

North West Synod Report on General Assembly 2014

Introduction

General Assembly is the “church meeting” of the whole United Reformed Church, meets every two years and is made up of ministers and lay people from each of our Synods along with Convenors of Assembly Committees, Synod Moderators, Assembly Moderators, representatives from our Resource Centres for Learning and ecumenical guests. Around 300 of us gathered in St David’s Hall in Cardiff between 3rd and 6th July. Each of our Synod representatives was asked to report on their perspectives of the various parts of the Assembly and I have pleasure in compiling these for you in this report.



General Assembly 2014 in St David’s Hall,

There were three significant changes to how we conducted business this year due to Assembly being a day shorter than in previous years. Firstly, in an effort to save time, various items were considered *en bloc*. These were deemed to be uncontentious and so, it was felt, could be dealt with quickly. In the event various resolutions attracted the necessary 6 signatories to remove them from *en bloc* work resulting in considerable time being taken to discuss them! Secondly, we met in parallel sessions on Friday afternoon to deal with reports more quickly than we would have done if we were working in our normal plenary mode. There was considerable pressure on time especially for the discussion around Same Sex Marriage which took up three, long, sessions instead of the one that was timetabled for it.

Assembly resolves resolutions in one of two ways – either by majority voting or by consensus decision making. In consensus mode the Moderator asks, at key points in a discussion, representatives to show an orange card to indicate warmth or blue to indicate coolness to an idea. Blue card holders should then be invited to speak to explain their coolness if they are in a minority. The idea is to hear the perspectives of those who differ from the majority. If a resolution does not achieve unanimity then we move to “Agreement” mode where blue card holders are invited to recognise that the mind of Assembly on a particular issue, note that they have registered their dissent but that they agree to stand aside, and either not vote or turn their card orange. I, personally, was moved to see friends of mine standing aside and turning their cards orange in a particularly difficult debate as they saw the clear mind of Assembly. However, this form of decision making can be rather frustrating and we found that on one issue, as 6 people felt unable to stand aside from the overwhelming view of Assembly, we were unable to move forward.



A mosaic cross made at the Youth Assembly provided a focal point for us

I would like to record my heartfelt thanks to each of our representatives for their dedication in giving of their time and energy to attend General Assembly; the schedule is punishing and it can be very tiring to listen intently to all that goes on. Our representatives were:

Revd Nigel Adkinson, Paulette Bailey, Angela Bogg, Andy Braunston, Sheila Church, Revd Martyn Coe, Revd Bob Day, Revd Kate Gray, Sheila Green, Judith Haughton, Revd Brian Jolly, Revd Nick Mark, Revd Carole Marsden, Peter Melvin, Dan Morrell, Revd George Mwaura, Revd Stuart Nixon, Revd John Piper, Tony Porter, Lauren Stranger, Revd Ruth Watson, Revd Martin Whiffen, and Alex Young. The Revd Richard Church was also present in his role as our Synod Moderator.

Andy Braunston
Interim Synod Clerk.

What Do You Think? Pre Assembly Meeting

This pre-Assembly meeting is to equip and prepare the representatives who are aged 26 and under for General Assembly.

Once we'd settled at the hotel, and headed over to City URC, where all our sessions took place, we got to know each other by playing *People Bingo*; we discovered who sings in the shower, who can (and can't) do the splits and headstands. I catastrophically failed in doing the latter! This was followed by a session of worship: we had four of these throughout the week. After this we began working our way through the *Book of Reports*. We started off by splitting into pairs and exploring the retrospective reports section in a 'speed dating' style, each pair was allocated a Committee report to look at, and we had a minute each to tell another pair about the report. Then we split into three groups and discussed resolutions 1-8 (the 'easy' ones). During the evening, we continued to discuss more resolutions until 11 o'clock!



Representatives from the Synods who were aged 26 and under meeting before Assembly

The next day, to our lack of surprise, the *Book of Reports* was opened once again and we began by discussing with Fiona Thomas (Education & Learning Committee Convenor) the EMI Green Shoots resolution. (*This proposed setting up a fund to support students training for ministry. Andy*) We then had a visit from the Clerk, the Revd James Breslin, the Clerk Designate, the Revd Michael Hopkins, and, later on, John Ellis the elder Moderator of General Assembly. We found the more informal setting very helpful, enabling us to find out more about what James, Michael and John do with regards to General Assembly, but it also helped us to get to know them better on a personal level. We were joined for dinner in the evening by the Revds David and Carla Grosch-Miller. David, the new clergy moderator of General Assembly, explained to us the story about the Australian well with the cattle – from which the Assembly theme of Drink Deeply came, giving us some inspirational words on his visions for the church. We all came out of this very motivated. We finished off the evening with more debate and discussion.

Personally, and I'm sure I speak on behalf of all the Under 26 reps, WDYT? is an excellent way of (predominantly) familiarising yourself with the *Book of Reports*. This proved invaluable when attending General Assembly as we knew exactly what was going on. I have heard many a person say how well-informed the Under 26 reps seem to be at GA, this is down to attending WDYT?. "I wish Over 26s had something like that" I hear them cry. (*Not if it includes headstands...Andy*) It is a great chance to meet with the other reps and I found myself very well prepared for General Assembly. It is a great chance to discuss and share stories amongst like-minded/like-aged people, to grow in confidence in what you believe; thus providing a stepping stone up to GA.

Dan Morrell

Opening Worship



The Communion Table in the Opening Worship Service

The theme of water was to pervade General Assembly and after opening with the beautiful hymn *Let us Build a House* our Moderators John Ellis and David Grosch Miller were inducted. After the powerful reading of Genesis 26 verses 12-33 on digging wells John Ellis gave a powerful address on *drinking deeply*. If we had come thinking that the Assembly was all about telling us everything in the garden was perfect and that the water of life was running smoothly John Ellis was quick to awaken us to reality. He focused on three themes. First a relationship with God especially through Prayer. Secondly if Christians believe what they say then they should be working together. Thirdly it is vital to tell the story of Jesus in a way that captivates today's generation. He talked of areas where we were doing well and challenged us in the areas where we need to

look at ourselves. He particularly made us think about off putting words like *mission* and suggested we needed to break the deadlock otherwise our diminishing membership of 60,000 would continue to fall. He

encouraged new initiatives and a readiness to experiment. He concluded with reference to Professor Tom Wright about the need for all of us to drink more deeply of God's thoughts and that we really need to turn faithful worshippers into disciples. After singing the specially written Assembly hymn *We are people on a journey* the service ended with a beautiful inclusive communion.

Nick Mark

Retiring Moderator's Reflections

The Revd Michael Jagessar reflected passionately on his years as Moderator of General Assembly. It was interesting to hear him reflect that he wished he'd been more adamant about those things that he is passionate about. Three elements of his speech struck me: *Habit of hospitality*: this idea that we, as a church, have a responsibility with our welcome both together and individually to reach out to those around us in our communities and to other churches. This hospitality should be inbuilt into everything we do. Yes we acknowledge this in our words and actions but Michael's challenge was to go further so that our 'small church with a big heart' will lead the way. Michael's clear passion for *expansive language* shone through. What began here with inclusivity and encompassing language was continued powerfully through Assembly as we were challenged by the idea of this for whom words and descriptions limit their ability to belong. When we say men and women what about those who are on a journey in-between? Michael urged us all to begin exploring *sacramental mystery*, silence and the in-between spaces in our worship and lives, where God feels close and sometimes words aren't enough for our descriptions. He concluded with the phrase that we should be "Motion and emotion, a church in motion, and people with emotion." Always moving, evolving, seeking but never forgetting the humanity around us where we are called, by God to be. I'd never heard Michael speak before, I found him enlightening and passionate in his words. I am sure his contribution to our church will continue to touch many people as his moderatorial role ends.



The Revd Michael Jagessar

Carole Marsden

Friday Bible Study Ecclesiastes 11: The Revd Tim Searle

This was a curate's egg of a Bible Study. On the one hand it was smoothly presented (after an otiose preamble about what the speaker was doing in Southampton) well-supported by slides on the big screen, challenging in the demands the speaker found in the text and culturally wide-ranging – the use of *The Shawshank Redemption* was especially bold. Too often, said Tim, the church is self-important and self-absorbed and we need to “cast our bread on the waters” – to be curious, conversational, real, and to listen. No more navel-gazing: let's take risks! On the other hand, there was no attempt to contextualise the extract: listeners might have taken Ecclesiastes (invariably referred to as “teacher”^{*} when the correct epithet is “preacher” – and that makes a difference!) at face value, instead of realising just how cynical his writing is – remember he begins: “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” – all, not just some things. A look at chapter 10 and the famous chapter 12 would also have helped. The implications of the study were that Koheleth thought that we would indeed, “find [our bread] after many days” but I suspect Koheleth emphatically derides that sentimentality. Indeed, as Tim himself said, most of the bread his children tried to feed systematically to the ducks failed to achieve the destination they intended. Koheleth would only be surprised that some actually did. The opportunity for discussion was good and well-placed and the instruction to listen an especially good text for General Assembly. “Out there beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing there's a field. I'll meet you there” on the other hand raises bigger questions about the authority of the church, and Saturday's debate became intriguingly relevant in that context.



The Revd Tim Searle

^{*}I suspect that he would be a memorable teacher but one who would lose no opportunity of rubbishing to his pupils whatever the headmaster and the parents wanted to achieve in the school at which he taught.

Tony Porter

Faith and Order Report

The Revd Elizabeth Welch introduced this report which she called urgent but not speedy. She talked of the gifts and graces of the URC and the engagement in living conversations regarding its future. The floor was soon opened to discussion. This was the first such session and the response from the floor was sadly very slow - this should be our opportunity to support General Assembly. Decline of the church seems always at the forefront of church life – but as a speaker from the Council for World Mission said, the world church is declining and they realised we need to talk to those leaving to ask for their reasons and try to act on them, however painful. Another speaker spoke emphatically that we should focus on what we can do and do it. A Roman Catholic visitor to Assembly told us the prophetic calling of the URC greatly helps the Catholic Church especially the work on ecumenism and aim for a united church. Another speaker suggested we should be *Uniting* and *Reforming*. A CRCW speaker suggested we should expand their work where needed and take the risk. This was my first time at General Assembly and I am pleased to say the queues to respond to subsequent topics grew and often time was too short to hear them all. It was a very concentrated 3 days, early starts and late finishes so at the end quite exhausting and I had little time to look at the stalls or see Cardiff! It was, however, a worthwhile way to see the work that goes on at this level and some stimulating and reflective worship at the beginning, during and end of sessions.



The Revd Elizabeth Welch introducing the Faith and Order report.

Sheila Green

Conciliarity & Church Meeting

The debate on Resolution 12 – Conciliarity was everything we would have expected given the matter being discussed and the proposal to commission resources for developing conciliar working was warmly received.

So in theory everything was done and dusted.

The practice turned out to be somewhat different as conciliar decision making was tested to the limit during the debate on Human Sexuality. Whilst I must commend a practice that seeks a resolution that is acceptable to all parties, I did find myself frustrated when Assembly's clear will was in danger of being thwarted by one or two resolute folk. Conciliar working clearly brings with it responsibilities – on the part of the majority, to accommodate the minority and on the part of the minority, not to frustrate the will of the majority.

My conclusion – Conciliar working is an ideal to aspire to and consensus should always be the goal we aim for.... but sometimes, out of respect for the will of an overwhelming majority, we have to accept it is not always possible.

Martin Whiffen



An enthusiastic speaker at General Assembly

Ordained Local Ministry

At the end of General Assembly in 2012 a Resolution was passed asking for some thought to be given to ordained local ministry. The Church of England have used this form of ministry to great effect – those who feel called to this ministry are trained in the CofE and are ordained to serve locally. They are, unlike Self Supporting Ministers, licensed to either a parish or group of parishes and their training is not at the level required for those who are paid clergy. The Church of England has found this form of ministry useful in ensuring that people are able to receive the Sacraments. The Faith and Order Commission reported on their work in this area and felt that they needed to do some more work. There was a sense of discomfort about ordaining people to different forms of ministry (one is a Minister of the Word and Sacrament or one isn't!), they felt we needed to explore, more fully, the ordained local ministry of elders that is

a hallmark of our Reformed tradition and wanted to explore, further, if elders, or one elder in a church, could be designated a celebrant elder who could, routinely, preside at the Sacraments. Discussion was lively: some representatives felt that we should also look at routinely allowing Assembly accredited preachers as celebrants as they also have a pastoral relationship with a congregation, others felt we needed to think about ecumenical considerations as many traditions do not allow lay presidency at the Sacraments – others felt that this shouldn't trouble us. The Resolution wasn't controversial and passed by Agreement as it simply sketched out the areas that the Faith and Order Committee need to work on over the next two years before reporting back to Assembly in 2016.

Andy Braunston



The Bible is brought in each day at the start of Assembly's business

Election of General Assembly Moderators, Recognition of Jubilee and New ministers



Alan Yates,
Elder Moderator Elect
2016-18

The Revd James Breslin, Clerk to Assembly, explained that there was only one lay candidate for Moderator of Assembly for 2016 - 2018. This was Mr Alan Yates who is a nationally accredited lay preacher and an elder. He has served on the Thames North synod executive committee and has a background in industrial management. For the ordained candidate there was a choice of three; Revd. Martin Camroux, co founder of *Free to Believe* and former council member of the *World Development Movement*, who has published a number of books,



The Revd Kevin Watson
Minister Moderator Elect
2016-18

Revd. John Durrell who has had experience in a number of pastorates from the south to the north of England, having originally been sent from Jersey, and who has had many years of involvement in ecumenical projects. The third candidate was Revd. Kevin Watson, Moderator of Yorkshire Synod, formerly a probation officer with a zeal for evangelism, social reform and an appreciation of the merits of the United Reformed Church. (He is also a Dr Who fan and never misses the Eurovision Song Contest!) That said the elected Moderators were announced the following day as Mr Yates and Revd. Watson.

General Assembly applauded all the **jubilee ministers**, those who are celebrating fifty, sixty and seventy years in ordained ministry. The Revd. Philip Eastman had achieved seventy years, 17 other ministers were celebrating sixty years and forty four ministers had been ordained for fifty years. The Revd. Roberta Rominger, General Secretary of URC and synod moderators introduced **new ministers and CRCWs** to the Assembly. Amongst these were two ministers from N.W. synod; Revd. Ruth Watson, minister of Worsley Road and Patricroft churches in Salford and Revd. Nigel Adkinson, minister of Radcliffe, Stand and Farnworth, three Greater Manchester churches.

Sheila Church

Friday Afternoon Parallel Sessions

Assembly broke into parallel sessions on Friday afternoon to ask questions about the various reports which had been presented. This was designed to save time and people chose to attend whichever session interested them the most.

I attended the parallel session on **Communications and Faith and Order** which was chaired by Michael Jaggesar and therefore entertaining yet still purposeful. There was some distraction from a separate "Parallel Session" also on Level 5 and not very far away; it's invariably a problem to site these extra sessions well. In **Communications** it was especially interesting to listen to the editor of *Reform*, who described the balancing act he agreed to perform on taking up his job - the balance between a magazine for the URC and yet also one



The Assembly Moderators with the Rev Howard John who is celebrating 60 years of ordained ministry.

which anyone interested in Christianity might enjoy reading - a balance he still feels he hasn't truly achieved. With **Faith & Order** there were some welcome and interesting guests from partner churches. Some of the report was about ecumenical relationships, some about the way the committee broadened itself through co-options. There was some wry humour when we were told that the 400th anniversary of "The Reformation" would soon be upon us, in 2017. Members asked "Which Reformation?" and the guest from the Moravian Church pointed to their "saint", Jan Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415. (They will be commemorating that next year.)

Tony Porter

I attended a parallel session of the Assembly's committee on **Ministries on Equalities**. I have to confess that I did not gain or hear anything useful at all. The session was held in the foyer of level 5 and ours was one of two groups. The other group was loud and very boisterous. A public address system would have helped.

George Mwaura

Andrew Alpin from the **Finance Committee** briefly discussed the finance and the inter synod resource sharing that takes place. It is a voluntary scheme which should be moved to a guided donation scheme which is being worked out. The committee were congratulated on the accounts for keeping expenditure under control; however the moderator expense has gone up due to a house purchased for a Synod Moderator.

Paulette Bailey

I attended the **Children's and Youth Work** parallel session. Karen Morrison and Matthew Barkley presented the Children's and Youth Work Report. The Youth Assembly had been well received by participants and visitors alike and we were challenged to encourage the young people from our churches to get involved with FURY. Karen gave an overview of the work that had been carried out and outlined the staff changes. The work of CYDO's was emphasised and again we were challenged to make use of our Synod's CYDO's. An updated version of the URC's safeguarding material will soon be published.

Judith Haughton

This was a very interesting presentation on the work being done within the church with our young people. Youth Assembly was described as a good and vibrant and kept young people with different experiences together. The event had about 150 participants who attended to have a say in issues surrounding mental health and the stigma came from this forum to General Assembly. The quality of debate from the young people were very impressive as they were more prepared studying the reports and that attitude it was felt should be taken at General Assembly. It was very pleasing to hear about the many initiatives that are happening for and with the young people within our church and the staff team should be commended for this.

Paulette Bailey



Children from a local primary school helped with our opening worship

I attended the parallel session on **Children and Youth**, together with **Finance** which seemed a strange combination, but I went along to find out what it was all about. What I found was a contrast of styles of discussion. The finance presentation was basically a distribution of the accounts for those who had not downloaded them, together with an overall "any questions". The children and Youth discussion was a step by step coverage of the whole report, pausing to ask questions at each stage.

While I can understand the need to have the sessions, as there were a lot of reports and not much time within Assembly to discuss them, and while it was useful to put faces to names and have the opportunity to



A Question Time style event at Cardiff City Church on Faith in Foodbanks

discuss in more detail the reports as written, I had two main concerns over the structure of the meetings. Firstly, it was simply more sitting and listening and odd comments offered, which was just more of the same of the main meeting, where the smaller groups could have been made more interactive as there were less people present. Secondly, there was no feedback from the other groups, so we didn't get to find out about the other reports, which may have been of interest. So while it had the potential to be a useful exercise, I personally don't think it was used to its full advantage.

Ruth Watson

Mission/Nominations/Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee

We looked at **Nominations** first. The Convenor reported it is getting harder and harder to find people prepared to take on national posts. There had been a real failure to try to achieve gender equality because sadly women had not been prepared to allow their names to go forward. There was a suggestion that the Committee should examine and publish what was the cause of the lack of suitable candidates so that the trend of decline could be addressed. Secondly we looked at the **Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee's** work. Most of this is confidential as it involves helping ministers with problems. Tribute was paid to Judy Stocking's tireless work. It was suggested that we need to look at wider help than offered by the Counselling Service available. Thirdly we looked at the vast area of work covered by the **Mission Committee**. Here the committee wanted to help provide resources for churches to do active Mission work. Reference was made to the successful publication *The Truth about Poverty*. The Committee and its officers play a full part in Joint Public Issues, Commitment For life and Ecumenical relations. We now share our Rural officer with the Methodist Church. Disquiet was raised about a seeming lack of response to the Palestine Situation. The Mission Committee emphasised a lot of work goes on behind the scenes and that we need to ensure impartiality because it is important to maintain links with the Jewish faith as well as Palestinian Christians.

Nick Mark

Mission Committee There are two reports about Mission in the Assembly Books of Reports. The first is a record of recent work undertaken by the committee and refers to the different sections of the committee. The second part was discussed in a parallel session. The only resolution, related to food banks, was welcomed. I raised issues related to the current deep tensions in Israel – Palestine and how the committee was progressing this work which is enabled by Commitment for Life, Church and Society and the World Church Team. Working with Brian Jolly we composed a resolution for Assembly which unfortunately could not be discussed due to lack of time. This is probably being referred to the next meeting of Mission Council:



The Clerk to Assembly, the Revd James Breslin offers advice to the Moderator.

General Assembly, upholding the call of the immediate past minister Moderator to be a prophetic church, expresses deep concern about the constant loss of life and deteriorating community relations in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, and its desire to respond sensitively and urgently to the challenge of indigenous Christians in their call for peace with justice for all people in the land. Assembly asks the Mission Committee to give priority to its work outlined in the Book of Reports (page 136, para 9.1), and with our ecumenical partners to make information and resources available to local churches as soon as possible.

Bob Day

Same Sex Marriage



The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 received Royal Assent on the 17th July 2013. The Act requires the governing body of a Church (in the case of the URC the General Assembly) to pass a resolution permitting individual churches to carry out same sex marriages. No individual church will be forced to perform them but no church can perform them without the consent of the governing body. The Human Sexuality Task group of the URC reported to the 2014 General Assembly in Cardiff at the Friday session. A very lively discussion followed at the end of which, it was clear that the majority of delegates warmed to the idea of allowing churches to offer such marriages. The Moderator then sought the permission of Assembly for a

Facilitation Group to produce a draft resolution. This was agreed by a very large majority; the group was made up of people with a range of views on same sex marriage.

The following day that resolution permitting same sex marriages was debated very thoroughly and several people gave very heartfelt opinions and some described very personal concerns. The resolution could not be agreed by consensus although the overwhelming majority of delegates were willing to pass the resolution. The moderator referred the matter back to the Facilitations Group to see if there was anything that could be done to rescue the proposals.

The last day of the Assembly found a retrenchment back from the original resolution whereby the matter would be referred to the Synods and individual Churches for their consideration; feedback should be sent to the General Secretary by the end of March next year. After which the current General Assembly could be reconvened to discuss the matter further in the light of comments and advice returning from the consultations. It would still require a resolution passed by the General Assembly to allow individual Churches to perform same sex marriages. That will not happen now for about a year.

Peter Melvin

The discussion around marriage was a tumultuous journey, which took place over three days. There were times of inspiration and frustration; pain and joy; as people shared their stories, thoughts, prayers and concerns. The impassioned theological arguments, however, which one may have expected, were not to be found here. The discussions centered around the human dimensions of relationship and identity, and around what seemed like the genuine desire of all present to ensure that whatever transpired reflected the will of God as experienced by the whole Church. On Friday, the moderator made every effort to create a safe space for all people to share their views. Some shared personal stories, others reflected on the situations in their local churches. Some concerns were shared. The mood of assembly was read as desiring a permissive resolution – a decision that would allow local churches to decide individually whether to hold same-sex marriages – and a facilitation group was tasked with creating the wording of such a resolution, which would be discussed the following day. Throughout the discussion, everyone was respected. There was concern, however, that not all sides of the debate had been heard. As such, on Saturday, when we came to discuss the permissive resolution that had been offered, the moderator encouraged those who had concerns about same-sex marriage to speak. Concerns that were raised largely related to a need for more discussion within local churches before this decision was made. In addition, some people raised theological concerns, as well as their worries about the wording of the resolution and its legal standing. It was also suggested that this may be a doctrinal matter, which would affect how it was to be decided.



A Speaker At General Assembly

All of the above led to a sense of confusion and anxiety, as we slowly but surely ran out of time for discussion. Eventually, it was concluded that we would sleep on it, prayerfully, and reconvene in the morning, hopefully



The induction of the Revd David Grosch Miller as a Moderator of General Assembly

with a new way forward. On Sunday morning, a new resolution was brought, which provided a way forward that allowed for more discussion in local churches, but which also recognised the urgency of this issue, by asking that churches and synods report back to Mission Council this coming year. Although there were some technical questions and issues, this was resolved by consensus. Now we must continue the conversations had at assembly and start new conversations together, as we discern the way forward.

In David Grosch-Miller’s address to assembly, he spoke of Jacob’s long night wrestling with the angel. His thoughts on prayer in wrestling both sum up our discussions about marriage and suggest the manner in which we might move forward.

Prayer is the foundation of the relationship between God and the people of God. It is a necessity and not the luxury to be indulged when time allows. The prayer is offered and for the moment it is enough. Jacob knows his need for God’s help and now he must wait and play his part. Prayer is the precursor to action, not the alternative. Jacob must wrestle the demons of the night, face his fears and not be overcome by them. (David Grosch-Miller, 2014)

Alex Young

Mission Council Report

Mission Council has the role of acting on behalf of General Assembly between its meetings and has met four times since the last Assembly. There has been lengthy discussion about the role and future of the United Reformed Church. This has taken place under the title “Living Conversations.” The Faith and Order Committee have shared various scenarios that may reflect the evolving life of the URC over the next few years. These have been made widely available to local churches. Following the last Assembly, proposals were brought to Mission Council in October 2012 to restructure the General Secretariat at Church House to create greater oversight and management. Three deputy General Secretaries are to be appointed for the areas of mission, discipleship and administration and resources. Two of these posts were affirmed at General Assembly and their induction took place during the closing act of worship on Sunday 6th July. The post with oversight of discipleship is still to be filled.

There are ongoing discussions between the URC and the Methodist Church and that included a joint session of the October 2012 Mission Council. In January 2013 there was a further meeting to consider shared areas of work between the two denominations. Mission Council have considered two resolutions from Synods concerning the possibility of returning to annual meetings of Assembly and reinstating the Children’s Assembly, discussions remain ongoing in this regard.



Indicating warmth to an idea

Mission Council has considered a new role description for Synod Moderator’s and this was discussed at Assembly. The membership of Mission Council was also reviewed in the light of the changes to the General Secretariat. The ongoing work and mission of the church remains the responsibility of Mission Council between each meeting of Assembly.

Nigel Adkinson

Synod Resolution on Giving to M&M



Registering for
General Assembly

This resolution was inspired by the work of New Brunswick Church who asked each member to spend Lent 2013 - Lent 2014 putting away £1 a week. They were so amazed by the results, which paid for a new boiler, they wanted to inspire the whole URC to do the same. So the challenge was offered to pay 1% more on the M&M on top of the normal increase. As expected, this Resolution brought varying opinions and comments. Many were concerned about the financial burden already on churches to meet their M&M payments and to ask

them to pay more would be hard to “sell”. Some reminded Assembly that if they were able to raise £7 million for Westminster College then anything is possible; while others broadened it to a review being needed of all the finances within the URC. By consensus voting, the meeting was minded to move forward with this

resolution, but not all. To help with clarification, the resolution was amended to read “at least an additional 1%”, which helped. When it came to the decision phase, consensus could not be reached as still some blue cards, but they gave way to the mind of the Assembly, so the Resolution was passed by Agreement, while acknowledging it was not the first choice for all. Overall an interesting experience, as financial debates usually are, with some overly cautious about detail and others wanting to minimise expenditure, while some very supportive of both the Resolution and the reasoning behind it.

Ruth Watson

Synod Resolution on Age Limit for NSM

This resolution resolved to raise the age limit for those offering themselves for non-stipendiary ministry but, due to lack of time was sent to Mission Council to deal with.

Synod of Scotland Resolution on Scottish Referendum

The Scottish Referendum resolution evoked a heated argument and lived true to its reputation of causing deep divisions. The same kind of polarisation seen in the media in England and Scotland was very much evident on the Assembly floor. The crux of the matter was the wording of the resolution tabled by the National Synod of Scotland requesting the Assembly to pass a resolution to ask the United Reformed Church to pray for the people of Scotland during and following the independence referendum to be held on the 18 of September 2014. Some of the delegates were of the opinion that the wording should be changed to read: *to pray for people of United Kingdom and Scotland during...while others argued that the resolution should read: to pray for people of Scotland and all those affected during... At times the arguments presented by the many contributors sounded pedantic and irrelevant to me. Before the assembly was a very simple and straightforward resolution: the church in Scotland was asking us to pray for the people of Scotland during a difficult time ahead. They faced a difficult decision as they have been part of the union with England for more than 400 years. All the Synod was asking us to do is to hold them in prayers as they made this humongous decision because in the wake of the referendum. The results were undoubtedly going to be a major cause of tension whichever way the referendum goes. This resolution exposed the many divisions that exist in our small church. The resolution was finally passed by consensus with the original wording.*

George Mwaura



Mr John Ellis, addressing
Assembly

En Bloc Business



Alex Young
at the Churches Together
bookstall

As Andy described in the introduction various items of non-contentious business were voted on together, en bloc. Resolutions 4, 5, and 6 concerned the reception of three new Mission Projects: Grindon Church Community Centre in Northern Synod, MediaCityUK Church and Metropolitan Church in our own Synod. Resolution 7 noted church changes and Resolution 8 set General Assembly 2016 in Southport. Resolution 18 giving changes to our Structure was not supported by SW Synod and was withdrawn. Resolution 21, about the powers vested in pre-union trusts was not suitable for en bloc for technical reasons and was taken out of the en bloc vote. Resolution 24 was also taken out of en bloc as it involved re-appointment of Synod Moderators. Items taken out of en bloc were dealt with later on during Assembly.

Stuart Nixon

Snippets on Saturday Morning Sessions on the Church in the World

World War I Anniversary - How do our churches mark this anniversary well within diverse communities - do we call it commemoration, celebration, memorial, remembrance? The URC is working on ecumenical resources and want to

encourage all our churches to make this a time to reflect, pray for peace, not shy away from difficult issues and to engage with the former and current armed forces and their families and army chaplains whom the URC supports in their ministry of Word and Sacraments. We can see this as an opportunity for sensitive community mission and engagement if we prepare well.

Mental Health - as many people spoke about their experiences of mental ill health as spoke about gay marriage. These were, as far as I am aware, the two most involved discussions I was part of. Mental ill health is increasing and resources for it are not. They are being cut. This is a justice matter and one which requires our urgent attention if we are not to lose trained psychologists, psychiatrists etc from the NHS. The URC is being encouraged to improve training to Ministers and CRCWs about how to support people with mental ill health and all congregations to actively work to break down the still-existing stigmas about it by sharing stories in worship, prayers, sermons etc as it was pointed out that there are people within the Bible who have mental ill health stories and good news to share with people today.

Foodbanks - they are increasing, capacity is not. There are different models but *Trussell Trust* gathers helpful statistics and is the most well-known model in the UK in many areas. There is a great ecumenical resource available online via the URC website with worship, action points, information and myth-busting. It is hoped it will also be available in print soon too. It is for all churches to explore food poverty issues relating to the wider UK context. I loved the comment from the assembly floor that we should think of food banks as nothing less than subversive in what they are doing and how they are doing it. Encouragement for us at the coal face.

Kate Gray

Saturday Bible Study Isaiah 12: 1-6

This thought provoking and excellent Bible Study was given by the Revd Kate Gray, minister of the Dandelion Community in Wythenshawe in our own North West Synod. The study was part of the Assembly theme of drinking deeply from the well of salvation and Kate spoke particularly about verse 3 in Isaiah 12: *With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.* This verse shows the need for gratitude to God and the need to cultivate this vital part of our faith in Jesus Christ. The image of a well which is deep in the ground emphasises that we must dig deeply to find God and the salvation which gives wholeness of life.



The Revd Kate Gray
leading a Bible Study

There were a number of stories related to water and wells. The first from El Salvador when there was a massacre of people at Santa Marta by the river on the border with Honduras. So many were killed that the river ran with blood. Twenty years later villagers returned to remember this event and their shared suffering. Using this example, a number of questions were posed for us to consider:



A harpist played during the sessions on Thursday afternoon.

- Can we find salvation in this story and where is God in it?
- Can you recall times in your life when your well was full and when your well was empty
- How do you cultivate your own well of salvation?

The source of a well is the well spring and can only be found by digging deep into the earth. The water is not found on the surface. The second example was from Zambia where wells had been sunk but were useless as there was poisonous water on the top. Four villages were without water and there was no school for the 400 children. The companies who had sunk the wells were not interested in doing more but then thanks to the efforts of one woman, work was done to remove the poisonous water and reach

the fresh pure water beneath. Now there is a flourishing school for children in those villages. The joy of which Isaiah speaks has to be cultivated and is a choice we make.

Water has many purposes, washing, cleaning, drinking, baptism. In Isaiah, the waters of salvation are offered to everyone for the healing of the nations. We need to consider what the waters of salvation are for us and how we can be bearers of joy. Who are the people who are filled with joy and how is this achieved?

The third story was of the wells in Wales; there are 2000 of these. A famous one is St Winifred's well in Holywell, North Wales. This has been a place of pilgrimage and encounter for generations and there is a hospice there. The water there bubbles and gushes out of the ground and is there for all. It flows freely. So salvation through Jesus Christ cannot be contained. It needs to bubble up and gives life to everyone. It moves our faith outwards to enable us to work out Christ's purposes in the world.

Angela Bogg

Congregational and General/URC Awards

The General Assembly celebrated the work of the many community-based projects based in or linked to United Reformed Churches the length and breadth of the three nations. These awards are sponsored by Congregational and General Insurance Company. The overall winner, presented with a cheque for £3,500 and a wall plaque, was **Glenorchy Work Club**. Based at Glenorchy United Reformed Church in Exmouth, the Work Club provides specialist help to the unemployed community following the closure of Exmouth job centre. No formal records are kept, but in the two years since the project opened, at least 110 people have found work as a direct result of help received at the Work Club. Synod members will remember our ex Moderator Peter Brain who is involved in the project and was there to support the team but did not go up onto the stage. He was busy taking photos! There was a general sense of celebration as we watched short films about each project made by the Revd Dr Kevin Snyman, a URC minister who gave us his time generously and at no cost to the church. These are available on the General Assembly section of the URC website. The other three winning projects were deemed to be equal runners-up, and each received a cheque for £2000 and a commemorative wall plaque. The projects were – in alphabetical order: **Adeyfield Free Church** in Hemel Hempstead started Messy Church SEND for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities – and their carers and families – to further their mission of being a truly inclusive church. **Chapelfield Grow your Own**, a community gardening project based at **Stand United Reformed Church** in Manchester that grows organic vegetables ... and then gives them away to local people. In the words of one of the workers it: “feeds the needy, not the greedy!” **Hope Restored**, which operates from **Gloddaeth United Church in Llandudno**. This big-hearted, twice weekly, project for homeless



Finalists for the Congregational and General Awards

people provides cooked meals, clean clothes and housing advice to anyone in need – and – such is its growing reputation, clients travel in from nearby towns to make use of all of it provides.

Bob Day

Education Learning / Student Finances



The induction of the new General Secretary and two deputy General Secretaries

There was a lot of discussion on the subject of introducing another method of meeting the budget for education and learning. This is presently funded from the Ministry and Mission fund. The majority of members of Assembly seemed to feel that churches were already contributing for this through M&M and that it should remain the same. The Education and Learning Committee had the difficult task of finding another way of generating funds as their budget was being reduced. If there is a shortfall in M&M, this could be increased by the extra 1% every church is being asked to voluntary give on top of their M&M assessment. This extra giving could cover the Education and Learning budget; this idea was reasonably well received by members. However, no church really wanted an increase in M&M as contributions to this fund are already increasing.

A proposal was made to find another method of providing grants to students as the committee felt the present system was not fair to everyone. However there were concerns from members that introducing any kind of means testing to students may discourage many from training for the ministry. Therefore, due to members not able to agree this Resolution it was withdrawn for further work to be undertaken.

Paulette Bailey

Moderators' Report, Equalities, Expansive language

The Synod Moderator's Report took place on the Saturday afternoon during business session 6 "Learning Church." The report was categorised under six sub headings including 'Growing Together,' 'The spectrum of ministries,' and 'Seeds of Renewal.' Significant matters were expressed during this session, which had the members of Assembly listening intently. The decrease in congregational numbers was mentioned, and how it negatively affects the funding the URC receives. Additionally, the growth of unity with the Methodist church has been discussed between moderators and close future relationships are being encouraged.

The Equalities Committee session followed the Moderator's report, and took into account various main points including the monitoring of gender, accessibility of the church and the ethnicities included in the congregations. This session was an overall discussion and members of Assembly were provided with a number of visual aids on the projector screen. Personally I believe this was an important area to cover since it encourages and maintains equality within the church, and aims to make everyone feel welcome and safe, no matter what their gender, ethnicity or physical ability is. It was raising awareness of these aspects within the United Reformed Church, and positively talking about them in detail since it was relatable to many members of Assembly.

Expansive Language (Resolution 15) was the last section of business session 6 on Saturday afternoon, before the break. It included a question session where members of Assembly could ask questions if they were unsure on any areas of the resolution. This was then followed by a discussion session, in which members of Assembly got up from their seats if they wished, introduced themselves at the microphone and expressed their opinion. Personally, I was glad this resolution was discussed and carried because expansive language should be used within worship as well as inclusive language. It broadens the representation of God and doesn't categorise Him by giving Him a name, gender or ethnicity.



The General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, the Revd Dr Hong Jung Lee address Assembly

The use of expansive language avoids the possible offense caused to some members of the church as it looks at various words, phrases and images that may reinforce stereotypes. For example, a member of Assembly discussed how the Bible describes sin to be the colour of black, and they were of a relevant ethnicity. There was a decision session at the end, in which the members of Assembly voted with the coloured voting cards provided. The votes were clear and the resolution was carried.

Lauren Stanger

Saturday Evening Bible Study



Enjoying a lunchtime special interest meeting focusing on El Salvador

The timetable for Assembly told us that a long day on Saturday would end with a Bible study led by Revd James Church (son of Richard and Sheila) on the picture of the vine used by Jesus in John 15. Unfortunately, the timetable is only an estimate. Saturday at Assembly was a bit of a nightmare. This was not because of the issues we were dealing with but because we spent far too much time and energy confused about our decision making processes and discussing points of order and complex minutiae that should have been dealt with elsewhere. The result was that we over-ran by more than an hour and had no time for James' Bible study. We are promised that it will be posted on the URC website. We did listen to John 15 read to us in order that we could reflect on it. James' Bible study is now available on line at <http://www.urc.org.uk/general-assembly/1158-general-assembly-archive.html>

During Assembly we were reminded more than once of two things: one is that every meeting of a council of the United Reformed Church is an opportunity for worship; and the other is that the purpose of every meeting of a council of the URC is to discern the mind of Christ. The followers of Jesus are called to dwell in his love as he dwells in his Father's love. "Dwelling" implies that we make our home there – in the love of Jesus – in the love of God. It was really good how Assembly was framed and infused by worship even if on one occasion it got squeezed out.

The followers of Jesus are called to dwell in his love in order to bear much fruit. That is our purpose and if that is not what we are doing then the gardener will break us off and throw us away. Assembly heard of some inspiring examples of fruit bearing around the church. As members of Assembly queued up to speak with not enough time to hear them all, they were asked "will what you want to say help us move forward in our seeking to discern the mind of Christ?" That is a challenge for all of us in our Synod and in our local churches.

John Piper

Address to the Throne

The Address to the Throne is a way for dissenting Christians to raise their concerns with the Head of State and the Government of the day. Anglicans, of course, as part of the Establishment found it easier to have their concerns addressed. The tradition continues in the URC and is one of the last items of business.

Many years ago when General assembly sent a Loyal Address it was bland and, sometimes, seen as fawning. This tended to produce, from someone on the floor of Assembly, a Dennis Skinner moment in which it would be suggested that the URC General assembly should be doing no such thing. This year Michael Jagessar proposed a resolution which brought firmly to the front Assembly's concerns for peace and justice. The Address encouraged commemoration, but not celebration, of World War I and raised again the tremendous work people of faith do to support those in our society who struggle especially those who have to use food banks. Again, the Address asked important question of why such work is needed when we would wish to be in just society. Assembly had already discussed prayers for those affected by the referendum in Scotland and, again, we sought both to offer of ourselves, and encourage in others, support for



all who are affected during and after the referendum and seeking people to work together whatever they would have wished for. Altogether it felt more satisfying than simply stopping after wishing her well and sending greetings.

Martyn Coe

Closing Worship



The Revd David Grosch-Miller, Moderator of General Assembly

As the orders were handed out for our closing worship it was evident that we were in for a weighty service of preaching, hymns, prayers and renewal of baptismal vows. It was lovely that worshippers from local congregations came to join us. I was struck particularly by the Revd David Grosch-Miller's sermon. He is our new Assembly Moderator. He began by talking about Jacob wrestling with God as he moved from going it alone to trusting fully in God and how the experiences changed him and the reminder was his limp! That struck a chord! The limp would be his confidence and assurance of God on his journey. However, the bit that spoke to me was the Moderator's challenge that instead of asking 'what' do we do? we should be asking 'why' do we do what we do. So he challenged ministers to stop stressing about what they don't have time to fit in and ask ourselves: why do we do

what we do? Churches need to stop trying to measure success by how busy we are and look at why we do what we do.

David believes that when we do we will be able to discover whether we find ritual, tradition, solid rock or mist beneath the layers of activity. We'll rediscover our core, our centre. Only then will we know what our fellowships need to nurture faith, fellowship and deeper relationships with each other and God.

"Why?" Is something I hear a lot of, many times every day. But it is challenging to ask that of church life, feeling impertinent even. We do things because we are good people, we do things to share the many things we have, we do things because we always have, we do things to stop us getting stuck in a rut.

The Moderators challenge was to ask...why? And to share our responses to help get back to core values and principles of our faith. To build up the people of God so that when we do things we are showing our scars, the wrestling we have done with God to get to that point, demonstrating and talking about how God has journeyed with us and still does. I, sadly, had to leave just before the end of the service but I found it an uplifting experience.

Carole Marsden

Fringe Meetings

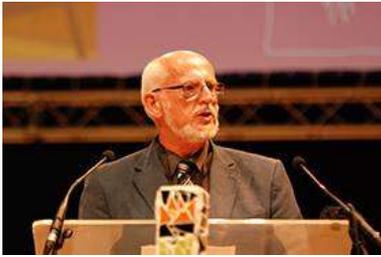
At lunchtimes and in the evenings various fringe meetings were held which enriched the Assembly.

I attended the fringe meeting about **Fresh Expressions** chaired by Linda Rayner. This was a bit slow to start and the man we went to hear, Phil Potter, was rather long-winded. An Anglican, he seemed intrigued by a URC audience but not really up to speed with us. Some in the (large) audience had very little idea of what FE is about, others wanted new suggestions to add on, which made continuity difficult. Lawrence Moore made us laugh when he said the URC is ready and waiting if the fifties ever come back and Phil himself memorably described a cartoon he'd seen of a Sunday morning congregation turning up to find God had put a large padlock and chain on the church door and added the notice: "You've been coming here long enough: now go away and get on with it!" Fresh Expressions is an ecumenical and generally forward-looking initiative and should be fully supported by the URC.



A fringe meeting on faith schools addressed by Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE

Tony Porter



The Revd Aled Edwards OBE reports on ecumenical developments in Wales.

Another perspective on Fresh Expressions: The presentation was made by Phil Potter, newly appointed team leader for Fresh Expressions. Phil outlined the definition of fresh expressions - a Fresh Expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church. It will come into being through principles of listening, service, incarnational mission and making disciples. It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context. Fresh expressions are: missional – serving people outside church; contextual – listening to people and entering their culture; educational – making discipleship a priority; ecclesial – forming church. He urged us to work more closely to make a difference to the landscape of British and international

Judith Haughton

church life.

And another perspective on Fresh Expressions: I attended the lunchtime session on fresh expressions as I thought we would be given some real examples of this so I could visualise what it means. No example was given – what we were told was to experiment and that it would be a gradual opening of eyes and minds, taking one step at a time. We need to change our culture and the way we do things and aim to be pioneers. We were referred to their website and the co-ordinator of Fresh Expression in the URC Linda Rayner should we require further information.

Paulette Bailey

On Friday lunchtime I attended a **Mission** special interest meeting and listened to Elizabeth Gray King introduce Create Talk. It was interesting to hear her speak of other ways of bringing a Christian narrative live without necessarily having to use words. I think it's a valuable resource for all worship leaders and on Saturday I listened to Michael Harvey speak of ways to ask people **Back to Church**. Both sessions were a welcome distraction from the more serious business of the Assembly.

George Mwaura

I attended a lunchtime meeting **for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people** and for those churches that wished to develop a ministry with our community. The meeting spent most of its time in introductions and musing about what an LGBT network might achieve. We then looked at a book of prayers and poems which had been developed by *Augustine United Church* in Edinburgh, *City Church Cardiff* and *St Columba's* in Oxford (curiously described as *the three URCs who have a specific ministry with LGBT people*) which was given out freely at Assembly. As in other aspects of Assembly I was struck by how many people spoke for us; I hope that, if an LGBT network evolves, it will help us speak for ourselves and to move beyond a dialogue where it is felt necessary to speak about experiences of pain and discrimination. My experience of the URC, and that of my congregation, is one of acceptance, blessing abundance and healing.

Andy Braunston



Assembly says farewell to the Revd Roberta Rominger

And Finally...

The hard work that goes into Assembly by the representatives, the Assembly Arrangements Committee, Moderators and chaplains is highly visible but the work of the staff – especially *Ann Barton* and *Kaan Craig* – from Church House goes, largely, unsung as does that of the various volunteers who helped with registration, stewarding, printing, and interceding throughout the Assembly. We owe these people huge debt of thanks.

General Assembly is fun, tiring, inspiring, frustrating, dynamic and, at times, boring. These are things we can all experience in our own Church Meetings and at Synod. They are all common responses to the gritty process of seeking to discern the mind of Christ together.

I am sure that all our Synod representatives have come back better informed about the United Reformed Church and, hopefully, with a real sense that:

- **we** are the URC,
- **we** are General Assembly just as
- **we** are Synod.

We belong to, and are responsible for, each other as we seek to live as committed disciples of the Lord Jesus in the mission field of our world.

Andy Braunston
15th July 2014

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