

General Assembly 27th June 2015 – News Round Up

General Assembly Recalled



General Assembly 2014 discussed whether to allow local churches to offer marriage to same sex couples if they felt called by God to do so. It was unable to

achieve consensus - although a large majority of members felt this was what we should do. Consequently we have engaged in an extensive consultation process with local churches and the 13 Synods on the issue of whether to allow churches to offer marriage to lesbian and gay couples. Mission Council recalled Assembly proposing a resolution which offered a different way forward for the church. This declared it is inappropriate to offer a single view on same sex marriage on behalf of the URC and that the appropriate Council to decide if a church should offer to host marriage of same sex couples is the local Church Meeting. This, and an associated discussion about whether to refer the matter back to the Synods in line with our Structure, was the focus of our discernment.

Opening Worship

*we were not
made for unison
but symphony*

As always our time together was a mixture of worship, discernment, discussion and formal business. Opening and closing worship was led by both Assembly Moderators and started

with a rousing rendition of Nahum Tate's *Through All the Changing Scenes of Life*. The chaplain, the Rev'd Nigel Uden, reflected on 2 Peter 1 - a letter written to a group of Christians living as a minority in a society with different ideologies and who were divided on doctrine and issues of lifestyle. Mr Uden reminded us that:

- Divine power gives us everything we need for godliness; the Church is God's creation not ours and that He sustains it. God's saving work does not stand or fall on our own efforts.
- Divine power transforms us. Mr Uden quoted Catholic theologian von Balthazar: "we were not made for unison but symphony" reminding us that other opinions than our own are also of God and that God's truth is most clearly discerned through discussion and difference.
- 2 Peter 1 points to the outcome. We were meeting on behalf of the entire URC to seek the best way to be effective and fruitful disciples in our knowledge of Christ and ministry. In Church history we have never all thought the same thing yet we are called to follow and see how the Good

News we have heard inspires us to be Good News to our world.

After singing Stuart Townend's evocative version of Psalm 23 we settled into business.

Resolution 4

The remainder of the morning was spent discussing Resolution 4 (Resolutions 1-3 and 6 were technical about the composition of Assembly and the production of the post Assembly Minutes).

*Diversity is about
being willing to be
mutually
inconvenienced*

Rev'd John Humphreys

The Moderator, Mr John Ellis, reminded us of our purpose as a recalled meeting of Assembly: the wider URC was expecting us to make decisions, in the context of worship. The Moderators recognised that there were more than one view in the room but urged us to recognise that different views come from a desire to be a faithful disciple of the Lord Jesus and to work for the good of the Church.

During discussion an attempt was made to acknowledge the consultation process but this did not, ultimately, find favour despite a lengthy discussion.

There was a lively debate on **doctrine**. The Faith and Order Committee felt that there was no doctrine of marriage within the URC. Some members of Assembly felt that this discussion should be centred in our doctrine of the Bible – our highest authority for what we believe and how we live discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; others felt that what was being discussed was our doctrine of the Church and where ecclesial authority lay. Those who were concerned about Scripture being our highest authority generally felt that the Bible does not support the marriage of same sex couples – others felt it was an issue of Biblical interpretation pointing out that many of our churches and ministers marry divorced people despite Scriptural prohibition. Those concerned with the doctrine of the Church felt that we believe the local Church Meeting is the main centre for our decision making.

Members challenged Assembly about our **relationship to the world and secular culture**. Some representatives felt that allowing churches to decide if they wished to offer marriage to same sex couples was giving in to the ideologies of our present age; others felt that this was a false dichotomy not least because many members of the Church are lesbian and gay and wish to, or already have, married.





The Moderators leading worship

After a long, and engaged, discussion we used our indicator cards to vote. It was clear that an overwhelming majority were in favour of the Resolution but it was not possible to resolve this by consensus.

After further discussion it was clear that it not possible to resolve this recognising disagreement. After a break, during which the Moderators met with blue cards holders, to hear their concerns in a smaller space, Mr Ellis, therefore, declared that he was minded, under our Standing Orders, to resolve this issue by moving to a majority vote as deferring it to a future Assembly was unlikely to change anything he had heard. The Resolution was then passed overwhelmingly.

We were asked to vote on the Resolution again, this time clearly using the majority mechanism so that it would be possible to discuss referring the matter to the Synods. **205 members of Assembly voted in favour and 14 voted against.**

Resolution 5

The Rev'd David Grosch Miller took the chair and introduced the second resolution offered by Mission Council. This has the effect of referring Resolution 4 to the Synods prior to a second vote at General Assembly next year. This is the same process we use for all major decisions, including changing the Structure or Basis of Union of the URC.

The reason for referral was to make sure that we are legally secure in the event of a challenge through the courts based on a claim that we hadn't followed our processes properly. Whilst there were mixed views on whether the marriage of same sex couples is a change in doctrine, it is obviously a change in our practice. A challenge in the courts could cost much money and take a lot of time to resolve. The extra year this would take would be used to devise a liturgy for same sex marriage and to clarify the process that local churches would need to follow if they wished to register their buildings for these marriages.

Some members felt there was no need for a delay given the consultation process; others felt that by moving ahead now we would be modelling the diversity and graciousness that had been urged upon us in the sermon and the Moderator's opening remarks. Some felt that time was needed for people who found this difficult to acclimatise to the new situation they found themselves in; that we should take great care to ensure that we are legally secure and to avoid a situation where marriages we celebrated were later called

into question. **In the end 184 people voted to refer Resolution 4 to the Synods and 30 voted against.**

Closing Worship

After sincere thanks were offered to the Assembly staff and volunteers as well as to the host church, Carrs Lane URC in Birmingham, Assembly closed in an act of worship. After singing the Assembly Hymn we reflected on 2 Corinthians 13:4; 11-13 and closed with the rousing hymn, *This is the Truth We Hold* written by URC minister Basil Bridge.

What Happens Next?

Synods have until the end of March 2016 to decide if they wish to resolve that "this be not proceeded with." If five, or more, Synods resolve this then the Resolution declaring the local Church Meeting to be the appropriate Council to authorise the marriage of same sex couples will fall. If fewer than five Synods resolve this (all Synods voted in favour of allowing Church Meetings to decide about allowing same sex marriage in their church in the recent consultation) then the issue will return to General Assembly next year meeting in Southport. The Resolution will then require a two thirds' majority to pass. After that, local churches who wish to offer such marriage ceremonies will need to resolve to do so in Church Meeting and then the trustees of the building (most often a Provincial Trust Company) will need to formally make the application to the Registrar General upon direction from a Church Meeting. During the coming the year, the URC will prepare everything it needs to do so, in the event of the resolution being ratified. The time taken for a church to be registered will then depend how quickly Trustees process requests and the Registrar General processes applications.



From left to right, the Rev'd Nigel Uden, Chaplain; the Rev'd Michael Hopkins, Clerk; Mr John Ellis & the Rev'd David Grosch Miller, Moderators.

*Notes from Andy Braunston, NW Synod Clerk.
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