

Paper P2

Law and polity advisory group

The standards for eldership

United Church 2017
Church 2018
Reformed Church 2018



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Basic Information

Contact	The Revd Professor David Thompson, convenor dmt3@cam.ac.uk
Action required	For discussion
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	The commitments made by our elders.
Main points	A suggestion that a new promise for elders be considered as an addition to those presently made.
Previous documents	Nothing very recent.
Consultation has taken place with...	A number of cases has been raised with LPAG over a period of years, from various quarters.

Summary of Impact

Financial	No impact on budget.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	This concern is paralleled in a number of other Reformed churches in different parts of the UK, and we may in due course be able to learn from their experience.

The standards for eldership

1. From time to time the law and polity advisory group has been asked by the Moderators' meeting collectively and particular synod officers to explain the sanctions that exist for disciplining elders in local churches, who act in a way that threatens the unity of those churches. Unfortunately, the Basis of Union and The Structure are not very helpful in the matter. Local churches have been expected to exercise the appropriate discipline, without troubling the synod. In larger churches, where there is a larger eldership and a resident minister, such an elder may be persuaded to resign; but in smaller churches, especially those involved in multi-church pastorates that are increasingly the norm in the United Reformed Church today, this may not be so easy.
2. When Assembly agreed to the new proposals for authorised elders to preside at the sacraments, one of the accompanying resolutions (at the suggestion of the Moderators' meeting) was that this should include more explicit provision for discipline. The ministries committee has produced a helpful Code of Conduct to set out the expectations of authorised elders. In such cases, authorisation is granted for defined periods, and if synods wish to rescind authorisation, they may do so.
3. However, this does not quite deal with the question of discipline, which in extreme cases might involve depriving someone of the title and privileges of being an elder. The law and polity advisory group has taken legal advice, and proposes a procedure analogous to that for ministers, i.e. not an offence-based procedure, but one related to promises made at ordination and induction. The basis of this could be secured by adding a new question to schedule B (affirmations to be made by elders at ordination and induction), based on question 8 of schedule C (affirmations to be made by ministers at ordination and induction). It would not apply to all existing elders immediately, but as their current periods of office expire, and if they are re-elected, they would make the additional promise at their induction for a further period.
4. Mission Council is therefore invited to consider whether there might be benefit in adding a question along the following lines.

Q: Do you promise as an elder of the United Reformed Church to seek its well-being, purity and peace, to cherish love towards all other churches and to endeavour always to build up the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?

A: By the grace of God I do, and all these things I profess and promise in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Should this find favour, LPAG will think about how best to seek formal approval for a change of this kind.

5. The law and polity advisory group has not given its attention to the actual process of discipline needed, apart from hoping that it will be simple; but instead it suggests that it confer with MIND and ministries committee before making detailed proposals.