

# Paper F2

## The Church Meeting

Faith and Order Committee





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## Faith and Order Committee: The Church Meeting

### Basic Information

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<b>Action required</b>	Discernment by Mission Council of the present and future role of the church meeting within the United Reformed Church, and of the particular spirituality that undergirds the URC's understanding of the church meeting.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	No
<b>Alternative options to consider, if any</b>	No

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	This paper looks at the role of the church meeting, as part of a discernment as to whether this is one of the defining characteristics of the United Reformed Church.
<b>Main points</b>	A range of theological reflections are offered for consideration, and a number of issues are identified. Questions for discussion are raised.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	This paper is based on the paper on the future of the church that went to the May 2013 Mission Council, and emerges out of the summary of the group discussions at that Mission Council, during which the church meeting was identified as one of the URC's particular distinctive gifts.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Mission Council and the Faith and Order Committee

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Clarification of one of the gifts of the URC offered in ecumenical encounter.

# The Church Meeting as one of the distinctive characteristics of the United Reformed Church

## Introduction

In the discussions about the future of the church at the May Mission Council, the church meeting was identified as both a distinctive characteristic of the United Reformed Church, and as an area in which more work needs to be done. This paper looks at comments made in Mission Council and the subsequent Faith and Order Committee discussion. It notes two papers that are in the process of being offered on particular aspects of the church meeting and offers some theological reflections on the role of the church meeting as a further stimulus for Mission Council discussions.

## Discussion at Mission Council, May 2013

The church meeting was clearly identified as one of the distinctive characteristics of the United Reformed Church, e.g. 'The Church Meeting – a gathering when at its best is something to cherish'; and 'we need to reclaim the importance of Church Meeting and find our place in it.' Critical comments were made, e.g. 'Some meetings 'play safe' and questions were asked, e.g. 'Can we bring 'Church Meeting' more to the focus or has its centrality gone? Do people realise that it is fundamental?' A comparison was made to the Occupy movement – "'Occupy' – passionate people who knew their subject had daily 'church' meeting". It was clear in the discussions both that church meetings are valued in our tradition and also that there are some critical issues to be addressed as to the role of the church meeting.

## Discussion at the Faith and Order Committee July 2013

The comments from Mission Council were looked at further in the Faith and Order Committee meeting in July. The committee had a prolonged discussion about the local church, including questions of the call, purpose and vocation of the local church and contextual and theological issues around this. An issue was identified as to the way in which congregations feel less able than they might have at one time to articulate their vision and purpose. The nature of membership was also identified as an area which needs more work. It was agreed to start by looking further at one of the areas that had clearly emerged from the Mission Council, the role of the church meeting. Further work was commissioned and drafts of two papers have been written, one by Augur Pearce and one by David Thompson. It is also hoped that this area can be addressed through the pages of Reform, to invite a wider conversation on the church meeting.

Augur Pearce prepared a helpful and extensive (25 pages) statement of the Church Meeting's various roles, powers, functions, limitations etc., based on the Scheme of Union, the URC Acts and his own experience of Church Meeting operation in three flourishing city churches. The plan is for this paper to be finalised as a paper available across the URC addressing the practical and legal matters with regard to the role of the Church Meeting.

David Thompson prepared an equally helpful paper (4 pages) on some of the historical issues around church meeting, e.g. the way in which its effectiveness has been perceived over the centuries and issues in terms of its relationship to the Elders Meeting. The plan is for this paper to be available to those who would like to take a longer historical look at the church meeting and the way in which the issues from previous generations are still issues for the church today.

## Theological reflections

It is interesting to note that in the founding documents of the United Reformed Church, the overall theological considerations with regard to the nature of the church are held separately from the particular functions of the various parts of the structure. Where the Church Meeting is written about, it does so in terms of a list of the functions of the church meeting, e.g. who is a member, what is the church meetings role re the call of a minister, and the relationship between the Elders and Church meetings. While the first functions listed are about outreach, mission, and considering the Christian faith, the issue about the particular nature of the church meeting as part of God's purpose for the church and the world, the place where the mind of Christ is discerned and the church meeting's dependence on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are not spelt out.

What follows are particular theological reflections for Mission Council to consider:

1. The church meeting is a defining characteristic of the United Reformed Church, but not on its own **the** defining characteristic.
2. The church meeting reflects the underlying spirituality of the United Reformed Church in terms of discerning the mind of Christ by the whole people of God. It connects with a range of other expressions of this spirituality, particularly with regard to the discernment of God's purpose. These expressions include the regular worship life of the church, prayer, study of the scriptures, and small group discussions.
3. The church meeting is rooted in prayer, worship, and listening to the Holy Spirit.
4. The church meeting is a place in which people listen for the voice of God in the multiplicity of different voices that are spoken.
5. The church meeting is based on scriptures and has been reinterpreted over the centuries in response to different ways of discerning the mind of Christ. Scriptural interpretation as, for example, in Acts 15, offers a picture in which an issue arises, there is much heated discussions, agreement is reached and then the decision is disseminated. It is worth revisiting the scriptural interpretation for our understanding of church meeting.
6. The church meeting symbolises God's affirmation of each person, where the worth and value of each person is celebrated, and each person is seen as a vehicle for hearing the Holy Spirit.
7. The church meeting is the place in which people (lay and ordained) hold each other to account with regard to mutual faithfulness to the Gospel.
8. The church meeting at its best is a place of dealing with the conflicts between different personalities and different view-points and working these through.
9. The church meeting is inspirational, in that it depends on the Holy Spirit who energises, renews and equips the whole people of God.

10. The church meeting is about discerning God's path for that particular local community, which means developing an understanding and connection with the people of the place.
11. The church meeting is about wrestling with the issues of the day.
12. Church meetings in any given locality are shaped and informed by their connectedness to other church meetings and the wider councils of the church. As the network of relationships is built, so the mind of Christ is discerned.

There is a range of issues that arises with regard to church meetings: (FAOC would like to keep the focus on constructive comments on church meetings and on the undergirding spirituality of the URC, but acknowledges that there is a range of issues that needs identifying in order to look at more positive ways forward.)

1. The way in which the spirituality which undergirds the church meeting is reflected across the whole church, either in terms of the local congregation or the wider church, is not always clearly understood and easily made visible.
2. The relationship between Elders and the church meeting; it is not always clear what the role between each of these is and which topics are best addressed by each one (bearing in mind that trustee legislation has opened up a new raft of issues for trustees to discuss).
3. The relationship between personal charismatic leadership and conciliar charismatic leadership – have we got the right balance between the charisms of personal leadership and the charisms of conciliar leadership? There is an argument to say that leadership through the church meeting too diffuse for the rapidly changing times in which we live. On the other hand, there is a counter argument which says that what we demonstrate in our attentiveness to the different voices in church meeting, is part of our offering of an alternative style of leadership in these changing times.
4. Do those attending church meetings feel affirmed, enthused, and confirmed in their vocation in God's world?
5. Church meetings are not always attentive enough to power struggles and conflicts and are sometimes insufficiently equipped with regard to ways in which to resolve these.
6. Does the church meeting meet too often and too regularly, so that it is in danger of looking into greater detail of practical business rather than being attentive to the Holy Spirit and the time in which the Holy Spirit moves? Or should the church meeting meet more frequently, so that it has sufficient time for the whole community to wait upon God?
7. In larger congregations, a small percentage of people attend church meetings. Does more work need to be done on the nature of scale in relation to congregations and the consequent effectiveness or otherwise of church meetings?
8. Church meetings are not always seen as connected to the wider councils of the church and vice versa. If it is not just a matter of handing things down or handing things up, what is the connection and the interplay?
9. The younger generations are not always enthused by church meetings. Are there ways of developing the use of social media such as Facebook, to encourage another kind of level of mutual connectedness?
10. Many different views have emerged about church meetings and their role in practice. Would it be helpful to undertake more research into church meetings and the issues as they are perceived on the ground?

## Questions for Mission Council to discuss

The results of this discussion will be fed in to further work by the Faith and Order Committee on the role of the church meeting and on the undergirding spirituality of the URC as it is reflected, not only in the church meeting, but across the life of the church.

1. You are invited to start by reflecting on the ways in which you have experienced the discernment of God's Spirit in the setting of the church meeting and in other parts of the life of local churches of which you have been part.
2. In the list of theological understandings above, which do you give priority to? What new ones would you add?
3. In what ways do you see the spirituality that undergirds the understanding of the church meeting more widely reflected and lived out across the life of the United Reformed Church?
4. What do you see as the most pressing issues that the URC needs to face with regard to the church meeting? Which issues would you add to the list above?