

**The United Reformed Church
Consultation on Eldership**

The Royal Foundation of St Katharine. October 24th to 26th 2006.

1) At General Assembly 2005 the Catch the Vision Core Group requested a piece of work on Eldership which would bring together various pieces of work undertaken by the Doctrine, Prayer and Worship, Ministries, and Life and Witness Committees as well as ongoing questions from Conversations on the Way to Unity. Doctrine, Prayer and Worship offered to act as lead Committee in putting together a major Conference and this duly took place on October 24th to 26th 2006 at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine in London.

2) At the Conference striking agreement emerged on the following. The ministry of the Elder is deeply valuable. It should be exercised co-operatively with Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Greater attention is needed to the following matters of real concern: the meaning of calling and election, preparation for ordination, ongoing training and development, support and accountability. In many ways all this is a significant endorsement of resolutions passed at General Assembly 2005 on the calling, training, equipping and personal development of Elders.

3) As the Conference progressed, amid a real sense of listening for God's leading, the view emerged that Elders should continue to be ordained. We were not unanimous. Most of the Elders present were initially drawn to the idea of commissioning, or were of the view that the terminology was not as important as the occasion itself. However over the three days there was a general movement and change of mind for some in the direction of ordination, which resulted in a clear majority among those present. What was significant was that the strong desire of several to progress ecumenically by moving from ordination to commissioning was answered powerfully by the representatives of our ecumenical partners, who urged an agenda based not on convenience but on clarity and theological rigour as we engaged in ecumenical debate. Ecumenism proceeds better when people are allowed to be themselves and honour their traditions by producing reasoned justifications for their practice. We therefore present what transpired in our struggle to articulate why we believe Elders should be ordained and a list of new work which we believe needs to be undertaken.

4) The Church of Jesus Christ comprises those who have been called by the grace of the Covenant God, who creates a community of disciples. To this divine act the Word and Sacraments bear witness. The Church is called to worship the triune God, to proclaim God's saving love, and to be a sign and instrument of God's Kingdom of love and justice in the world. "The whole membership of the Church, the clergy included, is primarily *laikos* (from which the word 'lay' derives) , because the Church is the *laos*, the people of God". (i) By their baptism all the members of the Church have their unique role to play in this common task, their diverse gifting leading to their respective vocations. Within this community, often called the Priesthood of all Believers, some are particularly called to exercise ministerial offices. So that the Church might be equipped to be the Church, God summons men and women to be set apart for the ministry of Word and Sacrament and pastoral oversight. In the Reformed tradition Ministers of Word and Sacrament share that ministry with Elders, who are called to ensure that the faith is passed from generation to generation for the building up of the body of Christ (Basis of Union Paragraph 19). Together they are responsible for the Church of God in its councils, local, regional and national. Together they are accountable for the worship and mission of the Church. Together they exercise pastoral oversight and take responsibility for the discernment and nurture of God-given gifts and talents in others. Together they share a ministry at the Lord's Table. Those ministries remain

crucial to the nature and purpose of the Church.

5) The Elders are called and committed to undertake, in partnership with Ministers of Word and Sacrament, responsibility for the life of the congregation in every aspect but particularly in relation to worship, fellowship, mission and service in the world. Just as the members of the body of Christ act corporately in their ministry and mission, so the Elders work collegially with Ministers of Word and Sacrament in carrying out their ministry. The Elders form a collective body whose work within the Church enables the Body of Christ to develop and extend its influence in society. As a team, the Elders' Meeting possesses diversity of gifts and exercises a collaborative ministry. It has particular responsibility for enabling the nurture and discipleship of the church members so that they in turn can be effective witnesses for Christ in their daily lives. As in all Christian ministry, the model of Eldership flows from the pattern of ministry we have seen in Jesus, rooted as it was in servanthood (Mark 10, 45).

6) Elders are called from within the membership, ordained for life and commonly inducted to serve for fixed terms. All these elements are important. Different times and contexts have shaped different models of Eldership, informed by Scripture, tradition and experience. We have found important models of ministry from the Bible. However we must take note of the growing ecumenical consensus, as indicated in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches report on the 1990 Consultation on Eldership (ii) :

"We believe that Scripture does not point to one single church order, and that the effort to impose such an order on Scripture should be abandoned.

This does not mean that Scripture offers no guidance for us as to the faithful ordering of the church and its offices of leadership. On the subject of elders, for example, there is solid evidence for the continued existence of collegial bodies of elders both in the Old and New Testaments.....However, as soon as we begin to enquire about the specific responsibilities of elders and their relation to other offices of the Church, we have to recognise that much of the biblical evidence used in the past can no longer be definitively maintained.....

We must therefore find another approach if we are to be guided by the whole witness of God's Word in Scripture in the ordering of the Church and its leadership. A more faithful and productive starting point will be God's great message of salvation for the world, and the divine calling of the Church for mission. Within that context, we may then enquire: [what tasks of ministry and leadership are necessary if the Church is to fulfil that calling?] How is that leadership to be chosen and to work together – with the whole Church – to the glory of God, for the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world?"

7) Sometimes secular models have benefited our understanding. However, we are concerned lest we simply baptize the spirit of the age. In every way we must seek a model of Eldership which is appropriate to particular Churches in their context, and not assume that one size fits all. There are however, some general principles which are applicable across the board. The Basis of Union is a helpful access point for those principles.

8) Regarding the lifelong nature of Eldership we would do well to heed the words of David Thompson:

"Being an Elder is not something you just drop into for a few years and then drop out of; it is not like serving on a committee. If you have the gifts and qualities which mark you out for the eldership, then other Christians will continue to turn to you for spiritual advice and

counsel, whether or not you happen to be 'a serving Elder'; what does cease is the representative function of Elders in the wider councils of the Church." (iii)

All too often membership of the Elders' Meeting has come to mean membership of a committee rather than part of the local church's ministerial team.

Regarding the fixed term aspect of Eldership, the opportunity to stand down when personal and work commitments necessitate is commendable practice, and the simple opportunity of having a sabbatical is an important provision.

9) Care needs to be given to spelling out the responsibilities of the wider Church to the local church and vice versa in the matter of Eldership. A strong case can be made for increasing the involvement of the wider Church in the recognition and preparation of Elders for ordination and their support during their service. The United Reformed Church should know who its Elders are in the same way that it knows about its other ministers. The Elder's gifts and graces will develop, and emphases may change as their personal pilgrimage moves forward.

10) Experience in the United Reformed Church is mixed when it comes to Eldership. There are churches, whether large or small, in which the oversight of the Elders' Meeting brings the best out of the congregation, enabling the vocation of the members and hence the mission of the church. In other situations things are less rosy, and one sometimes hears of enthusiastic church members who feel blocked or disabled by their church's Elders' Meeting. The crux of the matter is that the Church's ministry exists to enable and empower the Church in mission. We do not believe that some of the negative experiences should devalue the positive possibilities.

11) The United Reformed Church is made up of diverse churches, the majority of which are small in number of members, but often great in spirit. Nevertheless a common ethos generally prevails. The size of the Eldership needs to reflect the size of the congregation, but perhaps we have limited the work of the Elders' Meeting by making it an overcrowded place, when a much smaller group might have been more effective. This tendency has perhaps been associated with historical precedent – 'we always must have 12 Elders,' or a literal interpretation of the Basis of Union's requirement concerning the pastoral office of the Elder. In many congregations pastoral care is devolved from the Elders' Meeting to pastoral care teams; it is regrettable that some churches insist on having large unwieldy Elderships in order to reduce the pastoral visitation load of each elder! It may well be that the way forward outlined in this paper leads to smaller but better prepared Elders' Meetings.

12) There are a variety of tasks which all churches need to have carried out effectively. These may be broadly grouped under three headings: those related to the Church's sacramental life as it gathers to encounter God's Word in worship, prayer, and obedience; secondly there is the diaconal function whereby the church seeks to follow in the footsteps of the servant Christ in the world; and thirdly there is the managerial task of servicing the necessary structures of the Church (e.g. becoming managing trustees in response to changes in charity law). Each of these is important and the Elders' Meeting should make sure that each is addressed fully in the life of the congregation. It is all too easy for Elders to get trapped into concentrating on management, even if good management is necessary for effective mission. The United Reformed Church has a good track record when it comes to service: for example Make Poverty History, Commitment for Life, Peacemaking etc. Perhaps the emphasis for our spiritually driven age should be on the sacramental?

13) In a church where Ministers of Word and Sacrament are scarce, and vacancies long, we will increasingly need a dedicated and equipped Eldership to maintain and enhance the life and mission of the congregation. In churches of increasingly elderly members, the pastoral care burden will change. In a society which is bypassing the mainline churches, our Elders will need to play their part in enabling the Church to communicate to a non-churched population. All this points to a need for a well prepared and adequately supported Eldership. We regard the question of identification of new elders and the training and continuing development of all Elders as crucial.

14) Ordination sets the newly ordained person in a fresh relationship to the congregation, and this needs understanding humbly and positively. It is important that the local church, in fellowship with the wider Church, marks that passage in a refreshing liturgical manner. Ordination is that setting apart appropriate for ministries which have been established, through testing over time, as central to the life of the Church. In principle we are not averse to extending ordination to include other ministries which prove themselves in this way.

15) For the Reformers, following the pattern of the Apostolic Church, Minister and Elders first focussed around the Word and Sacraments as the means by which God in Christ drew near and fed the people. These days that starting point continues to inspire ideas of Minister and Elders working together so that through them God may equip and enable God's people for service. To this end there will be those set apart to particular Ministries of Word and Sacraments and those called Elders who will share with them in oversight in order to equip the whole Church. Together they will feed the people of God and take responsibility for pastoral care, spiritual health and the discernment and nurture of God-given gifts and talents in others. Through this shared ministry they also have a representative role in the wider councils of the Church and ecumenically. Out of this equipping many other ministries have emerged and will emerge. We wish particularly to affirm those of Church Related Community Workers and Lay Preachers.

16) We ask for further work on the following:

- Models of good practice in identification of new elders, their preparation before and continuing development after ordination
- Models of good practice in the conduct, content and oversight of Elders' Meetings
- Teasing out theologically the differences between ordination and commissioning
- The biblical roots of the language and practice of particular ministries
- The consequences of the fact that the whole membership of the Church, including the clergy, is primarily "lay", and the effects of making distinctions between "lay" and "ordained"
- Continuity and change in ecumenical understandings of ordination
- What our liturgies of induction and ordination reveal about our theological intentions and ecclesiology
- The role of Ministers and Elders together in Christian initiation

Bibliography

- i) "The training of Laymen in the Church" from *Concerns of the Churches*, preparation study for the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1948, p 16
- ii) "Evidence for a Reformed Order in Scripture" in *Eldership in the Reformed Churches Today*, World Alliance of Reformed Churches Geneva 1990, pp 8 & 9
- iii) David M. Thompson "Understanding the Eldership", background paper for the St Katharine's Consultation October 2006