

Paper F1

Faith and order committee
Authorised elders

United Church 2016
Church 2016
Reformed Church 2016
Church 2016

Paper F1



Faith and order committee

Authorised elders

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Elizabeth Welch minister@theroundchapel.org.uk
Action required	Information and advice The committee expects to take this paper to General Assembly in 2016, and is keen to learn whether the concerns noted at Mission Council last autumn have now been helpfully addressed
Draft resolution(s)	<p><i>There are no resolutions for Mission Council. The resolutions that follow have been drafted with Assembly in mind.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. that the existing guidance on Presidency at the Sacraments (<i>The Manual</i>, Section F) be amended to read: <p>The pattern of presidency at the sacraments should be as follows –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) a Minister of Word and Sacraments (including a retired minister who has expressed willingness to do so) should normally preside; b) when such a minister does not preside, the synod should make provision for presidency by another person, in accordance with the provisions of §25 of the <i>Basis of Union</i>: elders of the local congregation and accredited lay preachers regularly conducting worship in the congregation should be considered first; c) authorisation for such presidency by the synod, normally of members from within the congregation concerned, should be for an initial period of three to five years (according to synod judgement), including a probationary year on first appointment, with the possibility of renewal. Before renewal there should be consultation by the synod with the congregation, and a review of its needs. 2. that synods are recommended to provide regular support and guidance for each church without an authorised elder within its membership; and also for authorised elders, for example by holding an annual meeting where experiences can be shared. 3. that the ministries committee be invited to develop a specific code of conduct for authorised elders and lay preachers; and that those concerned agree to be bound by it before embarking on their ministry. 4. that a list of those authorised elders and lay preachers whose service has proved unsatisfactory be maintained by

	<p>the General Secretariat, to avoid the possibility of any individual exercising this ministry unhelpfully in one place and then moving elsewhere to try again.</p> <p>5. that the education and learning committee be invited to prepare an Assembly syllabus for the preparation of authorised elders and lay preachers, drawing on existing synod resources.</p> <p>6. that further attention be given by the ministries and education and learning committees to the possibility of expanding the concept of non-stipendiary ministry to include once more the original pattern of team non-stipendiary ministry.</p>
--	--

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To respond to resolution 13 of Assembly 2014 asking for work to be done on the possibility of authorising ‘celebrant elders’ to preside at the sacraments.
Main points	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revision of the Guidance on Presidency (<i>The Manual</i>, Section F) 2. Extension of the normal period of authorisation 3. Synods to organise regular support and guidance for each church without an authorised elder, and to hold regular meetings for all authorised elders 4. Ministries committee to prepare a code of conduct for authorised elders, which they would sign before embarking on their ministry 5. General Secretariat to maintain a list of authorised elders whose service has proved unsatisfactory 6. Education and learning committee to be invited to prepare an Assembly syllabus for the preparation of authorised elders, drawing on synod resources 7. Ministries and education and learning committees to be invited to give further attention to the possibility of restoring the original pattern of team non-stipendiary ministry
Previous relevant documents	General Assembly 2012, Resolution 35, <i>The Record</i> p41 General Assembly 2014, Resolution 13, <i>The Record</i> p6
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod moderators September 2015 Secretaries for Ministries and Education and Learning Ministries committee group on non-stipendiary ministry

Summary of Impact

Financial	No significant financial implication
External (e.g. ecumenical)	No change in position regarding sister churches.

Authorised elders

1.1 The General Assembly of 2014 asked the faith and order committee to set up a task group to explore the possibility of authorising ‘celebrant elders’ to preside at the sacraments, because Ministers of Word and Sacraments are increasingly expected to serve several congregations. The report of this group has been adopted by the committee for presentation to Assembly 2016.

1.2 The Committee recommends that the term ‘celebrant elders’ should not be used, since earlier attempts to create categories within the eldership have been perceived as divisive. Further we believe that theologically the congregation celebrates the sacraments: those presiding lead the biblical words of institution, the thanksgiving and related prayers, and perform the sacramental actions of baptising in water, breaking the bread and pouring the wine. Since there already exists a procedure for authorising elders and lay preachers to preside, its proposals now simply refer to ‘authorised elders’ – a term already familiar in several of our synods. The principal recommendations (embodied in Resolutions 1-5) are:

- to revise the current guidance on Presidency at the Sacraments (*The Manual*, Section F) by extending the term of service;
- to recommend that synods provide regular support and guidance for congregations without authorised elders and offer opportunities for those who are authorised to meet together regularly;
- to ask the ministries committee to develop a specific code of conduct for authorised elders and lay preachers which they would be required to sign before beginning their ministry;
- to maintain a list of any such elders and lay preachers whose term has been discontinued because their service had been unsatisfactory;
- and to invite the education and learning committee to develop an Assembly syllabus for the preparation of authorised elders and lay preachers, drawing on existing synod resources.

The committee has also accepted the task group’s recommendation that the ministries and education and learning committees should re-examine the approved patterns of non-stipendiary ministry so as to restore the original understanding of what would now be called ‘team non-stipendiary ministry’. This would ease some of the potential ecumenical difficulties surrounding an increase in the number of authorised elders and lay preachers (Resolution 6).

1.3 The committee believes that these proposals will meet the needs of our congregations; that they will strengthen the role of elders in the church; that they can be readily implemented and overseen by synods; and that they are realistic. By extending the term of service for which authorised elders and lay preachers are appointed, it hopes that the proposals will increase trust and involve less monitoring by synods.

1.4 In 1972 the United Reformed Church boldly committed itself to ‘take steps to ensure that so far as possible ordained Ministers of Word and Sacraments are readily available to every local church’ (*Basis of Union*, §25: see §2.4 – references to the history and theological justification for these proposals are in the Appendix). But because the two Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational) had different views of the appropriate pattern of presidency at the sacraments, paragraph 25 was a compromise. On the one hand, there was the Presbyterian view, which emphasised that those presiding at the sacraments represented the whole Church, not just a single congregation, and therefore sought to restrict exceptions to presidency by Ministers of Word and Sacraments as far as possible. On the other hand, the Congregational view regarded presidency at the sacraments as a decision for the local church, and was ready to authorise lay preachers, where Ministers of Word and

Sacraments were not available. The compromise was that presidency would normally fall to a minister of Word and Sacraments, but in cases of pastoral necessity deaconesses¹, elders and accredited² lay preachers might be authorised by District Councils to preside, thereby securing recognition by the wider church. Although the provisions of the *Basis of Union* apply to baptism as well as Holy Communion, in practice most of the discussion has taken place about Communion. Also, different views have been taken about what constitutes 'pastoral necessity' in various parts of the country. This was true from the beginning, but with the abolition of District Councils as a regular part of the Church's life, it has been necessary to create a common policy within each synod.

1.5 Those differences of view about sacramental order have been overtaken by a significant change in the pastoral situation facing our congregations. The number of ordained Ministers of Word and Sacraments has declined (notwithstanding the introduction of non-stipendiary ministry from 1979) and this is likely to continue. But the number of congregations has declined more slowly. The Church therefore confronts a new mission situation, if the sacraments are to continue to be readily available to our congregations.

1.6 How can the underlying differences of conviction on this matter that paragraph 25 sought to resolve be handled today? The committee's report to Assembly in 2014 noted that in several synods it had been suggested that there was already an ordained local ministry – the eldership; and it therefore suggested that a solution might be found by developing a new category of elder: 'celebrant elders'. The task group, however, argued:

- a) that ordination does not of itself give authority to preside; what determines the ministry authorised is the office to which a person is ordained (§§2.10-2.11);
- b) if elders, or a specified group of elders, were to be given authority to preside by ordination, this would require amendments to the Basis of Union (§2.13), which would change the nature of the eldership and involve lengthy consultation.

1.7 The committee recognises that urgent action is necessary. It is already four years since the Wessex Synod resolution was proposed in 2012. This is a mission imperative for many local churches, given the increasing number of multi-church pastorates, the clustering of churches with ministry teams including ministers, elders and lay preachers, and the inexorable problems of deploying a declining number of ministers over wider areas.

1.8 The Committee therefore proposes that synods should be encouraged to authorise elders, or lay preachers with a pastoral relationship to the congregation, for periods of between three and five years at a time (according to synod judgement), rather than for particular occasions or for a year at a time. (The current guidance in Section F of *The Manual* limits authorisation to periods of one year.) Such a proposal is supported by a majority of Synod Moderators; and it would satisfy those voices strongly urging a steer from Assembly, so that we should be seen to be acting as one church rather than thirteen synods. It would enable those authorised to feel that the preparation for the task is worth undertaking, as well as giving stability to local congregational situations. Moreover such persons should be used regularly, not just left as names on a list; otherwise the time spent in preparation is

1 The Presbyterian Church of England ordained deaconesses, who might have pastoral charge of a congregation but were not authorised to preside at the sacraments. At the formation of The United Reformed Church there were eight deaconesses, and one about to enter training. It was decided not to continue to recruit to this ministry in future, but to honour the ministry of those already in post. Of the six listed in the 1979 *Year Book*, three were ordained to the ministry in 1979 and two retired. The remaining one retired in 1990. The paragraph in the *Basis of Union* on Deaconesses was removed in 2000.

2 In 1972 the only form of URC accreditation was that through the Assembly lay preachers committee. Since then synods have begun to accredit lay preachers. Apart from lay preachers from other churches, they are the only category covered by paragraph 25 of the *Basis of Union*.

wasted (§2.27). All synods take seriously the responsibility of preparing elders to preside; this diversity of resources is an asset, which enables us to learn from one another's experience. The committee does not propose a maximum or minimum number per church, since it believes the Basis of Union intended the matter to be determined on the basis of need not numbers.

1.9 Various pastoral questions have been raised, although in general the detailed application of Assembly policy will always lie with the synods. Some have wondered about appropriate provision in various Fresh Expressions of church or Local Mission Projects; this must depend on the synod's judgement about the local situation in question. Presumably there will be a local church or a synod-appointed group to guide the development concerned; thus the recommendations would fall to them. Other questions have been raised about communion for the housebound, or for those in care homes and similar situations. There is an obvious difference between conducting a service for one or two church members in a home, and providing a service for all the residents. We commend the practice of the Synod of Scotland in giving special preparation for those presiding at communion with vulnerable adults. Another synod has suggested that a named elder might be given the task of preparing candidates for baptism and conducting the service. The committee regards this as an imaginative use of §25.

1.10 The new atmosphere of suspicion in parliamentary legislation about internal church discipline, exemplified by the Goddard Inquiry, has influenced the drafting of other details: the committee proposes a probationary period of one year for new appointments before commissioning; a code of conduct by which authorised elders and lay preachers would agree to be bound; regular support and guidance from synods for both churches without an authorised elder or lay preacher, and for those authorised to share their experience; and a list of any whose service has proved unsatisfactory, for reference if someone moves from one synod to another (resolutions 1(c), 2, 3, and 4; see also §2.14, 2.23, 2.33, 2.36, 2.37).

1.11 The development of a programme of missional discipleship, with a variety of learning resources, means that the preparation for such a ministry by those not ordained to the ministry of word and sacraments can be seen as part of a total commitment by the United Reformed Church to a new outward-facing approach in their local situation. In addressing the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:18ff) Paul alludes to Ezekiel 33-34, which enables him to characterise the elders as sentinels and shepherds. An elder looks outward at the wider community, recognising and understanding the pressures, concerns and context amid which the congregation serves. Elders also look inward, with a caring and supportive ministry towards the people who have elected them. Both aspects of the role matter. Elders can only help members in their faith and witness if they understand well the local context within which that faith is set and that witness expressed. A single Assembly list of the elements of a programme of preparation for authorised elders and lay preachers could build on the existing resources of each synod, and ensure that the delivery of such a programme would be adapted to the local situations of those preparing for this ministry. The committee proposes that the education and learning committee be invited to prepare such a syllabus, which could be linked to the work on Missional Discipleship (see Resolution 5).

1.12 The Committee therefore proposes:

1. **that the existing guidance on Presidency at the Sacraments** (*The Manual*, Section F) **be amended to read:**

The pattern of presidency at the sacraments should be as follows –

- a) **a Minister of Word and Sacraments (including a retired minister who has expressed willingness to do so) should normally preside;**
- b) **when such a minister does not preside, the synod should make provision for presidency by another person, in accordance with the provisions of §25 of the *Basis of Union*: elders of the local congregation**

- and accredited lay preachers regularly conducting worship in the congregation should be considered first;
- c) authorisation for such presidency by the synod, normally of members from within the congregation concerned, should be for an initial period of three to five years (according to synod judgement), including a probationary year on first appointment, with the possibility of renewal. Before renewal there should be consultation by the synod with the congregation, and a review of its needs.
2. that synods are recommended to provide regular support and guidance for each church without an authorised elder within its membership; and also for authorised elders, for example by holding an annual meeting where experiences can be shared.
3. that the ministries committee be invited to develop a specific code of conduct for authorised elders and lay preachers; and that those concerned agree to be bound by it before embarking on their ministry.
4. that a list of those authorised elders and lay preachers whose service has proved unsatisfactory be maintained by the General Secretariat, to avoid the possibility of any individual exercising this ministry unhelpfully in one place and then moving elsewhere to try again.
5. that the education and learning committee be invited to prepare an **Assembly syllabus for the preparation of authorised elders and lay preachers, drawing on existing synod resources.**

1.13 Finally the committee reminds Assembly that the original model of non-stipendiary ministry, introduced in 1979, (based on the practice of former Churches of Christ congregations) was rooted in local congregations. The committee proposes that there should be further exploration of the pattern of 'team non-stipendiary ministry', by the ministries committee (which has a working group on non-stipendiary ministry) and the education and learning committee. This would ensure that presidency at the sacraments (both baptism and Holy Communion) is rooted in the local congregations concerned. The committee therefore proposes:

6. **that further attention be given by the ministries and education and learning committees to the possibility of expanding the concept of non-stipendiary ministry to include once more the original pattern of team non-stipendiary ministry.**

1.14 The committee offers some concluding thoughts:

- a) *Teamwork*

Regardless of whether the committee's suggestion for further work on team non-stipendiary ministers is pursued, it believes that there should be a fresh look at the opportunities for teamwork, and the possibility of mixed teams of ministers of word and sacraments, elders and lay preachers; this suggestion, which has been mentioned more than once in previous Reports, should be referred to the ministries and education and learning committees, and to Synod Moderators and pastoral committees, in consultation with the local churches concerned.

b) *Information*

We are concerned at the apparent lack of information about who preaches and leads worship generally in our congregations week-by-week. Obviously local churches know what is happening, and we suggest that synods should gather more information than is routinely available today. Questions concerning presidency need to be set in the wider context of the current patterns of worship, which include, for example, services taken by authorised representatives of partner churches, and joint or united services. If Assembly and synods are to decide on these matters, we believe that they require more information than is currently available.

c) *'Clericalisation?'*

At the General Assembly in 1995, and to a lesser extent in 2005, some members expressed concern that the addition of further responsibilities to even two or three elders might distract them from their Christian witness in the wider world – what other traditions might call 'the clericalisation of the laity'. An elder's office in the United Reformed Church is one of governance and pastoral care; it carries authority and responsibility, dependent on the grace of God. There is no reason why another responsibility for some should impede the task of every Christian 'to give an account of the faith that is in us' in encountering an increasingly secularised world. To accept the popular distinction between clerical and lay is to deny the biblical view that the *laos* is the whole people of God, not only the unordained. It does not accord with the Reformed tradition. Nor is the difference one between 'amateurs' and 'professionals': this seriously undervalues the work of our elders in leading worship and preaching. One member of the task group remarked that it was only when preparing devotions, prayer with members who were sick, or presiding at the Lord's Supper that she was reminded of our concern for witness and service to the community and evangelism at home and abroad. The committee is therefore confident that nothing in these proposals will reduce the missionary potential of our elders.

d) *Differences of opinion*

We are struck by the fact that attempts to resolve some of these issues have divided opinion in the Church for more than 20 years (see §§1.4-1.6 above). The faith and order committee was not unanimous in bringing their recommendation to Assembly in 2014, and Assembly approved the resolution by agreement (rather than consensus). Therefore, although the task group has found unanimity in its thinking, the committee recognises that further decisions on this matter will not be easy, and will require an appropriate combination of prayer and realism, alongside theological discernment. The committee reminds members of Assembly that the United Reformed Church is committed to living with differences of opinion, unless its unity and peace are threatened – which is a matter for the Assembly to judge.

Appendix

History and theological justification The 2014 resolution

2.1 The Wessex resolution to General Assembly 2012 suggesting exploration of ordained local ministry was the latest initiative in a twenty-year long process to address the issues of continuity of ministerial service within local congregations, as multi-church pastorates and clusters have become more common and more use is made of the provision in the Basis of Union to authorise elders or lay preachers to preside at Holy Communion. A version of this was adopted by a majority of the faith and order committee and brought to General Assembly in 2014, which approved it by agreement (for the text see §2.2). A small task group was then set up to address the issues (§2.3, 2.6-2.7). The committee's conclusions are set out in §1.2 above.

2.2 Resolution 13 of 2014: ordained local ministry

1. General Assembly, affirming the existing gift of elders and the diversity of gifts within each elders meeting as part of the United Reformed Church's distinctive contribution to the Church universal, wishes to reinvigorate the role of elders and welcomes current work to that end.
2. General Assembly directs the faith and order committee to set up a task group incorporating expertise from other committees of the United Reformed Church to explore the possibility of authorising 'celebrant elders' to preside at the sacraments.

To that end General Assembly asks for work to be done in the following areas:

- a) the nature of ordination within the United Reformed Church, both of Ministers of Word and Sacrament (*sic*) and of elders;
- b) how within the understandings of the various traditions which make up our Church the sacrament of Holy Communion is linked to ordination;
- c) the suggested future relationships of 'celebrant elders' to local church leaders, lay preachers, Ministers of Word and Sacrament (*sic*), synods and General Assembly;
- d) the nature and financing of the requisite training to support such elders in their calling;
- e) the accountability of such elders and the question of who would be responsible for discerning, authorising and supporting their vocation;
- f) the place of such elders in local ecumenical partnerships.

General Assembly instructs that the progress of such work be reported to General Assembly in 2016.

The Task Group

2.3 The task group consisted of the Revd Professor David Thompson, Eastern Synod (convenor), the Revd Dr Sarah Hall, Wessex Synod, (secretary), Mrs Susan Bush, Northern Synod and Mrs Lesley Richmond, Synod of Scotland.

Background since 1972

2.4 Paragraph 25 states (in part):

The worship of the local church is an expression of the worship of the whole people of God. In order that this may be clearly seen, the United Reformed Church shall (a) take steps to ensure that so far as possible ordained ministers of the Word and Sacraments are readily available to every local church...

It has never proved possible to deliver that commitment in the way that was hoped. Furthermore, had there been any widespread adoption of the former Churches of Christ custom of weekly communion after 1981, its impossibility would have become apparent long since. Even without any change in communion practice, ready availability of Ministers of Word and Sacraments for every local church would have been difficult for the majority of former Congregationalist local churches making up the new Church to achieve. The section provided also for the training and accreditation of lay preachers (an office not otherwise defined in the Basis), and for the recognition of certain members of the United Reformed Church 'normally deaconesses, elders or accredited lay preachers' to preside at the sacraments 'where pastoral necessity so requires'. The paragraph has been the subject of successive interpretations by Assembly. The most recent one in 1998, states that the provisions of the paragraph 'are intended to establish the principle that worship should be led by representative persons recognised by the wider church as well as by the local church'.

Previous reports to Assembly

2.5 Two reports to Assembly in the past 20 years have aroused intense debate. The first was *Patterns of Ministry*, the recommendations of which, despite a two-year period of consultation in synods and District Councils, were mainly rejected by Assembly in 1995. The second, *Equipping the Saints* (2002-4), which was less overtly radical, received more support. Nevertheless, resolution 30 of 2005 on deployment accepted 'that not every congregation has or will have a Minister directly providing their day-to-day leadership'. An amendment that would have weakened the force of that statement was defeated. The Assembly discussions revealed that the differences of conviction underlying §25 in the late 1960s were the fundamental reason why both the *Patterns of Ministry* report of 1993 and the *Equipping the Saints* report of 2004 faced such disagreement in the General Assembly.

Process and conclusions

2.6 The task group has met seven times. A large part of one meeting was given over to discussion with the Revds Fiona Thomas (Secretary for Education and Learning) and Craig Bowman (Secretary for Ministries). In an attempt to set the question of presidency at the sacraments in the broader context of worship in the local church, Synod Moderators were also invited to consult their lay preaching commissioners to secure some sense of who actually preaches and conducts worship in our churches week by week, taking note of those served by Ministers of Word and Sacraments, accredited lay preachers (Assembly or synod), those occupying similar positions in other Churches, and others. Three synods (Wessex, Eastern and East Midlands) submitted detailed reports, and some other Moderators responded personally. After the November 2015 Mission Council Synod Moderators provided further information on the way in which authorisation of elders to preside at the sacraments is handled in their synods. The committee is grateful to all those who have assisted its work.

2.7 The initial conclusion was unsurprising. There is a shortage of ordained leadership not only in the United Reformed Church, but also in many of the traditional Churches. Proposed solutions have varied. The Church of England intends to increase numbers of ordinands by 50% in the next ten years; the Methodists' *Fruitful Field* initiative three years ago places ordinands in Circuits for a year before they spend any time in one of two remaining colleges; the Church of Scotland is merging local parishes, as is the Roman Catholic Church (though not without significant local opposition). In Africa, Asia and Latin America the traditional European size of parish has rarely become the norm; nonetheless some of these areas are those where the Church is growing most rapidly – not because of the number of ministers, but because of active and recognised groups of non-ordained members.

2.8 The original Wessex resolution to General Assembly asked for the exploration of 'some form of locally ordained ministry', which inevitably involves local church leadership in a broader sense than presidency at Communion. With current levels of ministry there need to be those alongside Ministers of Word and Sacraments to whom local congregations can look for leadership in mission and worship. This point was also made in *Equipping the Saints* in 2005. Such people need to be accountable so that if there are problems, for whatever reason, their service may be terminated with the minimum disruption to the peace and unity of the congregation.

The response to the six areas of work (see §2.2)

2.9 *The nature of ordination*

For the equipment of his people for this total ministry the Lord Jesus Christ gives particular gifts for particular ministries and calls *some of his servants* to exercise them in offices duly recognised within his Church... Those who enter on such ministries commit themselves to them for so long as God wills: the United Reformed Church having solemnly acknowledged their vocation and accepted their commitment shall appoint them *to their particular ministry and give them authority* to exercise it within the Church, *setting them apart with prayer that that they shall be given all needful gifts and graces for its fulfillment*, which solemn setting apart shall in the case of ministers and elders be termed ordination (*Basis of Union §20*) [italics added].

Some are called to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments. ... *They are commissioned to conduct public worship, to preach the Word and to administer the Sacraments...* Their service may be stipendiary or non-stipendiary... (*Basis of Union §21*) [italics added].

2.10 The general understanding of 'ordination' in biblical and Christian theology is the setting apart of someone by prayer, fasting and the laying-on of hands. Fasting has been overlooked in our traditions in the last century or more. The key question is, 'What office is a person ordained to?' since that determines the nature and meaning of ordination in a particular case. In other words, the primary significance that any ordination has relates to the definition of the office to which someone is ordained. This view is shared by Catholics and Protestants alike. Thus in the catholic tradition of a threefold ministry a person may be ordained to the office of deacon, priest or bishop: bishops and priests can preside at the Lord's Table; deacons cannot. This difference in function does not make the service for the ordination of a deacon any less of an ordination. There is nothing contradictory, in other words, in ordaining to some offices that carry the privilege of presidency at the sacraments and others that do not.

2.11 The *Basis of Union* also states that: ‘elders share with the minister in the pastoral oversight and leadership of the local churches, taking counsel together in the elders’ meeting for the whole church and having severally groups of members particularly entrusted to their pastoral care’ (§22). Neither the Basis, nor the service in *Worship from the United Reformed Church* (2004), which provides a longer statement of duties, makes any reference to presiding at the sacraments. (The only reference to the possibility of presidency by elders comes later in §25 of the Basis ‘where pastoral necessity so requires’, and requires specific authorisation.) The fact that elders are ordained is therefore irrelevant to the general question of presidency at the sacraments.

2.12 *How communion is linked to ordination*

The United Reformed Church celebrates the gospel sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. When in obedience to the Lord’s command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine outpoured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. United with him and with the whole Church on earth and in heaven, his people gathered at his table present their sacrifice of thanksgiving and renew the offering of themselves, and rejoice in the promise of his coming in glory (*Basis of Union* §15).

The worship of the local church is an expression of the worship of the whole people of God. In order that this may be clearly seen, the United Reformed Church shall (a) take steps to ensure that *so far as possible* ordained ministers of Word and Sacraments are *readily* available to every local church; (b) provide for the training of suitable men and women, members of the United Reformed Church, to be accredited by synods as lay preachers; (c) make provision through synods, in full consultation with the local churches concerned, for the *recognition of certain members of the United Reformed Church, normally deaconesses, elders or accredited lay preachers, who may be invited by local churches to preside at baptismal and communion services, where pastoral necessity so requires*. ... Apart from ordained ministers of the United Reformed Church and of other churches, only such recognized persons may be invited (*Basis of Union* §25) [italics added].

2.13 These provisions suggest that, if any decision were made to enable elders to preside at Communion *as one of their duties as elders*, an alteration of the Basis of Union would be required. An illustration of the kind of change that we have discussed would be either to specify an additional duty for elders to preside within the local congregation, or to remove the phrase ‘where pastoral necessity so requires’, or both. Such an alteration would be justified on the basis that (as resolution 30b of 2005 concerning deployment in the light of the report *Equipping the Saints* implied) it is no longer in practice the case in the United Reformed Church that ‘ordained Ministers of the Word and Sacraments are readily available to every local church’. However, the inclusion of such a duty might also put off others who would be quite prepared to become elders on the current basis. Thus the amendment might have to be more complicated, e.g. by inserting a phrase after ‘the local churches’ in §22 such as: ‘presiding (if they are willing) at the sacraments when required’. Such a detailed reflection was necessary in order to see whether there was a simple amendment that would achieve this. There is not one.

2.14 The interpretation of the phrase ‘pastoral necessity’ as the current criterion for authorisation of elders to preside at communion exemplifies the tension between different understandings of ‘normal’ practice within our churches. That tension has never been resolved, and experience suggests that ‘pastoral necessity’ sometimes lasts for much longer than was originally envisaged in the 1960s. To recognise this we propose extending the normal period for such authorisations from one year to three to five years, according to the judgement of the synod concerned. (The committee considers it unreasonable to expect someone to spend a year or more preparing for an authorisation that might only last for a year.) We also suggest that such authorisation be given for a probationary year on first appointment, before a service of commissioning takes place. This would make it possible for the candidate to conduct more than one service, and thereby enable both congregations and candidate to decide whether the candidate should continue.

2.15 The committee notes that the demographic profile of our Church has led to an increasing need for provision of Communion for the housebound and those in care homes. We affirm the importance of meeting this need; and we also affirm that in the Reformed tradition such services are understood as distinct services of the local church concerned. This is why it is customary for the person’s elder, and possibly another member, to be present with the minister at such a service. It is not part of the Reformed theology of communion for bread and wine already set apart at an earlier church service to be used for this purpose.

2.16 Lay preachers also may be authorised in case of pastoral necessity to preside at Communion (see *Basis of Union* §25), but they are listed after elders in the *Basis* and the 1995 guidance, because elders have a more obvious pastoral relationship with their church. The Moderators tell us that the majority of those currently authorised to preside are elders, and in some synods overwhelmingly so. Since lay preachers are often also elders, they have frequently taken this role, and perform other functions of local church leadership.³ The Committee urges lay preachers not to cite their lay preaching commitments as a reason for not agreeing to nomination as elders. While the proportion of congregations to ministers has increased considerably since the inauguration of the URC, the proportion of congregations to lay preachers has stayed remarkably constant, suggesting that the supply is being replenished. On the other hand we have no evidence to suggest that lay preachers are taking a higher proportion of services.

2.17 The Synod Moderators in responding to a request from the committee about the present position indicated that the current practice was to invite nominations from church meetings annually of elders or lay preachers for nomination (four synods limited the number to two or three per church), which were submitted to the pastoral committee for approval, and recorded in committee and/or synod minutes. In all twelve synods responding, a majority (sometimes overwhelming) were elders; any local preachers tended to be either church members or those who preached in the local area. All new nominees underwent a synod training course before presiding. Although at present all synods except one only made authorisations for one year at a time (three still authorised for one occasion at a time), a majority of Moderators would be content with a period of authorisation for three to five years.

2.18 In the *Patterns of Ministry Report*, there is a Statement on Presidency at the Sacraments in §5.1 that was accepted (with one amendment) by Assembly 1995 as an expression of the mind of the church ‘at this present time’ (*Reports to Assembly* 1995, pp

3 Research by the lay preaching committee 20 years ago suggested that one-third of Sunday services were taken by lay preachers. Evidence presented to the task group indicated that 44% of the congregations making a return in Wessex were served by ‘local arrangements’ for their weekly worship. 64% of those authorised to preside at Communion in Eastern Synod were neither Assembly- or synod-accredited lay preachers.

124-25; Resolution 45, *Record* 1995, p 45). An alternative to an amendment of the Basis of Union would be to update that Statement (which was published in Section F of *The Manual*, and is on the URC website). This would have the added advantage of involving Scotland in the decision, since the original statement was agreed before the union of 2000. It would also take account of the disappearance of District Councils in their original form. In order that some speedy action on this report is taken, the committee recommends **that the existing guidance on Presidency at the Sacraments** (*The Manual*, Section F) **be amended to read:**

The pattern of presidency at the sacraments should be as follows:

- a) **a Minister of Word and Sacraments (including a retired minister who has expressed willingness to do so) should normally preside;**
- b) **when such a Minister does not preside, the synod should make provision for presidency by another person, in accordance with the provisions of §25 of the *Basis of Union*: elders of the local congregation and accredited lay preachers regularly conducting worship in the congregation should be considered first;**
- c) **authorisation for such presidency by the synod, normally of members from within the congregation concerned, should be for an initial period of three to five years (according to synod judgement), including a probationary year on first appointment, with the possibility of renewal. Before renewal there should be consultation by the synod with the congregation, and a review of its needs (Resolution 1).**

The committee believes that such a process will remain true to the spirit of the Basis of Union. It will enable us to be ourselves, and it will be sensitive to our ecumenical context.

2.19 *The understanding of the constituent traditions about the relationship of ordination to communion*

The different interpretations of the relationship of ordination to communion among us arise from various strands within the historical antecedents of our Church. The *Form of Presbyterian Church Government* annexed to the *Westminster Confession* (1646/7) is silent about the ordination of any other ministers than ministers of word and sacrament, although it recognises the offices of elder and deacon as ministries in the Church (as well as teachers or doctors, who are ordained to the ministry of word and sacraments like pastors). The *Form of Presbyterian Church Government* also declares all ordinations to be an act of a presbytery, rather than a particular local congregation. The Church of Scotland found it difficult to agree on whether elders should be ordained in the late sixteenth century (see the difference between the First and the Second *Book of Discipline*).

2.20 On the other hand, *The Institution of Churches and the Order Appointed in them by Jesus Christ*, annexed to the *Savoy Declaration* of 1658, accepted the same fourfold ministry but placed the emphasis on the calling of persons to each office – that is ‘that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself, and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of that church’ (§11). Furthermore ‘those who are so chosen, though not set apart by imposition of hands, are rightly constituted ministers of Jesus Christ’ (§12). The work of preaching the Word was not confined to pastors and teachers, but could be undertaken by others, approved and called by the congregation (§13), i.e. lay preachers; and for good measure, the *Declaration* added that ‘ordination alone without the election or precedent consent of the church’ did not make any person a church-officer (§15). Thus for Congregationalists election by the local congregation was fundamental.

2.21 The Churches of Christ developed a different understanding of church order again, by routinely expecting elders to preside at the Lord's Table. The mandate at the ordination of elders read (in part) as follows:

'You are appointed to minister in sacred things, and to take your place at the Table of your blessed Lord. It will be your privilege and your duty to break the Bread of Life to this congregation, and for the due and adequate discharge of this Office you will answer to the great Head of the Church. It will fall to your lot, with your brother Elders, to rule over the House of God as the steward of God, to maintain the services of the Church, and to celebrate the sacraments with faithfulness, dignity and grace (Report of the Commission on Ordination, adopted by Annual Conference, Year Book 1942, p 148 [italics added]).

This was why they were recognized as auxiliary ministers in 1981.

2.22 Churches of Christ Elders did not operate individually as sole church leaders but as a team supported and resourced by their ministers, especially since single-congregation pastorates were very rare. The development of the auxiliary ministry into today's non-stipendiary ministry, differing from their stipendiary colleagues only in the lack of stipend rather than the nature and length of training, is understandable as a wish to express parity between the two ministries, yet a certain flexibility and accessibility of leadership has been lost to the local church (except perhaps in parts of Scotland) in this development from the original Churches of Christ understanding of eldership.

2.23 *The position of authorised elders within the church*

There are different kinds of 'pastoral necessity', which require different kinds of solution. A fundamental difference between the situation of larger (usually urban) and smaller (usually rural) churches runs through most of our approach to Church life beyond the local congregation. Typically the voices of the smaller churches are rarely heard or listened to. At least three different scenarios currently exist, which require rather different solutions:

- a) emergencies, when the appointed minister either fails to arrive or gives very late notice (i.e. less than 24 hours) of inability to come. Here, unless there is another eligible member of the congregation who can be approached and is willing, the procedure envisaged in the final paragraph of §25 of the *Basis* allows for the congregation assembled for a baptismal or communion service themselves to appoint, 'as a church meeting, a suitable person to preside at the sacrament in a case of emergency'. In practice, this is more likely to apply to a baptismal service, since a communion service could always be postponed to another Sunday.
- b) churches (e.g. in a multi-church pastorate) with no minister regularly assigned or obtainable, where some kind of continuity from week to week or month to month is desirable. This would justify the authorisation of a designated elder or lay preacher along the lines envisaged in §25 of the *Basis*.
- c) churches like those in (b), but where it would be more effective in terms of sharing the burden of preparation to have a team of designated elders or lay preachers authorised.

It should also be remembered that some multi-church pastorates may be quite large in area, or have geographical obstacles to speedy communication, such as mountains or rivers with few bridges.

2.24 Relationships of authorised elders with every council of the church – elderships, church meetings, synods and General Assembly – must be characterised by both support and accountability. The former Churches of Christ model of team leadership can be helpful here, allowing as it does for a differentiation within worship between presiding and preaching, and for a close working relationship between Ministers of Word and Sacrament and authorised elders.

2.25 The committee suggests that, to be true to the Church's understanding of call, the call of authorised elders should be recognised by a service of commissioning after approval of their names by the synod. There is a particular need to support those congregations that have no authorised elder in their membership. It also believes that authorised elders need support and encouragement from a larger group than their own local church. This would be more important if the length of service is extended. For this reason **synods are recommended to provide regular support and guidance for each church without an authorised elder within its membership; and also for authorised elders, for example by holding an annual meeting where experiences can be shared (Resolution 2).**

2.26 Where there are local church leaders in a congregation, the relationship between them and authorised elders should be clarified at the outset, because of any overlaps in function (see the *Guidelines*, approved and amended by Assembly, *Reports to Assembly* 1998, pp 66-67). Both are accountable to the elders' meeting, as well as the synod. Any greater detail should be set out by the synod that appoints them.

2.27 There are apparently some churches which currently propose names on a 'just in case' basis, and some synods approve them. The committee strongly urges on all concerned that this practice is in no-one's best interest; indeed it has been told that some persons already authorised have had so little experience that they would be nervous at being called upon. This is not what ministry is about. If people are nominated and approved, then they should be used – for their own sake as well as that of the churches. The proposed probationary year would obviously require this in order that there should be experience to be tested. There are also various ways in which such people can be involved in sharing the presidency with an ordained minister. From time-to-time at General Assembly others have been involved with the principal presider in saying parts of the Prayer of Thanksgiving; and simply to involve such a person at the front of the church alongside the minister can boost confidence. To preside at the Lord's Table is no light matter: it requires careful personal preparation and prayer; and it is a ministry to and for other Christians. The value of such a ministry in 'an emergency' is directly proportionate to that person's previous preparation and experience.

2.28 *Training for authorised elders*

The word 'training' has been experienced by some potential candidates in the past as a pejorative judgment on their current ability rather than as a supportive resource for improvement. The task group notes that 'formation' is now generally used in relation to education for pastoral ministry, rather than 'training'. Those who have years of experience in conducting worship may not see any need for further training. On the other hand, lay preaching courses are oversubscribed (more so than when they were described as training courses), and the idea of lifelong learning is increasingly accepted within society generally. We need both to motivate those currently serving to see the benefits available, and to persuade others that adopting such a position of leadership would be good for them and their congregation. The committee therefore suggests that the ministries and education and learning committees consider using the words 'further preparation' be used for authorised elders, rather than 'training'.

2.29 The *Basis of Union* (§21 and §25) emphasises that those who preside must also be recognised more widely than by the congregation alone. In every synod preparation is currently a prerequisite for those elders or lay preachers applying for permission to preside at the sacraments, though its content and style varies. The committee suggests that the synod should also be involved from the candidating process onwards, possibly through its Development/Training Officer. If a candidate has unsuccessfully offered for ministry of Word and Sacrament, this information should be available as part of the decision process, though it should not in itself be a reason for rejection.

2.30 Preparation for authorisation to preside needs to be tailored to individual needs and gifts, but also be of a sufficiently high (and common) standard. Currently the Church offers no form of preparation between training for local service (TLS) accreditation and full NSM ministerial education. The concept of 'graduate attributes' used in higher education to produce a well-rounded tertiary education could be considered.⁴ The model of apprenticeship, whether in the last year of initial ministerial education or as an integral part of the whole course, is already recognised in formation for ministry of Word and Sacraments and sometimes in placements before initial ministerial education begins. In TLS local tutor groups and placements (in *Gateways into Worship*) achieved this, although with the ending of TLS something new will be required. A clear understanding of what needs to be achieved to qualify for authorisation will be necessary. There should be a clear sense of the aims and objectives, including the use of appropriate prayers and enabling candidates to feel at ease with the procedures involved.

2.31 Apprenticeship used also to be the training method for lay preachers as the 'student' followed the 'expert' preacher around the churches. Candidates for authorised eldership might similarly be linked to Ministers of Word and Sacrament and learn 'on the job' by sharing in presidency in appropriate ways (see §2.27 above). The members of the task group, who are all well-acquainted with what professional qualifications in themselves tell anyone about adequate preparation, believe that there is scope for greater flexibility in the criteria used for authorisation for presidency at the sacraments, in particular the recognition of the significance of previous experience and the recommendations (as well as the requests) of local congregations. This is why they recommended that the normal period of authorisation for presidency be extended to three to five years, rather than one year at present (see §2.18 above).

2.32 While the practice of presidency at Communion in itself is already covered (see §2.17 above on what currently happens in the synods), preparation for authorised elders might helpfully be offered through an expanded module on the conduct of worship (including baptism) in the new material for missional education. Could there be levels of certification to encourage those who start off in a smaller way, so that, for example, there would be a series of short courses, the completion of each one would be marked with a certificate? (In the secular world such methods are used for one-day first aid or safeguarding courses.) Alternatively, material already used by the Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs) in preparation packages for elders and lay preachers could relatively easily be assembled into a course, preferably developed by all four RCLs in collaboration and then delivered from all four centres. Could the RCLs and the discipleship department work together on this? In our view a system that allows further preparation after a provisional authorisation is preferable to one in which authorisation follows the completion of all course requirements.

4 The concept of 'graduate attributes' as a way of defining the outcomes of higher education has been developed in this country, particularly (but not exclusively) in the Scottish universities, and includes such qualities as enquiry and lifelong learning, personal development, ability in public speaking and communicating ideas, working within a team, critical thinking and research skills, and leadership.

2.33 These two modes of learning, the more academic and the more practical, could helpfully be integrated. Mentoring for a year before final recognition would also be good, as would fixed terms of service with built-in assessment. When the synod adjudges preparation to be complete, the committee suggests a service of commissioning to mark the transition. Congregations should also be prepared for this new situation, both to support authorised elders and also to avoid misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations of them in their new role.

2.34 Since the 2014 General Assembly the discipleship and mission departments have begun work on a new programme of Missional Discipleship for the Church, which was introduced at Mission Council in November 2015. This report was already in draft at that Mission Council, but the point was made that any church-wide programme should include the kind of preparation for authorised elders presiding at the sacraments. In view of the phasing out of TLS a new programme will be necessary anyway. Since there are already resources in the various synods, the committee believes that it is only necessary for the Assembly to authorise a list of the elements in such programmes that are regarded as essential. The committee therefore recommends **that the education and learning committee be invited to prepare an Assembly syllabus for the preparation of authorised elders and lay preachers, drawing on existing synod resources. (Resolution 5).**

2.35 How much would this cost? The task group has not attempted to answer this question, because it does not know in detail about how what is currently offered is accounted for at present. In large part it depends on the number of candidates per year. But much of the initial work in dealing with preparatory material is a one-off exercise, which may be something that is part of the programme of a synod or the RCLs anyway. It is aware that some worry about the implications of any change for ministry and mission payments; but it regards that as a separate question, not directly related to its remit. There is no obvious way of reflecting on it until a decision has been taken on the main principle.

2.36 *The accountability of authorised elders*

Discipline can and should be exercised by the eldership of the church in which this ministry is to be exercised. However, the current promises made by elders on ordination and induction (*Basis*, Schedule B) do not include anything about presidency at the sacraments, because that is not a specified duty for elders. Authorised elders might be considered more likely to need DBS checks, and may be affected by other parliamentary legislation. For these reasons the committee believes that a separate code of conduct for authorised elders is necessary. The URC elders' code of conduct and the disciplinary and incapacity codes for ministers could be resources. The committee recommends **that the ministries committee be invited to develop a specific code of conduct for authorised elders and lay preachers; and that those concerned agree to be bound by it before embarking on their ministry (Resolution 3).** Where, for pastoral reasons, discipline becomes problematic – for example, in the case of conflict between an authorised elder and a local church leader or lay preacher – the synod pastoral committee should be called upon for help. However, the committee advises that the Synod Moderator should not engage directly with any disciplinary process, so as to be available for pastoral support to any parties as necessary.

2.37 There are also potential problems if authorised elders move from one synod to another where they are not known – though in principle they are no different from those faced in relation to those for any elder who moves to a different church and synod. The committee therefore recommends **that a list of those authorised elders and lay preachers whose service has proved unsatisfactory be maintained by the General Secretariat, to avoid the possibility of any individual exercising this ministry unhelpfully in one place and then moving elsewhere to try again (Resolution 4).**

2.38 *The place of authorised elders in local ecumenical partnerships*

The ecumenical implications of these recommendations are significant, both for local ecumenical partnerships (LEPs) and our wider ecumenical relations. The Church of England cannot at present recognise authorised elders for LEPs in which they and we are involved. The Methodist Church does not have an objection in principle to authorising non-presbyters to preside, but its criteria are based on a strict arithmetical calculation of need (see *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Volume 2, Book VI, section 3) and authorisation is only for three years. The current total is nearly 150 for the UK, including those ministers serving their probationary year before ordination. The Presbyterian Church in Wales, our major ecumenical partner in Wales, permits elders to administer the sacraments in specified situations, but only licenses them (for renewable periods of three years) after three years' training. In Scotland, the only LEPs involving the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland are large churches that do not require authorised elders. There are no problems with Baptist/URC congregations and probably would not be for community churches either. Thus in various ways other traditions, particular the URC's major partners, work with less flexibility over who can preside at the Sacraments. In view of the United Reformed Church's commitment to seek wider unity in the Church, the committee therefore ventures to suggest another possibility of answering the same need: reviving a model of team non-stipendiary ministry, arising from the former Churches of Christ understanding of eldership. This is not a substitute for the earlier recommendations, but one that might be more ecumenically fruitful among our partners, who would probably find the use of non-stipendiary ministers more acceptable than that of authorised elders.

2.39 There would be several other advantages in using once more the pattern of team non-stipendiary ministry that the Church recognised as early as 1979 (see *Reports to Assembly 1979*, pp 46-49, section II of which still reads as freshly today as when it was written):

a) Creativity

Increasingly our pastorates for stipendiary ministers include several congregations; or several pastorates are combined in clusters. This means that those ministers are more stretched so that they have enough to do simply maintaining what exists, rather than stepping back and reflecting on what new initiatives might be taken. Much more of the life of the church is unhelpfully compressed into Sunday mornings than in earlier years, though larger churches offer midweek opportunities. The more activities that are initiated, however, the more a team is required to lead them. Although EM1 now uses a teamwork approach, many ministers are still not experienced at working in teams. Teamwork is harder than doing everything oneself, because it means telling others what one is planning or doing in good time, as well as learning to trust and sharing ministerial control. This may be a sign that busy people are trying to do more than they can manage, at the expense of consultation. Some members of congregations may also be unwilling to let go of reliance on 'their' Minister of Word and Sacraments as the one to solve all problems.

b) Flexibility

Such a pattern of team leadership allows for flexibility, with the gifts of various people being used in leadership as the local situation requires, instead of expecting one person to be good at everything. The responsibilities of team non-stipendiary ministers could (depending upon their gifts) involve some administration, the conduct of worship (including the sacraments), and the time to reflect upon and assist in the leadership of new methods of evangelism, working as a team with the stipendiary ministers for the pastorates. Rather than falling into the trap of 'steady as she goes' and spreading ministry too thinly between different congregations – as may also be the case for those lay preachers, who rarely offer or receive ministry within their own congregations – a local gift-oriented leadership team has the potential for growth.

c) Discipline

A key element of this discussion (particularly in the minds of Synod Moderators) is the question of the discipline under which elders serve. At present, as discussion of safeguarding has demonstrated, elders count as 'volunteers'; and as such there is no obvious disciplinary process for them, unless the Church devises one. A code of conduct was approved by Assembly 2010, but it has received little publicity, and does not deal with the questions of accountability, term of office or circumstances in which a period of office can be terminated early. Non-stipendiary ministers, on the other hand, are subject to the ministerial disciplinary and incapacity process, because of their office.

2.40 This solution would require no amendments to the *Basis of Union* (other than the updating of the guidance on Presidency referred to in Resolution 1(a), which is not an amendment to the *Basis*).

2.41 The United Reformed Church rightly values its eldership. It has been suggested that instead of meeting the need for presidency at the sacraments in our churches by using the ministry of elders, the creation of more ministers might appear to devalue the elders we have. This is illogical; the need for elders' ministry remains. We usually rejoice if an elder feels the call to stipendiary ministry: why should this be different? The task of 'giving an account of the faith that is in us' is one for all Christians – church members and elders – not simply ministers. Where that is done most effectively, churches grow.

2.42 Taking all this into account, the committee recommends **that further attention be given by the ministries and education and learning committees to the possibility of expanding the concept of non-stipendiary ministry to include once more the original pattern of team non-stipendiary ministry (Resolution 6)**. The ministries committee already has a working party on non-stipendiary ministry, and the education and learning committee has spent much time in the last few years in adjusting to new requirements in the common awards for stipendiary ministry candidates.