

Mission Council round-up 7-9 November 2017

This round-up focusses on the business of Mission Council and gives short accounts of the content of the debates and discussions held and decisions reached at its November 2017 meeting. The full business papers, which include the resolutions, are [available here](#).

Day One – Tuesday 7 November 2017

Paper B1: Update from the children's and youth work committee

John Proctor, General Secretary, informed Mission Council that the moderators had removed Paper B1 removed from en bloc and asked the Revd Jenny Mills, convener of the children's and youth work committee, to speak to it. Ms Mills reminded Mission Council of Paper B3 (May Mission Council) which promised a thorough review of the URC's children's and youth work.

Beginning with a warm welcome to Sam Richards, the new Head of department, Ms Mills went on to detail the scope of the review, saying: 'The review is seeking to plan for the effective provision of children and youth work in the climate in which we operate ... with fewer resources. The review will ask "What are we doing? Why are we doing it?" and will be chaired by Sam Richards.'

The terms of reference are to be finalised by the end of this month; the review group pulled together by the end of January 2018 and the review itself to take place between February and June 2018, before reporting to General Assembly in July 2018.

Ms Mills concluded: 'This review It is exciting and invigorating and we 'whoop' it! It ties in with the URC's current emphasis on discipleship, and we want to continue that good work – to challenge and inspire children and young people, and to do that effectively.'

The Revd Kevin Watson, chairing the session, added: 'We need to both receive the challenge and hear the promise ... every blessing on the review.'

Paper H2: Funding additional ministry

The Revd Craig Bowman, Secretary for Ministries, and the Revd Paul Whittle, convener of the ministries committee, asked Mission Council to approve funding to run a pilot scheme for additional ministry within two synods.

The proposed scheme suggests providing synods with funds that can be used to support lay ministry (suggestions included family workers, pastoral assistants, community workers and local church leaders) in settings that would otherwise be impossible, if resources from outside the local area were not available to support them.

This fund would be held and released centrally and would be made available to synods for making grants to local churches to support other ministries.

Although a similar proposal – to pay for ministries other than as Ministers of Word and Sacraments or church related community workers (CRCW) – did not gain General Assembly approval in 2012, Mr Bowman told Mission Council that, during the past five years, the possibility of releasing money to support other ministries has continued to be raised by some people.

During general debate, some members expressed concern about the length of time it would take for centrally held funds to be released to synods, and about negative connotations the term 'other' rather than 'additional' ministry contained. Others expressed support for the proposals, calling the

proposals 'the right thing at the time' and that it was 'right to support the work of churches that were trying to be creative in the way members and the community was supported'.

Mr Bowman then explained how the two synods would be selected to participate in the pilot scheme, saying: 'We have three types of synod, one is comparatively resource rich, one is comparatively resource poor and then we have those in the middle.' He suggested that two synods, one from either end of the spectrum, should be selected.

The pilot scheme proposal, which will run for three years, was passed by consensus.

Paper M1: Updating Standing Orders

Paper M1 was removed from en bloc by some members who wished to review its use of pronouns/gender neutral language. A lengthy debate ensued, after which Mission Council agreed that gendered pronouns were not helpful, and no pronouns were necessary in the Standing Orders. Subject to the Clerk and General Secretary making these amendments to the text, the resolution, to adopt the revised version of the standing orders set out in Paper M1, was then passed by consensus.

Paper M3: Data protection

Mrs Jane Baird, Deputy General Secretary (Administration and Resources), presented the paper, which gave an overview of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which are scheduled to come into effect on 25 May 2018. Mrs Baird explained that the GDPR builds on the current data protection principles of the 1998 Data Protection Act, requires consent to be freely and clearly given, specific, informed and unambiguous. All organisations which handle data must comply with the GDPR.

Mrs Baird said: 'I am here as someone concerned about the way we handle data ... mainly because of the damage we could do to an individual or group because of poor processes or carelessness.'

She added: 'The URC handles lots of sensitive, private information and the make-up of the URC means we do not have the centralised controls that other organisations have.'

'The starting point for us all is to determine what data we hold, where it's held, how long we hold it for and how we disposed of it securely. URC/Church House is committed to supplying documents to help synods and churches navigate the GDPR but, concluded Mrs Baird, 'implementing good practice is the real challenge'.

Not surprisingly there were many questions from the floor of Mission Council, some very detailed. Mrs Baird and Andrew Middleton, legal adviser, answered where they could and Mrs Baird reassured Mission Council that any advice and guidance issued from Church House would be both robust and straightforward.

Paper P1: Complaints Policy

The Revd Michael Hopkins, Clerk of General Assembly, presented to Mission Council a proposal on whether the URC should have a denomination-wide policy for dealing with complaints. A detailed debate about the content of the policy followed the introductory presentation, with members accepting the principle of a denominational complaints policy but with further work on the proposed draft. A revised draft will be presented at a future Mission Council.

Day two – Wednesday 8 November 2017

Paper D2: Progress Report: Successor to TLS

The Revd Fiona Thomas, Secretary for Education and Learning, introduced Mr Graham Handscomb, convenor of the Stepwise task and finish group, who presented the paper.

Mr Handscomb began by saying it had been a delight to be part of the task and finish group – a creative space for the exciting yet daunting task of developing the successor to Training for Learning and Serving (TLS), with its working title of ‘Stepwise’. He went on to explain how Stepwise would be firmly embedded within Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today and the lay development strategy, and spoke clearly about the need for any training provision to be ‘fleet footed and flexible’ to meet current and future training needs.

In a comprehensive presentation Mr Handscomb covered the main points of the proposed Stepwise programme, describing it as being intended to offer opportunities for individual discipleship development, building on strengths and meeting the needs of participants, local congregations and the church at large. He explained how Stepwise will steadily become available through five streams – faith-filled life, faith-fuelled leadership, faith-filled confidence, faith-filled community and faith-filled worship – over a two-year period starting in September 2018.

Overall, there was support for Stepwise although some members were concerned about the lack of detail contained in the report, and there was a widespread desire for more information. Following the presentation there were many questions from the floor, including a call for early communications, queries regarding the emphasis on online learning, a need for training to equip people to lead worship, questions about the role of mentors, intergenerational training and a query on why there was an apparent lack of emphasis on evangelism training.

Both Mr Handscomb and Ms Thomas answered these concerns, seeking to reassure Mission Council that the thinking around Stepwise:

- included training on leading worship, and noting that such training will continue to be available via the transitional TLS provision;
- is intended to be open to all ages;
- will be available to those with access to online and traditional materials;
- and that the inclusion of ecumenical representation from Fresh Expressions and mission shaped ministry, on the task and finish group has ensured that developing evangelism is at the forefront of the group’s thinking.

Overall, Stepwise was committed to being strategic, not reinventing the wheel, or creating new resources where existing excellent material already exists. Ms Thomas concluded by saying: ‘Let’s work together and join things up!’

The desire for more detail was balanced by a call to ‘trust the experts we have appointed ... And allow them to do the work we have asked them to do.’

Mission Council then moved into decision making mode: the words ‘and in the light of the discussion at Mission Council’ were added to the end of the resolution, and, after further discussion, the resolution was agreed by consensus.

Paper M4: Age of youth representatives

The Revd Michael Hopkins, Clerk of General Assembly, brought to the attention of Mission Council a ‘small administrative error’ in the Structure, made at the 2016 General Assembly.

The draft resolution corrected the error and changing the age of youth representatives from 26 years and under to '25 years and under'. There was no discussion and the resolution was agreed by consensus.

Paper H1: Non-stipendiary ministry of Word and Sacraments

The main business on this paper was enacted on Tuesday and completed on Wednesday in session five.

H1 recognises the values of non-stipendiary ministry across the URC and raises the possibility of adopting a form of locally ordained non-stipendiary ministry (NSM). The paper was presented by the Revd Paul Whittle, convenor of the ministries committee (and moderator of Eastern Synod), who described NSM as a 'valued and diverse model of ministry ... of which there is not enough available to me in 'my' synod.'

Of the six resolutions presented (all of which can be viewed [online](#)) Mr Whittle described resolution one as specific training provision for NSMs, resolution two – to prepare a proposal for locally ordained ministers – as the most radical; resolutions three, four and five as 'sensible and appropriate; not to add anything – just to ensure good practice' and resolution six as looking at the training needs of those transferring between types of ministry.

Mission Council asked several questions for clarity, including one on the need for another layer of formally recognised ministry, and training provision, before moving into decision making mode.

Small text changes were made to resolutions one and six, before passing by consensus. Resolutions three, four and five were also passed by consensus and resolution two, after significant debate and the presentation of two alternative resolutions, was sent to the facilitation group, and will come back to Mission Council in a later session.

In session five, Mr Whittle, on behalf of the facilitation group, presented Mission Council with the following new resolution:

'Mission Council instructs the ministries committee to develop a fourth model of non-stipendiary ministry, based in a local church or mission project, whose training is locally focused, to meet the needs of the congregation and the community it serves. The proposal shall be brought to a future General Assembly or Mission Council.'

After a short discussion, the new resolution was agreed by consensus.

En bloc business

Papers B1, G3 and M1 were removed from en bloc and discussed, and reported on, separately.

The following papers were taken as en bloc business and passed by consensus.

Paper A1: General Assembly 2018 and 2020

A brief report by the Assembly arrangements committee on the progress of preparations for General Assembly (GA) 2018 and 2020. It covers invitations to visiting speakers, expenses of members, the use of interns and the question of GA in Scotland in 2020.

Paper G2: Procedure relating to the nomination and appointment of 'Church Nominated Directors' of the URC Ministers' Pension Trust Ltd

A resolution to amend the procedure for appointing directors to the URC Ministers' Pension Trust. It will allow the Treasurer and Deputy Treasurer to job share their responsibilities.

Paper I1: Mission update

A report on the work of the mission committee. The Revd Philip Brooks was appointed as Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. Recruitment for Secretary for Church and Society is underway. A task group is looking at the future of Fresh Expressions.

Paper J1: List of nominations

A report of changes to the nominations list since May 2017. The report may be read in full here.

Paper M2: Appeals Process

An amendment to the Rules of Procedure for General Assembly to more accurately define who a dissident is.

Paper O1: Report on recent work from HRAG

An update from the human resources advisory group. The group has reviewed job descriptions and salaries of staff where there have been major changes to their work. They have also reviewed policies at Church House.

Paper R1: Past Case Review Update

A report from the safeguarding advisory group. Phase two of the Past Case Review, open advertising, is concluded. Phase one, reviewing files and making recommendations, continues. A learning group is meeting and is expected to deliver a draft report to the next Mission Council.

Paper J2: Nominations supplementary report

The Revd Ray Adams, convenor of the nominations committee, warmly greeted Mission Council before introducing the [supplementary report](#) to [Paper J1](#), which added further names.

Mission Council was asked to note and approve the changes set out in Section A of the list of nominations agreed in May 2017, and appoint according to the list of nominations in sections B and C of the report.

During the comment stage of the process, Immediate past moderator, Mr John Ellis, drew members' attention to section D of the paper, that review groups had been formed for the following posts; Clerk of the General Assembly, convened by himself, Eastern Synod Moderator, convened by the Revd Bill Young (West Midlands), and National Synod of Wales Moderator, convened by the Revd Mike Shrubsole.

Mr Adams also asked Mission Council to appoint Mr Bob Christie, and Mr David Greatorex as members of the finance committee with immediate effect, until June 2021.

These resolutions were passed by consensus.

Paper C1: The future for *Reform*

Mr Peter Knowles, convenor of the communications committee, introduced Paper C1, asking Mission Council to continue with the current annual subsidy of £90,000 for the next three years.

Mr Knowles said he's very proud of the magazine, saying: 'the communications department and *Reform* staff team work hard to make it engaging and useful for individuals, small groups and the wider denomination.'

He explained he was asking Mission Council for two kinds of support:

1. Financial – a continuation of the current subsidy and;
2. Advocacy – to encourage your friends and acquaintances to read it – and then buy it.

There were no questions for clarification, but the discussion stage was lively. Several members of Mission Council said they were conflicted by this decision: while clearly seeing the value of *Reform* and noting that, in the past 18 months, the quality of the magazine has increased, it was felt that £90,000 a year was money that could perhaps be ‘better’ spent elsewhere.

One member said: ‘*Reform* has had it ... we need a proper plan ... it needs to be self-funding, with no top-up grants from the central budget.’ In response, Mr Knowles said he fully understood this point of view – Mission Council has a clear choice to make about how it uses its resources – but he was clear that keeping the subsidy constant has implied improvement targets within it, but it was not possible to develop and implement a business plan that would guarantee *Reform* becoming self-supporting.

There was some discussion on the digital version – of which there are currently 270 subscriptions – and a clear desire for the communications staff team and committee to actively push digital sales to increase the reach of *Reform*.

The resolution was put to Mission Council under majority voting rules, and passed with a clear majority.

Paper N1: Task group on the future of General Assembly

Paper N1 bridged two sessions, five and seven. In session five Mrs Val Morrison, as convenor of the task group, presented a report on the group’s review of General Assembly – including its location, frequency, size and duration, and the number of its moderators.

This paper recommends ending the present rotation of Assembly locations, in favour of central locations. It also sets out three options for the other questions under discussion:

- A. A slightly smaller, three-day Assembly, meeting every year, with one Moderator; and Mission Council meeting once a year.
- B. An Assembly reduced to half its present size, meeting every year, for four days, with one Moderator; and Mission Council meeting once a year.
- C. Continue as now, but with a slightly smaller Assembly.

Mrs Morrison asked Mission Council to decide on location, and to offer opinions on the other questions raised in the paper to shape the task group’s report to the 2018 General Assembly.

Members discussed the questions in groups and gave feedback to Mrs Morrison.

In session seven, Mission Council discussed the resolution to end the rotation of Assembly locations, and passed it unanimously. During the discussion, more than one member made the point that synods hosting Assembly would need help from other synods in stewarding the venue.

Ms Morrison then presented the feedback she had received from discussion groups. On the three options presented in the paper, she said: ‘50% preferred A, 50% preferred B; no one preferred C.’ Options A and B, both for annual assemblies, will therefore be presented to the 2018 General Assembly.

On the other questions discussed, Ms Morrison reported general support for the following: returning to one Moderator; having the same number of representatives from each synod; moderators not chairing Assembly until the end of their term of office. There was however little support for the proposal of issuing tokens to limit the number of times a member can speak.

Ms Morrison said that the task group would meet again soon to develop their proposals, shaped by this guidance from Mission Council, and bring them to General Assembly in 2018.

Paper Y1: Changes to the Rules of Procedure for the conduct of the URC

Mr Dan Morrell, URC Youth Assembly Moderator (URCYA), asked Mission Council to provide greater fairness amongst all nominees for the role of Moderator of General Assembly, and for procedures to mirror closely the procedure for electing the Moderator of Youth Assembly, citing that it has been proven to be fair and useful in determining, with prayer, the most suitable Moderator.

Mr Morrell explained that, at URCYA Moderator elections, those standing are given an opportunity to read out their 'pen portrait' and answer a question posed by the current Moderator.

Questions from the floor included an example of what kind of questions might be put to those standing. Mr Morrell explained that those standing could be asked to describe the skills they felt were suitable and applicable to the role of Moderator.

Continuing with his presentation, Mr Morrell added that he, along with Hannah Jones, Moderator-elect of URCYA, believed General Assembly's current procedure showed a bias towards nominees who are incumbent members of Assembly, and is not particularly helpful in helping members discern who may be best suited for the role.

Mr Morrell asked for the introduction of a 'Re-Open Nominations' (RON), option to ensure that the voices of those who might feel that a suitable candidate had yet to be identified, were heard.

A lengthy and far-reaching debate about RON and pen portraits followed.

One member, favouring pen portraits, said: 'If you don't have some way of seeing someone in action, lay or ordained, our choices of electing Moderators go down because, often, their work is seen in a smaller area of the church. Pen portraits provide the opportunity for people to hear about who is being elected – not so that it's competitive but so that those who are less well known are actually seen and heard, and people have some sense of who they are, rather than a name on a piece of paper.'

At the end of the lengthy and far-reaching discussion, Mission Council agreed by consensus to revisit the subject at the March 2018 meeting of Mission Council.

Paper F1: Faith and order committee update

The Revd Dr Alan Spence, convenor of the faith and order committee, introduced the short paper, saying it was self-explanatory and asked for questions.

Richard Church, Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship) asked if the faith and order committee (FAOC) would be able to take on responsibility for the oversight of the prayer and worship resources of the URC. Alan Spence said he felt that, although there is certainly a FAOC element to any such resources, he felt it was not really a job for them, although he'd be happy to have a worship focussed sub-committee attached to FAOC, if that would be helpful.

There was also a question on the state of formal conversations with the Church of England, as well as a request for a concise, more modern, version of the Statement of Faith and Order. On the first question, the Revd Philip Brooks, Secretary for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations confirmed the talks were still in the 'in tray'; and on the second question, Dr Spence said any re-writing of the Statement of Faith and Order was an important piece of work, but would need to be something that FAOC was 'commissioned' to do by General Assembly or Mission Council.

Dr Spence also said that there were plans afoot to write ten short papers on what the URC believes on subjects as wide-ranging as 'God' and 'Mission'.

The work and direction of the faith and order committee was commended.

Verbal update (D1)

The Revd Fiona Thomas, Secretary for Education and Learning, gave a verbal progress report on the development of lay training and congregational development. The education and learning committee, she said, had set up a task group to lead a consultation, chaired by the Revd Stephen Heap, a Baptist minister and professor of theology. The committee will bring a strategy to Mission Council in March.

Paper I3: Update on Walking the Way

Paper I3 was presented by the Revd Richard Church and Ms Francis Brienens, joint convenors of the Walking the Way steering group. The paper is a self-explanatory update on the ongoing work around Walking the Way.

Comments from the floor included some mixed views around the two films prepared for the Autumn synod meetings, and very positive feedback around the Prayers of Preparation. In response, Mr Church said the films had received a mixed response, but added, 'We're making resources available to the Church – if they're helpful then all well and good – if not – then don't use them!'

Paper I2: Commitment for Life Review

Paper I2 was presented by the Revd Bernie Collins, convenor of the mission committee. The paper is for information only and precedes a further paper and resolution on the matter planned for General Assembly 2018. The report details the findings of the review of Commitment for Life which took place between September 2016 and September 2017. In his short introduction Mr Collins noted the recent 25th anniversary of Commitment for Life, and commended the programme.

Questions and comments were invited from the floor. Some discomfort was expressed around the percentage of Commitment for Life funds that are used for administration. In response, Mr Collins agreed that the giving:administration ratio was a cause for concern.

Paper U1: Criteria for the appointment of a General Secretary

This paper was presented by Mr John Ellis, immediate-past moderator and convenor of the General Secretary nomination group that sought and appointed a General Secretary in 2013. The debate was started in session three, and completed in session eight.

Mission Council discussed at length the advantages and disadvantages of opening the post of General Secretary to lay people. A suggestion to defer discussion of the matter to General Assembly was voted on but did not gain support.

Several variations on the proposal in U1 were considered, then Mission Council voted on simply whether they wanted to see some change or no change. This vote was inconclusive.

Mr Ellis advised members that the Mission Council Advisory Group had asked for discussion and that had now had it. He said the question would not need to come before a later meeting of Mission Council unless the council required further information.

The Moderator of General Assembly, the Revd Kevin Watson, declared that it was inappropriate to continue with the discussion due to its inconclusive nature.

Day three – Thursday 9 November 2017

Paper G1: The Budget

Mr Ian Hardie, Treasurer and convenor of the finance committee, presented Paper G1.

Mr Hardie highlighted some noteworthy areas of the draft budget; he said that, although there was a continued modest decline in M&M, other sources of income will rise – specifically an increase in dividends and the rent from the second floor of the newly refurbished Church House. The costs of ministry are expected to decline slightly, and other costs will hold – and this will result in a deficit of around £1000 for the year.

Mr Hardie went on to explain that the financial projections for 2019 and 2020 show a clear deterioration in the URC's financial position – a result of the pressing need to increase contributions into both the ministers' and the lay staff pension funds. He said this need was challenging, adding: 'There may be hard choices ahead about how we close these gaps ... these gaps are unsustainable,' but said he planned to bring suggestions as to how it might be addressed to either the March 2018 meeting of Mission Council or General Assembly 2018.

A short discussion followed around paragraph 11 of [Paper G1](#) which outlined a plan to address a deficit in the lay staff pension scheme with a one-off £2 million contribution from URC Trust reserves.

The resolution agreeing the 2018 budget was passed unanimously, the vote was taken under majority voting rules.

Paper G3: Rule changes in calculating Ministers' Pension Fund benefits

Mr Ian Hardie introduced Paper G3 concerning rule changes in calculating ministers' pension fund benefits.

He asked for Mission Council to recognise:

- That the method set out in the present rules, relating to benefits for part-time members in ill health retirement cases, may, unintentionally, discriminate against those members;
- The UK Supreme Court recently clarified the law about the pension entitlement of same sex spouses and civil partners. The Church is advised to amend the rules to reflect the newly understood legal position.

In July 2017, the court judged, in Walker v Innospec Ltd, that Mr Walker's husband had the right to a survivor's pension calculated on the same basis as if Mr Walker were married to a woman. Provisions in the Equality Act allowing schemes to limit equality for civil and same-sex spouses to retirement benefits was declared contrary to EU law and ineffective.

The paper was discussed at length and an amendment to the draft resolution, recalling the policy set by the General Assembly that the Ministers' Pension Fund rules about same-sex relationships should offer exactly what the secular law requires, was proposed.

The amendment was passed under majority voting rules, as was the resolution.

Paper L1: Report on properties

The Revd Dick Gray, convenor of the URC Trust, presented Paper L1, an update report on two major property matters that the Trust has been involved in:

Church House: Mr Gray reported that the refurbishment had been a success; with one significant problem – a damp problem in the lower ground floor. The builders have taken ownership and are actively seeking solutions to the damp issue. The top floor of Church House has been let to Greenbelt, and they have now moved in. in.

The Windermere Centre: The Trust has accepted an offer of sale from a third party and the sale process is now underway.

Paper L1 concluded the business.

ends
URC communications team
November 2017