (or some variant therefore) would ensure each Synod had a representative, the Executive had the skills set necessary, and that the body was appropriately diverse.
- Other Committee Convenors might be invited to attend where it was helpful to their business.
- It is suggested the Convenor of the Safeguarding Committee is always in attendance in the same way that a trust body needs a trustee with designated responsibility for safeguarding matter (and partly thinking ahead if this entity were to become a trust body).
- The COO and Deputy General Secretaries would be in attendance, but not voting members.
- It is of note that this model would correspond roughly in size and function to the new Connexional Council that the Methodist Church has set up to serve as, in effect, the Executive of the Conference, with responsibility for governance matters and the ongoing work of the Conference throughout the year. It could be extremely helpful in future ecumenical working to have parallel bodies who could work jointly when helpful.
- We would need to give consideration as to whether Synods were asked to nominate people who could serve a term rather longer than a year – meaning those people would have to be GA representatives for the length of term they served. This would give some continuity to the work of the Executive.
- The anticipated cost of a 48 hour in-person meeting would be around £8,000.

Evaluating Option A

We believe that option A has some real strengths, and some potential weaknesses. The strength is in the very clear demarcation of the high-level discernment that the broader body of the General Assembly is asked to take, about the vocation, vision and strategy of the United Reformed Church and the work of the General Assembly. It would make clearer that General Assembly was to take that broad, strategic overview,

and the detailed outworking of the adopting of policies and processes would take place in the Executive.

It also has the strength that the General Assembly is a larger body in comparison to Option B.

A real strength is the size of the Assembly Executive, which is still representative of the church as a whole, but of a size that it can do real detailed scrutiny work of policies and procedures. It is also of a size to be able to horizon scan and determine most helpfully how to enable to General Assembly to fulfil its function of discernment at the highest level.

A possible weakness may emerge if decisions of the Executive are questioned and taken issue with, because they don't have the final authority of the General Assembly itself. This can be the case with the existing Executive, and in future there will need to be careful consideration given as to how the Trustees of the Assembly and the Assembly itself might resolve any potential dispute that could arise. We believe this to be manageable, and that the strengths of this model outweigh the weaknesses. The total cost of the option would be roughly £63,000. This is a saving of around £92,000 per year on the existing arrangements (which total around £155,000 a year).

Option B – A General Assembly that is slightly larger than the existing Assembly Executive, which would fulfil the functions of the current General Assembly and Assembly Executive.

This option would see a very significantly reduced General Assembly, which would meet twice a year in place of the existing Assembly and Assembly Executive. It would have an executive, which was an evolution of the current Business Committee, and would take on the responsibilities of the Business Committee.

The Assembly makeup would be:

Synod Representatives	78
(Six from each Synod, one being a Youth Representative)	
Officers of the General Assembly	5
Standing Committee Convenors	6
Trust Company Convenor	1
International and Ecumenical Representatives	3
Moderator Elect	1
College of Past Moderators	1
URC Youth	2
Diversity Representatives	3
Total	99

Notes:

- Please read this makeup in part in the light of the notes above, which are not repeated for the sake of brevity.
- There is no direct representation of the RCLs – it would be understood that they relate to the work of the Ministries Committee and through its convenor their concerns would have representation.
- There is no direct representation of military (or any other) chaplains. All ministers are members of Synods and can be nominated to attend on behalf of their Synod.
- The cost of two 48-hour meetings of the General Assembly per year would cost approximately £60,000

A much smaller Executive body would be formed from an evolved version of the current Business Committee and would have a very similar role and remit to the current Business Committee. Its makeup would be:

The Convenors of the three core Programme Committees	3
Officers of the General Assembly	5
Assistant Clerk	1
Diversity Representatives	2
Total	11

Notes:

- Currently, the members of the General Secretariat are full members of the Business Committee. Their presence is vital for its good functioning. However, they will no longer be full members of the General Assembly and should not be full members of its executive body. The General Secretary would remain a full member as an Officer of the General Assembly, but the COO and Deputy General Secretaries would be in attendance.
- The diversity representatives would need to be members of the General Assembly for the period of time they were serving, which may require Synods to be willing to nominate them for a period of three-four years as Synod Representatives.
- This brings the convenors of the three key programme committees of the General Assembly into the Executive. Currently the committees are represented through the General Secretariat. However, the streamlined committee structure, and the advent of three core programme committees for the work of the Assembly, make it advisable for those convenors to be part of the Executive to ensure a joined-up and strategic approach to the agenda and work of the Assembly as a whole.
- This would in effect be cost neutral because the Business Committee already meets once a year residentially for 24 hours.

Evaluating Option B

We believe Option B also has many strengths, and some weaknesses.

This model would avoid potential issues over decisions of the Executive being seen as having a lesser status to decisions of the General Assembly. The Assembly would meet twice a year and concern itself both with high-level strategy and the adoption of policies and procedures.

The Assembly, being somewhat smaller than in Option A, has the benefit of being better able to function in scrutinising detail. However, there is greater danger that it will get stuck in matters of detail and not be as concerned with discerning the big-picture issues of the life of the church and the world in discerning the vocation, vision and work of the United Reformed Church, at any one point in time.

The experience of the current Assembly Executive is that whilst it is smaller than the Assembly, one often hears from a wider range of voices. Hopefully some of that benefit would arise here, too. However, it is less broadly representative of the church as a whole because of the reduced number of Synod Representatives.

The total cost of this option would be around £60,000 per year giving a saving of around £95,000 per year.

Conclusions

We offer both these options to the General Assembly to aid our discussion and discernment. We believe that both have considerable merit and meet the general principles we have discerned through the conversations at Assembly Executive. There is almost no difference in cost between the models (which came as an unintended surprise). We believe that action is necessary – it is not tenable for Assembly to continue at its current size and still hold the respect of the wider church. Otherwise, there is a danger that the ‘centre’ of the church takes an ever-greater proportion of the resource of the church as a whole when resources are needed most pressingly at the front line of mission and ministry in the local church. Equally, at a moment that the budget decisions of the Assembly Executive have meant a very significant staffing restructure in the Offices of the General Assembly, and played their part in the need to review our RCL provision, it is not tenable for the General Assembly to not look to significantly reduce its expenditure on itself.

We commend these options to you, and hope that in our discernment together we will find a way forward which enables the General Assembly to carry out its vital function in our life together as the United Reformed Church, in a way fit for the middle of the 21st century, and that also uses our resources wisely. Whichever approach we take, there will be matters of detail which still need resolving. Therefore, we are not asking General Assembly to formally adopt changes at this Assembly, but rather to adopt an approach and ask for appropriate constitutional changes to be drafted. It is anticipated that these could be adopted at Assembly Executive in 2026, Synods asked to consider them in Spring Synod meetings, and then be finally adopted at General Assembly 2026 for implementation from General Assembly 2027.