

# Paper I10

Mission Committee

The 2017 General Election

United Church 2017  
Church 2017  
Reformed Church 2017  
Church 2017



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## Mission Committee

The 2017 General Election

### Basic Information

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<b>Action required</b>	Take note.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>None.</b>

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	A briefing to help members of Mission Council, and the wider United Reformed Church, prepare for the 2017 General Election.
<b>Main points</b>	The paper provides some context to the calling of the 2017 General Election, outlines reasons why it is important to Christians to engage with political processes, highlights issues about which the Church should be particularly concerned in the run-up to the election, provides some details around what activities churches might engage in and lists some further resources that members may find helpful.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Mission Council Paper M2, May 2015. General Assembly Record, Southport 2016.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	The Joint Public Issues Team

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	None.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Churches may wish to organize ecumenical hustings within their communities.

# The 2017 General Election

## 1 Background

- 1.1 On 18 April 2017, Prime Minister May announced her desire for the UK to hold a General Election on 8 June 2017. This announcement surprised just about everyone: the media, fellow politicians and, most importantly, voters, who have suddenly been confronted by another election within a very short period.
- 1.2 Over the last three years the UK has hosted two referendums, one on Scottish independence, the other on the UK's membership of the European Union, a General Election, elections for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies, as well as Local Authority and Mayoral elections.
- 1.3 So while some may welcome the opportunities that a General Election presents, many may feel worn out by politics, and less willing to engage with the regular debates and discussion that normally accompany an election. Yet *every* General Election presents an opportunity for citizens to participate critically and constructively in the democratic process, to challenge and scrutinise the policies and rhetoric of politicians, and, on this occasion, to draw attention to issues that are likely to be overshadowed by Brexit.

## 2 Responding in Good Faith

- 2.1 For Christians, engaging with democratic processes is an especially important way in which we can demonstrate our willingness put our faith into action. Irrespective of if you are in a swing seat, a safe seat or if you think all politicians are the same, your voice and your vote do matter. This does not mean that any one particular candidate or party is the answer, but it does mean that as Christians we have a part to play in the world, and that the issues we ask candidates and society to consider are important.
- 2.2 It also means that the way in which we conduct ourselves and treat one other during this election time should model a different way to much of the divisive politics we have seen. As Micah 6:8 says, we are required to 'do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly' with our God. Despite any feelings of fatigue, and irrespective of why it was called, this election is an opportunity for Christians to live out this calling.
- 2.3 The most important contribution you can make to the upcoming election is voting. To do so, you will need to ensure that you are registered to vote in your constituency. This needs to be done by the **22 May**.

## 3 Issues that matter in 2017

- 3.1 Whilst Brexit is undoubtedly the backdrop against which the election has been called, there are many other important issues which deserve reflection and engagement from voters and politicians in the coming weeks. They relate to both domestic issues, including welfare, poverty, and our asylum system, as well as global concerns, like how to ensure that our responsibilities to support those in the global south are not overshadowed by the complexities of the Brexit negotiation process. Further information on these issues will be found at the Joint Public Issues Team website, which is listed below.

a) Support for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The Syrian War continues to wreak havoc on the lives of innocent civilians, and the wider humanitarian crises taking place in countries like South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen have not abated. But if they feel forced to leave their countries, refugees and asylum seekers continue to face immense challenges in attempting to rebuild their lives in a new country. **While the UK has donated generously to affected regions, is there also a larger role for the UK to play in hosting displaced persons? What sort of treatment should we provide for asylum seekers when they arrive in the UK?**

b) Poverty and Economic Inequality in the UK

The face of UK poverty has changed over the past two decades. Poverty in the past was tightly linked to unemployment and old-age. Today pensioners are the age-group least likely to experience poverty, and the majority of poor families are in work. Brexit will have a huge effect on the UK economy. For those in poverty the most important questions are around how wealth within the country will be distributed. An incoming government could choose to emphasise post-Brexit policies that target money on poorer areas and on the least wealthy. **Many adults are unable to work full-time or at all due to illness or care responsibilities. How should a new Government ensure that they and their children can avoid poverty?**

c) The UK's Role in the World

After leaving the European Union, the UK will want to develop further positive relationships with European and other nations. A key national interest will be the UK's trade relations with other nations. But at what cost should these trade relations be pursued? **How can the UK ensure that its achievements in the areas of human rights, climate change and international development will not be eroded by new trade agreements with large, powerful economies?**

d) The Future of the Welfare State

Doctors, nurses and teachers report finding it increasingly difficult to perform their duties amidst shrinking budgets. The rapid growth of food banks over the past five years is also raising questions about the role of the Welfare State in the UK. **How much financial support should be given to these services? Should civil society play a larger role in supporting them, or is our increased involvement problematic?**

e) Devolution

The ongoing move towards devolution presents a new set of political opportunities and questions. As regions and nations continue to shift power from the traditional power bases of Westminster and Whitehall, the nature of our political debate is changing. **Will this trend continue in the future?**

## 4. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union

- 4.1 Although the upcoming election is not a vote about whether the UK should remain in the EU, the way the UK withdraws from the EU is certainly going to be the subject of much debate in the run up to the election.

- 4.2 Across the political spectrum, politicians and parties will have three major concerns:
- The strategy the UK Government will use during the negotiations to reach a deal.
  - The nature of the deal itself.
  - The impact that the withdrawal deal may have, positively or negatively, on the needs of the United Kingdom and the people who live here.
- 4.3 The negotiations that the UK is now engaged in will be some of the widest-ranging and most complex ever undertaken by our Government. Over the course of the negotiations, the following issues<sup>1</sup> will need to be addressed, and ideally, resolved.
- The rights of EU and UK citizens in each other's countries
  - The UK's spending commitments within the EU budget
  - The transfer of EU regulatory responsibilities from the EU to UK law
  - Determining the future of contracts drawn up under EU law
  - Clarifying the UK's commitment to UN environmental goals made via EU legislation
  - The rights of UK and EU fishing fleets to fish in each other's waters
  - Renegotiating cross-border security arrangements
- 4.4 At the 2016 General Assembly, the United Reformed Church passed an emergency resolution<sup>2</sup> responding to the referendum. This stated that *'the Church's responsibility now is to be a voice of love, hope, inclusion and compassion'* and outlined the way in which URC churches could respond. It called on URC members to *'pray for wisdom and honesty for those involved in negotiating the terms of the UK's exit from the EU'* and *'encourages members of the URC to continue to engage with the ongoing political and social debate.'*
- 4.5 As politicians and voters debate the nature of our withdrawal from the EU, you are encouraged to take time to read this resolution and to reflect on the issues it highlights. It drew attention especially to *'the value of being a diverse and multicultural society'* and the *'contributions that nationals of other European countries make to the UK'*. **How can we make sure that these values feature in electoral debates about Brexit?**

## 5. Things to be aware of

- 5.1 During elections, churches are sometimes unsure about what they can and cannot do or say. The passing of The Lobbying Act in 2014 has led to some further confusion about what work performed by the Church is classed as regulated activity.

<sup>1</sup> Further information is contained in this Chatham House briefing

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/preparing-uks-brexite-negotiation>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.urch.org.uk/images/General-Assemblies/Assembly2016/RECORD-2016w.pdf>

Resolution 50 p.29

- 5.2 Charities, which include church groups, are regulated under the Charities Acts and may not support or oppose a particular political party, candidate or group of candidates, but are allowed to work and campaign in order to bring about changes in the law or government policy. During periods of campaigning, charities are entitled to produce materials to accompany their work and to further their charitable purposes (as long as it does not advocate one candidate/political party.<sup>3</sup>)
- 5.3 In May 2015, Mission Council received a report<sup>4</sup> which outlined the reasons why the United Reformed Church would not be registering under the Lobbying Act. The bulk of our 'public issues' work is dealt with by the Joint Public Issues Team, and in view of this, this report stated that the *"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 synod 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."*
- 5.4 Undoubtedly, the most important way for churches to be involved in the upcoming election is by encouraging people to engage thoughtfully and prayerfully with the breadth of issues and then to exercise their democratic right to vote. If you or your church is confused about what exactly this means you can do, please do get in touch with the church and society secretary at Church House.
- 5.5 If your church plans to organise a hustings, then it is important to try to invite every political party or independent candidate – if in practice there are objective and impartial reasons for not inviting particular candidates (i.e. too many candidates), this reason must be made clear and public. Further guidance on organising a hustings may be found in the resources listed below.

## 6. Resources

- 6.1 As normal, the Joint Public Issues Team, which brings together the United Reformed Church, The Methodist Church, The Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Church of Scotland to work on issues of peace and justice, will be publishing various resources designed to help churches reflect on politics in the run up to the election. All of these materials may be found at: [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-june-2017/](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-june-2017/)
- **"This is a time"** offers some biblical reflections on some of the key themes of this election. You can also download it in Welsh: "Dyma amser..."
  - **"Holding a Question Time Meeting or Election Hustings"** is a resource containing all you need to know to hold a hustings in your constituency.
  - A detailed **issues briefing** will also be available by the time Mission Council has met.

Other helpful websites:

- Christians in Politics: [www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk)
- Churches together in Britain and Ireland: [www.churcheselection.org.uk](http://www.churcheselection.org.uk)
- Full Fact: [www.fullfact.org](http://www.fullfact.org)
- Simple Politics: [www.simplepolitics.co.uk](http://www.simplepolitics.co.uk)
- Quaker Vote: [www.election.quaker.org.uk](http://www.election.quaker.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Churches Legal Advisory Service Circular 2014/17 (9 October 2014)

<sup>4</sup> [https://urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/May-2015/M2\\_-\\_The\\_Lobbying\\_Act.pdf](https://urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/May-2015/M2_-_The_Lobbying_Act.pdf)