

Paper F2

Faith and Order Committee
The Future of Membership

United Reformed Church
Church 2017
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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	Elizabeth Welch welchea@talk21.com
Action required	Decision.
Draft resolution(s)	Mission Council receives the report of the Faith and Order Committee on the future of Church Membership in paper F2 of Mission Council May 2017, accepts the broad principles set out therein, and requests that the Faith and Order Committee undertake further work to develop these ideas, consulting with others as necessary, with the aim of working towards a common practice across the church, in order to establish clarity and reduce current inconsistencies over how church membership is handled.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The concept, understanding and practice of church membership within the URC. • To develop a more coherent and effective practice of recognising, valuing and recording those who are closely involved in the life of our churches.
Main points	Clarification is needed on how membership is understood in the URC. A way is needed of recognising those as members who are deeply involved in the life of our churches but have not for one reason or another come into formal membership. A category of 'voting members' meets the continued requirement for legal purposes of those who make the fullest commitment.
Previous documents	Paper F2 Mission Council May 2015
Consultation has taken place with...	Mission Council

Summary of Impact

Financial	Nil
External	Nil

The Future of Membership

1. **The Issue.** Discussions in the Faith and Order Committee and, subsequently, in Mission Council revealed questions about the practices associated with church membership in the United Reformed Church. The changing nature of society and the ecumenical commitments of the United Reformed Church have created a mismatch between traditional ways of expressing membership and their implementation in the local church. This paper seeks to propose new guidance on how membership is organised in our churches, while retaining the historic doctrines which shaped us.
2. **The Church Roll.** Broadly speaking, this paper recommends that local churches keep two rolls. The first roll will be the larger: it will consist of all who are associated with a local church in its worship and pastoral outreach. The second will be that specified by the Basis of Union, consisting of all those received as church members. They will have been received upon confession of faith or on renewal of promises on transfer. These are the people who will be the voting members of the church meeting, will be available to represent the local church in its wider councils, and to serve on them, and will be eligible for ordination as elders or ministers of word and sacrament.
3. If the changes outlined above were made the task of the elders in keeping a church roll would be simplified. The larger church roll would reflect those reckoned to be part of the local church, irrespective of their voting status. The house-bound and the casual attender could be included as part of the fellowship for which the church as a whole cares. Further, it would be possible from time to time to hold the equivalent of the Methodist Covenant Service, which has its origins in Nonconformist practice, at which 'voting members' renewed their commitment and those on the church roll were challenged to join them.
4. The considerations which lead to these proposals are set out below.

The roll of 'voting members'

5. **Legal Considerations.** Alongside our changing religious practices a nuanced view of church membership has grown as a consequence of a number of legal developments. Membership of the United Reformed Church is defined by the Basis of Union. The Church requires those seeking office, or acting as representatives in its wider councils, to be church members in this particular sense. Membership in this sense compares with that of secular organisations, in which people take responsibility for a common enterprise. Members are required on admission to make a profession of faith, as set out in the Basis of Union.
 - 5.1 The Basis of Union, as agreed in 1972, had a transitional provision for the use of forms 'customarily used by the uniting churches prior to unification', that is to say, more than forty years ago. Such forms were sometimes less clear in their expression of faith than the statement of Christian belief expressed in Schedule A of the Basis of Union. The service of admission to membership was revised some years ago to withdraw the transitional provision.

6. Commitment. The term 'voting' member has been used here, although other terms might be considered. It has the advantage of being clear to understand. It makes the point that 'voting' members are those who take on responsibility for the local church in terms of the Basis of Union. They are members of the Church Meeting, and are to that significant extent in sympathy with the Basis. This would be explored with them before they were admitted as communicants or received on transfer from another local church or denomination. Admission to the 'voting member' category will then be open to all who are prepared to express their Christian baptism through commitment to the local United Reformed Church. At the heart of that commitment is a willingness to wait upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit with one's fellow members.
7. The 'voting members' are therefore those who take responsibility as Church Meeting for maintaining the worship and witness of the local church and its denominational links. This responsibility is exercised corporately, those gathered together seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is why postal or proxy voting is not acceptable.
8. Everyone on the larger church roll should also be challenged to take up the responsibility of 'voting' membership, but they should not be classed as outsiders because they do not feel able to do so. This choice is important, but it is not as critical as the choice to be a Christian.
9. Absence. The roll required by the Basis of Union, of 'voting' members of Church Meeting, would need to be reviewed from time to time. Admission to this roll would be through the membership procedures laid down in the Basis of Union and the supporting guidance relating to Schedule A. However, it would now be possible to remove people from this roll without removing them from the church roll. The key to this is to put the onus on the absentee in the first place. 'Voting members' who were absentees could be asked whether they wished to continue in this capacity. Failure to reply could be taken as a negative. Since this is the point at which the law is involved care will need to be taken. This is the one area in which the old customs of discipline will still apply. Careful application to this principle will relieve local churches of the anomaly of people who take no active part in the life of the church for years, then turn up and vote at critical meetings. If all else fails, and it is decided to remove a person from the roll of 'voting members', it is essential that notice is given to them at their last known address.

The larger church roll

10. Membership of the Universal Church. Denominations with a different history to ours, such as Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican Communions, make separate provision for what we have here termed 'legal membership' since for them membership by baptism is determinative. The time may have come for the United Reformed Church to put itself into a comparable position. We believe that all baptised Christians are members of Christ's church. It is difficult to see how any other term than 'member' could be used for this purpose in everyday life.
11. The Committee would therefore be glad to know whether Mission Council welcomes this emphasis on Christian baptism as the proper starting point for reflection on membership in our Church. Would this help us see more clearly than we have sometimes done that every Christian belongs to the worldwide Body of Christ, and that we have a responsibility to nurture one another's growth in the faith?

12. Local churches can, and many do, keep a roll of all those associated with them, including children and young people. Such a roll might well include the unbaptised, for instance, the children of those with convictions about 'believers' baptism'. This should be encouraged and affirmed. Instead of having a church membership limited to part of the worshipping and serving congregation a local church roll should embody everyone. It would then be possible to avoid the use of terms such as 'associate member'.
13. Agreed Criteria. Local churches will need to agree criteria for membership of the larger church roll and make these known for the avoidance of misunderstandings. These criteria will be pastorally driven.

Corollaries and related issues

14. Local Ecumenical Partnerships already have provisions for a general roll of members and the identification of denominational members.
15. Synods will have the responsibility of identifying how these proposals might be implemented in *Fresh Expressions* of church.
16. Only 'voting' members would be eligible to transfer to the 'Wider Fold', and thus to become Isolated Members of the Church.
17. The proposals may offer a satisfactory solution to the concerns of long-standing church members who, for reasons of chronic medical conditions or extreme age, feel unable to take a full part in the life of the local church. They would not be removed from the church roll but could be relieved of any obligation to attend meetings or represent the church in wider councils. This would be a matter of pastoral sensitivity, to be discussed with the people concerned, where possible.
18. There will be implications for the future keeping of denominational statistics and for assessment of contributions to the wider Church.

Appendix: Historical Background

19. Membership of the United Reformed Church involves two concepts, held in tension. The first is the classic view of church membership, derived from Pauline theology, which sees church membership as incorporation in Christ by baptism, leading to koinonia (usually translated as 'fellowship') with other Christians. It includes the concepts of Christian discipleship and corporate worship. In this sense the United Reformed Church view is not substantially different from that of other Christian denominations. However, a sensitivity arose after the Reformation that a distinction should be made amongst the baptised in relation to those sharing in the Lord's Supper. We associate this sensitivity with the Puritans. They resisted the idea that all parishioners were entitled to share in Communion by virtue of residence. In their view the parish minister should be satisfied that proper repentance had been expressed before a person appeared at the table. After their enforced separation from the Church of England, Baptists, Independents and Presbyterians kept membership rolls of their communicant members. These were the basis of church discipline. In England

and Wales the discipline of the established churches was located in bishop's courts and was exercised into the eighteenth century, but not with the rigour demanded by Dissenters. In Scotland the Kirk practised this discipline, as did the various Scottish Calvinist Dissenters. The ultimate sanction in disciplinary processes was excommunication. Those judged unworthy to receive communion were denied it. Times of penitence preceded communion, which was observed only a few times each year. In Dissenting congregations this discipline was further reinforced by the practice of covenanting. Local congregations covenanted with each other to express their common Christian commitment, recognising the *koinonia* which bound them together. Members who broke covenant and remained unrepentant were expelled. Some covenants were renewed from time to time, meaning that those who chose not to subscribe ceased to be members.

20. An administrative device in this system of membership, in wide use in established churches and amongst Dissenters, was the issuing of communion tokens. These admitted the bearers to communion. Tokens were usually pewter and bearing the name of the parish or local church involved. Within living memory churches in our tradition issued communion cards, which served the same purpose and might also act as a record of attendance when collected up. Registers of members' attendance at communion were kept and persistent absentees removed from church rolls.
21. Within the United Reformed Church few would wish to exercise seventeenth-century discipline on church members, requiring moral judgements on individuals. Even if we did wish it, many small congregations have no capacity to act in a quasi-judicial manner. However, in our day, the removal of members from church rolls is carried out reluctantly, as if we were, in fact, making a moral judgement, rather than recognising a changed relationship. As an added complication, congregations generally welcome those who are not their own church members to Communion, without question. It is assumed that the stranger who comes to Communion has their own spiritual integrity, or that Communion will be a 'converting ordinance', to borrow a phrase from our past.