

Paper Y1

Frequency of General Assembly

Wessex Synod

United Church 2014
Church 2014
Reformed
Church 2014
Church



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Wessex Synod: Frequency of General Assembly

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	Clare Downing moderator@urcwessex.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council agrees to explore ways by which the United Reformed Church can return to the pattern of General Assembly being held every year.
Alternative options to consider, if any	

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To enable exploration of how the United Reformed Church can return to a pattern of annual General Assemblies.
Main points	The change from annual to biennial General Assembly, taken at the same time as the loss of District Councils, needs to be reviewed. Mission Council needs to be enabled to take an informed decision on whether a return to annual General Assemblies is the right way forward, and if so, what effects this would have for organisational and budgetary purposes.
Previous relevant documents	General Assembly 2005: resolution 43
Consultation has taken place with...	Wessex Synod (decision by agreement at November 2013 meeting). Synod Clerks have been made aware of this resolution.

Summary of Impact

Financial	Potentially significant and needs to be quantified as part of the exploration process.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	

Frequency of General Assembly

1. Whilst the resolutions passed at the 2005 General Assembly – to remove a decision making layer of the councils of the church and to reduce the frequency of General Assembly were taken with the best possible intentions – the result of the combination of these two decisions has had some adverse effects on the United Reformed Church and some consequences which were, perhaps, not foreseen.
2. Both decisions resulted in fewer church members being part of the decision making bodies of the United Reformed Church beyond the local congregation, both through the district committee structures and in taking part in Assembly-wide events. Whilst synods have addressed the sense of distance and isolation from the wider church in a variety of ways, the opportunity to hear about and take part in decisions about the life of the whole United Reformed Church cannot be dealt with at a synod level.
3. Biennial assemblies with a slightly reduced number of representatives mean that less than half of those who would previously have attended are now able to take part. It has also reduced a synod's ability to have some continuity in representation whilst also encouraging different people to attend.
4. In terms of the content of the Assembly, the work of committees and assembly staff is reduced to limited space in the book of reports and minimal time for presentations. We have lost one of the major opportunities for church members to understand and connect with the work done at the assembly level.
5. A further consequence is that the role of Mission Council has changed and an increasing amount of unfinished Assembly work is being remitted to it. More decisions are having to be taken by Mission Council between Assemblies to avoid unreasonable delays in business. Major change is also slowed where it must wait for Assembly approval. This has caused much discomfort especially as Mission Council is not constituted as a formal "council of the Church" and the boundaries have not been fully defined.
6. There is also an issue around the length of time the moderators of General Assembly have to commit to. Whilst the sharing of commitments through the two years between two moderators reduces their workload to some extent, this is more than outweighed by the need for both to attend such things as Mission Council.
7. In serving for a period of two years, the commitment is for six years in total. With the change in retirement age, this means that a minister coming up to retirement would be expected to serve until well beyond 70. For a younger minister it means being away from pastorate/post over the full period of service and it would be very difficult to consider a move within this time. Similar concerns apply to the lay moderator's post which might significantly reduce the pool of those who feel able to accept a nomination.
8. Finally, one unexpected consequence of the change to two moderators serving jointly for two years is the potential for roles and responsibilities to be confused. Whilst the simile of the assembly moderator being the equivalent of the constitutional monarch and the general

secretary being the prime minister is not altogether apt, there does seem to be a risk of the power base of two moderators for two years being quadrupled from one moderator for a year.

9. It is with these various matters in mind that Wessex Synod has asked Mission Council to explore a return to an annual General Assembly within a timescale such that, if the principle of an annual assembly were agreed, it would be possible to hold a General Assembly in 2017.

Resolution

Mission Council agrees to explore ways by which the United Reformed Church can return to the pattern of General Assembly being held every year.