

NORTH WESTERN SYNOD AT GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2026



Dear friends,

In the following pages you will find reports from members of synod who represented you at General Assembly. It was the first time I have attended in many years and was amazed to see how much it has changed. Being at the Hayes it was much more intimate, people from different synods mixed, talked and socialised together. It felt that as a denomination we were truly connected with each other. On a personal level it was wonderful to see old friends and to make many new ones. As your new Moderator I was greeted formally by Assembly, which was a wonderful experience. The last time I was greeted by Assembly was when I was first Ordained, and I was one of about 12 'new' ministers to be greeted. It is amusing to reflect that 3 of us at the Assembly in 2003 are now Synod Moderators!

The reports include will speak about many of the subjects that were discussed. It was not an easy assembly, and members toiled with some of the matters at hand. Hard decisions were made, and I believe as a Church we found new hope those decisions. I am slightly bias but the report from the Moderators encouraged us all to consider what 'Hope is...'. In the midst of all that is going on in society and the church, the reminder is that we do all this having our hope in Jesus Christ. This is the message that I will be sharing with churches as I travel around and asking everyone the question of what hope is for you and your church.

If you want to see the in depth reports from General Assembly, or the items that were discussed in detail these are available on the United Reformed Church Website. [General Assembly 2026](#)

It was a pleasure to represent the Synod at Assembly.

Mike Thomason, Moderator of North Western Synod



It was a privilege to be at General Assembly this year and listen to resolutions, debates and meeting others people from around the country.

I was very interested in PaperB7 - **Faith in Action Legacies of Slavery** which talked about enabling changes to happen and building bridges. That a three-strand 'Repairing Justice' proposed, including local (within the URC) for anti-racism training, regional which works with URC/UK and global to work with global partners to address areas of work identified by them.

One regional project was mentoring of young Black men and an application for funding has been submitted, and global is working with CRAF (Church Reparations Action Forum) with the Church of Jamaica to offer land inherited as a legacy of slavery on which villages will be built.

It felt like a positive report with lots going on for the legacy of slavery

More information can be found in the 2026 book of reports

Resource & Church Life Fund

I also attended the Resources & Church Life Fund as part of the standing orders. This is included the Business and Resources Committee which updates the meeting on the progress towards implementing the Church Life Review from November 2025.

One of the main areas implemented is a URC Resources Hub and Helpdesk with accounting, HR and payroll services to follow. This will result in a shared support service; a place find the information you need via the hub and helpdesk.

There is to be three phases with Phase 1 for the URC Rescues Hub and Helpdesk launched June 2026, Phase 2 to include further service and phase 3 looking at IT services. On the hub will be the up-to-date policies and forms, so outdated policies are not being followed. The Helpdesk will be able to triage, respond, help or advise external help if needed. It is hoped that will help elders, treasurers, secretaries and ministers find the help they need easily and in one place.

Barbara Aspinall



Grace and peace to you all.

It was a privilege to attend the United Reformed Church General Assembly for the first time since transferring from the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa. The gathering was prayerful, well-ordered, and deeply encouraging.

The Assembly began in a moving and reverent way — standing as the Bible was processed in, in silence and beautiful music. Beginning with Holy Communion reminded us that before we conduct business, we first meet God at His table. We were reminded: “God does not call the equipped; He equips the called.”

The flow of the meeting was excellent. One part I especially appreciated was the use of a light-hearted “mock resolution” at the beginning (about changing the Church’s official colour!). This was not trivial — it was a helpful and creative way of demonstrating how debate, voting, counting of votes, and procedures work. It set the tone for the Assembly, helped new members understand the process, and created an atmosphere of ease and shared laughter before moving into more serious matters. I loved that approach.

Even when difficult issues were later discussed, members spoke with maturity, respect, and grace. Differences were expressed honestly but handled positively, reflecting a Church confident enough to deliberate carefully while remaining united in Christ.

Several key themes stood out: Hospitality and care for the vulnerable — We were challenged to consider how the Church responds to immigrants, refugees, minorities, and those on the margins of society. Justice and reconciliation — There was thoughtful reflection on historical injustices, encouraging humility and a willingness to learn. Safeguarding and integrity — Strong emphasis was placed on transparency, accountability, and protecting the wellbeing of all.

The future of ministry — Honest questions were asked about sustaining ministry, encouraging vocations, and equipping both ordained and lay leaders for the years ahead.

In the Ministries discussion, we reflected on the shortage of stipendiary ministers and the reality of serving many congregations with limited resources. The question that struck me deeply was: What are we trying to maintain? Are we preserving structures from the past, or are we discerning what faithful ministry should look like for the future? It was a challenging but necessary conversation about sustainability, vocation, and courage to adapt.

There was also courageous discussion about the future of ministerial training, including the decision that Westminster will no longer train EM1 students, who will instead attend other colleges. There were mixed feelings — some expressed deep attachment to Westminster and concern for its history, while others reflected on practical and strategic realities. It was not an easy conversation, but it was handled thoughtfully and prayerfully.

The Assembly did not shy away from complex contemporary issues, including matters relating to LGBTQ+ and transgender people, engaging them with pastoral sensitivity and careful deliberation.

In worship we were reminded that while we plan, organise, and work faithfully, it is ultimately Christ who builds His Church. Our responsibility as God's people and as leaders is to be faithful — faithful in service, faithful in witness, faithful in love. The sustaining and growth of the Church belong to Him.

The outgoing Moderator described her year of service as "a blessing." It was so good to hear those words, because often we appoint people to positions of leadership and, instead of supporting them, we frustrate them. Her testimony reminded us that leadership in the Church can still be life-giving when it is rooted in grace, partnership, and prayer. We now pray for the incoming Moderator as he begins his term.

I left the Assembly encouraged. Christ was at the centre. The worship was uplifting. The discussions were honest. The spirit of hope was real.

Let us continue to pray for the URC and for courage to serve faithfully in our generations

Revd Noma Murambi

Thoughts from General Assembly 2026

Hilary Grierson

It is always a privilege to be nominated to attend General Assembly, representing the North Western Synod, it is an opportunity to meet not only with other Synod Colleagues but to meet people we haven't seen for some time, and also to meet new people, to both share and gain new ideas in the way we do things - networking is a valuable part of General Assembly.

One of the highlights for me at General Assembly is hearing the stories of our Ecumenical Guests; last year it was a guest from The Ukraine. This year the one that touched me the most was the lady who is the Director of Christian Education in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon - Najla Kassab, and she began her introduction by telling a story of her crossing the border from Lebanon into Syria just a few weeks ago. The bridge had been bombed during the recent war and was only partially standing. To reach the other side she had to get out of her car carry her luggage across the damaged structure on foot. Her reason for travelling was to support the churches in Syria, which is part of her Synod, and to participate in a gathering that brought churches together.

She went on to say that as she was walking across the broken bridge she was overwhelmed by hope. Even though the bridge had been damaged it did not stop her from reaching out to those in need. It reminded her that nothing, not even war or destruction can separate us from sharing the love of Christ with one another. God's love always finds away - keep building bridges where others see ruins - it also showed me that we always have hope - Najla is truly inspirational.

As well as joy at General Assembly seeing Community Awards presented to churches and the Ministers celebrating there years of Ministry, there are moments tinged with sadness, seeing the role of Ministers who have passed away over the past twelve months two from our own Synod.

Volunteers are the backbone of General Assembly and without these unsung heroes General Assembly probably wouldn't run as smoothly as it does, this could be said of our own Synod and Churches without these unsung heroes where would we be?

Saturday evenings seem to have become NW Synod evenings where all delegates from across the Synod gather to socialise, have photographs taken and of course to have a drink, thank you Tim Hopley our wonderful Synod Clerk, and where would we be without our resident 'Bar Maid' Gina Gibson - thank you Gina for organising us all. Seeing Barbara Aspinall up a chimney taking a group photograph was certainly a highlight of that evening!

Did I enjoy Assembly - yes I did, were the days long - yes they were, did I learn things to take away with me - yes I did, so thank you NW Synod.

Hilary Grierson - Delegate from Ashton

Emphasising Evangelism in the Life of the United Reformed Church

Revd Barnabas Shin

This was the second General Assembly I have attended in person during my eight years of ministry in the United Reformed Church. Reading through more than 370 pages of Assembly papers strengthened my identity as a URC minister and gave me a valuable opportunity to deepen my understanding of where the URC is now and where God may be leading us.

Among the many reports and resolutions considered by the Assembly, including both en bloc business and more challenging matters, one report from Mersey Synod particularly touched my heart. It expressed something that I have carried within me for a long time in my ministry: the importance of restoring evangelism to the centre of the Church's life and mission.

The paper argues that evangelism should not be driven by anxiety about declining membership or attendance. Instead, it should arise from confidence in the living God, revealed in Jesus Christ and present through the Holy Spirit as a natural response to knowing and experiencing the living God. As the report memorably puts it, evangelism is "a matter of discipleship, not desperation."

At the same time, the paper acknowledges that the URC has sometimes been hesitant to speak confidently about the Church itself. Without confidence in the identity and calling of the Church, evangelism can lose its foundation.

One aspect of the paper that particularly resonated with me is its emphasis on worship as the heart of evangelism. The Church is where people encounter the living Christ through the Word, the Sacraments, prayer and fellowship. This challenges us to ensure that our worship is not only welcoming but also spiritually deep, joyful and expectant. As we worship with confidence in God's presence and openness to the Holy Spirit, evangelism naturally flows from the life of the Church.

The report shares Mersey Synod's *Talking Faith* initiative. Its purpose was not simply to train people in evangelistic techniques. Rather, it sought to help church members think about everyday life through the lens of faith, speak naturally about God, and grow in confidence when discussing faith with others.

Through Resolution 61, the General Assembly reaffirmed that evangelism is central to the life and mission of the URC. It called every part of the Church to prioritise evangelism, recognised worship as the heart of evangelism, and encouraged churches to pursue spiritual renewal through faithful worship and openness to the Holy Spirit, supported by the practical outcomes of the Church Life Review.

I was particularly encouraged that it as a theological and spiritual call for the URC to rediscover its confidence in the living God and its identity as the Body of Christ. It is concerned with changing the culture of the Church rather than simply introducing another short-term evangelistic programme. My hope is that this report and resolution will be revisited by Synods, local churches and congregations across the URC. I hope that it will encourage us to reflect honestly upon our worship, our confidence in the gospel, and the ways in which we speak about our faith.

Chris Burton reflected on General Assembly when he led worship at Wilbraham St Ninians - here is part of his reflection:

Good morning – Our Genesis reading today (Genesis 28:10-19a) gave us another well-known story: Jacob's ladder. So Jacob is alone and on the run, having deceived his father and stolen Esau's birthright and blessing. As he rests for the night, Jacob dreams of a stairway, connecting heaven with earth. Jacob realises that he has encountered God in this spot and marks the place, naming it Bethel. And that's the bit we're focussing on today – recognising that we are in the presence of God.

I want to respond to that call to know God's presence, even in the midst of troubles and anxieties, through a very particular example – the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church. That might not seem like the most obvious example but, for those who aren't aware, "the General Assembly" – and I quote – "is a meeting normally held every year and lasting for four days in which ministers and other members (usually elders) of The United Reformed Church, together with a few ecumenical representatives, deliberate upon and make decisions concerning the whole work of the Church at home and abroad. The Basis of Union states that it 'shall embody the unity of The United Reformed Church and act as the central organ of its life and the final authority, under the Word of God and the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, in all matters of doctrine and order and in all other concerns of its common life.' In other words, it is our church's central decision-making body. I'm sorry if that description seemed like a bit of a mouthful but two weeks ago I was privileged to be one of the representatives of the North Western Synod at this year's General Assembly. And that term 'representative' is important. We were given very clear guidance that, unlike the sort of conference where people can be delegated to vote in a pre-determined way, Assembly members cannot be told how to vote. Those who represent Synods or committees may well know the views of their Synod or committee, but those bodies may not issue an instruction. Members of Assembly are expected to listen to the debate, to consider carefully all the points made, to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and to vote as their conscience directs.

This was actually my third time of attending but it's been a few years since I last went and what struck me once again was the absolute commitment to making decisions in the way that description lays out – prayerfully, seeking to discern the will of God through love under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Of course there were differences of opinion, but these were expressed with respect and recognition that everyone's contributions were valued. It's a four-day event and there was a lot to pack in so much of the Assembly's time is taken up with decisions on the business of the Church, but that need for recognising God's presence is underlined by every day beginning with worship and Bible study and with an Assembly Communion Service on Sunday.

Inevitably, much of the business was administrative, structural and not controversial but nonetheless important for the everyday working of the Church. But there were also subjects covered which, whilst not necessarily controversial within the confines of General Assembly, would definitely not be to the liking of many groups in the wider world. These covered issues such as the legacy of slavery, responding to the rise of Christian Nationalism and supporting Trans individuals, particularly young people.

I had initially intended to give a bit of a summary of some of the issues discussed, but how do you summarise in a few minutes a conference that was four days long, which considered a book of reports 371 pages long – and for which the daily summaries published on the URC website after each day's business amounted to more than 80 pages! The answer of course is that you can't, which is why, instead, I wanted to emphasise the process which, in itself reiterates and affirms the timeless and enduring lessons from the Bible and specifically today the need to be aware of and recognise the presence of God and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the decisions we make and the way we live.

All the hymns and songs I've chosen for today were sung in the worship at Assembly. And of them all, I don't think there is a better example of what I've been trying to say than this next hymn. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here"

Chris Burton

Reflection on GA 2026 Paper A3

Resource Centres for Learning: Education for Ministry Phase 1 (EM1)

At General Assembly (GA) 2026, Paper A3 invited us into a deep and difficult conversation about the future of EM1 formation and the Resource Centres for Learning within the United Reformed Church.

For me, this was not simply an institutional or financial discussion. It touched my own journey of calling. I had the privilege of training at both Northern College, now Luther King Theological College, as a Church Related Community Worker, and Westminster College as a candidate for the Ministry of Word and Sacraments.

When I transferred from CRCW ministry into Word and Sacraments ministry, some of my colleagues joked, "Oh, you are going to the dark side!" So, in many ways, I listened to this discussion from both the "dark side" and the "light side", with deep gratitude for both places.

I welcomed the report's recognition that ministerial formation is about much more than academic study. Some of the deepest learning happens through worship, prayer, shared community life, friendship, and the mutual support and challenge of living and learning together. My own experience at both colleges confirms the importance of these relationships.

At Northern College, I was shaped in my understanding of community, justice, mission, and faithful presence beyond the walls of the church. At Westminster College, I was given space to grow in theological reflection, worship, preaching, pastoral ministry, and sacramental life. I give thanks for both.

I also want to acknowledge Scottish College as a good and faithful place for training future URC ministers. Its continued role within the life of the URC is important, and I am grateful for the gifts it brings.

The Assembly recognised the reality of declining student numbers and the financial pressures facing the Church. These challenges cannot be ignored. However, I hope we will continue to ask not only what is financially sustainable, but also what kind of ministers, CRCWs, lay leaders, and disciples we wish to form for the future of the URC.

As a former CRCW, I am particularly aware that CRCW candidate numbers have been small for several years, and even smaller recently. This raises important questions about the future shape of CRCW formation. Since CRCW ministry is rooted in neighbourhoods, community development, ecumenical partnership, and local mission, perhaps we need to explore more flexible and contextual models, while still maintaining depth, quality, and theological seriousness.

At the same time, I hope the Church will think carefully and creatively about the future potential of Westminster College. Through its place within the Cambridge Theological Federation, and its connections with the wider world church, Westminster has significant ecumenical, academic, and international relationships. If the URC is already developing contextual and community based formation through the Newbigin Pioneering Hub, perhaps Westminster could still become a strategic partner in future training for mission, community development, discipleship, and lay leadership.

After a long, thoughtful, and prayerful discussion, General Assembly voted to pass the key resolutions of Paper A3. Resolution 2 was passed with an added Section H, encouraging the relevant committees and the Resource Centres for Learning to work together to ensure a flourishing URC presence in staff teams and a continuing URC contribution to theological education. Resolution 3 was also carried.

This means that Luther King Theological College will become the primary EM1 provider, while Scottish College will continue as a complementary provider. Westminster College's future relationship with the URC will need further discernment, care, and conversation.

I want to thank the committee for the way they handled this difficult matter so carefully and prayerfully. It was clear that this was not an easy decision for the whole URC. The emotion in the room, including from the Revd Dr John Bradbury, expressed something of the pain, significance, and weight of the moment.

I believe that the members of Assembly, including myself, brought this decision before the Lord. My prayer is that God will continue to use Westminster College in his own way, and that the gifts, history, and learning offered through Westminster will continue to bless the wider Church.

These colleges are more than buildings or institutions. For many ministers, CRCWs, elders, lay people, and church members, they have been places where people encountered God, discerned their vocation, deepened their faith, and formed lifelong friendships. They are part of the story and identity of the URC.

May God guide Luther King Theological College, Scottish College, Westminster College, and the whole United Reformed Church as we continue to seek faithful ways of forming ministers, CRCWs, lay leaders, and disciples for the mission of God

Revd Maria J. Y. Lee

As you will have gathered from the reflections, General Assembly was as varied in content, style and presentations as ever – and it might have made you wonder whether you would like to attend? If you are a member of the URC in the North Western Synod and you would like to be considered for 2027, then please let me know. Nominations Committee considers names for North Western Synod representatives at a meeting early in 2027 so that Synod Meeting in March can give its agreement, and we are always keen for new people to attend.

If you would like to read more about General Assembly 2026, the papers and draft minutes and daily summaries can be found on the URC website, which you can reach by clicking [here](#).

Thanks to all who attended this year; thanks to those of you who provided some reflections, and particular thanks to Barbara Aspinall for the photos.