

Paper M3

General Secretary
The future of
General Assembly

United Church 2016
Church 2016
Reformed Church 2016
Church 2016



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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd John Proctor john.proctor@urc.org.uk
Action required	Advice. This paper is at an interim stage, and comment and input from Mission Council are now sought, to guide its development
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	The future of General Assembly
Main points	The character of Assembly: it relational and is it relevant? The way we decide: how much does consensus help, and why? Linking Assembly to the wider life of the Church Paying for Assembly, and keeping it within budget
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council minutes 15/39 and 15/65, November 2015
Consultation has taken place with...	General Secretariat, the Treasurer

Summary of Impact

Financial	This paper aims, among other things, to bring Assembly within its agreed budget
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Nothing specific at the moment.

The future of General Assembly

1. Mission Council has asked me 'to initiate a review of the ways in which our meeting together as General Assembly may develop in the future so that it can better reflect our ethos as a conciliar church through the activity of growing together as the Body of Christ. In particular the review should consider whether General Assembly can be funded without calling upon additional finances from individuals and synods.'
2. That remit raises two obvious issues: what does Assembly accomplish; and what does it cost? But it raises too a broader issue, about the role of Assembly in the decision-making structures of the URC – its relationship to Mission Council, to committees and task groups, and to decisions taken in synods and local churches. Recent Mission Council discussion on 'Hearing God more clearly' reflected a strong commitment to Assembly, with a desire to meet annually if possible and to pay for this by reducing our committee work. Inevitably the three issues are linked: the role of Assembly; the wider web of meetings and decisions; and the cost of it all.
3. Traditionally a General Assembly in the Presbyterian tradition has three functions – administrative, legislative and judicial. It oversees the Church's work, determines rules and procedures, and adjudicates on serious difficulties. In those respects it is a working council with a job to do. In the Congregational tradition, however, annual gatherings of this kind have had a less defined, although perhaps not less important role. Their primary benefit is to nurture identity and fellowship, to celebrate what God is doing among us, and to provide a focus for mutual encouragement and support.
4. Some of our present dilemmas about Assembly result from the difference in the above two approaches. One tradition would judge an Assembly by what flows out from it – decisions, policies and so on. Another looks at what happens in Assembly: how well does it nurture the Christian life and vision of those who attend? Certainly there need not be a complete mismatch between these approaches. Good work can itself be uplifting; and an occasion that inspires is more likely to lead to good listening and wise resolutions. However, it may be worth teasing out some of the implications of the two models, in relation to the hopes and dreams that an Assembly kindles in us.
5. If Assembly is primarily a business meeting, with work to do, then we should aim at being efficient, informed and representative. The number of people who attend may not much matter, as long as we can trust them. Trust depends, of course, on how well they engage with their synods before Assembly and afterwards, so that there are good links between the conversation at Assembly and the needs of our congregations. But the actual decisions may not depend very tightly on the number of people making them. An average synod sends about twenty people to Assembly, and four to Mission Council. But I rarely hear people saying that Mission Council is unrepresentative on these grounds. If those four are diligent, vocal and in touch with the churches, they can take good decisions. The quality of Assembly's decision-making doesn't have very much to do with size; it could grow or shrink quite a lot without there being much change in the wisdom of its corporate judgment.
6. However, even a businesslike Assembly makes some gains by being larger rather than smaller. Here are some of the reasons why. There is a strand in Reformed tradition that thinks of the whole Church taking decisions together; we tend to suspect tight-knit power-groups. Some of our people find it energising to share in decision-making. Being present at Assembly draws members together in common vision, nurtures our identity as one body, and helps us to understand and honour policies that

would not have been our personal first choice. A big Assembly does have some advantages over a small Assembly, even if we view it as a business meeting.

7. However, if we switch to a view of Assembly as primarily an occasion for mutual support and growth, then big is definitely beautiful. If, like the Baptist Union of GB, we invited people to Assembly primarily for inspiration, vision and equipping, we might (like the BU) ask members to pay for themselves, we would restrict formal business to a small slice of our time together, and in planning for the event our only limitations would be logistical. How many can we fit in, how many want to come, and (depending on how we fund the event) how many can we pay for? – these would be the key questions, and we would aim for these numbers to be as high as possible. Learning, worship, celebration of God’s work, resourcing, networking – these would be the main themes, and debate would be cut to a minimum. No longer would we ask about the decisions Assembly takes, but about the experience Assembly offers. One or two days might very well be better than three or four, as more people could come.
8. So what does the Church want from Assembly? (i) Wise decisions? In that case, I don’t think size matters very much (para 5 above). (ii) Widely shared decisions (para 6)? That might fit the brief given me about conciliarity and growth, and it strikes me as the implicit rationale of Assembly at the moment. (iii) Or inspiration and equipping (para 7)? In which case, could we arrange for another body to take more of the decisions – Mission Council, perhaps? And could we then change the character of Assembly, and save some budgetary problems along the way?
9. Realistically, I cannot see the URC opting for either the first or third of the courses above. We value the notion of Assembly as primarily a ruling council of the Church. Moving away from this (as in para 7) would be legally complicated, and would feel like selling our birthright; we would not be willing to do it. But shrinking Assembly radically would not attract us either; we are not just interested in good decisions; we also want good numbers of people to take them. So can we acknowledge why it is that we want this? Are the reasons in para 6 above indeed the ones that matter most to us? And, even so, might we still think of these as relative rather than absolute preferences, so that we should not try to possess more of them than we can afford? We shall return to this point when we think about cost.
10. From now on, I shall work with the model of Assembly set out in para 6: primarily a business meeting, in which the Church wants a wide group of people to participate. If this model is to ‘reflect our ethos as a conciliar church through the activity of growing together as the Body of Christ’ what might be the criteria for achieving such a result? Two are implied in the brief: is it relational; and is it relevant?
11. Is Assembly relational? Does it truly enable people to get to know each other, to deal well with one another, to give and receive together, and to offer their personal inputs aptly and helpfully? Such a way of working would both match and nurture our conciliar ethos, and surely our current commitment to taking decisions by consensus reflects our desire to be properly relational. So more about consensus in a moment.
12. Is Assembly relevant? Does it address the needs and reflect the concerns of local churches: is it honest, grounded, encouraging, responsive? Only so will it help us to grow. Calling for relevance need not imply that Assembly must comfort rather than stir, nor that it must be introverted, concerned only with church life as a contained little world. At its best it will press us outwards, with eyes, hearts, lips and hands open in care, testimony and service. It will teach and challenge us in ways we had not expected, and send us out re-formed for the mission of Christ. However, one does occasionally hear that an Assembly is out of touch, and I am inclined to think that this sense of distance arises when our people feel that its business and decisions do not

- match well to the concerns of their local fellowship. If that is the complaint, then it will only be allayed if we look with greater care at the business we do, the programme we plan, and the ways that we listen to one another, and think how all this might be experienced by people whose main church involvement is local. Which might mean that we shall be most relevant when we are also properly relational.
13. I want to explore the notion of Assembly as relational by looking at how we discuss and decide. Why use consensus as much as we do? What is helpful about this method, and when might it prove unhelpful?
 14. There is a theological rationale for the consensus decision making (CDM) process in the 2007 General Assembly reports. As often happens in the URC, the case is supported by some good scriptural examples and some experiential reflection on church life. There is less by way of doctrinal analysis – moving from what we believe towards a theology of decision-making. By contrast the main themes of this 2007 report – pilgrimage, listening, openness, patience, exploration, discernment – are theology refracted through experience. They are practical theology, concerned with the active expression of godly communal life.
 15. I can think of four possible reasons to favour CDM. (i) Polity. If our theology of decision-making depends on us all journeying together, then CDM makes sure we do this. (ii) Prophecy. It is important to hear all the voices in a council, and sometimes the slowest members to speak, the most diffident people and the minority voices have wisdom that eludes the rest of us. CDM opens us to radical listening and so, often, to God. (iii) Process. CDM is a good procedure ‘for moving fluently and respectfully through the stages of debate’. It works well when a wide range of views need to be gradually exposed and explored. This is especially true when an issue is either new or controversial. The slowness of CDM can be a virtue. It gives people time to hear the Spirit, and to reflect on the input of others. (iv) Perception. CDM gives us more chance to gauge the depth of feeling on a difficult issue. It allows people’s instincts, emotions and concerns to contribute, in constructive and respectful ways.
 16. We may not yet have managed to distinguish between CDM as a method and unanimity as an ideal. Undoubtedly CDM is a helpful method for working through a discussion, and even after a careful and constructive use of the process, unanimity will sometimes elude us. But if we abandon outright the notion that CDM aims for unanimity, or set this aim aside too quickly and too often in practice, we may find that our commitment to the method will dilute and some of its benefits will be lost.
 17. The attitude of members of council is critical. CDM ‘relies on those present wanting to find a way that is good not just for themselves but for as many others as possible. That demands an attitude of mind and heart.’ There needs to be a common aim, and a desire to work together towards it, a readiness to listen to people with whom we disagree, and a willingness to be changed by the conciliar experience. This suggests that the capacity of a council to use CDM is nurtured by the broader culture of church life, and the extent to which we already want to live, speak and act as members of one another. In other words, Assembly can support our conciliar ethos, but we also depend on our wider conciliar ethos to enable good experience at Assembly.
 18. The slowness of CDM may require us to be more selective about what we discuss. As mentioned in para 7 above, it is possible that Mission Council could take more decisions. But perhaps we also need to learn not to waste time at Assembly by muddle and confusion. We do depend on those who prepare business for Assembly. The officers of Assembly are not censors, but they have an advisory role, to make sure that conveners and synod representatives bring resolutions in the most lucid and

constructive form possible. 'What are you aiming to achieve? How can we help you to make sure that Assembly understands this?' If these questions are answered before Assembly, we shall know better what to categorise *en bloc* and what needs to be tabled for our precious discussion time.

19. Finally, even when a conciliar discussion has been marked by attentive listening and growing convergence, it may still be hard for people who were not present to share the journey that was taken by those who were. A consensual council will only result in a consensual church, if we devote time and care afterwards to advocacy and explanation, and to a necessarily patient process of engagement with people who question the path that their council followed.
20. This takes us back to the issue of relevance. Any thinking about the renewal of Assembly needs to see it in context: most of what the URC achieves is done locally. Most of our worship, learning, care, mission and practical service happens through local churches. So Assembly needs to connect. People who represent synods or other constituencies are called, surely, to consult before and communicate afterwards. We cannot hope to be relevant, unless we talk to the people for whom we seek that relevance. Members of Assembly are not mandated to vote. They listen in Assembly for the Spirit, who may blow in unexpected directions. But they are responsible for thinking, 'How will this play out in my county, our city, this synod, the sort of churches I know?' They speak, listen and vote with that in mind, and then explain what Assembly has done to the people who are affected by it. Is that what happens at your synod meeting? Or elsewhere in your synod?
21. One way of bringing Assembly's work to the attention of the URC as a whole might be to recall that we are pretty good at running inspirational events of various kinds – synod days out, Youth Assembly, Pilots Big Day Out, multicultural celebrations, and so on. Could we do more to thread common themes through these events that connected well with the agenda of our central councils? That need not mean, lest you fear this, asking Pilots to explore the arcane excitements of church law and polity. But it could mean rejoicing in, for example, feasts and festivals, or roots and foundations, in a series of events over a year or two. Our Youth and Children's staff generate good titles every year, which are consistently concise and accessible, yet also substantial. A bit more synergy might help us all. That in turn might address the concern for inspirational gatherings noted above. Maybe Assembly isn't meant to be the main carrier of that particular expectation.
22. Now to finance. Recent Mission Council discussion on 'Hearing God more clearly' expressed a strong commitment to Assembly, within an overall concern to manage and limit spending on central councils and committees of the Church. The current budget for an Assembly is presently £100K p.a., thus £200K for each biennial meeting.
23. This figure was fixed by Assembly in 2012, as part of a major review of all our spending. We chose positively to put this money into Assembly, when we could have assigned some of it to other tasks. And we chose definitely to limit Assembly's budget to this sum because we believed that spending more than this would cut into other important needs. That budgetary discussion was difficult; to ignore its outcome would be dishonest. Yet we presently have an Assembly that actually costs more than this, and it appears that we are squaring the circle by asking synods and members of Assembly to help with costs. In 2016 we can run Assembly for £200K by limiting the board and lodging subvention to £50 per person per night (whereas Southport hotels cost about £70); by providing only partially for evening meals; and by asking synods to pick up their members' travel costs. The real cost is surely nearer to £250K, or even a little more.

24. Synods have made it clear that they do not wish their representatives to pay for going to Assembly. Nor are synods keen to pay for this regularly themselves; they might contribute in 2016, but do not wish to go on doing so. So how could Assembly cost less?
25. (i) It could meet more rarely.
(ii) It could have fewer members.
(iii) It could meet more briefly.
(iv) It could be less elaborate.
(v) We could try to make efficiencies in planning.
- (i) This would not be popular in the Church. Memories still go back to annual assemblies. Discussions at Mission Council, on the Wessex resolution of March 2014 and the medium term strategy group report in May 2015, confirm this view.
- (ii) We could take some small steps along this track if, for example, we allowed the size of Assembly to vary in proportion to membership figures. A synod's allocation would be one place in Assembly per 300 (or maybe one per 250) URC members in the churches. Of course one could argue whether membership is a precise measure of a local church's strength; but aggregated across a whole synod it is as fair a measure as we have got. And when a synod's numbers grow, so will its contingent in Assembly.
- (iii) and (iv) A combination of these two adjustments might be possible, with shorter and simpler meetings. A risk here would arise if we had to deal with business so briskly that members felt unable to contribute properly. But there is surely still room to explore these leads: could we save money on layout (not insisting on table groups), venue (fewer fringe stalls and events), audio-visual excellence or guests? Could we present even more uncontroversial business en bloc? What about the timing of discussions? Could better preparation help? It is better to get the paper on authorised elders, for example, into really good shape beforehand, than to have a ragged and lengthy debate on it; I have been glad to see the responsible committee attending to this concern.
- (v) And what about our planning? Could we use an events management company? Would they negotiate better deals on hotel rooms and meeting venues than our staff can? If so, could we find a company that would understand our needs and ethos? Could such a company range around the land, as Assembly moved? Or might we also look for a regular Assembly venue, to which we would return many times, and which would therefore offer various economies in preparation?
26. There are several loose ends that this paper does not address. It is presently only an interim draft.
- (i) Who makes decisions about Assembly? Another way of putting that question is to ask about the limits and the freedom given to the Assembly arrangements committee. Have they the power, for example, to shorten the Assembly by a day, if they could find a way to cover the business within a shorter time? And if not that, what can they decide, and what may they not?
- (ii) If we contain Assembly within its agreed budget, and also reduce money on committees, as Mission Council requested in 2014-15, where will policy be formed? I think the answer is that Mission Council might need to do a bit more. My sense is that it probably has capacity to do so, if it is well briefed.

- (iii) This leads, in turn, to the question of how we put the whole machine together – Assembly, Mission Council, committees, synods and congregations.

27. Now for some questions to help the thoughts above to develop in useful directions:

- (i) Paras 5-7: which of the following three aspects of Assembly is most important – the quality of its decisions, the sense of ownership around the decisions, or its inspirational character as an event? Put another way, are you primarily a paragraph 5 person, or para 6, or para 7?
- (ii) If you opted for para 5, do you agree that the size of the Assembly is not very important? If you think its size does matter, what for you would be its ideal size, and why?
- (iii) If you opted for para 6, are the reasons given in para 6 also the reasons that motivate you to care about participation? If not, what are your main reasons?
- (iv) If you opted for para 7, where would you expect the Church to do most of its business and take most of its decisions, if not at Assembly?
- (v) Para 15: which of the four reasons given for favouring CDM matters most to you? And which matters least? Is there another reason entirely that you would have put ahead of these four?
- (vi) Para 16: do you think we can aim for consensus in our business, without insisting on unanimity? What snags might arise if we did this, and how could we overcome them?
- (vii) Para 20: in years when you have not been at Assembly, what is your experience of the quality of information that has come back to you from those who did attend? What, if anything, would you have liked these people to do differently?
- (viii) Para 25: if you had to save over 20% of the cost of Assembly (as we do), which of these five threads would you expect to tug first and hardest? And which of the five would you be least inclined to touch?