

Paper P1

Assembly resolution 5: report on responses

Law and Polity Advisory Group

Responses to General Assembly 2018 Resolution five – New Ordination Promises for Elders

Basic information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Dr John Bradbury jpb44@cam.ac.uk
Action required	For information only.
Draft resolution(s)	None.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To inform Mission Council of the responses from Local Church Meetings to the consultation on the proposed new ordination promise for Elders.
Main points	The response was overwhelmingly positive.
Previous relevant documents	General Assembly 2018 resolution five.
Consultation has taken place with...	Local Churches and Synods.

Summary of impact

Financial	None.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	The proposed changes will raise the profile of our commitment to the unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church through making this integral to the ministry of Elders.

1. From the approximately 1350 local congregations of the United Reformed Church 187 churches responded to the consultation on the proposed change to the ordination promises for Elders accepted by the General Assembly in 2018. Many more congregations may well have considered this, but as not responding to the consultation is in effect to agree with the proposed change, many may not have felt the need to write formally to the General Secretary to express this.
2. Of the 187 Church Meetings to respond formally, only 32 opposed the change or expressed reservations. Of these, about three-quarters of the reservations expressed were about the promise to 'cherish love towards all other churches'.

This promise mirrors one that Ministers make at ordination. The concern is whether 'all other churches' is too ill defined, and might include groups who call themselves churches which we might not consider such.

3. The General Secretary and the Secretary for Ecumenical Relations have prepared a paper which sets out the position of the United Reformed Church regarding how we understand the statement and our relationships with other churches. This is appended to this report and we believe allays the fears expressed by the few churches expressing reservations.
4. A tiny number of churches objected on what might be termed 'congregationalist' grounds, that Elders only serve the local church. But from the inception of the URC, it has been the constitutional practice that Elders serve the wider councils of the Church, and through the Synod all congregations are represented in the wider councils of the Church. Whilst not every Elder will personally serve in this way, this is nonetheless an expression of how the URC lives together, and the way we form the family of the Church. We would invite congregations who responded in that way to understand the promise in the light of these foundational commitments we made to one another at the formation of the denomination.
5. The proposed changes have been warmly responded to by the overwhelming majority of churches who responded. Only a tiny number of Church Meetings objected, and we hope their objection is met in the statement below. A constitutional change only falls if more than one third of Synods or Local Churches object. This piece of business can therefore confidently return to the Assembly for final adoption.
6. This report is coming to Mission Council because it was Mission Council that brought the resolution to Assembly in 2018. It does not need Mission Council's further endorsement. But it is important that Mission Council know how its proposal has been received around the Church.

Appendix: Response from the General Secretary and Secretary for Ecumenical Relations to questions raised in the consultation:

A response to concerns about the new form of elders' promises

1. This response specifically considers the proposal that the commitment made by elders should include 'love towards all other churches'.

2. A first point to note is that the words have been in the ordination and induction promises for URC ministers for several decades and therefore are not new. Elders already commit to share with the minister in the oversight and leadership of the local church. Part of that oversight and leadership is the way we relate to other churches.
3. What do we mean by 'all other churches'? The simple answer is 'all those groups that we would recognise as churches'. If we recognise another group as really being a church, then part of our commitment and witness as URC is that we do all we can to love them and build bridges with them. If we don't recognise another group as really being a church, we wouldn't have the same commitment to them.
4. So, the churches with which we are linked in national and international fellowships of churches, such as Churches Together in England, are our main partners. We ought to cherish love towards them, even though not all of them are from our tradition and would not do everything in a way we would ourselves.
5. There are some groups which do not belong to Churches Together or anything like that, but we would still recognise as genuine churches – churches who understand God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who expect to discover and discern God's word in the Bible, who love Jesus and seek to live by his commands. It would be hoped that URC ministers and elders could cherish love towards these fellowships too.
6. Then there are other groups that would not fit well into a fellowship like Churches Together in England, and probably would not want to belong, like Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. These groups surely have some good people among them, but they would answer some big questions, like, 'Who is Jesus?' or 'How do we know God?' in ways that don't really reflect the faith that has carried the Church through 2000 years. In general, we would not expect to find ways of working with them, and they probably would not want to work with us anyway.
7. As we think about this broader view of church, and think about groups that might not fall under that category, it is also helpful to look at the full wording of the promise. In particular, notice how the promise refers to *the one holy, catholic and apostolic church*.

Q: Do you promise as an elder of the United Reformed Church to seek its wellbeing, unity and peace, to cherish love towards all other churches and to endeavour always so far as you are able to build up the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?
8. Those groups which would profess a very different faith to our own may not see themselves as being part of a larger Christian family – *the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church* – and so would not for us fall under what we would define as church. The promise is specifically referring to churches which could feel part of *the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church*.

9. Finally, when we respond to the question, we do so *by the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit*. We are therefore not relying on our own discernment, gifts and strength but on those of the trinitarian God.

John Proctor and Philip Brooks – November 2018