

Paper M4

Report of an Assembly commission

Church 2018
United
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Report of an Assembly commission

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Michael Hopkins clerk@urc.org.uk
Action required	Note.
Draft resolution(s)	N/a

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	Update.
Main points	<p>Commissions of General Assembly, whether meeting to hear appeals/constitutional reviews/references, or for the Ministerial disciplinary or incapacity processes, always report to the General Assembly.</p> <p>An Assembly commission met on 5 September 2018 to hear an appeal. The commission requested some further work be undertaken, and so the report is being laid on table of Mission Council as that further work may come before Mission Council before the Assembly meets.</p> <p>The usual formal report will continue to be made to the General Assembly of 2020.</p>
Previous relevant documents	None.
Consultation has taken place with...	N/a

Summary of impact

Financial	N/a
External (e.g. ecumenical)	N/a

Report of an appeal to the General Assembly by the Revd Wendy Williams, against a decision of the ministries committee

1. The Revd Wendy Williams appealed against the decision of the ministries committee that she had been deemed to have resigned from the Roll of Ministers of the United Reformed Church following her ordination as a deacon and a priest of the Church of England.
2. The appeal followed the procedure laid down under the Structure of the United Reformed Church paragraph five and the Rules of Procedure paragraph nine.
3. The officers of the Assembly appointed the following to serve as members of the Commission. Neither the appellant nor the ministries committee objected to any of the names:
Mr John Ellis, former Moderator of General Assembly, to convene the commission
Mrs Margaret Marshall, Clerk of West Midlands Synod
The Revd Geoffrey Clarke, East Midlands Synod
The Revd Sarah Moore, North Western Synod
The Revd Dr Matthew Prevett, Northern Synod
4. The Clerk of the Assembly was present to advise both the commission and the two parties, to facilitate the process, record the decision, and prepare the report for Assembly.
5. The Revd Wendy Williams was initially accompanied by Mr Peter Bounds during the hearing; after Mr Bounds had to leave, The Revd Gwynfor Evans accompanied Miss Williams. The ministries committee was represented by the Convener and Secretary, The Revd Paul Whittle and The Revd Craig Bowman.
6. Papers, submitted by both parties, were circulated in advance. Upon receipt of the papers, the Convener asked some questions of the Mersey Synod, and a further paper was submitted by their Moderator, which was also circulated in advance.
7. The hearing took place at Trinity United Reformed Church, Wigan, on 5 September 2018. The commission began at 10am and completed its business at 2.45pm. Before the appellant was invited to make her statement, the Convener explained the process, including the fact that the panel was acting on behalf of the General Assembly and there was no right of appeal against the decision. The Convener led those present in prayer.
8. Mr Bounds presented Miss Williams's case.
9. Mr Whittle and Mr Bowman presented the response of the ministries committee.
10. Members of the commission questioned both parties. The Convener thanked the parties for their time and submissions. The parties were asked to leave the room while the panel considered the submissions of the parties.

11. After discussion, the parties were recalled, and the Convenor gave the decision:
 - a) The commission affirmed Miss Williams' many years of devoted service as a United Reformed Church minister, within and beyond the denomination, and emphasised that no criticism of this was implied by considering her new situation.
 - b) The commission regretted the lack of communication about the planned Anglican ordination in July 2017, not least on the part of the Diocese of Liverpool, until very shortly before the intended date.
 - c) Despite the compressed timescale, Miss Williams was aware before deciding to go ahead with her Anglican ordination that the consequence would be removal from the United Reformed Church Roll of Ministers in line with established United Reformed Church policy. The commission therefore concluded that the subsequent action of the ministries committee in removing her name had to be upheld and the appeal against it had to be rejected.
 - d) The commission regretted that the decision to remove Miss Williams from the Roll had not been more immediately and clearly communicated to her. It requested the ministries committee to reconsider its process when a name is removed from the Roll to ensure both the individual and their Synod Moderator receive timely written notification and explanation.
 - e) The commission appreciated the view of the ministries committee that in the case of an ordination to another denomination it was pastorally more sensitive to have deemed a minister to have resigned than to put them through a disciplinary process. The commission asked the ministries committee to seek formal endorsement for this approach from Mission Council or General Assembly.
 - f) The commission shared the profound disappointment of all parties that the visible unity of Christ's Church is not yet our experience and that those who were called to serve across denominational boundaries sometimes need to make personally and pastorally painful choices about where their formal allegiance lies. The commission requests the faith and order committee to place into the United Reformed Church-Church of England Bilateral Dialogue the circumstances of Miss Williams's position and to seek better ways, preferably applicable to all dioceses, of recognising the sacramental ministry United Reformed Church ministers are sometimes asked to provide to Anglican congregations.
 - g) The commission welcomed the assurance of the Mersey Synod Moderator that the synod would continue to hold Miss Williams in high regard and maintain fellowship with her. In particular, the commission hoped the forthcoming 60th anniversary of her ordination into Christian ministry could be suitably and joyously celebrated within the synod.
12. Miss Williams thanked the commission for their work; she said that she had always sought to follow the Lord's plans for her life and would continue to obey the call of Christ to preach the Gospel wherever He led her.
13. The Convenor led those present in prayer.

5 September 2018