

Paper A3

Review of the *Structure* of the United Reformed Church Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Dr John P Bradbury, General Secretary john.bradbury@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	<p>Resolution 3 The Assembly Executive instructs the Business Committee to initiate a review of the <i>Structure</i> of the United Reformed Church in the light of the report in A3 and the discussion at the Assembly Executive, consulting widely in the process.</p> <p>Resolution 4 The Assembly Executive Instructs the Business Committee to incorporate the review of the Functions of the General Assembly in the <i>Structure</i> into this wider review, bringing revised proposals for the size and functions of the General Assembly, Assembly Executive and associated trust entities in the light of work on the revision of the <i>Structure</i>.</p> <p>Resolution 5 The Assembly Executive, in adopting Resolutions 3 and 4, recognises a change in the timetable for the work required by Resolution A4 of General Assembly July 2025.</p> <p>Resolution 6 The Assembly Executive, in the light of the change in timetable determines that the number of Synod Representatives at General Assembly shall remain 12 until the revision of the <i>Structure</i> is complete.</p> <p>Resolution 7 The Assembly Executive invites the Business Committee to appoint a working group to prepare work that can form the basis of wider consultation.</p>

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	
Main points	

Previous relevant documents	Report A4 – General Assembly July 2025.
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators.

Summary of impact

Financial	Costs of consultation process and the meeting of the reference group.
External (eg ecumenical)	

1. General Assembly in July 2025 instructed the Business Committee to initiate a review of the *Functions* of the General Assembly, as set out on the *Structure* of the United Reformed Church (its constitutional document which sets out the functions of each of the councils of the Church: Church Meeting; Elders Meeting; District Council; Synods, and General Assembly).

The logic of this decision was following a debate about the size of General Assembly, and also the related size and function of the Assembly Executive. On the basis that form should follow function, and there had been no review of the functions of the General Assembly for some time, this work should precede decisions about size and composition.

2. This resolution emerged from the work of a facilitation group at the General Assembly and was adopted unanimously by the Assembly.
3. Alongside the concern with a need to review the *Structure* with reference to the functioning of the General Assembly, various other issues have emerged that it would seem to make sense to address within the *Structure*.

It is worth saying at the outset, that the proposed revision of the *Structure* is not a proposal to revised the very fundamental structures of the United Reformed Church in terms of local churches, Synods and the General Assembly being the foundational conciliar parts of the life of the Church. Rather, it is an intention to review whether some of the details of the structure need to be evolved to meet the current needs and challenges of the church.

4. Various issues have come to our attention that would merit consideration in the review of the *Structure*. These include:
 - a. The current requirement that Synod Clerks and Treasurers, as Officers of Synods, be members of the United Reformed Church, when the practice of this can make appointments very difficult to make.
 - b. A concern that in very many places, local churches in reality function without a clear distinction between Church Meeting and Elders Meeting, particularly in very small congregations. This exposes those congregations, and the wider church, to considerable risks that decisions could be deemed to have been taken without appropriate authority. It could be better to have a constitutional option which allows for local churches to function in this way

within the *Structure* itself, to mitigate these risks, and make congregational life more easily manageable for smaller congregations.

- c. There are issues which arise about the interplay of the *Structure* and the *Model Constitution* which lead to ministers automatically being deemed a trustee of local church funds charities for each church they minister with. With the evolution of large pastorates, and groups of local churches in Missional Partnerships or Resource Church groups, this leads ministers to being a trustee of funds charities when they may be quite distant from the actual operation of the charity and the use of the funds. This exposes everyone to risks that we might do well to mitigate.
 - d. We are aware that currently there is no constitutional provision for the work of the Assembly Executive within the *Structure*, which whilst managed through Assembly delegating functions to the Executive in its set up, still at times leaves the Assembly Executive functioning without very clearly defined functions.
 - e. We are aware that there is a highly effective model for a 2-council model, which is many local churches works well, between Church Meetings and Elders Meetings. Church Meetings attend to the overall vision and vocation of the life of a congregation, Elders Meetings attend to matters of the worshipping life of the congregation and the management of the funds, policies and procedures of the life of the church. It is possible that such a model could form an effective basis, from within the heart of the culture and practice of the URC, for the work of the Assembly and Assembly Executive.
 - f. There is potentially a parallel issue as that experienced between General Assembly and the Assembly Executive, and Synods and Synod Executives. Whilst precise arrangements vary at the moment, there could be value in ensuring that Synod Executives have a clearly defined constitutional position, again to manage the risk that decisions could be deemed to have been taken *ultra vires* (without proper legal authority and therefore improperly).
5. These are examples that have already come to our attention, and ways in which people have suggested that revisions to the *Structure* would be helpful. It is highly likely that there are other revisions that it would be helpful and wise to make that have not yet come to our attention but would be discerned by the working group proposed.
 6. It is proposed that a working group be appointed of 6 representative people with expertise in governance, and experience of the operations of all the councils of the United Reformed Church to prepare initial work, including possible drafts, that can form the basis of wider consultation within the life of the Church.
 7. We have not attached a definitive timetable to this piece of work, recognising that it is considerable in scope, but the hope would be that it would be possible to bring a draft indicating the main changes proposed to Assembly Executive in February 2027, for agreement by General Assembly in 2027 (which would then need to be sent to Synods and Local Churches for any disagreement to be registered. Presuming fewer than a third of Synods or Local Churches registered

their disagreement, Assembly Executive could then adopt final changes in February 2028. This is very provisional, and it is important to recognise the quantity of existing pressing work that needs attention from Officers of the General Assembly, and the need to prioritise the quality of the work, rather than its speed.