

Guidelines on conduct and behaviour for Elders

1. Introduction

This paper sets down expectations of Elders in relation to Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs) within the United Reformed Church. Parallel papers about the expectations of ministers and CRCWs are to be read alongside this document.

2. Basis of Union

The foundation for the conduct of ministers is in the Basis of Union, summarised in Schedule E paragraph 2,

‘Ministers must conduct themselves and exercise all aspects of their ministries in a manner which is compatible with the unity and peace of the United Reformed Church and the affirmation made by ministers at ordination and induction (Schedule C) and the Statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church (Schedule D) in accordance with which ministers undertake to exercise their ministry.’

The relevant promises in Schedule C are

- a) ‘to live a holy life and to maintain the truth of the Gospel whatever trouble or persecution may arise’,
- b) ‘to fulfil the duties of your charge faithfully, to lead the church in worship, to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, to exercise pastoral care and oversight, to take your part in the councils of the Church, and to give leadership to the church in its mission to the world, and
- c) as a minister 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’.

Elders ‘share with Ministers of the Word and Sacrament 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. They are ‘associated with ministers in all the councils of the Church’. Elders promise at their ordination to ‘accept the office of elder of the United Reformed Church’ and promise ‘to perform its duties faithfully’.

Elders and members receive ministers at their induction or CRCWs at their commissioning ‘as from God’ to serve among them and with them in the world. They promise to pray for the Minister/CRCW, to seek together the will of God and ‘give due honour, consideration and encouragement, building one another up in faith, hope and love’.

Members promise, 'in dependence on God's grace, to be faithful in private and public worship, to live in the fellowship of the church and to share in its work', and to give and serve, as God enables them, 'for the advancement of his kingdom throughout the world'. They also promise 'by that same grace, to follow Christ and to seek to do and to bear his will' all the days of their life'.

3. Standards of Christian Behaviour

3a Personal integrity and health

- To live a Christian life as persons of prayer and integrity.
- To be committed to growing in faith and discipleship and developing the gifts each has been given.
- To be aware of the need of Ministers, Elders and members to have appropriate boundaries that safeguard personal and spiritual health and welfare, to promote healthy relationships with others and not to do anything to undermine the spiritual health of another.
- To undertake URC safeguarding training as appropriate and have a working knowledge of the URC's Good Practice 5.
- To recognise the need for Ministers, Elders and Members to have a healthy lifestyle and to balance demands on Ministers'/CRCWs' availability and accessibility with respect for Ministers'/CRCWs' time for family and friends, personal renewal and rest and spiritual growth.
- To maintain strict confidentiality of all matters shared in confidence, except when required by law to do otherwise, eg with regard to the safety of children and adults at risk, and to respect Ministers' needs to maintain that same confidentiality.
- To exercise care and sensitivity when seeking counsel from others and in discussion about pastoral concerns, in order that the identity of any person shall not be revealed unless permission has been granted.
- To refrain from using privilege or power for personal advantage or gain, whether financial, emotional, sexual or material (Good Practice 5 Section 3.3.10).

3b Relationships with Ministers

- To work collaboratively with Ministers/CRCWs and Elders and members in all aspects of the life of the pastorate.
- To support the Ministers/CRCWs, through prayer, encouragement and partnership, including honouring the terms of settlement with regard to holidays, financial benefits and continuing training.
- To regard all persons with equal respect and concern and not discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender, race, age, disability or sexual orientation, including Ministers/CRCWs.
- To honour the Ministers/CRCWs currently called to serve and not invite or encourage other ministers to be involved in the life of the church or to offer pastoral care without the Ministers'/CRCWs' consent.
- To refrain from raising pastoral issues with a previous Minister/CRCW.
- To respect the work of previous Ministers/CRCWs and deal honourably with their record.
- To welcome retired Ministers/CRCWs as members and worshippers in the pastorate.

3c Relationship with Elders, members and others

- To regard all persons with equal love and concern.
- To uphold values of faithfulness, trust and respect.
- To share leadership and pastoral care with others called to these purposes.
- To work collaboratively and safeguard the contribution of the whole church in decision-making processes.
- To seek advice from others if in doubt about one's competence to deal with any issue or situation.
- To consider very carefully taking any position of responsibility and to support the direction of church life initiated through the Ministers/CRCWs, Elders and Church Meetings.
- To observe proper boundaries in relationships and not to enter a sexual relationship with anyone in their care.
- Not to be alone with a child or children or young people or adult at risk in a place quite separate from others. If a child or young person wants to discuss a personal matter, follow Good Practice G5 Guidance on Lone Working 8.3.7.

3d Relationship with councils of the Church

- To recognise that the pastorate is part of the wider United Reformed Church and that the Ministers/CRCWs are committed to play their part in the wider councils of the Church and in ecumenical relationships.
- To engage positively with all the councils of the church.
- To participate in synod's consultation and review of the pastorate as appropriate.

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