

What is

The United Reformed Church?



Contents

This is a five session course designed for small groups of young people or adults in local churches; those preparing for church membership, those who are new to the United Reformed Church or for those who, for whatever reason, want to deepen their understanding of our tradition and ways.

The Statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order is the one we say together on some of our big public occasions and it provides a vivid

snapshot of what we are about. Those with well-tuned historical antennae will be able to pick up all sorts of references to our sometimes turbulent past and to issues that are still divisive among us. For those who say these words, some commentary may be helpful, along with an invitation to enter the debates. When the deeper implications of these phrases are appreciated they become not empty words to be parroted, or the 'boring bit' at an induction service, but spine-tingling testimony to the kind of church we are or hope to be.

The sessions are based on the responsive form of the Statement, since this is the version with which most people will be familiar.

Nature, Faith and Order
@ The United Reformed Church
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Session one — A faithful church

Many people in contemporary Britain have no idea what the United Reformed Church is or what we stand for. Our title is often mis-spelt and misunderstood and, no doubt, there are many who assume we are some kind of ‘sect’ – the Unification Church? But it is possible to explain who we are! This is what the Statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order does.

The Statement begins by saying loud and clear that we are part of the whole Christian Church, and we are glad to say that. We don’t believe we are the only true Church or that we are the ones who have got it right above all others. We’re part of the whole Church – we are not the whole Church ourselves. Saying that alone makes us different from some other Christian churches.

We also say that we believe the Christian faith as it is proclaimed by the whole Church. Of course there are differences of opinion about some things between different churches (and between different Christians!), but it remains true to say that whatever our differences from some other Christians on some secondary matters, we believe and proclaim in the United Reformed Church the Christian faith, the faith that the Apostles proclaimed. We might have to find new ways of saying it in our times, but it is very important to us that we stand in faithful continuity with the whole Church.

This is what we mean when we say that we believe in one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In what we call the doctrine of the Trinity, we try to put into words what cannot be adequately conveyed in language, the mystery and wonder of God. You could describe the Trinity as one way of talking about the Christian faith as a kind of story. From the creation of all things by God who is the source of all that is made, to Jesus who was God’s Son and who taught us all that God is our loving Father, to the hope and promise of the Holy Spirit who is present and active in the world today and in the days to come – in this story of our faith we believe that we have encountered and still encounter the reality of God who reaches out to us in love. The Trinity is also a beautiful way of expressing what Christians believe; that at the very heart of the truth and reality of God is a loving, personal relationship, – the three persons of Father, Son and Spirit are a picture of the perfect love of God which reaches out towards us too and which invites us to join in. We believe that the Trinity is the primary way Christians have been given to talk about the mystery of God’s presence with us and purpose for us. And this we share with the whole Church.

The second part of the Statement describes the important things about our life together as Christian people. We believe that we are called to this life by the Holy Spirit and that it is a joy and gift. ‘Calling’ is an important word in our tradition, because we believe that God is not an abstract idea or a distant force, but a living presence with whom we can enter into a close relationship. We believe that God lovingly calls us, each one, into the community of the church; that there’s something

personal and very special about this. But being a Christian is not only about this personal and individual relationship. It is also about being part of God's community in the Church and none of us can live well apart from the community of faith. We are like a vine which thrives on connection and which withers when cut. We all benefit from the corporate life of the Church, as we hear the Bible read and interpreted, as we receive God's gifts to us through the sacraments (of Baptism and the Lord's Supper) and as we share life together. This means that being a Christian in the United Reformed Church will involve being part of a local church where these things can happen and where we can learn from other Christians and help one another grow in faith and understanding. Notice that this part of the Statement says nothing about the necessity for there to be bishops, priests or even ministers! The Church benefits greatly from being well led by our ministers (servants of the Church!), but their role is to enable the Church to be what it needs to be. Notice too the simplicity of this section – the Church needs just a few things to 'be church'. This is an important witness of our tradition.

Questions for discussion

- How would you describe the core of the Christian faith? Try writing 'the Gospel in fifty words'. (Compare your answers!)
- What do you say to those who find 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' too male?
- Imagine that you have landed on a desert island. What are the essential things about practising the Christian faith that you will want to find a way to do as soon as possible?
- Think further about the image of the vine. How does it help you understand belonging to a Christian community? What other biblical metaphors open up the corporate life of the Church and why?
- Which do you think is the most important part of a Sunday service?
- Which things about the Christian faith do you think need restating for today?

Session two — A church based on the Bible

The Bible is very important for every kind of Christian church. But our own particular church traditions were shaped out of a time when there was a great renewal of interest in the Bible. Through a time called the Reformation (which stretched over a long period from the end of the fifteenth century to the end of the seventeenth) some Christians began again to study the Bible texts in their original languages (Greek and Hebrew) and to make new discoveries about them. Some also argued, at a time when literacy was expanding, that everyone should be able to read the Bible in his or her own language and so translations began to be made. Some feared that 'ignorant' people reading the Bible would lead to no good and wanted to protect the Bible from being misinterpreted, but our particular forebears were firmly on the side of opening it up to everyone. At the same time they wanted ministers to be well educated in the things of God so that they could help people understand the Bible. Even at the beginning of the development of the printing press printed Bibles in local languages became available in many homes and churches amazingly quickly. Bibles, Psalm books and commentaries were highly valued amongst the church communities from which we have come, although they remained controversial in some countries and in some time-periods for quite a while.

With this emphasis on reading and seeking to understand the Bible goes the strong principle that the 'highest authority' for our believing and living is 'God's Word in the Bible'. Notice that the Statement does not simply say that 'the Bible' is the authority, but 'God's Word in the Bible'. Jesus, described in John's Gospel as 'the Word made flesh' is the supreme authority. We believe that reading and interpreting the Bible is not necessarily straightforward, that God speaks to us as we interpret and that we need the help of the Holy Spirit. It is this reading under the Holy Spirit that we believe offers our surest hope of working out what is God's will for us. We know, from looking back over history, that faithful people have not always read with wisdom and insight (we see with sadness how some Reformed Christians in South Africa believed that the Bible taught them authoritatively that apartheid was God's will). So we do not assume that we can read without having to work and pray as we do so. But we trust that it is reading the Bible in a prayerful spirit and with God's help, above all else, that will help us to work out what we should believe and do. We would listen to what other Christians have said and still say as well. We would listen hard for the witness of our own experience and to what our own thinking and puzzling suggest – but God's Word in the Bible is the first source of wisdom for us and we would turn to it first.

What would it be like not to have your own copy of the Bible, but to depend on memory (your own and others)? Work together as a group at remembering a Bible story. See if you can put together the parable of the Prodigal Son from your corporate memory. Remember the shape of the story, as many particular phrases as possible, and what you can about the context and any kind of interpretation given in the Bible. Then look up the parable (Luke 15:11-32) – Reflect on the exercise, on why you

remembered what you did, and how this story might have been remembered and then written down by the early Christians. Move on to talk about the parable. What part has it played in your own Christian life? What does it mean? Does it remind you of any other stories in the Bible? Does it remind you of any other stories anywhere else? How does it connect with the central story of the Gospels, of Jesus who died on the cross and who rose again?

Questions for discussion

- What are your earliest memories of reading the Bible or of hearing Bible stories?
- Are there any bits of the Bible you really struggle with? If so, what helps you in your struggle?
- If you have a difficult decision to make, in what ways might reading the Bible help you?
- Do you have any suggestions for how the Bible might become more central to the life of your local church?
- If you could add a book to the Bible what would it be? (If you could take a book away which might you choose?) – you might like to compare your answers!
- What can be said in favour of keeping the Bible just as it is? (the gory bits, the sublime poetry ...)

Session three — Part of the one great Church, with a particular story of our own

Sometimes people have described us as a ‘non-credal’ church, believing that we rarely, if ever, say creeds in our worship and that we want to give individuals freedom to state the faith in their own words. However, it’s not quite as simple as that! It is true that the saying of creeds has not generally played a regular part in worship at most of our churches and it is true that we have placed a high value on freedom of conscience, but it is not true that we have no sense of the faith we can hold together or that ‘you can believe what you like in the URC’.

The Statement offers thanksgiving for the witness to the faith given by the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. (Note that ‘catholic faith’ here refers to the faith of the whole Church – and does not mean the same as Roman Catholic). These two creeds, both from the early centuries of the Church’s life, are important to us because of their great age, because they are honoured by churches throughout the world and through many centuries, and because they were framed at critical times when the Christian faith was being shaped. You can find them both in Rejoice and Sing and there are fascinating stories to tell about them. We often think of attention to the Virgin Mary as a rather late development in the Church’s life, so it’s fascinating to notice that she is named in the (comparatively brief) Apostles’ Creed! And it’s worth finding out the long story behind the brackets around one phrase in the Nicene Creed! We give thanks to God for these two creeds, not because they are exactly the words we would want to use today, but because they represent early attempts by the whole Church, meeting together, to say what the Christian faith is really about. From our own times, when Christians often find it hard to agree or to make joint statements, their achievement in framing these creeds seems a cause of thankfulness and even amazement. These creeds have some power and resonance, and as we write contemporary creeds and affirmations for today, or as we write hymns or offer prayers, it’s worth asking how far what we say is ‘in continuity’ with this particular honoured past.

It’s true that creeds in the early Church were often formed as part of a war against ‘untruth’, in battles we would not want to fight in the same ways. However they provide good testing grounds for our own attempts to speak the faith for today.

The Statement also acknowledges declarations of faith made by our particular forebears and give thanks for them. We recognise what they were trying to do in their own time in terms of re-describing the faith and remaking the church – and we honour them. But we do not believe that we honour them only by repeating their words exactly, but rather by doing in our time what they were trying to do in theirs; to be faithful to the Apostolic faith and making it clear for today. You can read about the history of these three traditions (in an excellent leaflet written by David Thompson, entitled *Where do we come from?: The origins of the United Reformed Church*).

The congregational response to this part of the Statement affirms that we believe that our faith comes from the same source as the early Church and as our historical forebears, but we also believe that faith has to be renewed for every generation. This is something that really does stand out about the United Reformed Church. We are ceaselessly working and praying to find ways of living and speaking our faith that will resonate with the times. Faith is not to be lived in a museum, but is for life today. Some would criticise us for this or at least warn us of the dangers. We could become so identified with our present culture that we do not recognise how Christ speaks to it to challenge and renew it. If we sit too light to the history of the Church we might miss out on a great wealth of wisdom and spiritual depth. Perhaps we make the mistake of thinking we have to 'start again' in every generation and we forget that we are not on our own in being Christians, that countless generations have gone before us and can offer us the witness of their faith. However, there are also plenty of voices who will cry that the Church is too often stuck in the past and that the world needs brave Christians who have the courage to let the Holy Spirit renew them in faith for their own times.

Questions for discussion

- Do you think that the Church is either too tied to the past or too swayed by present trends?
- What would a local congregation look like if it had the balance about right?
- Look at the Apostles' Creed and have a go at editing it to produce a 'creed for the 21st century'. What factors would you take into account as you did it?
- Have a go at writing a new statement of faith from scratch. (Please send your final text to the Doctrine, Prayer and Worship committee!)
- Can you imagine other ways of 'stating the faith' than by writing or saying a creed?
- How does your local congregation express its faith?

Session Four — A church that affirms freedom

You may have noticed the part in that section where we talk of the Church being ‘both Catholic and reformed’. We have already seen (in earlier sessions) that the United Reformed belongs to the whole catholic Church. The catholic Church is all those in heaven and on earth who have been called by the Holy Spirit to be Christ’s friends and followers. The local congregations to which we all belong are the whole Church in microcosm. When we are received into membership within a congregation we are received as members of the universal Church in one of its local expressions. The ‘reformed’ part of our title refers to our particular roots in the period called the Reformation and especially our links with the communities who, like John Calvin’s church in Geneva, came to call themselves Reformed. It’s worth remembering that we come from those who never wanted to set up a separate ‘Reformed’ church, but who wanted to reform the whole (catholic) Church. You might say that the Reformers did not want to be anything but good catholic Christians. Of course we also believe that reformation is a continual process and that we do not reach a point of being ‘reformed’. (Perhaps those who call us the United Reform Church make a good point, through their mistake!). God’s Spirit is continually reaching out to change us and to make us more like Christ.

Because of our particular inheritance through our history, the United Reformed Church has things to say about freedom. We say boldly that we are ready to take up the freedom to state the faith in new ways, to change the way we structure our life and to seek new ways of living in obedience to Christ. We also affirm the rights of personal conviction and conscience, and the right of the church, in things that affect obedience to God, to be independent (‘free’) of the state. Both these freedoms, of conscience and from the state, are anchored in the gospel.

This valuing of freedom, in these different ways, we have learned through sometimes bitter experience. We also shouldn’t be deceived into thinking that we have always lived up to our aspirations and proclaimed the importance of freedom, allowed it to others or lived it to the glory of God. Through the turbulent years of the Reformation there were those amongst the Reformed who had no qualms about compelling everyone in a nation to share their views. There are Reformed churches which do have a close relationship with the state, and respect for freedom of conscience has sometimes been hard won. Equally, there are those who would argue that although we make much noise about the freedom we have in Christ, it proves very difficult indeed to persuade us to stand up and exercise it!

We need to be careful not to idealise our own history in retrospect. However, it remains true that ‘we’ have known what it means to face persecution. In the reign of Elizabeth 1, some whom we can number among our predecessors were executed for believing that it was not in the power of the monarch or parliament to tell the church what to pray, how to worship, or how to order its life. In 1660-62, when the Church of

England 'ejected' those they called Dissenters (some others of our forebears), 'we' were nearly wiped out through various forms of social exclusion. We were excluded from the universities and the professions and not able to worship in the ways of our choosing in the parish churches. We learned over centuries the harsh lessons of coming out on the losing side of history. This experience has taught us the importance of certain freedoms and the desirability of a society that allows more than one form of faith expression. When we acquired the name 'nonconformist' (in England and Wales) we turned this often to positive value as a label that suggests the kind of courage required sometimes to resist or to question the status quo. We also had considerable political impact as those who spoke from somewhere else than the 'ruling' class. As many of the freedoms for which we have stood are now commonly accepted, and since many in the Church of England now question the rightness of an 'established' church, these stances are not ours alone. However, in a culture which is increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith they have new force and importance. We have experience of weighing in the balance questions of freedom of speech with the need to be careful of causing offence. We have experience of living in a society where we are not the dominant voice. We have experience of thinking about the proper relationship between church and state. As we think today about such things as blasphemy laws, faith schools and 'defender of faith' versus 'defender of faiths', we have something to offer into the discussion.

Questions for discussion

- If it were your decision alone, how would you use your freedom to change the local church you belong to? What restraints are there, or should there be, on your own individual freedom?
- Is there anything that your local church (or the whole United Reformed Church) might decide to declare or do that would mean you would personally feel compelled to leave?
- Think further about the origins of our freedom. P T Forsyth said that ours is a "founded freedom" – what do you think he meant? Are there limits to 'freedom of speech'?
- How does your local church handle conflict? How do you think churches should hold together different views – and how can we know when it might be right to separate?
- Do you think that the Church of England should be separate from the state? What arguments might there be in favour of a state church?
- What do you think are the particular obligations of a Christian politician?

Session Five — A church praying and working for unity

The Church has always been a very diverse community and there have been debates, arguments and divisions since the beginning. You only have to read the New Testament to see that there never was a golden age when perfect peace reigned among and between Christians! However there have been some major divisions in the Church which have caused great pain and damage, not only to the witness of the Church, but to its very life. Near the end of the first millennium the Church separated into East and West (not quite, but almost, equivalent to the churches we would now describe as Orthodox and Roman Catholic). The Reformation period led to further separations among the churches (and there have been more since!) and these divisions have been a great sadness to many over the centuries. The United Reformed Church believes that the Church is one, and that the unity which God gives us should be real and evident among us, there for all to see.

The fragmentation and disunity of the Church is a terrible contradiction of the Gospel of God's reconciling love. We believe that it is God's purpose that the Church should be in visible unity and also that God will's to bring the whole creation into a harmonious and flourishing peace. This is why the 'United' part of our title is also important and significant. We can celebrate that in 1972 (and then in 1981 and 2000), those formerly separated have come into union. The United Reformed Church has, as part of its very reason for being, a giving of itself in prayer and work for the visible unity of the Church.

We recognise that the unity of the Church may not come about in the way we first envisaged (through national institutional union), but we remain committed to seeking ways to deepen and express the unity which Christ is bringing to his Church. So, we are involved in many local unity projects, we are thoroughly committed to dialogue with other Christian traditions and churches, we are always present and active in international and national ecumenical work, and we are committed to finding ways to bridge new divides which cut across even single denominations or local churches (like the so-called evangelical/liberal divide). This strong commitment to unity seems particularly striking in us now, when ecumenism is at something of a low ebb, after the high tide of the 1960s. It may be that we have a particular vocation in this, though it is proving testing to work out how to live it. For the United Reformed Church, prayer for the unity of the church is very much at the heart of what it means for us to be the church. In a world which is finding it hard to know how to live with so much 'difference', a community so committed to building unity and peace has a significant mission.

Questions for discussion

- Where have you experienced disunity between Christians? And where have you seen examples of unity becoming real and visible?
- Some people say that we've spent too much time on ecumenism while forgetting mission. What do you think is the relationship between the two?
- If we are in an 'ecumenical Winter' do you think Spring will come and if so what might it look like?
- If all the churches came together overnight, what contributions would the United Reformed Church bring to it? And what things would we gain from other Christian traditions?
- Is there a difference between work to build unity between Christians and work to build peace between faiths?

Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church

With the whole Christian Church
the United Reformed Church believes in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**The living God, the only God,
ever to be praised.**

The life of faith to which we are called
is the Spirit's gift
continually received
through the Word, the Sacraments
and our Christian life together.

**We acknowledge the gift
and answer the call,
giving thanks for the means of grace.**

The highest authority
for what we believe and do
is God's Word in the Bible
alive for his people today
through the help of the Spirit.

**We respond to this Word,
whose servants we are
with all God's people
through the years.**

We accept with thanksgiving to God
the witness to the catholic faith
in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.
We acknowledge the declarations
made in our own tradition
by Congregationalists, Presbyterians
and Churches of Christ
in which they stated the faith
and sought to make its implications clear.

**Faith alive and active:
gift of an eternal source,
renewed for every generation.**

We conduct our life together
according to the Basis of Union
in which we give expression to our faith
in forms which we believe contain
the essential elements of the Church's life,
both catholic and reformed;

but we affirm our right and readiness,
if the need arises,
to change the Basis of Union
and to make new statements of faith
in ever new obedience to the Living Christ.

**Our crucified and risen Lord,
who leads us in our faith
and brings it to perfection.**

Held together in the Body of Christ
through the freedom of the Spirit,
we rejoice in the diversity of the Spirit's gifts
and uphold the rights of personal conviction.
For the sake of faith and fellowship
it shall be for the church to decide
where differences of conviction
hurt our unity and peace.

**We commit ourselves
to speak the truth in love
and grow together
in the peace of Christ.**

We believe that
Christ gives his Church a government
distinct from the government of the state.
In things that affect obedience to God
the Church is not subordinate to the state,
but must serve the Lord Jesus Christ,
its only Ruler and Head.
Civil authorities are called
to serve God's will of justice and peace for all humankind,
and to respect the rights of conscience and belief.

**While we ourselves
are servants in the world
as citizens of God's eternal kingdom.**

We affirm our intention
to go on praying and working,
with all our fellow Christians,
for the visible unity of the Church
in the way Christ chooses
so that people and nations
may be led to love and serve God
and praise him more and more for ever.

**Source, Guide, and Goal
of all that is:
to God be eternal glory.
Amen.**