

FRIDAY 8 JULY

New moderators inducted

On the opening day of its General Assembly, the United Reformed Church inducted the Revd Kevin Watson and Mr Alan Yates as moderators. They will serve for two years, succeeding the Revd David Grosch-Miller and Mr John Ellis, who were thanked during the induction.

Mr Watson currently serves as Yorkshire Synod's Moderator, and will continue to do so alongside his Assembly moderatorial duties. He hopes to 'help the URC rediscover the confidence that comes from knowing Jesus is the Way'.

Mr Yates, an accredited URC lay preacher and elder, works as a management consultant. He said: 'I am really looking forward to my term as Moderator. I am humbled by the great people I have met and am looking forward to meeting more.'

Coptic bishop addresses Assembly

Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK addressed General Assembly, focussing on refugees and the Middle East. He said: 'The infant Christ and the holy family were refugees; we must be able to look for the face of Christ in every refugee.' The talk ended with a call to advocate justice, 'not just for ourselves but for everyone made in the image of God'. The address was very well received by Assembly.

The talk began by Bishop Angaelos explaining that he had addressed Methodist Conference earlier in the week. He described his visit to the URC Assembly as his 'ecumenical grand slam', adding: 'Together, whatever our differences, we are the Church. There is only one body of Christ.'

Assessing the ecumenical landscape

During the first business session of Assembly, Nicola Furley-Smith, Moderator of the URC's Southern Synod, spoke about the 'Unity, Identity and Mission' report, which developed from conversations taking place at a joint URC/Church of England consultation group. The report was passed by Assembly as part of the en bloc set of resolutions addressed on Sunday afternoon.

Ms Furley-Smith (who is a co-convenor of the committee responsible for the report, along with the Rt Revd James Newcome, Bishop of Carlisle) asked Assembly: 'What does the goal of unity mean for members of our churches today?' Her address examined what oneness in the Christian Church could look like, highlighting the ecumenical county of Cumbria as an example of practical unity.

In brief

- Steve Summers, chair of the URC's Greenbelt planning group, commended the URC's association with Greenbelt festival to Assembly. 'Greenbelt is an enduring movement,' he said, 'a spiritual sanctuary and a creative environment for learning.'
- Victoria Paulding reported the findings so far of the Church's engagement with 20 to 40 year olds task group. It has another two years to complete its work.
- During Communion, the ministers and missionaries of the Church who had died since the last Assembly were commemorated.
- During the Sunday service, a collection was taken for Christian Aid's refugee crisis appeal. £2,179.51 was raised, not including gift aid.
- The URC has adopted a new environmental policy: a statement of intent encouraging churches to take up practical steps, and give attention to prayer, Bible teaching and reflection in caring for God's creation.
- Assembly was addressed by the Revd Chris Ferguson, General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the Revd Dr Susan Durber, Moderator of the faith and order commission of the World Council of Churches and the Revd Dr Majid Abel, senior pastor of the Naulakha Presbyterian Church in Pakistan.
- The Revd Nigel Uden and Mr Derek Estill were elected as Moderators of General Assembly for 2018-20.

SATURDAY 9 JULY

Credit union partnership

The United Reformed Church joined the Churches' Mutual Credit Union (CMCU) on Saturday, enabling ministers, elders and congregations to invest savings that will then fund affordable loans to people who might otherwise have had to use payday lenders. General Assembly enthusiastically agreed to the resolution, commending the three years of work that made it possible. Immediately after the debate, Mr John Ellis, URC Treasurer, and the Venerable Antony MacRow-Wood, the President of the CMCU, started signing up the first CMCU members from the URC.

Mr Ellis was 'delighted' by Assembly's support and urged local churches to 'spread the word, join this movement and do something practical [for] economic justice.'

This is a chance to point to the values of the kingdom of God.' www.cmcu.org.uk

Community projects honoured

At Saturday lunchtime, the United Reformed Church General Assembly celebrated the work of the four winning initiatives commended in its Community Project Awards scheme, which is sponsored by the church insurer, Congregational & General. Assembly warmly applauded the finalists after watching an upbeat video about the work of each project.

The overall winner is Families Matter, based at Cornerstone URC in Hythe, Hampshire. The project provides a range of practical▶

This round up summarises business up until Sunday evening only. Fuller reports on Assembly business are available online at www.urc.org.uk/news. Reports will also be made available in the July/August News Update and the September edition of Digest. All Assembly reporting, including this round up, is bought to you by the URC communications team. We've been working against the clock, so please forgive any errors.

SATURDAY 9 JULY (CONTINUED)

► support for families, including parenting classes. Representatives of Families Matter were presented with a wall plaque and a cheque for £4,000.

The Revd David Grosch-Miller, immediate-past Moderator of the URC's General Assembly and one of the award judges, said that he was 'absolutely delighted' at the 'impressive, life-giving projects' from local URC congregations. Visit <http://youtu.be/W84aTZkKqAY> to watch a video about the winning projects.

Same-sex marriage vote

It has long been clear that the denomination cannot express a single view on the issue of same-sex marriage; on Saturday afternoon, when Assembly considered the issue again, it voted to empower its local churches – if they so wish – to conduct and register marriages for same-sex couples. This means that the URC is now the largest UK denomination to freely permit same-sex

couples to marry in its churches.

A two-thirds majority was needed to allow the proposal to be confirmed as the denomination's final decision – Assembly voted in favour of the resolution by 240 votes to 21 votes. United Reformed churches in England and Wales wishing to register their buildings for the marriage of same-sex couples are now able to start that process immediately. (In Scotland the legal framework is rather different, but the effects of the Church's decision will be broadly similar.)

Speaking about the vote, the Revd John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC said: 'Today the URC has made an important decision – at which some will rejoice and with which others will be uncomfortable ... this has been a sensitive issue for many in our churches. It has been important to take our time over the decision process, and to listen as carefully as we can to one another along the way.' More at <http://bit.ly/sslegal>

Synods, safeguarding and Walking the Way

The business referred to Assembly by Mission Council was the 'Walking the Way' initiative (resolution 1), the safeguarding past case review, and the functions of synods (resolutions 5 and 6). Resolution 1 commended 'Walking the Way – Living the Life of Jesus Today', an initiative promoting missional discipleship, aiming make sharing faith normal and natural. It was passed by consensus.

Assembly was given a report on the safeguarding past case review confirming that phase one – a survey of ministers files – is complete. Phase two involves a much more wide-reaching invitation for complaints. There was no resolution in connection with the report.

Resolutions 5 and 6, concerning the functions of synods, were passed by a majority vote.

SUNDAY 10 JULY

Vibrant Communion

Assembly was treated to a vibrant Communion service on Sunday, including uplifting hymns, choral singing, a youth group drama, a video presentation from children and a rousing sermon from the Revd Kevin Watson, Moderator of General Assembly. Making plentiful use of images, video and songs, Mr Watson's sermon encouraged the Church to 'rediscover the way of resurrection.'

URC Youth delivered a drama based on Matthew 9:9-13 that elicited many laughs; in their version, Jesus brags about his food-based miracles, and the disciples were sick of eating bread and fish – they ate Chinese food instead. The drama ended with a series of statements and a call to let Jesus into our lives, 'all right?' The Assembly enthusiastically replied: 'All right!'

Sunday Brexit

The Revd Tracey Lewis, convenor of the mission committee, said that following the vote to leave the EU we were in 'days of uncertainty and change ... as we seek the good news ... and challenges of the kingdom of God.'

The mission team affirmed the URC's commitment to a diverse and multicultural society, to security for EU and other global citizens, to partnership with European churches, to challenge racism, reconciliation and the need to engage with global justice.

Assembly members discussed:

- What are your experiences and thoughts after the EU Referendum vote? and
- What will we say together, politically, as the URC?

A facilitation group brought a resolution, which was passed overwhelmingly. The full text is available online from <http://bit.ly/gabrexit>

'What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?'

General Assembly passed a new resolution replacing Resolutions 21 to 23 on 'What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?' The issue had been referred to a facilitation group on Saturday after Assembly failed to reach consensus. The new resolution, which instructed the faith and order committee to work closely with the Walking the Way steering group, was carried by consensus.

Expectations of Ministry

Resolution 13, concerning 21st-century expectations of ministry, was passed by consensus, noting disagreement. This resolution was discussed at length. The expectations document for Ministers of Word and Sacraments used since 2012 will now have formal status and be used to guide and inform the work of those selecting and training people for ministry.

In brief continued...

- Mr Ian Hardie was appointed as Treasurer of the URC from July 2017. Until then he is Deputy Treasurer. The Revd John Piper was appointed as Deputy Treasurer from July 2017.

- Assembly paid tribute to 105 jubilee ministers who are celebrating 40, 50 and 60 years in ministry.

- Assembly voted to increase its budget by 15%, allowing for expenses that are currently being paid for by synods. A task group was appointed to review the form, size, duration, location and funding of Assembly.

- The following resolutions – 2, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 20, 25, 27, 30, 34, 35 and 36 – were categorised as en bloc taken together and passed by consensus.

- Assembly has appointed the Revd David Herbert as Moderator of the Northern Synod, and reappointed Moderator of the Wessex Synod the Revd Clare Downing and Southern Synod Moderator, the Revd Nicola Furley-Smith.

- On Monday morning, Assembly was due to take business on deployment (Resolutions 28 and 29), authorised elders (Resolutions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19), Israel-Palestine, the nuclear weapons ban treaty (Resolution 33) and youth representation at Assembly.