



The United Reformed Church

86 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9RT, United Kingdom

General Secretary: The Revd John Proctor

29th June 2015

To synods and local congregations of the United Reformed Church

Dear Friends,

We write to let you know about last Saturday's one-day meeting of the General Assembly in Birmingham, which discussed the marriage of same-sex couples. This was a continuation of work begun at last year's General Assembly in Cardiff, with the same membership, chiefly drawn from the thirteen synods of the Church. The discussion was thus able to take into account the thoughts and concerns that had been shared at Cardiff. Assembly also reflected on the results of the Church-wide consultation that ran from last September until March and to which the majority of our local churches contributed.

Assembly took some significant decisions, as follows:

Assembly decided not to express a single opinion on the matter of same-sex marriage. Members' convictions and views vary widely. No single view could fairly represent the URC as a whole.

For that reason, local Church Meetings in England and Wales should be responsible for deciding whether to apply to register their church buildings for same-sex marriage services. A local church might with integrity opt either to do this or not to do it. [In ecumenical churches the decision must also depend on the other participating denominations. But, so far as the URC is concerned, the view of the local church will be key.]

In Scotland, where the law focuses on the nomination of celebrants, the Synod of Scotland would act for our Church in this matter, under the oversight of the Registrar General for Scotland.

Finally, Assembly decided, since the marriage of same-sex couples would significantly alter URC practice, to seek ratification of the above set of policies by the formal process that we use for constitutional changes. This will involve asking our thirteen synods to consider the matter, and unless at least five of them ask that it 'be not proceeded with', bringing it back for final decision at next year's Assembly. Only at that stage could all of the above policies come into operation.

You will surely understand that Assembly's work was not straightforward. As well as the underlying theological issues, this matter is both legally complex and pastorally sensitive, and many of our people have been deeply affected by the Church's discussion – for a wide variety of reasons. So Saturday's decisions have left some hopeful of a new pastoral openness in the Church, yet frustrated by the prospect of a year's delay before it could

become reality. Others, by contrast, think it wrong that the Church might change its practice in this way, and regret that the Assembly has not adhered more fully to the traditional view of marriage. We have, in a discussion conducted on all sides with good conscience and good intent, caused one another some degree of hurt.

Yet Elizabeth Caswell, who presented much of the business on behalf of the Human Sexuality Task Group, reminded us of the words of Romans 14: 'Welcome one another.' We are not the first group of Christians to wrestle with a divisive issue. Others before us have struggled to cope when they find that sisters and brothers in Christ, people whom they know and love well, disagree with them. The words of Romans speak out of such a situation, inviting us to value the unity of our Church, so that difference of opinion may not weaken important bonds of contact and care.

In the tasks and duties to which you have appointed the three of us, we shall try to be open and faithful to all in the URC. That does not mean that the Assembly Moderators and General Secretary can interact closely with every local church. This support role belongs with Synods, and particularly with their Moderators. But as the Church carries forward the decisions Assembly has made, we shall try to handle any discussion that continues with honesty, care and pastoral respect, and to lead in ways that help the people of the Church to value, trust and love one another.

You in turn, as you serve in your local churches and communities, have an important contribution to make, for the good of the Church and the work of the gospel. Part of our distinctive witness as a denomination is that we build bridges when opinions differ. We do this in our own local churches; we do it in our ecumenical work; and we do it across the breadth of the URC as a whole. So we thank and value you, for what you give to this whole. We wish you strength, hope and wisdom, as you carry forward the work of Christ's good news in your locality.

If you wish to reply to this letter, please address your response to the General Secretary and all three of us will then read it.

Yours sincerely,



John Ellis and David Grosch-Miller
Moderators of General Assembly



John Proctor
General Secretary