

# Paper F2

Faith and Order Committee  
Authorised Elders

Church 2015  
**United**  
Church **Reformed**  
**Church** Church 2015



# Paper F2

## Faith and Order Committee Authorised Elders

### Basic Information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	The Revd Elizabeth Welch <a href="mailto:welchea@talk21.com">welchea@talk21.com</a>
<b>Action required</b>	Advice
<b>Questions for Mission Council</b>	<p><b>Because this work was mandated by Assembly and will be reported to Assembly, the committee would like to hear ...</b></p> <p>a) <b>Whether this paper is heading in the right direction. And;</b></p> <p>b) <b>If yes, are there areas where Mission Council would welcome further clarification and development?</b></p> <p>c) <b>If no, are there alternate directions that Mission Council would feel are more helpful?</b></p>

### Summary of Content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	<p>Subject: The authorisation of certain appointed Elders to preside at Holy Communion</p> <p>Aim: To respond to the expressed need for local leadership able to celebrate Communion in the absence of an ordained minister.</p>
<b>Main points</b>	<p>That synods should arrange for the appointment of certain elders within local churches as elders authorised to celebrate communion in the absence of an ordained minister.</p> <p>That there should be proper preparation for such a role and that it should be agreed for a fixed period of five years.</p>
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Faith and Order committee paper on Ordained Local Ministry to General Assembly 2014 (page 120 of <i>Book of Reports</i> )
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	The Faith and Order committee

### Summary of Impact

<b>Financial</b>	None
<b>External (e.g. ecumenical)</b>	Implications within Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

# Authorised Elders

## Summary of the issue

- 1 The Wessex Resolution to General Assembly 2012 suggesting a new form 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 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 Advisory Committee and brought to General Assembly in 2014, which approved it by agreement. A small Task Group was then set up to address the issues. The Task Group here summarises its work on the specific issues set by the Assembly 2014 resolution. A distinction is drawn between actions that can be taken immediately by Assembly and those that might require more time, either because of additional work, or changes to the Basis of Union, or otherwise. The Group does not favour using the term 'Celebrant Elder', because distinctive categories have previously been criticised strongly as 'dividing the eldership'; but it does suggest revising the current guidance on Presidency (*Manual*, section F), by amending the 1995 Assembly resolution, and in particular by extending the normal period for authorisation to preside for elders (or lay preachers) from one to five years.

## The background

- 2 When the United Reformed Church was initially formed in 1972, its Basis of Union contained a bold commitment. In §25 it stated:
 

'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...'

Throughout its history since then 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, the commitment to 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 last term has been the subject of successive interpretations by Assembly. The most recent one, incorporated as a footnote to paragraph 25 of the Basis 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'.

- 3 So this is not a new issue. Two reports to Assembly in the last twenty years have aroused intense debate. The first was *Patterns of Ministry*, the recommendations of which were mainly rejected by Assembly in 1995; and the second, *Equipping the Saints* (2005), which was less overtly radical, received more support. In particular, resolution 30 of 2005 on deployment accepted 'that not every congregation has or will have a Minister directly providing their day-to-day leadership' (and an amendment that would have weakened the force of that statement was defeated).
- 4 In 1998 the Discipleship, Stewardship and Witness committee brought a resolution to Assembly (29), encouraging synods and district councils in consultation with local churches 'to identify forms of local church leadership', which might be explored within the context of agreed guidelines; and this has been tried in some synods, with mixed success. Some of the questions raised in paragraph 1.2 of their Report (*Reports to Assembly, 1998*, p 66) show how the same issues continue to vex us:
- How would they differ from elders?
  - How would they relate to ordained ministers
  - Doesn't 'local leadership' describe precisely what we expect of non-stipendiary ministry?
  - Is this a 'back-door' into ministry for people who would otherwise not be accepted?
  - Will this lead to a change in role for ordained ministers?
  - Isn't the church secretary usually regarded as the lay leader in the local congregation?
  - Would we be thinking about this at all if there were not a shortage of 'real' ministers?
  - What are the implications for ecumenical situations?
- Moreover, although the guidelines then approved stated explicitly that such local leaders would be appointed for an agreed period of service according to a clearly defined agreement and job description, approved by all parties, and that they would be accountable to the local eldership, the Synod Moderators have reported to us that this has been more difficult to deliver in practice than was intended.
- 5 Nevertheless in 2012 a synod resolution from Wessex asking for some form of local ordained ministry was referred to the Faith and Order committee, and despite divided views within that committee it brought a report to Assembly 2014 asking for further exploration of the eldership. Accordingly Assembly 2014 passed Resolution 13 by agreement:
- 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 and of elders;
    - b) how within the understandings of the various traditions which make up our Church the sacrament of communion is linked to ordination;
    - c) the suggested future relationships of 'celebrant elders' to local church leaders, lay preachers, Ministers of Word and Sacraments, 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' (*Assembly Record 2014*, p 6; *Book of Reports 2014*, pp 120-27).
- 6 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.

## Process

- 7 The Task Group has met six times. A large part of one meeting was given over to a meeting with the Revds Fiona Thomas (Secretary for Education and Learning) and Craig Bowman (Secretary for Ministries). Synod Moderators were also invited to consult their Lay Preaching Commissioners to secure some sense of who actually 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 Synod Moderators responded personally. The Task Group is grateful to all those who have assisted its work. It is aware that its information base is weak: but suspects that this is because it is no-one's job to keep it.
- 8 We began our work by sharing our own stories: two ministers (one non-stipendiary) with very different experiences, and two church secretaries, one of whom had found it necessary to take a lead role in welding together a group of five previously disparate congregations to form a Joint Pastorate (out of a previous Mission Partnership) during a long ministerial vacancy. We also examined the material submitted from synods. From these we identified some common issues and questions, which we then related to the specific tasks set us by General Assembly. An interim report was made to the Faith and Order committee in March (originally suggested as the target date for completion); a further report was made in June, of which this is a revision.
- 9 The initial conclusion was obvious. There is a shortage of ordained leadership not only in the United Reformed Church, but also in many of the traditional Churches. We noted that 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 two years ago aims to train ministers 'on the ground' before they spend a shorter length of time than before in one of two colleges; the Church of Scotland is merging local parishes, as is the Roman Catholic Church (though not without significant local opposition). The grouping of parishes and congregations has become more widespread in all Churches; the number of Catholic parishes with a weekly mass is diminishing in France, and some may have mass only once every three months or even once a year. (Ordinations in the French Catholic Church are less than 100 per year.) 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.



- 10 Thus it seems unlikely that more stipendiary ministry as such is the answer to the United Reformed Church's problems, not least because we have as many ministers as congregations are currently willing to pay for, irrespective of the level of future vocations. Furthermore, 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. 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. In considering whether 'Celebrant Elders' are the answer to this need, the Task Group has inevitably found itself reflecting on broader issues of local church leadership.
- 11 At the outset the Task Group wishes to emphasise one point. The term 'celebrant elder' is inconsistent with a Reformed (and truly catholic) understanding of the Eucharist. The congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper, and the one(s) presiding leads the saying of the narrative of institution and the thanksgiving and related prayers at the heart of the service. Thus in the rest of this report, we shall refer to authorised elders (meaning those authorised by synods under the provisions of section 25 of the *Basis*) – a term already in use in some synods.<sup>1</sup>

### The mandate (see §5)

- 12 We now turn to the six specific questions we were asked to investigate, before offering some conclusions.
- 13 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 fulfilment*, 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 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].

- 14 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 tended to be 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

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<sup>1</sup> We note in passing that §25 of the *Basis* refers to presidency at the sacraments, i.e. Baptism as well as Communion; but since we were not asked to consider baptism, we have not done so.

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.

- 15 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 reference to the possibility of presidency by elders comes later '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.
- 16 Working within this historical understanding of ordination, the task group discerned two options. One, which we have been mandated by General Assembly to explore, is to create a new category of persons who can preside at Communion: 'Celebrant Elders'. We recall, however, that a similar proposal to create two categories within the Eldership provoked fierce opposition at General Assembly in 1995, with many arguing that it would destroy the integrity of the eldership. Obvious ecumenical difficulties would also attend this suggestion: it is most unlikely, for example, that either the Methodists or the Church of England would recognise it in Local Ecumenical Partnerships in which they and we were involved. A second option would be to consider some expansion of non-stipendiary ministry (see §§39-40).
- 17 *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 the 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 recognised persons may be invited *Basis of Union* §25 [italics added].

- 18 These provisions, which already go beyond what Methodism or the Church of England would find easily acceptable, suggest that, if it were intended to enable 'authorised elders' to regularly preside at Communion, 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'. The Task Group felt it necessary to go into such detail in order to clarify its own mind as to whether there was a simple amendment: it does not believe that there is.
- 19 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. A senior minister in the Church has written that, 'In some parts of the United Reformed Church [often from the formerly Presbyterian parts of the church] the necessary pastoral dimension in presidency has been interpreted more in terms of the pastoral need (which has made it an exception) and in other parts of the Church [often from the formerly Congregational side] more in terms of the pastoral relationship (which has made it more commonplace)'. 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 to five years. (To expect someone to spend a year or more preparing for an authorisation that might only last for a year is unreasonable.) 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' (Resolution 45, *Record* 1995, p 45; *Reports to Assembly* 1995, pp 124-25). 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 advantages of involving Scotland in the decision, since it was agreed before the union of 2000; and taking account of the disappearance of District Councils in their original form. **In order that some speedy action on this report is taken, we recommend that this guidance be amended to read:**

**We suggest the following pattern of presidency –**

- (a) **a Minister of Word and Sacraments (including a retired minister who has expressed willingness to do so) should preside when available;**
- (b) **in situations of pastoral necessity, the synod should make provision for presidency by another person, included in the provisions of §25 of the *Basis of Union*: elders of the local congregation and accredited lay preachers 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 five years. Before renewal there should be consultation with, and a review of, the needs of the congregation.**



**We believe 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.**

- 20 The different interpretations of ‘pastoral necessity’ arise from the various strands within the historical antecedents of our Church. Scottish Presbyterians found it difficult to agree on whether Elders should be ordained in the late sixteenth century. 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 Sacraments, although it does recognise 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.
- 21 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). In addition, 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.
- 22 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 [bold added].*
- This was why they were recognised as auxiliary ministers in 1981.
- 23 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 Scotland) in this development from the original Churches of Christ understanding of eldership.

- 24 The Task Group also notes that the original age restrictions of 50 (now 55) on training for ministry of Word and Sacrament within the United Reformed Church precluded a significant proportion of accredited lay preachers (who had already undergone some theological training) from offering themselves for this office in the Church. Although accredited (which, at the time the Basis of Union was written, meant exclusively Assembly accreditation, synod accreditation being a later development) lay preachers are among the categories of person who may be authorised in case of pastoral necessity (see *Basis of Union* §25, cited above) to preside at Communion, they were deliberately placed after elders in the list of categories because elders have a local pastoral link with their church. In practice, since lay preachers are often also elders, they have frequently taken this role, and also perform other functions of local-church leadership. Moreover, while the proportion of congregations to ministers has increased considerably since the beginning of the URC, the proportion of congregations to lay preachers has stayed remarkably constant, suggesting that the supply is being replenished. It would make sense, therefore, for any recommendation that presidency by elders should become more frequent to apply particularly to lay preachers as an already qualified subset of elders.
- 25 Our enquiries have revealed a gap in our detailed understanding of congregational life. Complete statistics are lacking of the extent to which our lay preachers are also elders, and even of the numbers (and qualifications) of preachers leading worship in our churches. Of the congregations making a return in Wessex 44% were served by 'local arrangements' and 64% of those authorised to preside at communion in Eastern Synod were neither Assembly- or synod-accredited lay preachers. Research by the Lay Preaching committee twenty years ago suggested that one-third of Sunday services were taken by lay preachers. It seems unlikely that this proportion will have increased. So although there has been a fairly constant plea by lay preachers to be authorised to preside as a matter of routine, that clearly would not resolve the current questions. In any case, given the significance attached by our churches to preaching, this must be a matter of concern for the Church, and a stimulus to further research. Meanwhile, **we recommend that any lay preachers, who are not elders and are nominated by a local congregation to preside at communion, should test a call to eldership within their local congregation.**
- 26 *The position of Authorised Elders within the church*
- 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.
- 27 We suggest that, to be true to the Church's understanding of call, the call of authorised elders should be recognised within the eldership and church meeting of their own church; and also within the eldership and church meeting of that church or group of churches which they are to invited to serve in this way, should this be other than their home congregation (in the case of small churches which can find no authorised elder within their own fellowship). The Task Group notes that such a process of discernment can be hindered by the absence of stipendiary ministry in the local church or pastorate concerned. For this reason **at synod level we recommend that there should be a designated local stipendiary Minister of Word and Sacrament for each church without an authorised elder within it, who could provide guidance, even if that minister does not have formal pastoral responsibility for the congregation.**

- 28 Since the *Basis of Union* (§21 and §25) emphasises that those who preside must also be recognised more widely than by the congregation alone, and since, so far as we are aware (though its content and style varies), in every synod training is currently a prerequisite for those elders or lay preachers applying for permission to preside at Communion, 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 Sacraments, this information should be available as part of the decision process, though it should not in itself be a reason for rejection. **At General Assembly level, we recommend that a roll of accredited authorised elders and lay preachers be maintained, to avoid the possibility of any individual exercising this ministry unhelpfully in one place and then moving elsewhere to try again.** It will also be necessary to address the relationship between authorised elders and Local Church Leaders where they exist, because of the overlaps in function (see the *Guidelines*, approved and amended by Assembly, *Reports to Assembly* 1998, pp 66-67). This should be a task for the synod that appoints them.
- 29 It has been suggested to us that there are some churches which currently propose names on a 'just in case' basis, and some synods that approve them. We strongly urge all concerned that this practice is in no-one's best interest; indeed we have 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. There are 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.
- 30 The Church needs to recognise that there are different kinds of 'pastoral necessity', which require different kinds of solution. There is a fundamental difference between the situation of larger (usually urban) and smaller (usually rural) churches, which 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. The Group has identified at least three different scenarios that 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 member of the congregation who can be approached and is willing, the procedure envisaged in the final paragraph of §25 of the *Basis* will have to be used.
  - 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 contain quite large areas, or geographical obstacles to speedy communication, such as mountains or rivers with few bridges.

31 *Training for Authorised Elders*

Unfortunately, the very word 'training' is often experienced by potential candidates as a pejorative judgment on their current ability rather than as a supportive resource for improvement. We note that the word is not now generally used in relation to education for ministry. Those who have years of experience in presiding at Communion 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. **We therefore recommend that for authorised elders (depending upon consultation with the Ministries and Education & Learning committees) the word 'training' be replaced by 'further preparation'.**

32 Preparation for local-church leadership needs to be tailored to individual needs and gifts, but also be of a sufficiently high standard. The model of apprenticeship, whether in the last year of initial ministerial education or integrated into the whole course, is already recognised in formation for ministry of Word and Sacraments and sometimes in placements before initial ministerial education begins. It also happens through Training for Learning and Serving local tutor groups and placements (in *Gateways into Worship*). 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 §29 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 Communion, in particular the recognition of the significance of previous experience and the recommendations (as well as the requests) of local congregations. This is why we have recommended that the normal period of authorisation for presidency be extended to five years, rather than the existing one year (see §19 above).

33 While the practice of presidency at Communion in itself is already covered (see §28 above on what currently happens in the Synods), preparation for authorised elders might helpfully be offered through an adapted version of TLS, for example in an expanded module on the conduct of worship. Could there be levels of certification other than TLS 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 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 TLS work together on this? A preliminary view from the Education and Learning Committee was that, using material currently available, and paralleling authorised elders with Assembly/Synod accredited lay preachers, the minimum requirement would be satisfactory completion both of the relevant Synod 'Presiding at communion' course and of the whole of TLS Lite (which can be done intensively in a year or less so in two) to give a theological basis for local-church leadership, whether or not



candidates felt called to preach. The Task Group feels that this may be setting the starting barrier too high, given the existing pressures in the churches – see the number of people authorised in Eastern or Wessex Synods, who appear to be neither elders or accredited lay preachers. 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. We have in mind what might be called a probationary period of service before commissioning, during which presidency would be permitted. **In any case, we recommend that greater publicity be given to the existing material for preparation.**

- 34 We felt that increasingly there was potential for the provision of on-line learning which could be accessed from anywhere, given that most people in their 50s or younger were now experienced in working online, though care would need to be taken not to exclude those for whom this was not the case (e.g. because of slower broadband speeds or poor connections in some parts of the country). But some elements of preparation necessarily involve a face-to-face approach.
- 35 These two modes of learning, the more academic and the more practical, could helpfully be integrated. Mentoring for a year before final recognition would be good, as would fixed terms of service with built-in assessment. When the synod adjudges preparation to be complete, we suggest a service of commissioning to mark the transition. We feel that congregations should also be prepared for this new situation, both to support authorised elders and also to avoid misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations of their new role.
- 36 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. We are aware that some worry about the implications of any change for Ministry and Mission payments; but we regard that as a separate question, not directly related to our remit, and there is no obvious way of reflecting on it until a decision has been taken on the main principle.
- 37 *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. Where there is a weak eldership, problems of maverick leadership may arise, so elders need to be equipped to hold local leadership of any kind accountable. The Synod Moderators have been concerned about the accountability of Local Church Leaders; but the Guidelines approved by Assembly in 1998 are quite clear that such leaders are accountable to the local eldership. That would suggest that some elders meetings may be reluctant to tackle hard questions. 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 any elder who moves to a different church and synod. 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, we advise 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. Either the URC Elders Code of Conduct or the disciplinary and incapacity codes for ministers could be resources. **We recommend that a specific code of conduct for**



**authorised elders be developed and that those concerned sign up to it before embarking on their ministry.**

38 Like other groups in this area before us, we have looked at immediate and longer-term questions. The Faith and Order Committee believes strongly that it is important to make a clear distinction between what might be done now, i.e. at Assembly 2016, and what requires further work in order to be implemented at a later date. In the light of the foregoing, it proposes the following resolutions for General Assembly 2016:

**1 that the existing guidance on Presidency at the Sacraments 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 preside when available;**
- (b) in situations of pastoral necessity, the Synod should make provision for presidency by another person, included in the provisions of §25 of the *Basis of Union*: elders of the local congregation and accredited lay preachers 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 five years. Before renewal there should be consultation with, and a review of, the needs of the congregation.**

**We believe 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 (§19).**

- 2 that any lay preachers, who are not elders and are nominated by a local congregation to preside at communion, should test a call to eldership within their local congregation (§25).**
- 3 that within each Synod should be a designated local stipendiary minister of Word and Sacrament for each church without an authorised elder within it, who could provide guidance, even if that minister does not have formal pastoral responsibility for the congregation (§27).**
- 4 that a roll of accredited authorised elders and lay preachers be maintained by the General Assembly, to avoid the possibility of any individual exercising this ministry unhelpfully in one place and then moving elsewhere to try again (§28).**
- 5 that greater publicity be given to the existing material for preparation (§33).**
- 6 that for authorised elders (depending upon consultation with the Ministries and Education & Learning Committees) the word ‘training’ be replaced by ‘further preparation’ (§31).**
- 7 that a specific code of conduct for authorised elders be developed and that those concerned sign up to it before embarking on their ministry (§37).**

39 *Ecumenical Implications*

The ecumenical implications of these recommendations are significant, both for Local Ecumenical Partnerships and our wider ecumenical relations. Other than in Baptist/URC congregations, this whole idea is problematic for LEPs, because other traditions work with less flexibility over who can preside at the Sacraments. Even the Presbyterian Church in Wales, our major ecumenical partner in Wales, which does permit Elders to administer the sacraments in specified situations, only licenses them (for renewable periods of three years) after three years' training. Given the United Reformed Church's commitment to seek wider unity in the Church, we therefore venture 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 face similar problems.

40 *Team non-stipendiary ministry*

There would be several advantages in using once more a pattern 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 – included in Appendix):

## a) 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.

## b) Creativity

Increasingly our pastorates for stipendiary ministers include several congregations. 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. Moreover, 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. 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 minister for the pastorate.

## c) Flexibility

This is in no sense a second-best solution. Such a pattern of team leadership allows for flexibility, with the gifts of various people being used in leadership as the local situation requires, rather than one person being expected to be

good at everything. 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.

d) Ecumenical contexts including LEPs

Team non-stipendiary ministry raises no additional difficulties to relationships between the traditional denominations (though newer charismatic and community churches are less likely to have difficulties with the idea of authorised elders).

e) This solution would require no amendments to the *Basis of Union* (other than the updating of the guidance on Presidency referred to in §18, which is not an amendment to the *Basis*).

41 There would be some disadvantages:

a) Level of preparation

Currently the Church offers no form of preparation between 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.<sup>2</sup> The point mentioned in §§31-32 above, however, concerning the tension between qualifications and discernment, should be considered here too.

b) Teamwork

While 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 trust and the loss of 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.

c) Potential devaluation of the existing ministry of elders

The United Reformed Church rightly values its eldership. It has been suggested that instead of meeting the need for presidency at the sacraments and local leadership in our churches by using the ministry of elders, the creation of more ministers might appear to devalue the elders we have. But 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? In any case 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

42 Taking all this into account, **we recommend that further attention be given to expanding the concept of non-stipendiary ministry to include once more the original pattern of team non-stipendiary ministry.** This does require further consultation with the Ministries Committee, which already has a working party on non-stipendiary ministry, and the Education and Learning Committee, which has spent much time in the last few years in adjusting to new requirements in the Common Awards for stipendiary ministry candidates.

43 **Concluding reflections**

a) *Teamwork*

Regardless of whether our suggestion for further work on team non-stipendiary ministers is pursued, we believe that there should be a fresh look at the opportunities for teamwork, and in particular that this suggestion should be referred to the Ministries and Education & Learning committees, and to Synod Moderators and Pastoral committees, in consultation with the local churches concerned.

b) *Local Church Leaders*

If there is serious concern about the accountability of Local Church Leaders, then these situations should be investigated to discover whether, when set up, they conformed to the 1998 Guidelines, and, if not, why not. All Christian leadership should be servant-leadership.

c) *Information*

We are concerned at the apparent lack of information about who leads worship in our congregations week by week, and believe that intelligent decisions on these matters require more information than is currently available.

d) *'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'. The Task Group rejects that argument. 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 buy into 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. Sadly, anecdotal evidence suggests that few elders' meetings spend a long time considering the mission of their local church, rather than details of administration. One member of the 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 Group is therefore confident that nothing in these proposals will reduce the missionary potential of our elders.

e) *Differences of opinion*

We are struck by the fact that attempts to resolve some of these issues have divided opinion in the Church for over twenty years. The Faith and Order Committee was not unanimous in bringing their recommendation to Assembly in 2014, and Assembly approved the resolution by agreement. Therefore, although the Task Group has found unanimity in its thinking, it recognises that further decisions on this matter will not be easy, and will require an appropriate combination of prayer and realism, alongside theological discernment.

Susan Bush, Sarah Hall, Lesley Richmond and David Thompson.  
21 July 2015

## Appendix

### **Extract from the Statement on ‘Auxiliary Ministry’ resulting from a national consultation in Rossendale, Lancashire, 6-8 November 1978, as included in the *Reports to Assembly 1979 (46-52)*.**

Among the reasons which lead us to recommend the confirmation of the Assembly’s decision to authorise auxiliary or non-stipendiary ministry are the following:-

- 1 The New Testament evidence shows that the ministry of the apostolic church was not tied to a stipendiary system. While Paul asserted the right of the preacher of the Gospel to the support of the Church, he refused to exercise this right in his own case. The early expansion of the Church depended upon a non-professional ministry.
- 2 At many times and places, and notably in our own time, we have witnessed the rapid missionary expansion of churches which rely upon a non-stipendiary ministry.
- 3 The United Reformed Church includes a very large number of small churches, many of which are potential centres of growth. We ought to see that all are furnished with a ministry of Word, Sacrament and pastoral care of the highest possible standard, acknowledged and authorised by the whole Church. This cannot be achieved solely by a full-time stipendiary ministry.
- 4 There are ‘unevangelised areas’ in the life of contemporary Britain – sectors of society where there is little or no relevant Christian witness. A ministry of those already working in these areas could open the way for the birth and growth of Christian congregations within them, developing a style of life, worship, teaching and ministry appropriate to their needs.
- 5 There are members of the Church whose talents for various aspects of ministry have in the past lain dormant because there has been no recognised place for them in accustomed pattern of the Church. Their talents could be awakened and brought into use by the challenge of such leadership near at hand, and of suitable training available without having to leave present commitments to work and family.
- 6 Some of our sister churches, notably the Church of England, have already some years of fruitful experience in the development of a non-stipendiary ministry, and this encourages us to believe that the Spirit may be leading the Church in this way.