

Guidelines: Introduction to FAQ

The following was agreed at Loughborough University in July 2010 (Resolution 12): General Assembly, recognising the high standard of conduct and behaviour displayed by the vast majority of Ministers of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, and Elders within the United Reformed Church, encourages all in leadership positions within the church to continue to maintain those standards. Realising, however, that there are times in the life of the church when disagreement arises over the boundaries of acceptable conduct and behaviour General Assembly adopts the Guidelines on Conduct and Behaviour for Ministers of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers and Elders.

The three documents attempt to draw attention to the implications of the promise made by ministers 'to live a holy life', outline what duty to colleagues may look like, and define the type of activities that may damage the well-being, purity and peace of the United Reformed Church. They are not comprehensive lists of proscribed activities but guidelines marking out the boundaries, for the crossing of which an individual can be held accountable.

Those candidating for the ministries of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Work will be expected to be aware of the content of these papers and this will be included in the assessment process of the United Reformed Church. Additionally their content should be discussed with those who are being prepared for ordination as elders within the United Reformed Church, as well as being a valued resource for those already ordained as they reflect on their role as elders.

It has been asked whether General Assembly's adoption of the Guidelines on Conduct and Behaviour undermines the disciplinary process (Section O) for Ministers of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers. The matter has been carefully considered by the Ministerial Incapacity and Discipline Advisory Group and the URC's legal advisors. It should be recognized that the basis for the Disciplinary Process is the behaviour of a minister considered against the Ordination or Commissioning Promises and the Guidelines themselves make it clear in paragraph 2 that "the foundation for the conduct of Ministers is in the Basis of Union, summarised in Schedule E paragraph 2".

Paragraph 1 of the Guidelines for Ministers and CRCWs refers to "expectations" and the resolution before General Assembly contained words such as "encourages" and "adopts". There is no wording which suggests that a Minister should be judged against the Guidelines as opposed to their Ordination Promises. The Disciplinary Process does not have the jurisdiction to make and base decisions upon the Guidelines and it has never been intended that the Guidelines should be used in this way.

The Ministerial Incapacity and Discipline Advisory Group intends to include reference to both the Capability Procedure (adopted by General Assembly in 2008) and the Guidelines in the "General" section of the Disciplinary Process to improve clarity.

In the preparation and consideration of these documents over several years much of the discussion has concerned only a small number of the guidelines and we are conscious that the

final form of the three papers has left some people disappointed. Two things should therefore be emphasised here.

First, we should not lose sight of the breadth of these documents and the areas on which they touch, which make them a useful tool in a number of settings:

- In discussions between ministers and elders in establishing expectations in a time of new ministry;
- With candidates for ministry, both Ministers of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers, as expectations regarding lifestyle are explored and the nature of leadership probed;
- With those preparing for ordination and induction as elders as the nature of the role as a spiritual leader in the local congregations is addressed.
- During the Ministerial Accompanied Self Appraisal (MASA) and Local Mission and Ministry Review (LMMR) processes.
- When ministers are moving and/or preparing for retirement.

Second, in order to keep the documents to a manageable length, as well as complying with the desire that they should be a signpost to the areas of danger rather than an encyclopaedia of rules, it was not possible to produce a resource which explained the nuances of particular guidelines.

What follows is an exploration of some of the issues that have been raised relating to specific guidelines within the three papers in the form of a 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQ) document. It is intended to address these issues in the form of a hypothetical question and an answer relating to that scenario. This may not address all the concerns relating to a specific guideline but will aid in understanding the intention.

The guidelines covered by this paper are not the only ones over which questions may be asked but are some of those which have provoked the most discussion. Furthermore, this paper is not definitive and it is envisaged that it may be added to as questions are asked and wisdom is gathered.

10th November 2010