

# Paper F2

Faith and Order Committee  
Report of the Committee's work

United Church 2015  
Church 2015  
Reformed Church 2015  
Church 2015



# Paper F2

## Faith and Order Committee Church Membership

### Basic Information

|                                       |                                       |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Contact name and email address</b> | David Tatem<br>david.tatem@urc.org.uk |
| <b>Action required</b>                | Discussion, and advice to committee.  |
| <b>Draft resolution(s)</b>            | <b>None at present.</b>               |

### Summary of Content

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Subject and aim(s)</b>                   | To report the committee's work on church membership.                               |
| <b>Main points</b>                          | Several; in particular the notion of a non-local URC membership, the 'Wider Fold'. |
| <b>Previous relevant documents</b>          |  |
| <b>Consultation has taken place with...</b> | FURY, through a representative on the working group.                               |

### Summary of Impact

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Financial</b>                  | There would be some administrative cost of setting up such a scheme, but we are not yet at the stage of doing this.             |
| <b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b> | It might help some of our members to connect more readily with other Christians in the places where they live, serve and study. |

# Church Membership:

## A discussion paper

1. The Faith & Order Committee, meeting in November 2014, discussed the first report of the task group on membership issues and found the reflections helpful. In particular it encouraged the group to continue to explore the possibility of a new membership category (hitherto referred to as 'Division 14') which is being offered for discussion at Mission Council.
2. In addition to this the Committee also reports that the group is engaged in other work relating to Church membership as follows:
  - 2.1 No suggestions were made by the Committee to amend the 'Guidelines for Ministers and Churches regarding Membership of the United Reformed Church', but the group was asked to submit it for the Law & Polity Advisory Group to check its accuracy.
  - 2.2 The group is working on the draft of a leaflet for potential members, consistent with the Guidelines.
  - 2.3 The Committee had encouraged the group to work on guidelines for discipline in local churches. This was felt to be a task more suited to the Law & Polity Advisory Group since it would mean explaining and commenting on our existing rules, rather than suggesting anything novel.
3. What follows considers 'Division 14' in further detail. A majority of the Task Group favoured the new provisional title '**The Wider Fold**' (hereafter WF), though all agreed that once constituted it would be sensible for the first members of WF to be invited to suggest a preferred name for confirmation by General Assembly.

After discussion, the suggestions for WF were as follows:

### The Principles

4. Membership in the URC is still an important concept. It represents a degree of commitment in exchange for the right to share in decisions for the denomination. WF cannot replace entirely the need for rooting in a local church, though it can provide on a temporary basis for those who find a meaningful link to a local church impractical. We do not believe it is right for people to be treated as URC members or to share in URC decisions if they have no background at all in some local manifestation of the church.
5. In many ways WF could be treated as a non-geographical equivalent of the local church. People could be admitted to it by transfer from a local church, and admitted to a local church by transfer from WF. Only actual local churches, however (so not WF) should be able to admit candidates on profession of faith. This is because, in our longstanding practice, admission to membership involves not only a willingness to commit and a declaration during public worship, but also (for good reason) the decision of a council of the church, made on the recommendation of another council, the Elders' Meeting, which is satisfied of the candidate's preparation and sincerity.

- WF would not have the resources to satisfy itself in this way, but could rely on the judgment of a local church commending candidates for transfer.
6. WF would not be for everyone. It would exist to serve three 'constituencies' of people who have joined the URC in the regular way through the decision of a church meeting, who want to continue to 'belong' and to maintain their commitment; but who are unable, for reasons of distance or mobility, to put down regular roots in an existing local church. The constituencies would be:
    - students and young people resident away from home for part of the year;
    - members of the armed forces and their households who receive the ministry of URC chaplains and;
    - members of the URC, including retired ministers and non-serving elders, who have moved away from any locality where regular attendance at a local church is practical.
  7. Ministers in this last situation, whether retired or in secular employment, may currently be in the anomalous situation of being on the Roll of Ministers but not on any membership roll. We envisage the WF membership roll would be a way to end that anomaly; but the corollary of this is that a certain minimum contact (the same as required for a lay person to stay on the WF roll) would become a condition of remaining on the Roll of Ministers.
  8. We had previously thought those who come to Christianity through 'fresh expressions of church' might also be potential members of WF. But we now feel it is up to each synod to decide whether a 'fresh expressions' group is sufficiently settled to be recognised as a local church and to elect elders. If it is not, then we do not feel its attenders can yet be considered members of the URC.

## The Detail

9. Individuals will join the URC by the existing two routes:
  - Baptism in infancy –
  - Preparation for membership –
  - Elders' Meeting recommendation and Church Meeting approval –
  - Affirmations –
  - Admission to full privileges and responsibilities of membership

OR

  - Preparation for membership –
  - Elders' Meeting recommendation and Church Meeting approval –
  - Affirmations and Baptism –
  - Admission to full privileges and responsibilities of membership
10. Having joined the URC, an individual in one of the three constituencies above may ask his/her local church to transfer him/her to WF. The Church Meeting (CM) (or by delegation the Elders Meeting [EM]) of that church, if it considers the member to be in good standing, passes the member's name and contact details to the administrator of WF, who enters these on a WF membership roll. The name is removed from the roll of the local church.
11. The administrator of WF must be an elder, minister of Word and sacrament or a crcw. (There may be several part-time administrators, in which case this requirement will apply at least to the lead administrator.) His/her functions will be those set out in this paper, including maintenance of records, of the website, and linking WF members to

- local URC resources wherever they are. He/she (the lead administrator, if more than one) is appointed by the General Assembly, but is nominated by, and reports, to the deputy general secretary (mission). He/she works on a voluntary (or a part-time employment?) basis (from home? from an office paid for out of the WF budget?). All expenses are covered by the WF budget. He/she is assisted by a consultative council of WF members, which meets at least yearly to reflect on the general running of WF, the website in particular, and to plan any WF events. Representatives of concerned Assembly committees may also sit on the council, and a Moderator of Assembly, a synod moderator or the General Secretary will sit in on each annual meeting.
12. As an indication of continued commitment to the URC and good standing, members on the WF roll will be asked to communicate at least annually with the administrator and supply prescribed information. A member failing to do this may, after reminder, be removed from the roll and thus from URC membership. If a minister is removed from the WF roll, the administrator will notify the synod of which that minister is a member, with a view to his/her removal also from the Roll of Ministers of the URC. A comparable procedure will be adopted if, in future, a central record of elders is kept.
  13. For public worship, opportunities of Christian service or training, or pastoral care (especially in crisis), the administrator will (on request) seek to put a WF member in touch with appropriate contacts or resources in his or her current locality.
  14. An area of the URC website is dedicated to WF and under the control of its administrator. Its function will be to provide resources for WF members, enhance the sense of 'belonging', provide a means of financial contribution to the work of WF and the wider URC, and publicise events relevant to any WF constituency.
  15. A person on the WF roll will be eligible to become a member of a synod under Structure para 2(4)(e),(f), (g), (i) or (j) if he/she is currently resident in the province or nation concerned; or of the General Assembly under Structure para 2(6)(a), (b), (e), (h) or (k); or of any committee of either council. If he/she was previously a retired minister or non-serving elder that status will continue, as will amenability to discipline in respect of that office. Local churches which a person on the WF roll currently attends are encouraged (but not required) to allow him/her to attend and speak (but not vote) at church meetings. But he/she cannot be chosen as a serving elder in any local church whilst on the WF roll, nor elected to a synod as a local church representative. Since people in the three constituencies now have a route to membership of wider councils and committees through WF, all provisions in the Structure for non-members of the church to serve on these bodies will be revoked.
  16. A minister or crw called back to active ministry or to be an interim moderator will be automatically transferred as a member from WF to the church where he/she is to serve. Any other person wishing to rejoin a local church will be commended by the WF administrator to that church. This will be technically an admission by transfer, but the 'receiving' EM and CM may wish to make the same enquiries as they would make for an admission on profession of faith, since the administrator cannot know the candidate as well as a commending church normally would.
  17. A member would be removed from the WF roll in any of the following ways:
    - Death;
    - Transfer to the roll of a local church;
    - Removal at own written request;
    - Removal for failure of contact (as above) and;
    - Disciplinary removal.

18. A minister or elder on the WF roll would not be considered for disciplinary removal from membership until the Ministerial Disciplinary Process, or any procedure currently in use for the discipline of elders, had run its course. Subject to this, there would be a disciplinary procedure for members of the Wider Fold (DPWF) which the administrator could invoke on his/her own initiative, or on reference by any EM, or the moderator of any synod, with which the member had been associated, or by the general secretary. A WF member in respect of which the DPWF had been invoked could elect for a central or local hearing. A local hearing would mean the WF member submitting to the jurisdiction of a local church nominated by the administrator, whose EM and CM would then proceed as though the WF member were a member of that local church. A central hearing would entail a panel convened by (but not including) the administrator hearing allegations against the member and deciding accordingly. (A central panel would, like an Assembly Commission under the Ministerial Disciplinary Process, be considered as acting for the Assembly.) In cases where a local church member would be suspended or removed from the local church's roll, the WF member will be suspended or removed from the WF roll.
19. The WF budget will comprise parts of the budgets of relevant Assembly committees (e.g. Youth, Mission, Ministries). It will be under the administrator's control, advised by the consultative council. WF members will be encouraged to give according to their means as they would in a local church; their payments will be made into the WF budget to relieve its dependency on committee budgets. Any surplus will be paid into the M&M Fund.
20. The question was raised about those who are now in the three constituencies, and therefore the first potential members of WF. The principle of joining a local church first, and then transferring to WF, may be workable in future, but would be more difficult to impose on these potential 'founder members' *en bloc*. It may therefore be necessary to liaise with certain local churches at strategic points round the country and to ask them to act as 'admitting churches' simply to get WF off the ground. Even though such churches might be admitting people with whom they would then have no further contact, this seems preferable to departing from the principle of local church roots.