

Paper C2

Sustainability of Stipendiary Ministry in the United Reformed Church

Ministries Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Discussion
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	<p>This paper argues that the sustainability of stipendiary ministry in the United Reformed Church is now a critical theological and strategic issue, not simply an organisational or financial one. Ministry of the Word and Sacraments lies at the heart of the Church's life, and the question facing the denomination is what a faithful and sustainable pattern of ministry should look like in the future.</p>
Main points	<p>The paper highlights that the URC currently has around 241 deployable stipendiary ministers serving approximately 1,200 churches – a ratio of around 1 minister to 5 churches – which places the Church at or beyond a significant “tipping point” of sustainability. While ministry continues, increasing strain is being carried through overwork, reliance on retired ministers and lay leadership, longer vacancies, and growing fragility within pastoral and sacramental life.</p> <p>Projected trends suggest a continuing decline in minister numbers over the next decade, with potentially around 128 deployable ministers remaining by 2035 unless substantial action is taken. Recruitment alone cannot reverse the short-term decline because ministerial formation takes time.</p> <p>In response, the paper proposes thinking not simply about numbers, but about a wider “ministerial formation ecology” in which ordained, commissioned and lay ministries are understood as interconnected and mutually sustaining. Ministers of Word and Sacraments, CRCWs, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, Lay Pioneers, Elders and other</p>

	<p>forms of leadership are all seen as part of one coherent pattern of vocation, formation, accountability and service.</p> <p>The paper does not offer a single predetermined solution. Instead, it invites the whole Church into shared discernment around three key questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the Church is actually trying to sustain; • what level of stipendiary ministry it is willing and able to support; • and what a faithful and sustainable ecology of ministry might look like by 2035. <p>Its central argument is that the URC must move from reactive management of decline towards intentional, theologically grounded decision-making about the future shape of ministry and Church life.</p>
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	None
External (eg ecumenical)	None

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Within the Reformed tradition, the ministry of the Word and Sacraments is not an optional feature of the Church's life but lies at its very heart. The Church is gathered, nourished and sent through the faithful proclamation of the Word, the right administration of the Sacraments, and the pastoral oversight of God's people. Ministers are called, formed, and set apart by the Church to serve the whole people of God, enabling the Church to remain rooted in Scripture, sustained in sacramental life, and ordered within its conciliar structures.
- 1.2 This ministry is exercised not in competition with the priesthood of all believers, but in service to it. Ministers equip, discern, and enable the gifts of the whole Church, holding together Word, Sacrament, pastoral care, and mission.
- 1.3 Questions about the sustainability of stipendiary ministry are not simply organisational or financial; they are theological questions about the ordering of faithfulness and future shape of the Church's life.
- 1.4 This is a moment not simply to preserve inherited patterns but to discern what a faithful and sustainable pattern of ministry now requires.

2. Purpose of this Paper

- 2.1 This paper brings together a wider piece of work on the sustainability of stipendiary ministry and the development of a coherent framework for ministerial formation.
- 2.2 It is offered to the Church as an invitation to shared discernment at a critical moment in our common life.
- 2.3 It arises from a growing recognition that the sustainability of stipendiary ministry can no longer be assumed, and that the questions we now face are not simply about numbers or structures, but about the faithfulness, coherence and future shape of the Church's ministry.
- 2.4 The purpose of this paper is therefore threefold:
- it seeks to name, with honesty and clarity, the present reality in which we find ourselves, including the pressures, constraints and emerging risks within our current patterns of ministry;
 - it offers a theological and strategic framework within which those realities can be interpreted, moving the conversation beyond reaction towards discernment;
 - it invites the whole Church to engage in a shared process of decision-making about the future, recognising that no single council or committee can determine this alone.
- 2.5 This is not a paper that offers a single solution or predetermined outcome. Rather, it seeks to create the space in which the Church may ask the right questions, attend to the leading of the Spirit, and take responsibility together for the pattern of ministry it is seeking to sustain and embody in the years ahead.
- 2.6 At its heart, this is an act of stewardship. It is about how we care for those who are called to ministry, how we order our common life, and how we remain faithful to the gospel in a time of significant change.
- 2.7 At its heart lies a single question: **What would a faithful and sustainable ecology of ministry look like for the United Reformed Church in 2035 – and what must we begin to do now to move towards it?**

3. Present Position

- 3.1 At the time of writing (March 2026), the United Reformed Church has 241 deployable stipendiary Ministers of the Word and Sacraments across approximately 1,200 churches, excluding Synod Moderators and those serving in Assembly appointed roles.
- 3.2 This gives a ratio of 1 minister to approximately 5 churches, placing the Church already within what may be described as a high-risk zone.
- 3.3 At that level, the system does not immediately fail but it becomes increasingly fragile. Worship continues, structures remain in place, and ministry is still exercised. However, this apparent stability conceals a growing fragility.
- 3.4 The church is increasingly dependent upon:
- over-extension of stipendiary ministers;

- significant reliance on lay leadership;
- the availability of retired ministers;
- interim and vacancy arrangements;
- ecumenical sharing of ministry.

3.5 In such a context, sustainability is no longer primarily a question of whether ministry happens somewhere, but whether it can be offered in a way that is regular, pastoral, sacramental, safe formational, and resilient.

4. Sustainability Thresholds and the Tipping Point

4.1 Experience across the Church, supported by ecumenical comparison, suggests that sustainability in stipendiary ministry operates within identifiable thresholds.

4.2 At approximately **300 deployable ministers** (around 1:4 churches), the Church is broadly sustainable. Ministry can be exercised with resilience, reasonable geographical spread, and space for leadership, mission and pastoral depth.

4.3 At around **250 ministers**, the system becomes stretched but remains manageable. Signs of strain begin to emerge, particularly in vacancy length and geographical coverage, but the overall pattern remains coherent.

4.4 At approximately **240 ministers (1:5)**, the Church reaches a **tipping point**. At this level, the balance shifts from sustainability to managed strain. Expectations placed upon ministers begin to exceed what can be sustained in a healthy and consistent way. Ministry becomes increasingly reactive rather than intentional.

4.5 Beyond this point:

- at around **200 ministers (1:6)**, the Church experiences severe strain, with growing inconsistency in pastoral presence, sacramental provision and oversight;
- below **150 ministers (1:8)**, the Church enters structural fragility, where inherited patterns of ministry and pastorate organisation become increasingly difficult to sustain;
- at approximately **120 ministers (1:10)**, the system approaches critical failure without significant reconfiguration.

4.6 On this analysis, the United Reformed Church is now operating **at or just beyond the tipping point** where sustainability can no longer be assumed.

4.7 This does not mean that ministry ceases. Rather, it means that the cost of sustaining ministry becomes increasingly high: borne in overwork, inconsistency, diminished pastoral depth, and increasing reliance on contingency rather than design.

5. Projected Trajectory, Risk, Recruitment and Strategic Implications

5.1 Current patterns point to a significant decline in deployable ministers over the next decade: around 200 by 2028, below 150 by 2032, and approximately 128 by 2035. This indicates that the Church has already entered unsustainable territory, with acute strain expected within three years and structural risk within the decade. The length of ministerial formation means this short-term decline cannot be quickly reversed.

- 5.2 This challenge is not purely numerical. It is intensified by geography, uneven distribution, increasing complexity of ministry, longer vacancies, and pressures on wellbeing. The result is a gradual “thinning” of ministry, where organisational continuity may remain but depth of pastoral care, sacramental life, and missional leadership is diminished.
- 5.3 To maintain the current level of 241 deployable ministers, **113 new ministers** are required between 2026 and 2035 (**around 11–12 annually**). Allowing for a realistic completion rate, recruitment needs to exceed this baseline; however, current figures already fall short, and variability in training pathways adds further uncertainty.
- 5.4 Strategically, recruitment from 2026 onwards will not prevent decline before 2029. The Church must therefore manage short-term sustainability through retired ministers, lay leadership, flexible deployment, and prioritisation of core functions while addressing the longer-term scale and shape of ministry needed for the future.

6. So what is the answer? Ministerial Formation as an Ecology

- 6.1 At the heart of the Church’s life lies not a set of disconnected pathways, but a shared participation in the call of God. To speak of a ministerial formation ecology is to name the conviction that all accredited ministries – Ministers of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, Lay Pioneers and Elders – belong within a single, coherent pattern of discernment, formation and accountability.
- 6.2 Ecology is a deliberate and theological metaphor. It holds together ordained, commissioned and lay ministries; discernment, training and lifelong learning; and the life of local church, Synod and Assembly, as an interconnected whole. Formation is not a sequence of isolated stages, but a living system in which each part shapes and is shaped by the others. Its health is measured not simply by the functioning of individual elements, but by the coherence and vitality of the whole.
- 6.3 Such an ecology assumes interdependence, lifelong formation, and attentiveness to context. It resists mechanistic control, calling instead for careful nurture, wise stewardship and ongoing discernment. The question is not only whether ministers are formed, but whether the Church’s pattern of forming them is itself life-giving and sustainable.
- 6.4 This vision is grounded in a Reformed understanding of vocation: that calling is both inwardly discerned and outwardly recognised by the councils of the Church. Formation is therefore held corporately. The Church calls, forms, authorises and sustains those who minister in its name, within the shared life of this ecology.
- 6.5 What follows does not present a final model for the URC to follow as this is a whole Church issue. Rather, it offers a structured set of questions and a proposed process by which the denomination may discern a faithful and sustainable pattern of formation for the years ahead.

7. Questions for the Church

Question 1

What are we trying to sustain – numbers, or a faithful pattern of ministry?

At the heart of this work lies a prior and more fundamental question: Are we seeking to sustain a number, or are we seeking to sustain a faithful pattern of ministry within the life of the Church?

It would be possible to approach the present situation as a problem of numerical deficit, to be addressed through increased recruitment into stipendiary ministry. Such an approach would naturally lead to a focus on pipelines, targets, and throughput. However, that in itself does not answer the deeper ecclesiological question.

The more searching question is whether the United Reformed Church is being called, in this season, not simply to maintain what has been, but to discern what a sustainable, theologically coherent and properly ordered pattern of ministry now looks like. That requires us to attend carefully to the relationship between Ministers of the Word and Sacraments, Non-Stipendiary Ministers, Church Related Community Workers, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneers, Elders, and the wider life of the local church.

This is not a question of abandoning stipendiary ministry, but of ensuring that it is held within a ministerial ecology that is faithful, resilient, and appropriately shaped for the context in which we now find ourselves.

Question 2

What level of stipendiary ministry is the Church willing and able to sustain?

The data set out in this paper makes clear that the present trajectory is not neutral. It requires the Church to exercise discernment and to make an intentional decision about what it is seeking to sustain by 2035.

Broadly, there are three possible directions of travel. The first is one of replacement, in which the Church seeks to hold the current number of deployable ministers at around 240. The second is stabilisation, involving modest growth towards approximately 260 ministers. The third is recovery, which would involve intentional and sustained growth towards 300 or more deployable ministers. Each of these pathways carries significant implications. There are clear financial consequences, particularly in relation to the Ministry and Mission Fund. There are implications for recruitment expectations, for the scale and nature of ministerial formation, and for the way in which deployment is understood and enacted. There are also, importantly, theological implications, touching on how the Church understands the nature of ministry, oversight, and presence.

Without clarity at this point, the Church risks remaining in a reactive posture, responding to pressures as they arise rather than shaping its life with intention and theological integrity.

Question 3

What would a faithful and sustainable ecology of ministry look like for the United Reformed Church in 2035 and what must we begin to do now to move towards it?

Even with renewed energy around recruitment and formation, the reality is that the number of deployable ministers will fall over the next three to five years. Formation takes time, and there is no immediate way of reversing that trend.

The question before us, therefore, is not only what the Church might look like in 2035, but how we are called to live faithfully, responsibly and pastorally in the meantime.

This will require more than incremental adjustment. It calls for a shared and deliberate approach across the whole Church. We will need to think carefully about the contribution of active retired ministers, be clearer about what we are asking of those currently serving in stipendiary ministry, and invest with renewed seriousness in lay leadership in all its forms.

It will also mean being more intentional about what we prioritise. The ministry of Word and Sacraments, the pastoral care of God's people, and the forming of disciples cannot become optional or squeezed to the margins. If anything, they need to be held more clearly at the centre.

Alongside this, we will need to face, with honesty, the fact that some of our inherited patterns of deployment and pastorate structure are becoming harder to sustain. That will require careful, and at times difficult, reconfiguration.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 The United Reformed Church is not facing immediate collapse, but it has reached a critical threshold.
- 8.2 The issue is not simply how many ministers the Church will have, but what form of ministerial life will enable it to remain faithful.
- 8.3 At heart, this is not simply a question about capacity. It is a question about vocation. What kind of Church are we being called to be in the next five years – and how do we live that faithfully, not only in the decade ahead, but now?
- 8.4 This paper invites the Assembly to act with honesty, theological clarity and shared responsibility in shaping the next phase of the Church's life.