

# Paper Y1

## Video-conferencing and decision-making

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<b>Action required</b>	Decision.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Mission Council</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) affirms the policy agreed by resolution M4 of November 2015, that postal and proxy votes are not accepted in the councils of the church, except where the United Reformed Church Structure, Rules of Procedure, the URC Act or Local Church constitutions apply</li><li>b) understands this policy to mean that members must be present in person at meetings of the councils of the church in order to cast a vote</li><li>c) agrees that when councils of the church meet to exercise their functions under the Structure, members joining the meeting by video-conferencing or telephone conference call may, at the discretion of the person chairing or convening the meeting, have their views considered at the meeting but may not cast a vote or take part in the decision phase of the consensus process (and for the avoidance of doubt, the same provision applies to committees exercising functions under the Structure under devolved powers from councils)</li><li>d) welcomes councils and committees of the church exploring the potential of new forms of communication where these aid the operational running of the church, or facilitate ongoing work on topics between meetings in the same physical space; and</li><li>e) directs the Clerk to write into Standing Orders the clarification of policy regarding decision-making through video-conferencing, recognizing that</li></ul>

	<b>Standing Orders may be suspended if the occasion warrants this.</b>
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## Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	To clarify the place of video-conferencing in making decisions in the councils of the United Reformed Church.
<b>Main points</b>	Affirms and clarifies the statement of policy from November 2014, that postal and proxy votes are not accepted in councils of the Church except where specific provision is made, and extends this to clarify the place of video-conferencing as a means of making decisions under the Structure. Welcomes further exploration of appropriate use of video-conferencing to aid the operation of the Church.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Mission Council Paper M4, November 2014.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Synod Moderators, General Secretary, Clerk of the General Assembly, convenor of law and polity advisory group.

## Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	None, although developing appropriate video-conferencing should lead to financial and environmental savings.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	None.

1. A recent Church Meeting that was discerning whether a candidate should be called as Minister to a pastorate used FaceTime – a person to person mobile phone video messaging system – to allow an Elder of the church to participate who was unable to attend in person. There was some discussion afterwards as to whether that Elder's vote could be counted in deciding to issue a call to the Minister.
  
2. The Synod Moderator sought advice from the Assembly Clerk, raising as concerns the facts that:
  - Only one person had been given the opportunity to connect like this (although nobody else had asked for the facility)
  - The facility had not been offered to the other church in the two-church pastorate
  - The person chairing the meeting was the only one who could see the Elder connecting remotely, and the meeting chair had to relay salient points to and from the meeting.

The Moderator and Assembly Clerk agreed that in these circumstances it was inappropriate for the Elder's vote to be counted. Happily, discounting that vote did not affect the outcome of the call.
  
3. Discussion with other Synod Moderators makes clear that the concerns above are shared. Further, questions were raised about how we ensure equal opportunity to those who cannot access the internet, and for churches that do not

have internet connection or appropriate projection/video-conferencing equipment, and how the dynamic of the meeting and remote users' participation is affected if the connection drops. There may be environmental benefits to video-conferencing through reducing unnecessary travel, and surely wider participation in our decision making is to be welcomed. There are also ecclesiological questions of how we discern the mind of Christ in our meetings. Is it any different to use video- and telephone-conferencing for our committee meetings than it is to use it for the councils of our Church? Should it be?

4. The Charity Commission of England and Wales accepts that telephone and video conferencing may be appropriate in some circumstances, but states that 'for a meeting to be valid, the people attending must be able to see and hear each other.'<sup>1</sup> (Their guidance is that telephone conference calls are only permissible if the charity's governing document permits it.)
5. Having discussed the situation with other Moderators who share the same concerns, we bring the following resolution to Mission Council to clarify the denominational position, bearing in mind our long-held belief that in the councils of the church we make our decisions through seeking to discern together the mind of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-meetings-making-decisions-and-voting> retrieved 28/1/2020