

Paper M4

Clerk of General Assembly
Affirmation of voting practice

United Church 2015
Church 2015
Reformed Church 2015
Church 2015



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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Michael Hopkins clerk@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Acting on behalf of General Assembly, Mission Council affirms the long standing practice of the United Reformed Church and its predecessor denominations, that postal and/or proxy votes are not permitted in the councils of the church on business which is subject to discussion, unless otherwise provided for in Structure, the Rules of Procedure, the URC Act, or Local Church constitutions. This is because we believe such meetings are to seek the will of God, and everyone present is open to the possibility of changing their mind in openness to the Holy Spirit until a decision is made. The views of absent members may be made known to those present before any decision is made, but only those present should make a decision.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Affirming the unwritten status quo that normally only members present may vote in the councils of the church.
Main points	Affirming the unwritten status quo that normally only members present may vote in the councils of the church.
Previous relevant documents	None
Consultation has taken place with...	Director of Studies in Reformed Theology, Westminster College Cambridge.

Summary of Impact

Financial	None
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Reduces risk of reputational damage by decisions not properly taken.

Affirmation of voting practice

1. As Clerk, I have received queries from Ministers, often working with a church on behalf of the synod, such as serving as an Interim Moderator, who find themselves in a Church Meeting they do not know as well as their own, and faced with somewhat hostile people, perhaps not brought up in our traditions, demanding 'chapter and verse' on why they cannot vote on behalf of another person not present. In one example, a pastoral convener was visiting a Church Meeting to chair its vote on a merger with another church, and someone who was not a member produced a power of attorney for a close relative who was a member, claiming that this gave them the 'right' to their relative's vote. In another example, a minister was placed under extreme pressure because certain members who were opposed to a proposal were not present. This is what has given rise to my paper.
2. Many of our former Congregational churches have constitutions, which spell out all manner of matters of organisation and procedure. The purpose of this resolution is not to address the preparation or content of these. Mission Council, acting on the advice of the Law and Polity Advisory group, approved a model constitution for Local Churches, which has been available on the denomination's website as a resource since then. However, this resolution is about providing the tools needed to help people do jobs they have been asked to in difficult situations, not about the longer term tasks of writing or editing constitutions.
3. It is true that in theory all members of the United Reformed Church should know and understand the general theology of a Church Meeting, which should have been explained to them when they joined the United Reformed Church, and why postal or proxy votes are not appropriate for matters that are discussed; and it is even truer that all our Ministers should be able to explain this.
4. However, the world around us has changed, and the climate in which we now find ourselves is one in which the prevailing mood is directly opposed to this thinking. There are a great many organisations, from political parties and trades unions to special interest groups (such as the National Trust and the WI) which encourage their thousands of members to participate in mass votes by postal or proxy voting. It is also the case that a greater proportion of our members than ever before come from backgrounds outside our tradition, and that we live in an age increasingly assertive of democracy and rights, and an increasingly litigious culture.
5. What this is leading to is a situation in which the non-acceptance of postal and proxy votes for matters that are discussed, because of our theology of the members present seeking the will of God, is increasingly challenged, even though people should know and understand why this is so. Even more challenging is the presence of people of an increasing litigious mindset (although one might question how such thinking can be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit). One minister quoted a church member who referenced a judicial review on the requirement for secret ballots at public meetings (which was irrelevant because a Church Meeting is not a public meeting). While it is perfectly possible to answer such challenges, it can be unsettling, indeed unnecessarily distressing, to some ministers to find themselves put in such a position. The only purpose of this resolution is to enable the Clerk to help people who find themselves in tricky situations.

6. Traditionally this 'rule' has not been written down because in former times it was so self-evident that no-one ever had any need to do so. It is no longer so self-evident as to not need saying.
7. The proposed resolution is simply an immediate step to provide the Clerk with some documentation to help people do their jobs in challenging circumstances. No doubt, in the fullness of time, there will be a more appropriate way to include this in other parts of our constitutional documents, as and when they are amended.
8. The Assembly's own Rules of Procedure provide for a postal ballot, in the limited circumstances of an unexpected Moderatorial election, and the many local churches contain provisions for things like postal votes for the election of Elders. This resolution is not intended to challenge any of that, simply to provide a piece of support for pressured people in difficult circumstances. When matters are not subject to discussion, it is easier to see how postal/proxy votes are reasonable.
9. The resolution is formally seconded by the General Secretary.