

Paper F1

Faith and Order Committee

‘The Wider Fold’

A Scheme for including isolated
members of the United Reformed
Church

United Reformed Church
Church 2017
Church 2017
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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Elizabeth Welch welchea@talk21.com
Action required	Discussion and agreement.
Draft resolution(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acting on behalf of General Assembly, Mission Council agrees the scheme for isolated members, and direct that it be inserted into the Rules of Procedure. 2. Mission Council directs that this scheme shall be interpreted widely, graciously, and generously, and in particular that during the initial stages the commendation of a Synod Moderator or an Assembly Officer shall be sufficient for the name of a minister, and their spouse/ widow(er) to be added to this Roll, and the commendation of a minister in pastoral charge shall be sufficient for the name of any other person who has formerly been a member of the URC and could have become an isolated member, had such a scheme existed at the relevant time.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Provision of formal URC membership for those who for various reasons are geographically isolated from a local URC but who wish to retain a formal membership.
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership in the United Reformed Church is an important concept • Isolated Membership offers a non-geographical substitute for the local church • Isolated Membership would not be open to everyone. It would exist primarily to serve five 'constituencies' of people who have joined the URC in the regular way through the decision of a Church Meeting • Those who are members of the United Reformed Church through Isolated Membership would be eligible for all forms of service, as any other member is. • Its sole purpose to deal with one specific issue, and to do so in a way that although it may stretch our rules and the theological principles underlying them, does not break them.

Previous relevant documents	Paper F2 Mission Council May 2015 General Assembly 2016 <i>Book of Reports</i> page 128
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Council, General Assembly, Law and Polity Advisory Group

Summary of Impact

Financial	Nil
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Improved ecumenical recognition of URC members and presence in churches of other traditions.

‘The Wider Fold’

A Scheme for including isolated members of the United Reformed Church

The principles

- 1.1 Membership in the United Reformed Church is an important concept. It represents a degree of commitment in exchange for the right to share in decisions of the church. However, there are people who have been received as members of a local church, and who retain a commitment to the URC, but now live too far distant from a local church to worship there regularly. There are also people with a transitory lifestyle, students, young adults, or members of the armed forces for instance, who wish to identify with the URC but do not easily fit into the traditional forms of membership. Isolated Membership is intended to provide membership for those who find a meaningful link to a local church impractical. It is intended to overcome their geographical isolation by including them in the denomination as a whole.
- 1.2 Isolated Membership offers a non-geographical substitute for the local church, with all the limitations of a substitute. People would be admitted to it by transfer from a local church, and admitted to a local church by transfer from Isolated Membership. Only actual local churches, however (so not Isolated Membership) would be able to admit candidates on profession of faith. This is because, in our long-standing 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. Isolated Membership is neither appropriate nor practical for doing any of that, and will rely on the judgement of a Church Meeting commending candidates for transfer.
- 1.3 Isolated Membership would not be open to everyone. It would exist primarily to serve five ‘constituencies’ of people who have joined the URC in the regular way through the decision of a Church Meeting, who wish 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 likely constituencies would be:
 - i) students and young adults, resident away from home for part of the year, or in a transitory lifestyle in the early years of a career;
 - ii) members of the armed forces and their households who receive the ministry of URC chaplains;
 - iii) members of the URC, including retired ministers and non-serving elders, who have moved away from any locality where regular attendance at a local United Reformed Church is practical;
 - iv) URC members worshipping in a church of another denomination, which had earlier been a local ecumenical partnership in which the URC was involved but is no longer;

- v) URC members whose local church has closed, and who are not able to worship in another local church, but who wish to retain their membership of the URC.
- 1.4 Thought has been given to the suggestion that those who come to Christianity through ‘fresh expressions of church’ might also be potential members through Isolated Membership. It is up to each Synod to decide whether a ‘fresh expression’ is sufficiently settled to be recognised as a local church, to hold a Church Meeting, to elect elders, etc. If it is not, then we do not feel its attenders can yet be considered members of the URC and they would not, therefore, be eligible for Isolated Membership.
 - 1.5 Those who are members of the United Reformed Church through Isolated Membership would be eligible for all forms of service, as any other member is, and it would be possible for Isolated Members to contribute financially.
 - 1.6 There are a great many issues surrounding membership. This scheme is not intended, and not able, to address them all. Its sole purpose to deal with one specific issue, and to do so in a way that although it may stretch our rules and the theological principles underlying them, does not break them.

Draft Scheme for Isolated Members of the URC

To be inserted as a new section into the Rules of Procedure

(N.B. The paragraph numbers below are for use at Mission Council, and this numbering might not apply when these paragraphs were written into the *Rules*)

- 2.1 The normal pattern would be for a local church to retain on their membership roll the name of someone who finds themselves living at a distance, noting that students at university some distance from their home would normally be left upon a membership roll until they have graduated, and students for the ministry would likewise normally be left upon a membership roll until they complete their training, even if they have moved their permanent home to a training institution. However, if a local church was unable or unwilling to retain these, or any other, names on their membership roll, then such people could become Isolated Members.
- 2.2 The General Assembly, in consultation with the Synods, may identify a local church which has a particular vocation to “hold” the membership of Isolated Members. Such an agreement, made in conjunction with the Synod, would include appropriate arrangements such that that the said local church neither receives a greater than fair share of scoping, nor requests for excessive contributions to the Ministry and Mission Fund. Such agreement would also include details of who will be responsible for maintaining at least annual contact with Isolated Members, at least by telephone or electronic means. If an Isolated Member wishes to resign from the URC, this will be received in the normal way by the Church Meeting. If an Isolated Member refuses contact, other than through ill health, for a period of two years, they may be deemed to have resigned.
- 2.3 It is agreed that such Isolated Members may be added to the membership roll of the said local church simply by resolution of the Church Meeting, with no further ceremony. Isolated Members wishing to make a financial contribution to the URC, may do so by direct gifts to the Ministry and Mission Fund. Isolated Members will be eligible for all forms of service in the wider church as are other members.

