

Notes from Mission Council

Mission Council is the Executive of the United Reformed Church, is made up of four representatives from each Synod, convenors of Committees and the officers of General Assembly. It met over the weekend of 8-10th May in Swanwick.

Worship



Our time together is punctuated with worship reminding us of our primary function to discern the mind of Christ together. GA Moderator John Ellis led the opening worship and preached about the relevance of Paul's letter to the Romans in the light of the general

election debates and the discussions to be had on same-sex marriage. Many Christians had bemoaned the quality of the debates in the run up to the Election but ignored the fact that we need to address difficult issues together in a better way. Our common bond in Christ is the key to achieving that - with the need to be honest with each other; without honesty we will never build trust.

Richard Church, former NW Synod Moderator, was inducted as the new URC General Secretary (Discipleship) in the opening worship.

Morning and evening prayers were led by either the chaplain, Nigel Uden, or GA Moderator David Grosch Miller who presided at Sunday's, silent, closing celebration of Holy Communion.

Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty

The URC has long called for a ban on nuclear weapons. We were presented a resolution which sharpened the call for this by encouraging our newly elected government to sign up for such a treaty. After informed and lively discussion on this paper it was agreed that this debate should also be held on the floor of General Assembly, not just at Mission Council.

Consensus Decision Making (CDM)

John Proctor announced an ongoing review of the CDM process and asked us: if there is there anything in Reformed history or theology that shows that we have a particular reason for using CDM; for well thought through views on why CDM may be inappropriate – and

not just because it sometimes gets us stuck; and if there are any good reasons why doing something else would have a fuller and deeper integrity.

Greenbelt Festival

We are now working towards a strong presence in 2016 and 2017 when we hope to be sponsors of the festival.

National Synods

We approved a paper which will allow the two National Synods to act and speak on behalf of the whole URC in public affairs, or in the conduct of ecumenical relationships, specific to the nations concerned – but without prejudice to Assembly. As this is a change to our Structure it will be sent to Synods for comment.

Historical Case Review

We agreed to start a historic case review of previous disciplinary cases and ministers' files to ensure that any complaints involving safeguarding issues were dealt with appropriately. An initial triage of files will flag up any areas of concern which will then be reviewed by our safeguarding team. We want to do this as it is the right thing to do, we note that the Methodists have just finished a similar review and we are aware that the Goddard Enquiry will expect churches and other organizations to have done this.

Church Membership

We broke into small groups to discuss a range of questions from the Faith and Order Committee relating to church membership and appropriate ways of maintaining it if circumstances prevent people from being able to regularly attend a local URC.



The Communion Table with the Assembly Bible provided a focus for our work

Support for Persecuted Christians and Religious Minorities

We expressed the URC's solidarity with those who are persecuted around the world for their



faith and called on the newly-elected British government to prioritise religious freedom. We expressed deep and prayerful concern for those who are persecuted for their faith, called upon the new government to make religious freedom a strategic priority and to take practical steps to show that commitment and mandated the Assembly Officers to represent these concerns to the Government.

En Bloc Business

As has become our practice a number of issues were dealt with in one procedural, en bloc, resolution. (Items can be removed from this business if 3 members ask.) En Bloc business included: appointments (Westminster College staff, West Midlands and NW Synod Moderators, members of various Committees); reports from various committees (Faith and Order, Mission, Nominations) and the accounts. All papers, including those items resolved en bloc, are on the URC website.

The Marriage of Same Sex Couples

Two sessions were devoted to discussing Same Sex Marriage in the light of the consultation exercise we have been engaged in over the Autumn and Spring. Consequently we resolved to recall Assembly at the end of June and to ask it to consider a resolution which: affirms the 2007 commitments on Human Sexuality; recognises it is not appropriate to express a single view on Same Sex Marriage due to the diversity of views within the church; declares that it is up to the local Church Meeting to consider if it wishes to celebrate such marriages; clarifies how LEPs should address this issue; notes the different legal context in Scotland; and recalls that most trusts on which local church buildings are commonly held empower the Church Meeting to direct how the building should be used. We also resolved to invite Assembly to refer this resolution, if it is accepted, to the Synods allowing further time for prayerful consideration. Great care was taken to listen to a diversity of views and to respect the different

perspectives that were shared. We also noted that appropriate pastoral care should be offered to churches and ministers that may find this resolution difficult.



The URC Logo

A spirited discussion about the URC logo was held and a suggestion that a competition to design a new logo did not find favour. However, it was

suggested that our current logo could be adjusted to make it easier to use in digital media.

Governance Options

Recently there has been a concern to reconnect the work of Assembly with our local churches; some have suggested a return to an annual meeting of assembly. We were offered a range of scenarios that would either be cost neutral or make savings in the church's budget. One idea is to reduce the number of central committees to three – one for each area of work done by deputy general secretaries; another was to abolish programme committees and form ad hoc working parties as necessary and have an additional, shorter, Assembly every alternate year; a third option was to have two day Assemblies every year with three central committees. We broke into groups to discuss these options thoroughly and to suggest further ideas. Feedback from these groups will be analysed and further ideas will be reported to a later Mission Council.

Christian Aid Presentation

Andrew Weston, FRY moderator, gave a dynamic presentation of Christian Aid's work in Ethiopia where they work, in particular, with



very poor women helping them generate wealth by giving them a cow or goat as well as solar lights and stoves.

Notes taken by Andy Braunston, NW Synod Clerk