L: The Learning Church

Introduction
The United Reformed Church has long been committed to being both a learned and a learning church, making development opportunities available to people where they are, and taking into account their existing strengths, experiences and their desire to grow. General Assembly 2016 (Resolution 1) commended *Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today* to the wider church urging the denomination to adopt a fresh emphasis on making and releasing disciples within the URC. It is in the context of *Walking the Way* that all the learning, training and development endeavours of the church are currently set.

Many of the standing committees of the General Assembly have a part to play in maintaining the breadth and quality of learning opportunities in the United Reformed Church. Two committees have particular responsibilities in this area – the education and learning committee has oversight of adult learning in the church, whilst the children and youth work committee works to ensure that children and young people are seen as disciples in their own right. These two committees, together with the mission department come together in *Stepwise*, an intergenerational discipleship development programme which started in September 2018 and will be fully available from September 2020.

1. Principles
In 2006 the General Assembly endorsed four key training principles for the United Reformed Church:
- Integrated education and training to equip the whole people of God for mission;
- Ecumenical engagement at every stage;
- The presentation of a distinctive Reformed ethos and history in that ecumenical engagement;
- The delivery of this policy in a manner appropriate to the circumstances of the three nations in which the United Reformed Church is situated.

2. Involvement of the Resource Centres for Learning and synods
While General Assembly set the policies and the Assembly committees ensure that these are pursued in all relevant activities, the place where the people of the church experience the implementation of the policies is in their local church and through their synod. Sometimes they will find that there is involvement of one of the three Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs) which serve the whole URC. These are:

*The Scottish United Reformed and Congregational College*
*Northern College, Manchester*
*Westminster College, Cambridge*
As theological educators, the teaching staff of the RCLs are available to the whole Church at every level of learning: designing content for Stepwise streams, taking part in synod resourcing events, teaching on open courses at the colleges, and equipping people who are undertaking public ministry – either currently or in the future – whether as lay preachers, Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs), or Ministers of Word and Sacraments.

The 13 synods of the URC are responsible for helping local churches to provide relevant learning opportunities and building up the people of God. They usually have designated officers covering particular areas: Training and Development officers; Mission Enablers; Children and Youth Development Officers or equivalents. The synod office is often the first port of call when seeking information about individual or congregational development.

3. Discipleship Development

In addition to courses and other materials suggested through Walking the Way and particular offerings from individual synods, there are a number of specific resources available through the URC website. Many of these can be reached through the education and learning committee’s webpage as well as through the specific links given throughout this document.

(a) Membership: A series of discussions in five sessions on the Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church, suitable for individuals and groups of people wanting to know more about the United Reformed Church.

(b) Eldership: A collection of resources in eight sections is available which can be used by existing elders, for equipping people who are considering becoming elders, or by their equivalents in Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

(c) Lay Preaching: There are two routes to becoming a Lay Preacher in the United Reformed Church:

i) Locally-Recognised Lay Preachers usually pursue a programme which takes about 12 months through their synod. In many synods this consists of a series of five Local Introductory Training Experience (LITE) courses taken in small groups close to their home church, with assignments to be completed.

Having successfully conducted an assessed service the applicant will usually be recognised by the synod and listed in their year book as a lay preacher. Some synods have designed their own alternatives to the LITE course. Someone recognised in their own synod as a lay preacher may not automatically be recognised as such if they move to a different synod.

ii) Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers pursue a programme which takes three years, and is overseen by both their synod and the Assembly education and learning committee. The first year requires completion of four of the five LITE
courses designated for synod-recognised lay preachers, with a different and more stretching set of assignments. The second year consists of the ‘Gateways into Worship’ course, completed over an academic year (September to June) and is tutored within the synod and includes a residential weekend in each of three terms; a supervised placement with a local church other than the student’s own and completion of a number of assignments marked centrally. The third year of mentored reflective practice is designed to give the potential preacher a wide experience of shaping and leading different kinds of worship with the support of an experienced mentor. https://urc.org.uk/tls-page.html

There are assessed services at two points – at the end of ‘Gateways into Worship’ (to give feedback on progress) and at the end of the year of mentored reflective practice (to decide if the required standard for Assembly accreditation has been met).

Assembly accreditation is transferable wherever the preacher finds themselves in the United Reformed Church, and is also recognised by ecumenical partners. Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers are eligible to apply for up to £200 per year towards their ongoing development. Information on this can be found here.

(d) Church Leadership programme: People in church leadership roles, whether or not they are ordained or commissioned, may be encouraged by their synod to attend this programme which consists of two five-day residential events six months apart. There are bursaries for lay people, and the programme is eligible for EM3 funding. Full details here.

4. Education for Ministry: Word and Sacraments or Church Related Community Worker

There are three phases of education for ministry (EM):

- Education for Ministry Phase 1 (EM1): Initial ministerial education, when accepted candidates prepare for ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacraments or commissioning as a CRCW;

- Education for Ministry Phase 2 (EM2): Post-ordination or post-commissioning education, which usually lasts for three years;

- Education for Ministry Phase 3 (EM3): Continuing ministerial education which is available throughout the active ministry of an individual.

Education for Ministry Phase 1 (EM1)

Entry qualifications

The following educational qualifications are the normal standard for entry into EM1 for both stipendiary and non-stipendiary service (all four models) as either a Minister of Word and Sacraments or CRCW:
1. GCSE (Grade A-C) in English Language or the equivalent as an essential prerequisite.

2. plus one of the following:
   i)  2 'A' Levels
   ii) 3 Scottish 'Highers'
   iii) a degree from a UK University, or equivalent.
   iv) 120 first degree credits from the Open University or other UK University working on a modular system.
   v) an advanced GNVQ, involving a substantial quantity of discursive work
   vi) successful completion of Training for Learning and Serving (TLS) at an agreed standard.
   vii) such professional qualifications or experience of life and work as, in the opinion of the Assessment Panel, is of equivalent standard and provides a suitable foundation for training.

   (General Assembly 1997)

Paths through EM1
All accepted candidates, whatever pathway they follow, are expected to undertake:

1. Completion of the ‘United Reformed Church Introductory Course’ tutored within their synod; this includes the weekend programme of study entitled ‘Our Church – a course on the ethos and history of the United Reformed Church for those serving in it’ which takes place annually in late June/early July.

2. Completion of safeguarding training (children, and adults at risk) through their RCL before starting any pastoral placements.

3. Participation in at least one of the URC Summer Schools, organised in the last week of July each year for EM1 students and their families.

All EM1 students are also encouraged to explore the opportunities for an appropriate placement through the ‘Belonging to the World Church’ programme in conjunction with their RCL.

Candidates accepted to prepare for non-stipendiary service usually pursue EM1 part-time alongside their existing work and family commitments. Candidates accepted for stipendiary service will normally pursue EM1 as a full-time student. It is often possible for them to remain in their home and attend courses at their RCL on a semi-residential and distance basis, although some students move home to be nearer their RCL.

EM1 normally lasts for four years, with at least 800 hours of placement during that time, alongside study for a minimum of a Diploma in Higher Education in Theology. All successful CRCW candidates are placed with Northern College and pursue courses which meet the English Standards Board requirements for qualified Community Workers; they will also work towards achieving a Diploma in Higher Education in Theology.
Details of the EM1 pathways offered by the three RCLs, and the financial support available from the URC are available in two printed booklets from synod offices or online.

In November 2018 Mission Council agreed a new local model of non-stipendiary service, known as Model 4 NSM. This is designed for candidates who already have a place to minister agreed by their synod by the time they reach the Assembly assessment conference. Their EM1 period will be two years rather than the usual four years, and they will not be expected to achieve the Diploma of Higher Education in Theology which is the minimum requirement for all other candidates by the end of EM1. Their ordination will be to a particular local context, and if they seek to transfer to another model of ministry, they are likely to be expected to meet additional educational requirements.

**Education for Ministry Phase 2 (EM2)**

Having completed EM1 and been called and either ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacraments or commissioned as a CRCW, the new minister enters EM2. This is a phase where they are encouraged and supported to reflect on their experience through:

- Interaction with a pastoral adviser appointed by their receiving synod
- Synod events organised for small groups of EM2 ministers
- Annual residential events which bring all the EM2 ministers together. These are organised by the URC’s Education & Learning Programme Officer.

Successful completion of EM2 is shown by the issuing of a completion certificate by the minister’s synod. Further information on the EM2 period with guidelines for how it operates can be found here.

In addition to the specifically EM2-oriented programme described above, all EM2 ministers are eligible to apply for 50% of the continuing ministerial education support available in EM3, as well as being encouraged to devote up to a week each year on learning activities beyond EM2.

**Education for Ministry Phase 3 (EM3)**

- Having been issued with a certificate of completion of EM2 by their synod, ministers are eligible to apply for financial support towards the two weeks of continuing ministerial education which they are encouraged to undertake each year. This is in addition to their attendance at synod events such as Spring/Summer Schools.
- Not all valuable learning has a financial cost to it, and ministers are encouraged to continually seek out fresh ways of reflecting on what they do. The RCLs are available to them as places of advice and refreshment, and most synods have officers who can offer guidance on learning and development.
- Ministers in transition from one kind of ministry to another very different kind of ministry (e.g. from urban to rural, or pastoral charge to chaplaincy) may apply for addition funding and time to enable them to prepare for the transition.
(d) Ministers who have completed a few years of service after EM2 are often encouraged to attend the Church Leadership Programme which seeks to strengthen personal qualities, insights and skills for effective Christian leadership.

(e) After every ten years of service a minister is eligible to apply for a sabbatical of up to three months, in place of the usual two weeks of EM3. This has to be organised and authorised with the synod at least six months in advance of taking the sabbatical.

(f) Ministers who wish to undertake higher degrees alongside their ministry may apply to use EM3 funding towards this. They may also, through their synod Training and Development Officer or EM3 Officer, apply for additional funds from the Continuing Studies Fund held by the education and learning committee.

Guidelines on EM3 support are available on the URC website.

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