

## Appendix one

### **Towards a ministry of Children's and Youth Workers**

The church exists to continue Christ's ministry in the world. The Basis of Union confirms that the whole people of God are called to this ministry through 'worship, prayer, proclamation of the Gospel, and Christian witness; by mutual and outgoing care and responsibility; and by obedient discipleship in the whole of daily life, according to the gifts and opportunities given to each one' (*Basis of Union* paragraph 19).

All Christian ministry is seen as participation in the ministry of Christ. 'The primary ministry is that of the risen Christ himself, and we are enabled to participate in it by the power of the Holy Spirit' (*God's Reign and Our Unity* 74 p.47). All ministries are inspired by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church to be this reconciling community for the glory of God and the salvation of humanity (Ephesians 4:11-13). The Holy Spirit bestows on the community diverse and complementary gifts. These are for the common good of the whole people and are manifested in acts of service within the community and to the world. 'All members are called to discover, with the help of the community, the gifts they have received and to use them for the building up of the church and the service of the world to which the church is sent' (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* para 5 p.20).

All Christians, by their calling to be saints and their participation in the Body of Christ, witnessed by promises made at baptism and on becoming a church member, share in various ways in the one ministry of the whole body of Christ. However, 'minister' in this context designates someone who is given specific responsibilities within the life of the church. This is expressed in terms of the Word and Sacraments, or in terms of leadership, or in community engagement. All Christians are called to discipleship, and some whose discipleship involves a call to a specific ministry identified and recognised by the church as essential to its life and mission.

Ministry in its broadest sense is defined as the service to which the whole people of God is called, whether as individuals, as a local community, or as the universal church. Ministry or ministries can also denote the specific institutional forms which this service may take. However, within the United Reformed Church, ordained or commissioned ministry refers to persons who have received particular gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit or charisms, which are recognised by the church, which are nurtured through training, and which are confirmed when the church appoints someone for service by ordination or commissioning. The church needs an ordained or commissioned ministry to fulfil its mission, those who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ and thereby provide a focus for its unity (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* paragraph 8, page 21).

### **Ministry in the United Reformed Church**

Within the United Reformed Church there exist certain ministries, or offices, which are duly recognised, which help equip the whole church to continue Christ's ministry. To refer to every member of the church having a ministry to exercise or participating in the ministry of the whole people of God is not the same as to say that every member is a minister. Thus, the Basis of Union continues with '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' (*Basis of Union* paragraph 20).

Thus, in the Reformed tradition, the church is made visible when the Word of God is proclaimed and heard, and the Sacraments (of baptism and the Lord's Supper) are celebrated. As a result, there is a Ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

Ministers of the Word and Sacraments 'conduct public worship... preach the Word and... administer the Sacraments... exercise pastoral care and oversight... give leadership to the church in its mission to the world' (*Basis of Union* paragraph 21). This ministry exists because of the conviction that 'the life of faith to which it is called is a gift of the Holy Spirit continually received in Word and Sacrament and in the common life of God's people' (*Basis of Union* paragraph 12, cf. 13). The minister of the Word and Sacraments is recognised by the local and wider church and is tasked with enabling the local church to understand its life, witness and mission in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God and as an expression of the one (holy catholic and apostolic) church that is called into being by, and belongs to, God. In the United Reformed Church, there is only one order of Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Ministers might exercise their ministry in various ways: in a local pastorate, in special category ministries, in Synod or General Assembly posts, as Synod Moderators, as General Secretary. The Ministry of the Word and Sacraments is open to all who the church believes have been called to it, and they exercise this ministry alongside Elders. Eldership is also a public office in the church. Elders, meeting together in Council, are responsible for pastoral, spiritual and missionary leadership in the local church.

Alongside Ministers and Elders, the United Reformed Church also acknowledges two further ministries. Because of the importance of proclaiming the Word in the Reformed tradition, the church recognises the ministry of 'lay preachers'. 'Lay preachers', often identified by local reputation, have always played a significant role in the worship-life of the United Reformed Church and authorised training courses and Assembly accreditation has been provided for them.

The United Reformed Church also trains and commissions Church-Related Community Workers (CRCWs). Their focus is to act as a link between the church and the community, drawing the one into a full and fruitful relationship with the other. They are commissioned to make the Kingdom known through drawing the church into co-operative action with the community which enables God's will of peace and justice for the world, in some measure, to be actualized (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 22). The CRCW's role in the life of the URC is unique. While recognized as a particular ministry within the life of the church, the CRCW has no formal role or responsibility for worship (which is one point that links the other three 'particular ministries' of Minister, Elder, lay preacher and lay pioneer), even if many CRCWs lead worship regularly.

Although the Basis of Union identifies these four as formal ministries or offices in the Church, they should not be seen as the only 'ministries' that can be exercised in the Church. They exist in the wider context of Christ's ministry which continues through the whole Body of Christ ('people of God') and are orientated to enabling that wider ministry rather than fulfilling it on behalf of other members.

In each respect, particular offices are acknowledged in order to enable the ministry of the whole: 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.'

## **Why a separate ministry of Children's and Youth Workers?**

A ministry of youth workers within the United Reformed Church is not a new thing. As far back as 1976 General Assembly urged local churches to encourage more men and women to offer themselves for service as youth workers in church, statutory and voluntary youth organisations. Indeed, Assembly commended existing youth workers to take part in the URC Introductory Training Course or some other training programme relevant to their work within the Church in order to improve the quality of the Church's work amongst young people.

The Growing Up Report (1999) recognised that training should be provided for Youth and Children's Workers recognising their work as a distinctive and important ministry (MC January 2001, paper I). This ministry was seen as a welcome realisation of the fact that God gives different gifts to different people and that it is the church's responsibility to discern, develop and deploy those gifts.

However, these General Assembly resolutions did not result in a formal ministry, distinct from the those mentioned in the Basis of Union.

In 2023 General Assembly agreed that it was minded that there should be a formal ministry of URC Children's, Youth and/or Family Minister. If, as the URC states, Christ continues his ministry in the world through the whole people of God and calls some to exercise specific offices in the Church to assist the whole people of God to exercise that ministry, it may be inferred that this ministry cannot be done within the existing Ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

Some consideration, therefore, must be given to why we might have a formal ministry in the Church which only ministers to one section of it (children and youth) instead of seeing it as part of the Church's work that someone might undertake because of their baptismal/membership promises.

## **Children and young people matter**

All humanity is loved and valued by God. Genesis 1 affirms every person is created in God's own image to reflect God's nature and character. In Psalm 139, the writer ponders his first beginnings as an unborn child in the womb: 'For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' Similarly, in Jeremiah God says, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.' (Jeremiah 1:5).

These insights from Scripture tell us that God is deeply and intimately involved in our growth and development before as well as after birth. From their earliest moments unborn children are subject to God's call to be and to become. They respond in precisely one way – they grow and develop. This tells us something very important. God's call to children is first to grow as human beings. Their growth in the womb and after birth is a response to a continued calling. God calls us to this human development in body, mind and spirit right throughout our lives, however long or

short, until at the end we are called out of life into God's eternal presence. Every child is precious before God and subject to exactly the same Call.

Jesus spent much of his time challenging the community in which he lived and moved. He dignified those who society rejected. He even placed a child in the centre to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God (Matthew 18:3-5). The Christian community has often needed to be reminded that all of humanity needs to be valued for all are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

Children in the ancient near east were valued, not least to perpetuate the family line. The notion of 'childhood' was not even recognised in the ancient world where children were understood as members of a household and participants in the household economic system contributing as was appropriate for their age.<sup>1</sup> But they were also vulnerable, with mortality rates at 50%.<sup>2</sup>

In one particular episode recorded in the Gospels, Jesus laid hands on and blessed children being brought to him by their parents (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17), about which there have been various theological and historical interpretations suggested over the years. For example, some scholars have argued that the disciples rebuked the parents because they thought Jesus was too busy for children or that children were unimportant, while others have suggested that the rebuke was directed towards a false belief by the parents that a magical touch from Jesus would give their children salvation. Regardless of the reason, Jesus did not want the children to be excluded from his ministry and blessing due to any misunderstanding of either parents or His disciples. Whatever the intentions of the parents may have been, they did regard both Jesus and their children as important. In ancient Israel, children were usually seen as a blessing from God (Psalm 127:3-5). The Mosaic Law also protected children, even those who were orphans (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 14:29, 24:19-21, 26:12, 27:19). Indeed, Jesus blessing the children parallels Jacob (Israel) blessing his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:1-20). Further, Jesus knew that children were not perfect (Matthew 11:16-17).

Further the Talmud suggests that it was common tradition for parents to bring their children to the synagogue to have a blessing (Birkat Yeladim or priestly blessing) from the elders. Therefore, it should not be surprising, that parents in 1st century Judea would want Jesus to bless their children.

When Jesus suggests that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it, he may have used it as an opportunity to state clearly that children were also included in the Kingdom of God by treating children as human beings created in the image of God who had as much worth as adults. The Gospels do not differentiate between adult and child. Just as Jesus healed many adults, casting out demons and bringing Lazarus back to life, the Gospels record Jesus healing children, casting out demons from children, and even one bringing a child back to life (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-42; John 4:46-54; Luke

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<sup>1</sup> K.Garroway Children in the Ancient Near Eastern Household p. 2014

<sup>2</sup> <https://theconversation.com/children-in-the-ancient-middle-east-were-valued-and-vulnerable-not-unlike-children-today-120490>

8:41-56 etc.). Note the children come from families of varying economic status and culture, demonstrating the value that Jesus placed on all children. Jesus' deliberate act of blessing children was a powerful sign and a political act about how his kingdom works.

Among the visions of the kingdom, God's presence is signified by children playing safely (Zephaniah 8:12). The Good Shepherd especially tends to the those with young, carefully carrying them close to his heart (Isaiah 40:11). On the day of Pentecost, the prophet Joel's words promising that God's spirit will particularly gift the young with prophecy and visions becomes a gift to the church (Acts 2:17). Jesus' exhortation is to minister to children and learn from them how to rediscover and embrace childlikeness as children of God, with a clear encouragement about the importance of actively nurturing the faith of children and young people rather than preventing them from hearing God's Call (Matthew 18:6). Children tell us important things about our own spiritual health. This is how we learn how to become children of God.

### **Children and young people matter in society**

Many in the Church still speak of the generation gap between children and young people and adults. However, this is not an accurate description of what is happening particularly as our society rapidly changes. Young people are growing up in a different world to that experienced by previous generations. The life experiences of young people in modern societies have changed significantly over the last two or three decades. Today's young people are of a different culture, not simply a different age. The primary frontier which needs to be crossed when engaging with young people is not so much a generation gap as a profound change in culture. In the past, it had been assumed that young people will 'grow out' of this phase and that when they do, they will 'become like us'. That attitude is no longer sustainable or wise. In society there has been a changing understanding of children and young people as individuals with their own rights and responsibilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the rights that must be realised for children to develop to their full potential. One of the UNCRC's General Principles is that children have the right to participate – and to be listened to – in all decisions that affect them. Participation rights are linked to children's levels of maturity and apply accordingly. This is to support their development, but it also helps everyone achieve better-informed decisions. It strengthens society.

Medical science no longer treats children as mini adults but has developed paediatric care to nurture their physical and mental development. Growing understanding of the life-long impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) has renewed a focus on attending to the needs of the children amidst rising mental health, social and behavioural issues. This has been mirrored in the church by an understanding of children and young people as disciples in their own right<sup>3</sup> with particular gifts and needs, spirituality, ways of holding faith and God connection.

### **Children and young people matter in the URC**

The church seeks to receive the gifts of God through children and young people through their participation in the life of the Church. In 1984, General Assembly

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<sup>3</sup> Charter for Children, General Assembly 1990

declared that the voices of children and young people should be heard as a natural, rich God-given blessing to the Christian Church. It urged all churches to provide opportunity and training for children and young people to be actively involved in the planning and conducting of regular worship and to set aside at least one Sunday a year (such as the last Sunday of February) for services in which young people play a major part in the preparation and leadership of the worship. This was reinforced in General Assembly 1985 and by 1990 the Charter for Children in the Church was commended to Provinces, Districts and local churches.

In 2008, General Assembly welcomed the Vision for Youth and Children's Work across the United Reformed Church and commended it to local churches and Synods as a way of prioritising and shaping ministry with children and young people. Believing that young people flourish as human beings when they are entrusted with responsibility and leadership roles, the Church has made provision for reserved places for young people on the roll of General Assembly. Another example of this is at local level where young people have been elected to serve as Elders in their local church. Further, in 2022, General Assembly resolved afresh to ensure that all structures and councils of the church are consistently mindful of the voice of children and of the impact of their decisions on children and future generations. To enable this, all councils of the Church were encouraged to review how they are able to hear and respond to children.

General Assembly often urges, but the local church often cannot implement what they have been asked to do because of all the other demands on a church's time. With multi-church pastorates spread over wider geographical areas, the expectation that this ministry falls to the skills of a Minister of the Word and Sacraments is no longer feasible.

The URC sees children's and youth ministry as an essential priority for the church that is currently ageing for three reasons:

- Most people come to faith by the age of 18. It makes sense that the church should put an emphasis on engaging with people of that age group where big life choices about values are being made, and that means children and young people
- Children and young people are the fastest declining age group within the URC which means the URC is failing to engage with people at the time in their life when they are most receptive to finding faith for themselves. Jesus' call to join in the Missio Dei in Matthew 28 is as relevant today as it was then. Children and Young people are just as important to disciple as adults
- Since 1972 our church has been committed to supporting those who work with children and young people. This now leads to a recognition of the need for more specialised ministry to nurture the holistic well-being and spiritual flourishing of children and young people as well as nurturing congregations who care for them.

A new formal ministry needs to work towards every child and young person having a life-enhancing encounter with the Christian faith and the person of Jesus Christ. It needs to recognise and welcome the capacity of children and young people to transform the Church and the world. And it needs to provide support and development for all those working with children and young people. We recognise that

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God is calling people into this ministry who have skills in building a culture of intergenerational relationships who can help congregations to recognise children and young people as equal members of the Body of Christ.

Church Commissioned Children's and Youth Workers are the ideal bridge people to help congregations to embrace intergenerationality in our churches for the future of God's kingdom.