

Paper M2

Officers of Assembly
The Lobbying Act

Church 2015
United
Church **Reformed**
Church Church 2015



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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	John Proctor john.proctor@urc.org.uk
Action required	Take note.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To report that the officers of General Assembly decided not to register the United Reformed Church under the Lobbying Act.
Main points	As above.
Previous relevant documents	Mission Council Paper M2, November 2014.
Consultation has taken place with...	The Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of GB, and the Joint Public Issues Team of our three denominations.

Summary of Impact

Financial	We do not expect there to be any.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	We have sought to keep close contact with JPIT partners as we have addressed this matter, which has surely helped to nurture ecumenical trust.

The Lobbying Act

1. Understanding the implications of this Act has been difficult. It was not originally meant to apply to churches, but its wording seems to cover some things that we do. Lawyers – even those who deal regularly with churches – were not all of one mind about its relevance to our sort of work.
2. This complexity is increased by our involvement in the Joint Public Issues Team. This group of staff from the Baptist Union of GB and the Methodist Church, as well as from the URC, provide an informed, co-ordinated and professional focus for much of our engagement with public issues. We were keen to reach a common view with our JPIT partners, about whether the work of the Team would require registration or not.
3. When Mission Council discussed the matter in November, it could not reach a clear decision, and remitted the matter to the officers of General Assembly (James Breslin, John Ellis, David Grosch-Miller, Michael Hopkins and John Proctor). On the basis of what we learned by the end of January, the officers decided not to register.
4. We were helped by legal advice supplied to the Methodist Church, and by colleagues there who interpreted this. Our own legal adviser has been a model of clarity, and Francis Brienen has done much of the necessary staff work with care and insight.
5. Our primary reason for not registering is that we now think that most of JPIT's work should not be viewed as regulated. Not much of the work of other Assembly staff is regulated, and initiatives taken in synods or local churches do not count against our central Church total. Therefore the overall amount of regulated activity for which we are responsible seems unlikely to reach the threshold that would require registration.
6. A letter we sent to Rachel Lampard, the senior staff member in JPIT, sets out our position with care, and I have copied this below. She assured us that the Team will work within the guidance we have given.
7. I have let synods know what we decided, and we have continued to monitor with care any staff work that might be regarded as regulated.
8. Synod initiatives do not count in the central URC total, and are unlikely on their own account to exceed thresholds. An exception might be where a synod is involved in a JPIT within its own area. Yet even there, much of the work would not be regulated.
9. Local church initiatives do not count in central or in synod totals.
10. It took us a long time to decide to do nothing, and I am sorry for the uncertainty and delay. This decision was taken carefully and conscientiously. It may yet be important to demonstrate that we have been working within the law, and our careful record-keeping should allow us to do this, if we need to.

LETTER FROM JOHN PROCTOR TO RACHEL LAMPARD, February 2, 2015

Dear Rachel,

I write on behalf of the five Officers of the URC General Assembly, who have been tasked with deciding whether our Church should register under the Lobbying Act. We have decided that, on the basis of what we presently know, we should not do so. In this we have been helped by a Methodist paper dated just before Christmas, summarising and interpreting legal advice that the Connexion had received, and are very grateful to Doug for sending this.

We should like, in recording this decision, to give JPIT a steer identical to the Methodist guidance that you reported to us: 'The Methodist Council received advice that JPIT's work would not be regulated, and so has encouraged JPIT not to alter its work or self-censor. ... Having said that, we are being careful not to do or say anything without even more consideration than usual. ... I can reassure you that we are being particularly careful of anything which goes out in the name of our Churches during this period, and that includes blogs on the JPIT site.'

As we have also noted, the careful keeping of lists, records and accounts will be a constant and necessary duty, until we see for sure how this Act is going to work in practice, and how much of our work will fall into the regulated category. I believe that Wendy Cooper is helping to monitor all of this on the URC's behalf.

Despite the difficulty we have had in coming to a clear mind on this matter, the URC would like to affirm with a much surer clarity that JPIT is a project of which we are proud, and that we value very highly indeed the thoughtful and persistent work that it does, to focus so much of our public witness. Thank you indeed.

Yours sincerely,
John