

# General Assembly 2012 News round-up

## FRIDAY 6 JULY

### New moderator inducted to URC General Assembly

In the opening session of Assembly, the Revd Dr Michael Jagessar was inducted as moderator of General Assembly 2012-14.

During his two-year moderatorship, Dr Jagessar will continue in his permanent role as URC secretary for racial justice and multicultural ministry. Mrs Val Morrison was reaffirmed in her lay moderator's role. She is expected to hand over to the newly-elected lay moderator, Mr John Ellis, next summer.

### Moderator addresses General Assembly

The Revd Dr Michael Jagessar gave a passionate and lively address, appealing to Assembly members to embrace a habit of trusting in a generous God instead of allowing our lives to be determined by scarcity.

He said: "The re-authoring of our conversations along positive stories of generosity and abundance is not about avoiding tough questions or not dealing with pain or grief: it is about facing them squarely but through a different set of optics – God's expansive generosity through Jesus Christ."

A full version of the address is available online. <http://bit.ly/LErmTQ>

### Rapturous applause for jubilee ministers

Rapturous applause greeted the "jubilee ministers" – those ministers celebrating more than 50 years of ministry – when they were presented to General Assembly this afternoon. The Revd Roberta Rominger, URC general secretary, made particular mention of the Revd Reg Dean, whose 83 years of ministry make him the longest serving URC minister.

### In brief

• The Revd David Grosch-Miller was announced as the ministerial moderator of General Assembly for 2014-16. Mr John Ellis was announced as lay moderator for 2013-16.

• General Assembly gave warm applause to new URC ministers, who have been inducted since the last General Assembly 2010. Welcoming them, the Revd Dr Michael Jagessar, said: "Go in peace, take risks, have fun, serve God."

• Two new churches were formally received into the URC at Assembly: Heston Asian URC in West London and Bournemouth International Church. Both began as mission projects of the Church – and both are thriving.

• During its Sunday morning session at St Andrew's URC, General Assembly gave thanks for the life and service of ministers who had died since the last General Assembly in 2010. To view the written commemoration, visit <http://bit.ly/RI276s>

• Stories from the Children's Assembly can be found online at <http://urc.org.uk> and the Children's Assembly blog can be viewed at <http://urcchildrensassembly2012.blogspot.co.uk>

• General Assembly received notice of 22 local church closures and thanked God for their worship, witness and service.

• Recognising the reducing number of adults aged 20 to 40 in the URC and the concerns of the URC youth assembly 2012, Assembly asked Mission Council to address these issues and to consider

## SATURDAY 7 JULY

### Assembly enables civil partnerships to be registered in local churches

Assembly agreed a resolution allowing local churches to decide on whether to allow civil partnerships to be registered in their buildings. In taking this decision, the URC has become the first mainstream Christian denomination to allow same-sex partners to register their civil partnership in church.

This resolution takes effect immediately and enables local United Reformed churches in England and Wales to consider whether they wish to allow civil partnerships to be registered on their premises (i.e. for the legal formalities, as well as the religious ceremony, to take place in church). Once a church has decided to take this step, it will need to ask its trustees to apply to the superintendent registrar of the relevant local authority to become registered as an approved venue.

### Awards highlight community action

Four diverse projects were honoured as part of the 2012 Community Project Awards sponsored by the URC and insurer, Congregational & General.

Winning a first-place prize of £3,000, The Edge Project was named the overall winner – a youth centre whose varied support programme has helped transform the lives of underprivileged young people in the Holmewood area of Bradford.

Three other projects were awarded

joint second place and received £2,000. Our Tribe – an Edinburgh-based project whose work supports greater integration between the lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender (LGBT) community and the local church; The Terminus Initiative – an ecumenical project in Sheffield, offering a variety of community services; and The Avenue Centre – a project that works with families in the community surrounding Southampton.

For more on this story, including links to the winning projects, visit <http://bit.ly/M77gQp>

***This News round-up and all the reporting on General Assembly 2012 was brought to you by the URC communications team who used the URC website, Facebook and Twitter to keep you updated with Assembly news throughout. Longer versions of all stories are available on the URC website and a full report will also appear in the September issue of REFORM magazine. This round-up contains news up to and including Sunday evening and part of Monday's business***

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## SATURDAY 7 JULY continued

### Report shows youth and children's work growing

Presenting the first part of the Youth and Children's report, Rob Weston, convenor of the youth and children's work committee, detailed growth in areas of the committee's work. He said: "We have seen nine new Pilots companies begin in the last 12 months; the change of title from FURY Assembly to Youth Assembly has enabled the participation of more young people at January's Youth Assembly; and Children's Assembly has evolved to become a vibrant and integral part of General Assembly."

Assembly agreed to "affirm the Youth and Children's work offered by Pilots and commend it to all local churches" and to celebrate Pilots through a dedicated Sunday service each year.

Mr Weston also expressed his thanks to "talented staff", including Jo Williams, who will be leaving the role of children's secretary in July, and John Brown, who leaves his role as URC youth work development officer in October.

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## SUNDAY 8 JULY

### Major budget cuts agreed

Accepting the recommendation of Mission Council, which met in March 2012, General Assembly asked six of its committees to achieve expenditure reductions amounting to £600,000 in 2013 relative to their 2012 budgets.

The decision came after an emotionally-charged debate, which reflected the particular consternation of many members over cuts to programmes affecting children and young people in the church. It continues a process that began in November 2011, when Mission Council agreed the deficit in the budget for 2012 was not sustainable and asked the Mission Council Advisory Group to oversee a review that could lead to recommendations to the Assembly for cuts.

While Mission Council chose to identify £600,000 of savings in net expenditure in March 2012, the Moderators' Think Tank, on the advice of Finance Committee and the URC Trust, had recommended that £1m savings be found at that time. Treasurer John Ellis warned that committees would need to review their longer-term costs to produce further savings.

### Changes to ministers' pension benefits

URC ministers wishing to receive full retirement benefits will need to work until age 68 in the future. Following changes to the Rules of the Ministers' Pension Fund agreed at the URC General Assembly in Scarborough, younger ministers in the United Reformed Church will need to work until age 68 to receive as good a pension as that which has hitherto been available to retiring ministers. This will make little difference to older ministers approaching retirement, since the benefits they have earned through service up to 2012 will still be calculated on the old basis assuming a retirement age of 65.

The changes make clear that it will still be possible for any minister to retire at age 65 if they so wish, with reduced benefits where applicable. Separate decisions were taken allowing the church to pay higher ill-health pensions to stipendiary ministers with longer service, and to simplify the church's pension arrangements in the light of new government regulations.

### In brief continued...

how to improve the integration of this age group at every level of the URC.

- On Saturday evening, Assembly celebrated the rich history of the URC in a joyous hour-long party, which marked several significant anniversaries including: the 40th anniversary of the URC, 75 years of Pilots, 25 years of TLS (Training for Learning and Serving), 25 years of the Windermere Centre and 20 years of Commitment for Life.

A rendition of "Happy Birthday" was accompanied by the sound of dozens of party poppers popping!

- Assembly has voted to change the normal retirement age of full-time stipendiary ministers from 65 to 68. No minister will be forced to work beyond 65, but 68 would be the full pensionable age. Ruth Whitehead, convenor of the ministries committee, which brought the resolution, said: "Ministries will receive any requests to work beyond 68 with acclaim and amazement."

- Hundreds of members of Assembly and Children's Assembly marched with members of the congregation of St Andrew's URC, from St Andrew's church to Scarborough Town Hall on Sunday. Their "walk of witness" gave expression to the concerns of many about the disproportionate impact of spending cuts and welfare reforms on the most vulnerable in our society.

At the Town Hall, the walkers, led by the moderators of the General Assembly, The Revd Dr Michael Jagessar and Mrs Val Morrison, met Scarborough's MP, Robert Goodwill, and presented him with a copy of the Scarborough Statement and the URC's Report on Poverty and Inequality. (Both documents are available from <http://bit.ly/MPa0aK>).

- The Ministries Committee report was sent back to Mission Council for further work.

- Three ecumenical guests shared aspects of their work with the United Reformed Church: the Venerable Dr Joy Tetley – Church of England co-convenor of the URC/CofE study group, Dame Anne Doyle of the Roman Catholic/URC dialogue group and John Bradley – southern field officer for Churches Together in England.

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## MONDAY 9 JULY

### Independent commission appointed

In recognition of a variety of general issues brought to a head by the resignation of the 2010-elected moderator-elect, Mr Lawrence Moore, General Assembly has passed a resolution to appoint "an independent commission to consult with those involved to identify issues that arise from this unhappy experience."

### Final airing for ZI

Roberta Rominger, speaking as co-convenor of the ZI steering group, took a variety of questions on the end of the campaign.

She confirmed that Mission Committee would be taking the lead on moving forward the URC's work on radical welcome and that the copyright for posters created for

the campaign belongs to the URC; decisions as to their availability have not yet been taken. As to funding, she informed Assembly that ZI had been mainly funded by a grant from CW M. The accounts to the end of 2011 showed a total expenditure of £325,000; final accounts are now being prepared.