

# Paper S2

Medium Term Strategy Group  
Hearing God More Clearly:  
Governance Options

United Church 2015  
Church 2015  
Reformed Church 2015  
Church 2015



# Paper S2

## Medium Term Strategy Group

Hearing God more clearly: governance options

### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	John Ellis john.ellis@urc.org.uk
<b>Action required</b>	Reflection and discussion.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None at the moment.</b>

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	<p><u>Subject</u>: the pattern of meeting of General Assembly, and of those committees and advisory groups (including Mission Council) that support and serve our central decision-making.</p> <p><u>Aim</u>: to invite reflection on what we spend, what we achieve and whether we can improve our practice.</p>
<b>Main points</b>	MTSG was asked to review the meeting pattern of General Assembly. Since the work of Assembly depends closely on the resource that we invest in committee work, MTSG wants to ask Mission Council if we can organise this work more efficiently.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Mission Council, March 2014: papers A and Y1, and minutes 14/06 (1) and 14/06 (2).
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	The general secretariat has had opportunity to comment.

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	This is discussed with care throughout the paper.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	We do not envisage a direct ecumenical impact.

# Hearing God more clearly: governance options

## Purpose

1. The March 2014 Mission Council heard concerns about the current pattern of biennial General Assemblies and their links with various other aspects of the life of the Church and passed a resolution asking for a review led by the Medium Term Strategy Group (MTSG) and the Assembly Arrangements Committee (AAC). This paper does not attempt to address all the issues Mission Council identified but aims to promote an informed discussion about a key component: the pattern of Assemblies in the context of other denominational governance structures.

## Starting Assumptions

2. The MTSG assumes it is a given that the primary purpose of all our governance structures is to hear and articulate what God is saying to the Church and to do that in ways that command the confidence of the wider United Reformed Church.
3. The MTSG heard the main concerns being expressed at Mission Council as not necessarily about the discernment processes of the governance bodies but about the remoteness of their work from local churches and synods. One consequence of this is that if the governance bodies believed God was saying something unexpected or new to the Church, it was less likely to be persuasive once reiterated outside the governance bodies.
4. Of the existing 'central' structures, it appeared to be the predominant view at Mission Council that the most serious psychological gap was between local churches and the biennial Assembly. The infrequency and smallness of Assembly was straining the glue that held the denomination together.

## Recent History

5. Under *Catch the Vision* District Councils were abolished and the Assembly moved from being annual to biennial. These changes reflected both the much smaller size of the Church compared with 1972, when the original structures were promulgated, and a concern at the cost of holding an Assembly meeting, then rising towards £300k. It was also hoped that a two-year governance cycle would improve the quality of work brought to Assembly.
6. In the wide-ranging discussions leading to a necessary reduction in the central budget from 2013, Mission Council recommended, and Assembly decided, that the costs of the biennial Assembly should be reduced from £300k to £200k. The AAC has delivered this as requested, but with a marked reduction in the level of central support for Assembly members' accommodation and travel costs. A number of other savings were unpopular, such as the ending of the small parallel Children's Assembly.
7. Neither of the periods of reform outlined in the previous two paragraphs changed significantly the pattern of Assembly Committees, which complement the work of Assembly and Mission Council in the governance of the Church. The MTSG believes that this part of our structure needs to be considered alongside thoughts on how to reshape the pattern of Assembly and Mission Council meetings.

## Our Committee Structure

8. Most areas of work undertaken by Assembly staff are overseen by one of the Assembly committees, several of which have sub-committees. Like Mission Council they may also create Task Groups, which are not necessarily permanent. The Nominations Committee seeks to identify suitable people to serve on all these bodies.
9. The MTSG has done a comprehensive mapping of this structure using Nominations Committee data and notes that the URC currently has over 50 such committees etc. There are over 500 seats to be filled on them. As a number of people serve either ex officio or coincidentally on several different groups, fewer than 500 different individuals are members of central bodies.
10. This structure consumes in a typical year around 25,000 person-hours of members' time, excluding the time devoted to their associated committees by the paid staff. The direct cost of running this structure (i.e. excluding the staff time contributed) is of the order of £120k pa.
11. Few if any of the Committees have any formal system for reviewing their work's effectiveness (i.e. what they achieve) or efficiency (i.e. whether the resources consumed are proportionate to what they achieve). It is clear that many individuals give generously of their time and expertise as part of their commitment to Christ; in some instances this gift saves the Church very large sums in professional fees. It is also clear that the average age of many of the committees is high and that the Nominations Committee finds it impossible to achieve all the diversity they would hope for in every committee.
12. Even if all the committees, sub-committees and task groups are both effective and efficient, there is still the question of whether a Church much smaller than it once was still wishes to invest these sums in this structure. Money and time not used in central committee structures could be released for other work.
13. There is also the perennial tension – sometimes, but not always, positive – between the responsibility of staff members to their committee and their responsibility to their line manager in Church House or elsewhere. It is a particularly pertinent time to be looking afresh at that question as Mission Council has supported the establishment of the new general secretariat, with three deputy general secretaries having line management responsibility between them for all areas of our staff's work. This structure was explicitly set up to, inter alia; bring about a step change in the quality of management of staff. If this is achieved, is the need for committees to oversee and hold accountable staff members also reporting to the deputy general secretaries still the best possible use of resources?

## Some Costings

14. All costings given in this paper are approximations based on study of available data but make no claim to be precise. They are orders of magnitude to inform a discussion not figures to slot into a formal budget.
15. In none of the discussions about improving our governance patterns has there been any suggestion that local churches want to contribute more M&M money to increase the total cost of governance structures. Therefore this paper only explores options that could be cost neutral or offer savings relative to the 2014 budget.
16. If we are to respond to the pleas for more resources for Assembly, e.g. so it can meet more frequently, then we need to identify corresponding savings elsewhere in areas where current resources are achieving less than they could do if devoted to Assembly.

17. The March 2014 Mission Council resolutions specifically asked for thinking about the pattern of Mission Council meetings alongside the pattern of Assemblies. The MTSG suggest we should also put alongside that the pattern of our committee structure. Currently a typical meeting of Mission Council costs around £20k and a meeting of Assembly £200k.
18. If Mission Council judges it a priority to make some savings in order to devote more resources to Assemblies, some options in broad brush terms might include the following. The possible savings quoted are over a two-year period unless otherwise specified.
- (i) Streamlining existing committees: with limited specified exceptions, ask all committees etc to reduce their memberships by 50%. It is not always the case that a committee of twelve achieves twice as much as a committee of six. Saving: £80k
  - (ii) Three principal committees: with limited specified exceptions, abolish all committees etc and replace by three committees, one for each deputy general secretary's area of responsibility. These committees would give overall direction and accountability, leaving detailed oversight of staff work to the line management. Major policy questions would come to Mission Council or Assembly as now. Saving: £100k
  - (iii) Abolish programme committees: abolish committees etc not required for legal reasons, leaving oversight and accountability via the general secretariat to Mission Council and Assembly. Staff would be free to set up short term project groups and networks where expertise was required. Saving: £150k
  - (iv) Shorten Mission Council meetings: some Mission Council meetings could be only a day meeting. Saving: £10k per meeting
  - (v) Shorten Assembly meetings: Assembly could meet over two days rather than four. Saving: £60k per meeting.

## Alternative Scenarios

19. The MTSG does not at this stage bring any proposal. What follow are hypothetical scenarios to promote discussion of what Mission Council feels would help address the issues behind its March 2014 resolution. Many other scenarios are of course possible. The desired outcome of this discussion is a clear sense of the direction in which Mission Council would like further work to go. Discussion groups will be asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the three scenarios offered and indicate one of these or another as their preferred scenario for further exploration.

### Scenario A

- Retain four-day biennial Assembly
- Restore the level of financial support to Assembly members re travel and accommodation: cost £50k
- Add a third Mission Council in the non-Assembly year: cost £20k
- Opt for three principal committees: saving £100k
- Overall saving £30k.

### Scenario B

- Retain four-day biennial Assembly
- Add a two-day Assembly in intervening year: cost £120k
- Abolish programme committees: saving £150k
- Overall saving £30k.

**Scenario C**

- Abolish four-day biennial Assembly: saving £200k
- Hold two-day Assembly every year: cost £240k
- Restore the level of financial support to Assembly members re travel and accommodation: cost £60k
- Opt for three principal committees: saving £100k
- Overall cost neutral.

**Scenario D**

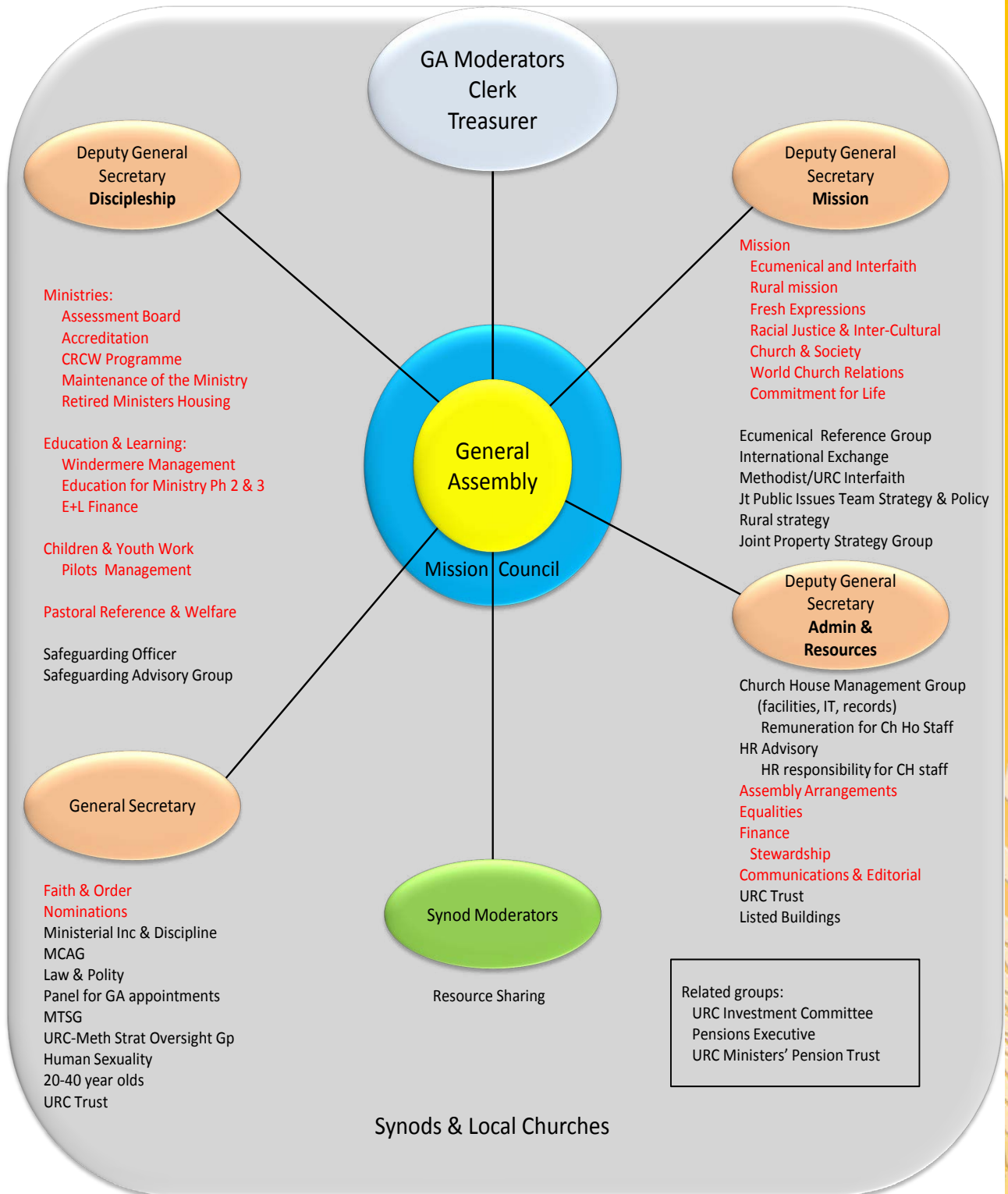
- Your group's much better scenario than any of the above.

**Vital Footnote**

20. This paper has sought to open up a discussion on some issues Mission Council asked to be explored. It addresses practical questions implicit in the Mission Council resolution. Nevertheless the MTSG is totally clear that hearing what God is saying to the Church does not depend primarily on the pattern of our meetings but on our personal and collective discipleship and how we use the time available in those meetings. The MTSG is glad others are working on questions like the best way to express our conciliar principles in godly decision-making.



# United Reformed Church – Group Structure



The above reflects the report of the Nominations Committee to the 2014, and the operational work of the General Secretariat. Excludes: reps on Ecumenical Church bodies; reps on governing bodies of theological colleges; URC associated colleges & school governors. Red text indicates a General Assembly committee and its subcommittees and responsibilities.

