



The
United
Reformed
Church



They've asked me to be an
Elder

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Introduction

The booklet has been primarily written for those who have been asked to consider a call to eldership by their Minister or an Elder in their congregation. The booklet is also relevant to those who have become aware that God is calling them to service in the Church and wish to find out more about eldership as part of their discernment process.

The booklet gives an overview of the role, core responsibilities and necessary skills and abilities of post holders. The functions of the Elders meeting are set out in The Basis of Union and can be found from page 10 of this booklet. A word of reassurance – individual Elders are not expected to have all the gifts, skills and abilities listed – eldership is definitely a team activity!

Eldership is, without doubt, challenging – and in some ways, as the role has developed and changed over the past ten years or so, the challenges have grown. But so too has the level of fulfilment and the potential for Elders to make significant, creative and exciting contributions to the life of their local church and community and the wider United Reformed Church. Eldership has always been both a privilege and a responsibility – but it's also deeply fulfilling.

Discerning a call

You may be surprised to have been asked to consider being an Elder; you might be feeling proud, or scared, or even immediately certain of your answer. Whatever your feelings we suggest you take your time to discern if this invitation feels like a call to you – or definitely does not. Don't feel pressurised into giving a quick response – whatever the circumstances of your local situation. Think and pray about it and, if possible, seek the counsel of someone whose judgement you trust – ideally someone who is currently or has recently been a serving Elder in the URC and can answer any questions.

As part of your discernment process we strongly recommend you get as much information about the realities of serving as an Elder; read this booklet, talk to other Elders; ask the Elders' Meeting if you could shadow a serving Elder, and ideally attend an Elders' meeting to see first-hand how the Elders interact with one another, how decisions are reached and how the eldership team works in your local context.

What else to consider?

You may feel you lack the faith to be an Elder – ultimately only you and God know the innermost working of your heart, but it is worth remembering most (if not all) Christians feel inadequate or unsure of their abilities at times, and if you feel the call to eldership within yourself, you can be certain that God will help you meet its challenges.

And don't forget that Elders are no different from any other church members – all are called to develop and grow in faith, through prayer, worship, sacraments and learning – the call to eldership is a renewed call to these things as well.

'The best thing about being an Elder? For me it's sitting and listening to someone – it's a real privilege to be trusted.'

Eldership: what is it?

In the United Reformed Church, the eldership of a local congregation is a significant ministry – the Elders share responsibility, with the Minister of Word and Sacraments, for the spiritual oversight of the congregation. The Elders' meeting is intended to be a distinctive and vital part of every URC congregation – with the Elders collectively possessing the abilities, skills and spiritual gifts of leadership.

At its best, the Elders' meeting is at the heart of every local congregation, providing impetus and positive influence on the mission, witness and service of the church. In short, Elders play an essential role in enabling the congregation to live fruitful lives as God's people.

It's also worth noting that, both as a result of the steady fall in the number of Ministers of Word and Sacraments and the need for the church to respond to its changing context, the role of Elder has changed significantly in the last decade or so.

There is now more recognition that Elders are a key part of the church leadership team, actively and creatively serving at the heart of the local church, as it seeks to respond to the needs and circumstances of the 21st century.

For example, at least one synod has recently run a course to train Elders to conduct funerals; and, in churches up and down the country, Elders are taking the lead on any number of building and other projects. Don't be tempted to dismiss the role as 'dry and dull' – it's frequently anything but!

Daunted? Don't be! Elders work as a close knit and supportive team, with each Elder bringing distinct gifts and abilities to the eldership, as they work together for the good of the congregation they serve.

The current Elders should already be fulfilling the responsibilities of eldership, and if you decide you're being called to join them, you will be part of the continuing work. As you consider whether you are called to eldership it's essential to remember its team element.

Roles and responsibilities of Elders

Or, to put it another way, what do Elders do? The answer to this depends very much on the particular life and circumstances of your own congregation – including the number of serving Elders. The 'official' functions of eldership have been set out in the The Basis of Union, so you may like to read the full text later in this booklet, and perhaps discuss it with a serving Elder, to find out how the Elders' meeting deals with these duties. Some of the duties are ongoing, some occasional, some are done by small groups, some by everyone.

Obviously, within the Elders' Meeting, and the life of the church, specific roles and ministries need to be undertaken, and it might be that others are keen for you to take on one or more of these because of the gifts and skills they've already seen within you. It's worth asking the Elders' Meeting what it thinks your particular contribution could be.

'Being an Elder has the potential to be extraordinarily exciting and creative ... it's a calling which is both challenging and very fulfilling.'

The Elders' Meeting (the Minister and the serving Elders) are normally the charity trustees of the local church funds and, under the terms of the Charities Act 2011, have specific and legal responsibilities, as 'the persons having the general control and management of the administration of a charity'.

There is more detailed information on the trustee aspects of eldership in Area 7 (pages 47-53) of the preparation and development resources on eldership on the URC website – and we would encourage you to read these.

The safeguarding responsibilities of serving Elders

The serving Elders of United Reformed churches are responsible for overseeing all aspects of safeguarding – these duties include responding appropriately and quickly to any incidents of abuse/alleged abuse, ensuring appropriate and sufficient pastoral care and support is in place, overseeing children's, youth and community work, assessing risks and implementing and following safer recruitment procedures – basically ensuring everyone who engages with the life of the local church is kept safe.

Elders in churches that don't currently have children or adults at risk attending, need to be mindful that, at any point in the future, people from either group could start attending and/or accessing services of the church – for this reason good safeguarding practices need to be in place in all churches. Having the right procedures and safeguards in place not only protects and promotes the welfare of children and adults and protects the reputation of the church but also enhances the confidence of all involved in the life of the local church.

The safeguarding responsibilities of Elders are an important part of the role of Elder – but they are not things to be scared of! Taking the necessary steps to ensure everyone in the congregation is kept safe is one of the duties shared with other Elders.

Elders and potential Elders looking for more information about this role, should, in the first instance, contact their local synod office.

Expected characteristics of Elders

You have been asked to consider being an Elder because those who have asked you have already recognised in you the expected traits and characteristics of Elders. These include: integrity, a commitment to prayer, ability to keep confidential information confidential; listening skills; willingness to be supportive of colleagues (including the Minister and the eldership team). The preparation and development resources on eldership (pages 44-46) have more information on the expected characteristics.

What is the time commitment?

All church ministry is, in some way, costly – and becoming an Elder is no exception. It will mean committing time and energy to the role, along with a sharing and giving of self. As mentioned above, so much of the role is dependent on local circumstances: local churches vary tremendously in what is asked of their eldership so it would be sensible to check with one or two serving Elders just what would be involved in terms of time and priorities related to this calling.

'When the Elders and the Minister work as a team – all using the skills and talents they have been given – the local church, and wider community, can be transformed.'

At the very least attendance at the Elders' meetings (often held monthly) is important and you would be expected to prioritise this. In addition, in some churches' Elders take part in study days, training days and occasional residential retreats.

Ask yourself: is this a priority I can make and to which I am willing to give my time and energy? Are there things which I'll need to give up or let go of, to enable me to say yes to this new ministry of eldership?

How long are Elders appointed for?

In the URC, Elders, like Ministers of Word and Sacraments, are ordained for life. Ordination is an outward sign of God's call; it recognises both the spiritual nature of the call and the important role that Elders play in church leadership.

However, although ordination as an Elder is for life, this doesn't mean that you'll be expected to serve as an Elder for the rest of your life. The most common practice is for a three-year term of service, renewable by agreement of the Church Meeting and the Elder – with many churches operating a mandatory sabbatical of at least a year after six years of service. Not all

churches operate in this way, as with all aspects of church life different practices exist for a whole host of reasons. In some churches there is a distinct shortage of leaders, and as a result, Elders tend to serve for more than three years; perhaps not best practice but a realistic and practical solution to the church circumstance. Elders not actively serving are known as non-serving Elders.

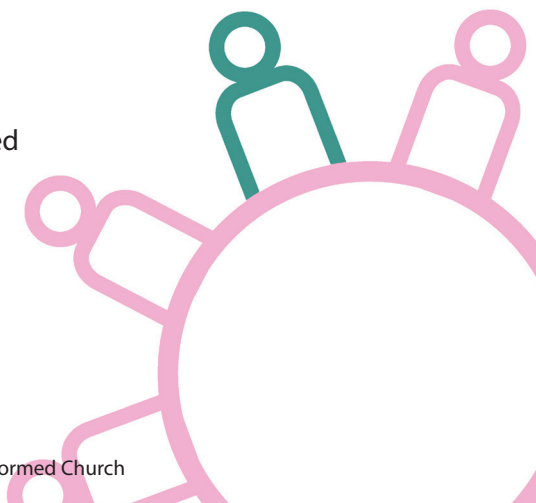
At ordination, an Elder becomes an Elder of the denomination, not just the congregation. So, if you move to another United Reformed Church, you will still be an ordained Elder and eligible to be asked to serve in your new church home. (In fact, if you move to another part of the world, you will probably be recognised as an Elder in most Reformed churches across the globe.)

What preparation and development will I receive?

The local church, the synod and the wider Church all offer support as well as preparation and development opportunities. Many churches hold 'away days' and/or study evenings for Elders; synod and Assembly events are also offered to Elders; and the three Resource Centres for Learning (Northern College, the Scottish College and Westminster College) provide a range of courses and events relevant to Elders. Speak to your Minister, a serving Elder in your church or contact the synod office for more information on what's available in your area. In addition, there are excellent preparation and development resources available on the URC website.

The ordination service

If you do decide that you are being called to be an Elder, you will be ordained and inducted as an Elder. During the ordination service, you will be asked to make a series of affirmations.



The following text, taken from the URC's service book *Worship from the United Reformed Church*, forms a central part of the ordination service for Elders.

'The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service. To equip them for this ministry he gives them particular gifts, and calls some of his servants to exercise them in offices duly recognised within the Church. Some are called to the ministry of Word and Sacraments; some are called to be Elders.'

The Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church is read, and is immediately followed by these questions:

Do you accept this statement and confess again your faith in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

I do.

In dependence on God's grace do you reaffirm your trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and your promise to follow him and to seek to do and to bear his will all the days of your life?

I do.

Do you believe that the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people?

I do.

After the ordination, the Minister asks the members of the church to accept the ministry of all the Elders to be inducted:

Do you, the members of this local church, accept and receive (name/s) to serve as an Elder/Elders among you?

We do.

Will you encourage and support him/her/them, and respond to his/her/their ministry acknowledging that it comes to you from God?

We will.

The service concludes with these words:

Eternal God, you have called us all to serve you in the world and to share your love with each other and our neighbours. Through the decision of this local church you have called (name/s) to serve us as an Elder/Elders. Give them the promised blessings of your Holy Spirit and fill them with fresh vision and courage, to lead us in the work you have called us to do. Make them wise with the mind of Christ, and give them the gifts they need to fulfil this service faithfully; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A prayer for those considering eldership

Loving God, guide me now as I seek to find your way for me.

Create in me a renewed dedication to your service.

Set before me the example of Christ Jesus.

Fill me with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

This I pray, trusting in your grace.

Amen.

The functions of the Elders' meeting (from The Basis of Union)

- (i) to foster in the congregation concern for witness and service to the community, evangelism at home and abroad, Christian education, ecumenical action, local inter-church relations and the wider responsibilities of the whole Church;
- (ii) to see that public worship is regularly offered and the sacraments are duly administered, and generally to promote the welfare of the congregation;
- (iii) to ensure pastoral care of the congregation, in which the Minister is joined by Elders having particular responsibility for groups of members;

- (iv) to nominate from among its members a church secretary (or secretaries), to be elected by the church meeting, to serve both the church meeting and the Elders' meeting;
- (v) to arrange for pulpit supply in a vacancy;
- (vi) to keep the roll of members (see paragraph 2 (1)) and (as an aid to the discharge of the congregation's pastoral and evangelistic responsibility) lists of names of adherents and children attached to the congregation, and in consultation with the church meeting to maintain standards of membership and to advise on the admission of members on profession of faith and by transfer, on the suspension of members, and on the removal of names from the roll;
- (vii) to be responsible for the institution and oversight of work among children and young people and of all organisations within the congregation;
- (viii) to call for the election of Elders and advise on the number required;
- (ix) to consider the suitability of any applicant for recognition as a candidate for the ministry or for service as a CRCW and to advise the church meeting about its recommendation to the synod;
- (x) to recommend to the church meeting arrangements for the proper maintenance of buildings and the general oversight of all the financial responsibilities of the local church;
- (xi) to act on behalf of the church meeting and bring concerns to the wider councils of the United Reformed Church;
- (xii) to do such other things as may be necessary in pursuance of its responsibility for the common life of the Church.

This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those who have been asked to consider taking on a role in the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/ask



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