

## Day two – 20 March

### Session five

#### **Paper N1: The future of General Assembly**

This paper was presented by Dick Gray, who made it clear that Mission Council were not being asked to make the decision on the future of General Assembly; that decision would be taken by General Assembly in July 2018. The thrust of the paper favoured a slightly smaller annual Assembly, 72 hours in duration and always to meet at the Swanwick Conference Centre in Derbyshire.

Mission Council was invited to comment on the paper and the draft resolutions. A lengthy and wide-ranging discussion followed.

There was engagement with draft resolution six, with several members calling for an increase in the number and breadth of ecumenical representation at General Assembly. Unsurprisingly, section 16 – the question of whether General Assembly should have one or two Moderators – attracted much debate with views expressed in favour of retaining two *and* returning to one. Alan Yates, current moderator spoke passionately in favour of retaining the current model of two moderators; and the further point was made that if we want younger, working, lay people, then we may need to consider paying them to free them up for service to the URC. The role of the Moderator also became a talking point, with wide agreement that the scope and expectations of the role had grown hugely in recent years and may need to be revisited and contained.

All feedback was noted and will be fed in to the paper to be presented at General Assembly in July.

#### **Paper F1: Scripture and the Church**

The faith and order committee has been considering the role of the Bible in the United Reformed Church for some years, and the Revd Dr Alan Spence, convenor of the committee, this afternoon shared some of their thinking with Mission Council.

The URC, said Dr Spence, is part of the one diverse Christian family held together by our one set of scriptures – by hearing the stories of the Bible and being warmed and challenged by them. Our understanding develops. Abolitionists, feminists, Marxists, conservationists and others have helped us see what we had not seen there before.

The particular problem of the URC, said Dr Spence, had been highlighted in the Revd Dr Romily Micklem's doctoral thesis: councils of the Church are not able to judge between alternative readings of Scripture because the URC does not have a shared tradition of how to read Scripture. As a result we are reluctant to set clear boundaries around ways of expressing our Church's faith. Another problem is that while this creates rich diversity it also gives rise to insularity. Interpreters of the Bible can't work together because they don't have a shared interpretive framework, but live in silos of interpretation or echo chambers.

'It's a huge question,' said, Dr Spence, 'so pardon the boldness of the answer: we have to talk to each other, engage with each other outside our silos.' Citing the example of Catholicism and Lutheranism, he said that both sides tried to overcome their vast divide by talking to each other and eventually came to joint understanding of issues that had long been deeply divisive. 'Imagine what we would gain from doing that in the URC!'

‘We engage with each other so that we might know the truth,’ he said. ‘And the truth shall set us free.’

Members of Mission Council expressed appreciation for the paper. In response to a practical question about how to proceed, Dr Spence suggested: ‘Bring together people of different points of view and make them talk to each other. It’s hard work. Be creative.’

The Moderator of General Assembly, the Revd Kevin Watson, thanked Dr Spence both for the work of the committee seen in the paper and the way that he had presented it.

### **Session six was designated as free time**

### **Session seven**

#### **En bloc business**

Papers P1, T1 and H2 were removed from en bloc and discussed, and reported on, separately.

The following papers were taken as en bloc business and were passed unanimously, by consensus.

#### **Paper B1: Children’s and youth work committee**

An update on the progress of the review of the Children’s and Youth Work in the URC, and the plans for current and future developments which include: The Big Speak Out event, Children’s and Youth Work’s contribution to Greenbelt, a weekend for young people at Crossfire Camp, and an autumn gathering for local church children’s, families and youth workers.

#### **Paper D1: Westminster College governors, appointment of tutor in New Testament Language, Literature and Theology**

A report on the successful process of advertising, shortlisting and interviewing for the post of New Testament Tutor for Westminster College. Dr Christine Joynes, Director of the Centre for Reception History of the Bible, University of Oxford, has been appointed to the post, which will become vacant in summer 2018, when the current postholder, the Revd Dr Yak-hwee Tan, moves on.

#### **Paper H1: Ministries update**

This paper updated Mission Council on a range of issues which has been discussed by the ministries committee in recent months. These included models of non-stipendiary ministry and certificates of eligibility.

#### **Paper H3: proposed amendments to the plan for partnership**

The report highlighted several minor amendments required to tidy up the Plan for Partnership in Ministerial Remuneration.

#### **Paper I1: Partnership re-commitment**

A report seeking the re-affirmation of the URC’s partnership with the growing UK congregations of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana (EPCG). Mission Council also affirmed the principle that an individual should not serve as an elder in both the URC and the EPCG simultaneously.

### **Paper I3: Mission and discipleship**

This paper highlighted key developments on the denomination's focus on lifelong Christian discipleship, Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today. The report highlighted the resources now available to support individuals and congregations and provided an update on future work.

### **Papers J1: List of nominations**

Reports from the nominations committee, containing amendments to the nominations list, making appointments, advising on appointments to be made by General Assembly and reviewing the governance of Westminster College.

### **Paper K1: Pastoral reference and welfare committee**

A resolution to move some of the work assigned to the pastoral reference and welfare committee to the safeguarding advisory group.

### **Paper R1: Safeguarding**

An update on the URC's safeguarding practice.

### **Paper R2: Safeguarding, past case review update**

An update on phases 1 and 2 of the past case review.

### **Paper V1: Resource sharing task group, raising the ministry and mission fund**

A comparison of approaches to raising the ministry and mission fund across the synods. The resource sharing task group concludes that most synods are happy to continue with their different approaches as these are working well.

### **Paper J2: Nominations committee, supplementary report**

The Revd Ray Adams introduced Paper J2, which clarified various details of the nominations list and advised on the names of those General Assembly will be invited to appoint or re-appoint to posts.

The report recommended that:

- Clive Curtis' position on the equalities committee be extended by one year.
- The Revd Michael Hopkins serves a final term, as Clerk of the General Assembly, from the end of Assembly until the end of General Assembly 2024.
- The Revd Paul Whittle continues to serve, as Moderator of the Eastern Synod, from the end of his current term on 31 August 2020 until 31 August 2023.
- The Revd Simon Walking continues to serve as Moderator of the National Synod of Wales from the end of his current term of 31 August 2019 until 31 August 2024.

The report's four resolutions – relating to the approval of changes and corrections in part A and B of the report, appointments made in section C, and the commendation of the reappointments list in section E of the report were passed by consensus.

### **Paper Y1: Changes to the Rules of Procedure for the conduct of the United Reformed Church**

Paper Y1 was presented by Mr Dan Morrell and Ms Hannah Jones, immediate past Moderator and present Moderator of Youth Assembly, who brought it as a private members' resolution. It proposes

that Mission Council send a resolution to General Assembly to change the rules of procedure for electing the Moderators of General Assembly.

The matter was discussed by Mission Council in November 2017 and deferred. Now the resolution has been divided into two sections to enable each section to be voted on separately. Section A proposes giving candidates an opportunity to speak as part of the election process; section B proposes a 'reopen nomination' option on the ballot.

After discussion, it was agreed that section A should refer to paragraphs 3.5 and 3.8 of the rules of procedure, and that section B should refer to paragraphs 3.7, 3.9 and 3.15. The wording of the resolution was changed to reflect that.

Mr Morrell was asked to define the 'brief' biography candidates that would present. He suggested approximately 300 words.

The Revd Jacky Embrey, Moderator of Mersey Synod, spoke of her visit to the Youth Assembly, where she saw the proposed mode of election in action. 'The process was very positive,' she said. 'It gives a better idea of how God is leading us.'

Members of Mission Council noted the value of hearing candidates speak, but concerns were expressed about how reopening nominations would work. The Revd Michael Hopkins, Clerk of General Assembly, noted that there is already an option to vote 'no' when there is only one candidate.

Section A was passed by consensus, so that part of the proposal will be brought to General Assembly in July 2018. Section B was not passed. James Breslin, convener of the Assembly Arrangements Committee, noted that the resolution will come to General Assembly after the moderators have been elected, so, if passed, will not affect the election this time round.

#### **Paper D4: The Cambridge Theological Federation**

The Revd Nigel Uden, convener of Westminster College's governors, presented this paper, which spoke about the importance of the Cambridge Theological Federation (CTF) in the life of Westminster College, and the recent changes in funding the CTF.

Mr Uden was unequivocal in his support of Westminster College's continuing relationship to the CTF, saying that the Federation is 'important in enabling Westminster College to be as good a Resource Centre for Learning as it can be', adding that the sharing of resources has 'allowed the college to flourish'. There was also praise for Neil Thorogood, Principal of Westminster College, in his role as current president of the CTF.

One member of Mission Council questioned whether, in its support of the CTF, the college gives more than it receives. Mr Uden responded that there have been conversations about the way the CTF is resourced, with some interest in looking to a more equitable division of support.

#### **Paper M2: The Church's Hymnody – digest of responses**

Mr John Ellis, who had collated the responses to the survey (see day one report), presented his findings.

Mission Council learnt that in the completed questionnaires received, 81 churches were represented – about 6% of URC congregations – and thus the results are of value. (All answers have been rounded to the nearest 5%.)

Of the 81 churches, 55% currently use hymnbooks and 45% screen.

Of the churches using hymnbooks 50% use *Rejoice & Sing*; 25% *Mission Praise*, 10% *The Church Hymnary* and 15% an assortment of other hymnbooks.

Tellingly, virtually all respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with their current hymn resources, with just 20% of respondents saying that, if the church wanted a new source of hymns they would prefer one that was URC-branded.

Overall, Mr Elis concluded, the results of this survey did not indicate ‘a clamour for a new URC hymnbook’.

### **Paper P2: The standards for eldership**

The Revd Professor David Thompson, convenor of the law and polity advisory group, presented Paper P2 on the standards for eldership. He spoke of the increasing importance of elders in the life of local churches, especially those involved in multi-church pastorates, and of queries to the advisory group from synod moderators and officers, to explain sanctions that exist for disciplining elders who misbehave. Paper P2 suggested, at their ordination or induction, elders make the following promise: ‘Do you promise as an elder of the United Reformed Church to seek its well-being, purity and peace, to cherish love towards all other churches and to endeavour always to build up the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church? Following a wide-ranging discussion Mission Council was in favour of adding this question – although there was no resolution.

### **Paper D3: Training for authorised elders**

The Revd Professor Neil Messer, convenor of the education and learning committee, presented this report for information only. He reported that the committee had been instructed by General Assembly 2016 to create training material for authorised elders. The task had been completed, he said, and the training material is now available on the United Reformed Church website.