

# Paper F1

Ordained Local Ministry  
Faith and Order Committee

United Church 2014  
Church 2014  
Reformed Church 2014  
Church 2014



# Paper F1

## Faith and Order Committee: Ordained Local Ministry

### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	Elizabeth Welch, convener of Faith and Order Committee minister@theroundchapel.org.uk
<b>Action required</b>	Discussion of proposals consequent upon resolution 35 of General Assembly 2012 on ordained local ministry.
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	There is no resolution, but there are three options, with the one favoured by Faith and Order Committee highlighted.
<b>Alternative options to consider, if any</b>	

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	This paper explores the concept of ordained local ministry and whether the URC should move in this direction.
<b>Main points</b>	The Faith and Order Committee would like to propose that the URC take another look at elders, as already an ordained local ministry, to see if slightly re-configuring this ministry would meet the expressed need.
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Resolution 35 of General Assembly 2012.
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Ministries and Education and Learning committees; the Synod of Scotland by visit; the other synods by email consultation.

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	There might be financial implications regarding training.
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	The URC would need to consider the impact in terms of our ecumenical partners of authorising elders to preside at the sacraments.

# Ordained Local 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.” (1)

## Summary

The Faith and Order Committee (FAOC) has been asked to respond to Resolution 35 of General Assembly 2012 concerning the possibility of ordained local ministry being of use to the United Reformed Church. This paper considers the idea of adding an additional category of ministry to what is already recognised within the United Reformed Church. However, it notes that we inherit from our parent traditions differing views on the interpretation of the phrase “pastoral necessity” and the value of lay presidency at communion. It also recognises concerns that it could be construed as ordination “by the back door” and lead to unaccountable local leadership as well as some practical difficulties in the way of ordained local ministry. A brief examination both of past resolutions brought on this topic to Assembly and of feedback at synod level lead to the possibility that, instead of either an extra category of ordained ministry or a blanket approval of lay presidency, the URC should explore further use of that local ordained leadership we already value: the eldership.

## 1 The issue

1.1 Given the demography of the United Reformed Church, it is not uncommon for members of our smaller churches to feel they have insufficient contact with ordained ministers, either when wishing to celebrate communion or in terms of local leadership more generally. Attempting to address this difficulty, Resolution 35 of the 2012 General Assembly, brought by Wessex Synod, states that:

General Assembly requests the Ministries Committee and the Faith and Order Committee to consider whether some form of locally ordained ministry would be helpful to the mission of the United Reformed Church and to report back to Mission Council with a view to further discussion and a decision at General Assembly 2014 (2).

1.2 This resolution noted that “there are many lay preachers, and some elders, who are regularly presiding at sacraments, usually with appropriate authorisation, often in a reasonably small number of churches which they visit fairly regularly. In practice such people are already exercising a ministry of Word and sacraments. We believe that it would be far better theologically to ordain such people to a ministry of Word and sacraments. We also believe our ecumenical partners would find this easier to understand” (3).

1.3 David Thompson puts the case cogently:

“The principle here is the philosophical one, that if something looks like a minister, acts like a minister, and does the things that ministers do, then it is reasonable to suppose that it is a minister. Moreover, if they are ministers, why should they not be ordained?” (4)

1.4 This had also been the perspective of the Faith and Order Reference Group (FORG – now an Assembly Committee, FAOC) when this question was previously brought to our attention. In 2011, as the result of initiatives from the Synods of Scotland and the West Midlands, the general secretary requested FORG to consider whether lay presidency at Communion could be theologically affirmed as a gift to other churches. Reference was made in FORG’s discussions at that stage to the Church of Scotland’s recent development of an order of Ordained Local Ministers: assessed, trained [to Certificate level] and qualified for the Ordained Local Ministry (OLM); deployed locally with a remit for preaching,

sacramental ministry and pastoral care; serving under the direction of an Ordained National Minister; normally in a non-stipendiary role, but able to be paid if circumstances dictate this is the best option. (5)

1.5 However, from the Synod of Scotland perspective, OLM was not necessarily the answer. It was felt that the transition from Churches of Christ presiding elders (see Appendix A1) to auxiliary ministers, with all the demands of training (now essentially identical to those for stipendiary ministry) on what are now “non-stipendiary ministers”, had discouraged many from offering a local ministry of word and sacrament. The demands of extra training inherent in the Church of Scotland OLM model could equally jeopardise the relationship between lay preachers and the local congregations whom they have got to know well over the years, and put off others from developing such relationships, thus repeating the mistake originally made when presiding elders morphed into ministers. Age might also prove a bar for such transitions to be feasible.

1.6 Papers were exchanged between FORG and the Synod of Scotland. A meeting held between representatives of each concluded that “We all recognise that the United Reformed Church has a problem; that the pattern of our ministry is not fitting the needs of the churches, and indeed the communities we serve.” (6)

## **2. The difficulty**

2.1 But though the difficulty was easily recognised, as with many other questions, we in the United Reformed Church hold in good faith a spectrum of views as to how to categorise or resolve it. While the Wessex resolution exemplifies the desire of many in our churches to do things “decently and in order”, the discussion above, catalysed by the Synod of Scotland, demonstrates an equally strong desire to take seriously the role of the laity in sacramental leadership.

2.2 The interpretation of the phrase “pastoral necessity” in the current criteria for authorisation of lay presidency at communion (Resolution 10 ratified by synods and Assembly in 1998 (7) exemplifies the tension between different understandings of “normal” practice within our churches. “A pastoral dimension has been understood to mean a) in cases of pastoral need and b) by those who had a pastoral relationship with the Church concerned. In some parts of the United Reformed Church the necessary pastoral dimension in lay presidency has been interpreted more in terms of the pastoral need (which has made it an exception) and in other parts of the Church more in terms of the pastoral relationship (which has made it more commonplace)”. (8)

## **3. The history**

These conflicting understandings of what is “normal” have deep roots in our pre-union traditions (for a brief treatment of this, see Appendix A). While the Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church makes it clear that we are not bound by the past, but must follow Christ wherever he leads, yet without some understanding of our different histories it is much harder to take into consideration the viewpoints of others.

## **4. The theology**

4.1 All Church traditions claim a biblical pattern for the forms and orders of ministry that they establish. One key text in all our traditions has been Ephesians 4. Of the gifts that are given, “some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”... From this text, Calvin argues that pastors and teachers are those “whom the church can

never go without” (9). To this, he adds the ministries of elder and deacon. Whilst there is a claim of a biblical pattern for this ministry, others will argue that there is a sense of pragmatism within the reformed tradition and would therefore see that the ordering of our ministries is in principle flexible and contingent to a certain extent (10).

4.2 The FORG response when this was first discussed in February 2011 highlighted the following points: “The sacraments should be available to God’s people in a way that corresponds to our theological inheritance and Reformed faith; there is a need to involve the wider church in an affirmation of the suitability of those who preside; there is a sense in which presidency at the sacraments is a discipline and it is reasonable to expect that those who preside should be under orders” (11).

4.3 John Bradbury helpfully brings in the perspective of our European colleagues in the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), where the question of locally ordained ministers has also been explored: “It [CPCE] maintains that where the ministry to be exercised is one of Word and Sacrament, ordination is appropriate and necessary. The text states that: ‘The decisive factor for ordination is whether or not the service in question is a ministry of word and sacraments. If it is, the person to serve should be ordained [as a minister of word and sacraments], regardless of the time frame and geographical limitations that have been set for the particular service’” (12).

4.4 However, we cannot forget that recognition of the vocation and ministry of the laos, the whole people of God, is also a theological imperative held dear among some in the United Reformed Church. “In the Churches of Christ, presidency at communion was always the function of the elders of the local congregation. However, it was never the custom for the same person to preside and preach, even if the minister was the preacher. Hence the function of the elders (who were understood in the earliest days to be the bishops of the congregation on New Testament lines) as presidents was never in doubt” (13).

4.4 Could such apparently conflicting positions be reconciled? It seemed sensible to find out more about how the issue played out at grassroots level. Could any points of confluence be determined?

## 5. Voices from the synods

5.1 These questions have, of course, been raised and debated before, exhaustively. However, “when in 1995 proposals for Moderating Elders and Local Ministers were brought to Assembly, these were both defeated, the first by a large majority and the second by a clear majority. A compromise resolution encouraging Mission Council to explore the possibility of new forms of local leadership was approved (14). The result has been a variety of patterns developed in different synods” (15). It therefore seemed right for FAOC to canvass the current views of the synods, through the moderators, in order to explore how the situation is currently experienced.

5.2 The Wessex resolution showed a clear desire in that synod for the development of ordained local ministry; Thames North indicated some support for this. The Synod of Scotland showed an equally strong desire to affirm lay presidency; West Midlands also showed interest in this way forward, in light both of the increasing disparity between the number of ministers and of churches and that synod’s historical appreciation of lay presidency.

5.3 However, a different point of view from either of these was raised in unanimity by six further synods: “We already have local ordained ministry. We have Elders.” While further questions can properly be raised about the distinction between the United Reformed Church’s ordination of ministers of word and sacrament and of Elders (see below 7.1.2), this groundswell of opinion was worth closer examination.

## 6. A solution?

6.1 Elders have already been highlighted within FAOC discussions about the future of the United Reformed Church and ecumenical conversations as one of the gifts of the United Reformed Church to the wider church. What is the point, synods argued, of creating another category of ministry beyond that which we already have? South Western Synod expanded: “URC ecclesiology bestows upon the local church the authority to elect elders and to invite whomsoever they wish to preach; it offers authorisation to preside to those not on the Roll of Ministers and allows us to be flexible in interpreting pastoral necessity. Inventing new categories of ministry will not change these.”

6.2 Concerns were expressed about the possibility of unsuccessful candidates for ordained ministry being ordained by the “back door” of local ministry; about the relationship of an ordained local ministry to the existing leadership team of elders; about possible disciplinary issues if people rise to leadership without understanding the conciliar nature of the local and wider church in the United Reformed Church; and the difficulty of holding such leaders accountable, when the local church may prefer an unaccountable leader to none at all. It was pointed out that elders are accountable to the Church Meeting directly. Moreover, the Ministries committee has already worked out guidelines for elders’ conduct paralleling those to which ministers have assented (16).

6.3 Positively, several synods described the efforts already being put into “encouraging and equipping our elders to embrace and fulfil their calling to give spiritual leadership to the church” (Yorkshire Synod).

## 7 Yes, but...

7.1 FAOC is painfully aware of the complexities of this issue, covering theological, pastoral and practical aspects cutting to the heart of what we believe it means to be the United Reformed Church. Questions of both principle and practice remain to be resolved if we are to take this path.

7.1.1 It could be argued that this is an old set of arguments, less relevant in the developing context of pioneer ministries, Fresh Expressions and our growing relationships with some of the new churches in which boundaries between lay and ordained leadership are less significant. Certainly questions of church order are looking different these days with some dialogue partners. Yet this question will not go away if we ignore it, for the balance between order and freedom, pragmatism and inspiration still needs to be struck.

7.1.2 During the compilation of this paper systematic-theological questions in need of further work by FAOC or others have arisen.

For example:

- Is it the need for lay presidency or for local leadership, or both, that really lie at the heart of this problem? How can we decide?
- Does good order necessarily imply ordination?
- How does the ordination of elders differ from that of ministers of word and sacrament yet remain ordination?
- Would the recognition of some elders as fitting celebrants of the sacraments be a

pragmatic response to felt need, or a discernment of the Spirit's gifting? How can we tell the difference, and how can the church agree on this?

7.1.3 Practical-theological issues have also emerged from our discussions thus far, highlighting the lack of hard evidence, beyond the anecdotal, concerning conditions on the ground in our churches. The Basis of Union promises that the United Reformed Church shall "take steps to ensure that *so far as possible* ordained ministers of the Word and Sacraments are readily available to every local church" (17) [my italics]. But what proportion of congregations in different synods still have regular access to what level of ministerial oversight? What is the best use we can be making of all those – CRCWs, elders, ministers of word and sacrament, lay preachers, local leaders and others – who are leading the churches? What are the implications for their training?

7.2 What if we were to decide to move forward in this direction? Careful development of good process would be necessary in order to support and guide elders who felt called to this ministry, as well as their congregations. Here are just a few of the considerations that might arise.

7.2.1 Since FAOC would not argue that every elder has the gifting and call to become what one might label (for the sake of argument), a celebrating elder, a call/discernment process would still be required. How would this be done? Within the local church? Through synod pastoral committees? At Assembly level? Would already celebrating elders need to go through further training initially, or regular refresher courses, in a parallel way to Assembly-accredited lay preachers (18)? Would the Church have the authority to insist on this, or the money to fund it? How would celebrating elders in a congregation with little or no ministerial oversight receive support in their leadership beyond the local level?

7.2.2. Questions of power and accountability must also be tackled. For example, if a lay preacher who is not an elder has a regular relationship including celebrating communion with a church other than their own, and under this scheme they are ordained celebrating elder, in which congregation should their eldership be rooted – their "home" church, or in one of those in which they exercise this aspect of their ministry? And to which congregation are they answerable?

7.3 Finally, to acknowledge the practicalities of the situation obtaining in each of our nations, if not every congregation can even find enough serving elders, is it naïve to expect a sufficient supply of celebrating elders to emerge, even from the pool of regular "lay celebrants" whom we know already exist within some of our synods? Age and the rigours of training requirements (considered in 1.5), may also prove dissuasive factors.

7.4 This has been no easy debate for FAOC. Significant questions of principle remain unanswered or contested and as a committee we would hesitate to claim full unanimity in our conclusions. However, we feel that the time has come to test the mind of the Church.

- Do we rest content with the current situation: lay presidency variously authorised under an elastic definition of "pastoral necessity"?
- Do we decide that ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament for all who preside is necessary for the good order of the church?
- Or do we explore further dimensions of the gift of eldership already given to the United Reformed Church?

We seek the Spirit's guidance through the councils of the Church.

# APPENDIX A

A1 “The Churches of Christ had both Deacons and Elders but only the Elders were ordained to Word and Sacrament. Under the Union [in 1981], Elders became Auxiliary Ministers gradually morphing into the present title of Non-stipendiary Minister. In the Churches of Christ, elders were elected by the congregation and formed part of a Team Ministry, leading worship including presiding at Communion and involved in the pastoral care of the congregation” (19).

A2 Moreover, in the Congregational tradition, lay presidency at the sacraments had been exercised and received as a gift to congregations for decades by the time the United Reformed Church was formed. There were different historic reasons for this: “In the nineteenth century – the period of most rapid growth – the celebration of the sacraments was very much less frequent than it subsequently became... In the twentieth century, however, a gradual change took place... in the incorporation of communion into the main service, rather than being an ‘after-service’ for the faithful few. Thus by the 1960s the expectation that lay preachers would preside, assisted by the publication of service books from the 1930s onwards, had grown” (20).

## Footnotes

- 1 Basis of Union, The Manual A.20, The Manual Of The United Reformed Church, URC Publication, London.
- 2 Record of Assembly 2012, 41.
- 3 Reports to Assembly 2012, 268.
- 4 Thompson, David, ‘Lay preachers: a ministry in search of a theology’, unpublished paper, 2012.
- 5 2010 Church of Scotland Ministries Council report to that church’s General Assembly – p.3/27, Blue Book.
- 6 From notes of a meeting between representatives of the United Reformed Church’s Faith and Order Reference Group and representatives of the pastoral committee of the National Synod of Scotland on the question of Presidency at the Sacraments – May 14th 2012.
- 7 Record of Assembly 1998, 10.
- 8 Mortimer, Richard, unpublished paper submitted to FORG, June 2010.
- 9 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion 1559, Bk 4, III, 4, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 1960, 1057.
- 10 Bradbury, John, ‘Local Ordained Ministry: A discussion paper for the Faith and Order Committee of the United Reformed Church’, Nov 2012.
- 11 Pope, Robert, ‘Presidency at the Sacraments’, unpublished paper for FORG, 2011.
- 12 Bradbury, ibid quoting Ministry, Order and Episkope, CPCE 2012, 66
- 13 Thompson, David, ‘Some notes on Eldership in the United Reformed Church’, unpublished paper, 2011.
- 14 Record of Assembly 1995, 44-47.
- 15 Thompson, David, ibid, 2012.
- 16 [http://urc.org.uk/images/Ministries/Ministries%20Committee/Toolbox/guidelines\\_elders.pdf](http://urc.org.uk/images/Ministries/Ministries%20Committee/Toolbox/guidelines_elders.pdf)
- 17 Basis of Union, The Manual A.24, The Manual Of The United Reformed Church, URC Publication, London.
- 18 <http://www.urc.org.uk/lay-preachers.html#four>
- 19 Barr, Mary, paper prepared for Synod of Scotland meeting September 2011 and submitted to FORG, August 2011.
- 20 Thompson, David, ibid, 2012.