

# Assembly Business Digest



**A round up of the decisions made at the 2023 General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, which took place at The Hayes Conference Centre from June 30-July 3.**

The 2023 General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, began with worship led by the Revd Lindsey Sanderson, Chaplain to the Moderator 2022-2023. Lindsey was also confirmed as the next Moderator of the National Synod of Scotland.



“Spaces of grace” was the theme underpinning worship throughout Assembly,

We need grace in communal life, said the Revd Fiona Bennett, the Moderator of the General Assembly. It is through God’s grace we become able to laugh, cry, to wonder, and through that grace we also have hope for the world and God’s community of disciples.

In Assembly, she said, let us open our hearts, minds and hands to the ocean of God’s grace.

Following the decision of the 2022 Assembly to create the role of Chief Operating Officer, the Moderator welcomed and commissioned Victoria James to the position.

## **Ecumenical welcome**

The Revd Canon Helen Cameron, currently Moderator of the Free Churches Group and one of the presidents of Churches Together in England, brought ecumenical greetings, in particular from the conference of the

Methodist Church, where she had just recently been elected President-designate.



## **Synod Moderator’s Report**

The Synod Moderators’ report, ‘Life after 50’, looks back on the URC’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in October 2022, and challenges the Church to adapt to our changing circumstances, which can be liberating. The paper concludes with [questions for local churches to discuss](#).

## **East Midlands Resolution for Ukraine**

The General Assembly sent greetings to the United Methodist Church in Ukraine, the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ukraine and the Transcarpathian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church of Ukraine.

General Assembly further instructed the Mission and Finance Committees, with Synods and ecumenical partners, to determine what help might appropriately be offered to the Transcarpathian Reformed Church as a result of the Russian invasion and the ongoing consequences of the war in Ukraine

## **Bristol Korean Church**

Bristol Korean Church was received as a new local church of the URC.

The Revd Yohan Song was then formally greeted by the Moderator of General Assembly who called the occasion “really exciting”.



Fiona asked Yohan what prayers he would like as a “new limb within the URC body”? Yohan responded that he was truly grateful for the opportunity and that Bristol Korean Church regards itself as a seed planted in fertile soil, the URC. He asked for prayers that the Bristol Korean Church would be a proactive, fertile church, filled with hope and joy.

## **Bible Studies**

Days two and three started with worship and a Bible study led by Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. They can be read on the above mentioned page.

Dr Brady invited members of Assembly to imagine themselves in Zacchaeus’s place – called by Christ, not to lose ourselves in pressure of work, but to consider Christ’s demands on us.

## **FACT**

Dr Sam Richards, Head of Children’s and Youth introduced URC Treasure: Faith Adventures for Children Together (FACT) – a new, free, weekly resource for churches to support children aged from 0-12 years old.

## **Withdrawal of call**

At present, the call of a Minister of Word and Sacraments or a Church Related

Community Worker (CRCW) can be withdrawn as a result of a disciplinary, incapacity or capability process. However, there are times when a breakdown of a pastoral relationship may lead to a withdrawal of call.

As it is, the local church or pastorate issues a call, with which the Synod concurs, and the same councils of the Church need to be involved in the process for a call to be withdrawn.

After several comments from the floor, paragraphs 4.10 and 4.11 were withdrawn from the policy by the Ministries Committee.

John Bradbury encouraged Assembly to accept the policy in the knowledge that it always evolves and could be fine-tuned after General Assembly, to avoid policy being drafted from the floor. The lack of a policy puts many people in a vulnerable place and open to legal challenge.

Assembly adopted the policy with a request from the Moderator for those with concerns to contact Ministries.

## **Communications Strategy**

Paper C1 was presented by the Revd Peter Stevenson, Convenor of the Communications Committee, supported by Andy Jackson, Head of Communications.

Peter began by showing well-known logos, the brand and value of which can be easily identified to make the point that those logos convey an impression. The resolutions seek to develop and present an impression of the URC attached to its brand and logo.

After Assembly returned from buzz groups where it explored points outlined in the paper, Peter explained the purpose of Resolutions 14-19, that much of communication is about creating a good first impression and sustaining the thought in people’s mind that whenever they come into contact with an organisation, they know that they can trust the information about it to be true, appropriate and accurate. Resolutions 14-19 were all carried.

## Community Project Awards



This year marks the 25th year of the URC's community project awards. The awards are given at each General Assembly to celebrate innovative and transformative work that United Reformed Churches do in their communities.

Since 1998, 66 projects have won awards with prizes totalling £125,000. The scheme was founded by the Revd David Lawrence when Editor of *Reform*, and for the past 14 years has been sponsored by Congregational.

Three projects won awards at this year's Assembly:

- Causeway Community Garden, at St Johns United Reformed Church, Warrington, Cheshire, a garden that offers space for the community to enjoy and to support mental health;
- Darwen Asylum Refugee Enterprise, at Central United Reformed Church, Darwen, Lancashire, a drop-in service for the local refugee and asylum seeker community;
- Wooler Warm Welcome, at Wooler United Reformed Church, Northumberland, a warm, safe and comfortable place for people to meet informally.

## Greetings from ecumenical and international guests



Partners from Taiwan and Korea were welcomed as well as Najla Kassab, President of the World Council of Reformed Churches, who spoke at the URC Ministers' Gathering last year, and Gordon Cowans, former Moderator of the United Church Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and the current Chair of its Reparations Task Group.

Philip Brooks, Deputy General Secretary (Mission) also welcomed ecumenical and international guests, and invited the Dr Anna Krauss, General Secretary of the Council of Lutheran Churches in Great Britain, and the new President of Churches Together in England, representing the Fourth Presidency Group, to address the Assembly.

"We are committed to journeying together ecumenically. I'm thankful for all churches to stay with us and to work together with us on these issues. I don't want to forget about the empty chair."

## Legacies of Slavery, proposals for repairing justice

General Assembly agreed to give anti-racism training to Church office holders, including all ministers in the URC. This follows from the confession and apology that Assembly passed in 2022 concerning transatlantic slavery and its continuing legacies.

Karen Campbell, Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries, asked Assembly to



think of the Church's commitment to anti-racism as a journey. The URC needs to get its own house in order, she said, if it is to speak with credibility into the wider world.

## Poverty and Inequality in the URC

Paper I2 was introduced by a series of audio recordings of people talking about their experiences of poverty in recent months, produced by the Changing Realities project. Simeon Mitchell reiterated how Jesus came to give news to the poor and how the resolution sought to do just that.

Resolution 31 called on General Assembly to challenge poverty and the structures that cause marginalisation by recognising that poverty is a result of political choices and systemic injustices, and calling on political leaders to make commitments towards the eradication of structural poverty in the UK; It asked the Mission and Ministries committees to reflect on the ways in which the Church might be able to demonstrate its commitment to people living in poverty through the allocating of resources for ministry and mission, and to bring any such proposals to a future General Assembly.

## yoURChurch



General Assembly made the online meeting yoURChurch a congregation of the URC. yoURChurch began meeting during the first lockdown in 2020, and has continued ever since.

Assembly heard feedback from worshippers about how yoURChurch meets needs other

churches don't. 'It is literally a godsend,' said one. The Revd Martin Henninger, a guest from the Church of the Palatinate in Germany, said that yoURChurch had maintained links between Palatinate and URC during the pandemic.

## New Assembly hymn

On its final day, Assembly sang a hymn written specially by the Revd Dominic Grant in response to the discussions of the last four days: <https://bit.ly/GA23-hymn>

## Moderator-Elect 2023-2024 acceptance speech



"Have we not seen assembly charting a clear course to uphold the dignity and integrity of humankind in all its multi-faceted, colour-filled, relational wonder?"

So began the acceptance speech by the Revd Timothy Meadows, Moderator-Elect for the office of the United Reformed Church General Assembly Moderator 2024-2025. "The United Reformed Church continues to embrace a diverse creation. Calling the church to be and practise the ways of grace."

"I am honoured and already feel the weight of this new adventure. I accept your call to be Moderator of General Assembly 2024 – 2025. I look forward to the chance to meet and listen to you. Let's all keep travelling together, lift God's people up and recognise the Christ among us."

## Recognition of Children's, Youth and Family Ministry

Presented by the Revd Paul Robinson and Dr Sam Richards, Paper B1 set out the broad context and landscape of the church's children's and youth work ministry.

The paper was remaindered and returned in session ten where Paul thanked all for their contributions to the discussion phase of the presentation of the paper and further talks. In light of those discussions, Paul presented an amended version of the resolution which now reads:

General Assembly is minded that there should be a formal ministry of URC Children's Youth and/or Family Minister and asks the Children's and Youth Work Committee, the Ministries Committee and the Education and Learning Committee to consider what would be needed to introduce such a ministry and bring proposals to General Assembly 2024.

## Church Life Review Group – Introducing the story and principles



The Church Life Review Group (CLRG) was established by the 2021 General Assembly to examine the structures, resources, and work of the denomination. "We see the Church as facing a Kairos moment", the group reported, "where it has an opportunity to try different ways of being the Church and bring new energy to its mission".

The key question that formed itself for the CLRG was: "What enables local United Reformed Churches to flourish, and how

might the United Reformed Church most effectively use the financial resources it has to enable that flourishing?"

The CLRG had not tried to set a Church-wide mission strategy but, instead, produced some resources, research and evidence "to help us shape our discernment here about what we do next".

One way in which the concept of flourishing was explored was through the URC's partnership with the think tank Theos, whose report can be at [www.urc.org.uk/clrg](http://www.urc.org.uk/clrg).

The Revd Steve Faber spoke to the question of finances, to the experiences of local congregations, and the wider issue of sharing resources.

He touched on questions of money, which have been addressed in detail by Moore Kingston Smith Nonprofit Advisory. They have produced a [combined financial analysis of synods and General Assembly](#), after mapping accounting across the URC's 14 legal entities and 13 Synods.

Dr Bradbury said the report is a work in progress, containing proposals for future work. Specifically, focussed work needs done on sharing of resources, on how local churches can best be equipped by central support functions, and on developing models of employed lay work.

## CLRG – Establishing the groundwork

Asking Assembly to commend the five reflections on the theology of money for prayer, reflection and study, Victoria Turner asked whether our financial resources are a blessing or a burden.

## Synods

Dr Bradbury said one recurring theme within the CLRG's consultations had been a quiet underlying conversation about the place of Synods within the denomination. He said there are still those who lament the loss of District Councils.

However, he believed that synods are “vital sinews” that hold local churches together. “If we need economies of scale, we believe that is much more a question about Trust Companies, not about the ecclesial vocation of oversight and support to local churches in their mission, ministry and evangelism.” Assembly agreed with the CLRG that the role of synods should be affirmed.

### **CLRG – Resource sharing**

Resolution 48 asked for the appointment of a task group on resource sharing, to report to the 2024 Assembly which would look at how to remove barriers in order to facilitate financial support across synod boundaries.

The Moderator of Eastern Synod, the Revd Lythan Nevard said: “The URC is not fair; the fact that we’ve not done this before is something we should repent of, but now we’re here – hallelujah!” The resolution was passed unanimously.



Assembly was next asked to empower the Business Committee, in consultation with the Nominations Committee, to set up a task group to explore ways in which the URC might offer consistent, locally accessible support functions for local churches in areas including (e.g.) finance; property; health and safety; human resources; and safeguarding.

Dr Bradbury noted that some very hard decisions will have to be made. He raised the possibility of an extraordinary General Assembly to address such tough choices.

The PLATO - Property, Legal and Trust Officers – handbook will be re-established online with Synods to ensure that proposed

PLATO policies are ones for which each synod is prepared to carry liability.

### **CLRG – Infrastructure working group**

Resolution 51 set up a working group to examine models of, and infrastructure to support, employed lay work, and to ask how mission and ministry could be encouraged in the development of new URC communities of discipleship and worship.

### **CLRG – Church Life review Structures**

Resolution 52 presented principles which would underpin decisions about committee structures. These would include an aim of reducing the number of committees to create a structure proportionate to the current size of the URC. He noted, for example, that we have experts doing some of our work for us who don’t necessarily require committees to direct them.

Resolution 53 proposed amendments to the composition of the Business Committee. Resolution 54 proposed a new process for managing nominations to URC committees. These were passed.

### **CLRG – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**

Dr Bradbury asked for the group to be kept small – three skilled members only – but it was minuted that the young people would be listened to carefully and be central to the process.

### **CLRG – Worship**





Mr Faber asked for the Faith and Order Committee to be given additional responsibility for worship, adding sincere thanks for the current Worship Reference Group, which would now be dissolved. The Revd Neil Thorogood emphasised that we understand ourselves best in worship, and strongly supported drawing these areas of expertise together. Both resolutions were passed unanimously.

A merged resolution created the Resources Committee that will bring together responsibility for the work relating to Church House Management, Communications, Finance and Human Resources, which are currently looked after by separate committees. The new resolution also added optional time for the Nominations Committee to bring nominations for the new committee. The Assembly agreed this “in principle” proposal.

### **Affirming the human dignity of transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people**

Following a consultation with its facilitation group, General Assembly:

- affirmed the human dignity of transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming (GNC) people and asserts their right, within and beyond the URC, to live without threat of violence and hatred;
- committed to furthering the church’s understanding of, and pastoral care for transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people in the church, both locally and across the denomination and requests the Equalities Committee to facilitate this;
- recognised the church’s failure to challenge the assumptions and patterns of behaviour which lead to transphobia and acknowledges that church sometimes perpetuates these patterns;
- supported the right of all to receive affirming non-directive support and healthcare, and to express their sexuality, gender and identity without coercion or the fear thereof.

After a safe unstreamed session took place, there were questions on the floor about the definition of the word transphobia, and a reminder that there are those who hold a traditional view of sexuality, and that the breadth of the church won’t agree with all aspects of the resolution.

The resolution, taken in parts, was all carried.

“Obviously this is not a comfortable place to be,” Fiona Bennett, General Assembly Moderator said. “Conflict is also a gift because with conflict is energy, which offers us the opportunity to hear something new. We see what we can learn from each other. It has been the will of Assembly that we address this resolution at this General Assembly. We should allow this energy to create not to destroy, using the power of God’s spirit.”

### **Finance and Ministries: Stipendiary Ministers Target Numbers**



Ian Hardie, outgoing URC Treasurer, explained that over the past 20 years the committee has tried to find ways of identifying what has been affordable.

However, by 2021 it had become clear that membership number movements were a very imperfect proxy for changes in the level of M&M giving as opposed to using M&M giving itself.

The main aim of the paper asks General Assembly to consider replacement of the existing (suspended) policy for calculating the target number of stipendiary ministers. A facilitation group presented Resolution 24a,

which sought to find a way in which the ambition for growth could be captured without transferring risk or making promises where there was no money.

### **Address to the Throne**

The Revd Clare Downing, immediate past Moderator of the General Assembly, presented the Address to the Throne.

### **Moderator's reflection**

As she prepared to hand over to her successor, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly the Revd Fiona Bennett shared some reflections on her year in the role.

Ms Bennett said she had discovered in a new way a great community of disciples. She had also encountered a wide range of mixed feelings, from acceptance and belonging within the URC to tiredness and a sense of deflation; compounded by the uncertainty facing our planet and institutions. But she felt that she could trust the people she met right across the denomination – not because they were perfect “but because we are whole”.



Fiona offered thanks to many individuals who have supported her during the year. And she recalled a conversation with Karen Campbell when she said that if her successor as Moderator was a Black woman, she would be beyond happy. “That my sister Tessa has been willing to take up this call and bring her wisdom and courage and grace to this role to serve us all... well, my cup overflows.”

### **Northern Synod**

The Revd Kim Plumpton was officially greeted as the incoming Moderator of the Northern Synod.

### **Induction of Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson**



The Revd Dr Tessa Henry-Robinson has been inducted as the new Moderator of General Assembly. Her induction was part of a joyous closing act of worship led by Karen Campbell, one of the Chaplains to the Moderator.

The Revd Stephen Ansa-Addo, the other Chaplain, reminded members of Assembly that they were ‘saturated by God’s grace’.

***Reporting team: Andy Jackson, Ann-Marie Nye, Stephen Tomkins and Laurence Wareing.***

***Pictures by Chris Andrews.***

***You can read more about the General Assembly in the September issue of Reform and its URC News supplement Digest.***

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