

Paper C3

A Three-Year Review and Strategic Framework for Ministry (2026–2029)

Ministries Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Mary Thomas dso-s@urcwessex.org.uk Nicola Furley-Smith nicola.furley-smith@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 19 Assembly instructs the Ministries Committee to conduct a review of learning and formation across all accredited ministries in the United Reformed Church in accordance with the outline in paper C3.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	<p>This paper proposes that the Ministries Committee undertake a three-year strategic review of learning and formation across all accredited ministries in the United Reformed Church, with the aim of bringing a coherent proposal to General Assembly by 2029.</p> <p>At its centre is the question: What would a coherent, faithful, and sustainable ecology of ministerial formation look like for the URC in 2035, and what must be done now to move towards it?</p>
Main points	<p>The paper argues that ministerial formation should be understood as a single interconnected “ecology” rather than a series of separate pathways. Ministers of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers, Lay Pioneers, and Elders are all part of one shared system of discernment, formation, accountability, and lifelong learning. Formation is described as relational, contextual, lifelong, and corporately held across the local church, Synod, and Assembly.</p> <p>The paper identifies several key areas for discernment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the theological purpose of accredited ministry and the Church’s calling; • the nature and relationship of different ministries within a shared ecology;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> standards and formation required for trusted ministry; pathways for lifelong learning and development; and the need for simplicity, sustainability, and possible structural change. <p>Overall, the paper invites the Church into a process of theological discernment and strategic leadership about the future shape of ministerial formation in the URC.</p>
Previous relevant documents	
Consultation has taken place with...	

Summary of impact

Financial	None
External (eg ecumenical)	None

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to invite the Ministries Committee to initiate and shape a three-year review and strategic framework for learning and formation across the accredited ministries of the United Reformed Church, ordained, commissioned, and lay, so as to bring forward a coherent proposal to General Assembly.
- 1.2 At the heart of this work lies a single, guiding question: **What would a coherent, faithful, and sustainable ecology of ministerial formation look like for the United Reformed Church in 2035 – and what must we begin to do now to move towards it?**

2. Introduction

- 2.1 At the heart of the Church's life is not a set of pathways, but a shared participation in the call of God. The language of a ministerial formation ecology expresses the conviction that all accredited ministries, Ministers of Word and Sacraments (MWS), Church Related Community Workers (CRCWs), Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers (AALPs), Lay Pioneers (AALPis), and Elders belong within a single, coherent pattern of discernment, formation, and accountability.
- 2.2 This language is not decorative. It is descriptive. It names a way of seeing the Church's life as relational, interconnected, and alive. Formation is not something that happens in parts, or is owned by particular institutions. It is held across the whole life of the Church: local, Synod, and Assembly; discernment, training, and lifelong learning.
- 2.3 Within such an ecology:
- no ministry exists in isolation, but is sustained by, and contributes to, the others;
 - formation is lifelong, not confined to entry;
 - formation is contextual, shaped within real communities;

- discernment takes precedence over control;
- the question is not simply whether parts function, but whether the whole is life-giving and sustainable.

2.4 This reflects a deeply Reformed understanding of vocation: that calling is both inwardly discerned and outwardly recognised by the councils of the Church. Formation, therefore, is not owned by any one pathway or provider. It is held corporately. The Church calls, forms, authorises, and sustains those who minister in its name.

2.5 This paper does not seek to present a final model. Rather, it offers a disciplined framework for discernment, identifying the key areas in which the Church is asked to exercise theological judgement and strategic leadership.

3. Areas for Discernment

3.1 The questions set out below are not exhaustive. They are intended to focus the Church's attention on the key areas which will shape the future of ministerial formation.

3.2 Theological Purpose

What is God calling the United Reformed Church to be, and what place does accredited ministry hold within that calling?

3.2.1 Before structures are considered, the Church is invited to attend to its theological intent. This includes reflecting on the nature of the Church's calling in this present moment, and the relationship between accredited ministry and the ministry of the whole people of God.

3.2.2 It requires clarity about what must be held as constitutive of our identity particularly in relation to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Work and where change may be required, not as a concession to circumstance, but as an act of faithfulness.

3.2.3 Underlying this is a necessary question: *Are we shaping formation around what we have been, or around what we believe God is calling us to become?*

3.3 The Nature and Shape of Ministry

What are we forming people for and how do the Church's ministries relate to one another within a single ecology?

3.3.1 Clarity about formation depends upon clarity about ministry itself. The Church is invited to consider what it expects of Ministers of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, and Assembly Accredited Lay Ministries, not only at the point of entry, but over time.

3.3.2 This includes giving attention to the distinctiveness of each ministry, while also ensuring that each is located within a shared and coherent pattern of service.

3.3.3 Particular care is required in articulating the relationship between role and office: between what a person does and the nature of the trust they hold within the councils of the Church.

3.4 Standards and Formation

What does it mean to be formed well enough to be entrusted with ministry in the name of the Church?

3.4.1 This question lies at the heart of the Church's responsibility. Authorisation to ministry is not simply a matter of capability but of trust.

- 3.4.2 The Church is invited to consider what must be held in common across all accredited ministries: theological grounding, engagement with Scripture, formation for conciliar life, safeguarding, ethical practice, and reflective discipline.
- 3.4.3 Within this, the relationship between stipendiary and non-stipendiary ministry must be addressed with care. Any move towards proportionate formation must not lead to diminished formation.
- 3.4.4 The question to be held is a simple but searching one: *How do we ensure that all who are authorised for ministry are formed well enough to be trusted with it?*

3.5 Pathways and Lifelong Formation

What pattern of formation will sustain ministry over time?

- 3.5.1 Formation does not end at ordination, commissioning, or accreditation. The Church is invited to consider the coherence of the whole pattern of formation, from discernment through Education for Ministry phases 1,2 and 3 (EM1, EM2, EM3). And whilst this applies to MWS and CRCWs, what should we have in place for AALPs, AALPis and Elders?
- 3.5.2 This includes reviewing the current structure of pathways, identifying areas of duplication or gap, and considering whether more flexible or staged approaches might better serve the diversity of ministries.
- 3.5.3 It also requires attention to the integration of ongoing learning, ensuring that ministers are formed not only for entry into ministry, but for sustainability, resilience, and growth over time.

3.6 Simplicity, Sustainability, and Change

What must we reshape, simplify, or let go of in order to sustain a faithful pattern of formation?

- 3.6.1 This work calls for honesty as well as imagination. Not all that is currently held can or should be sustained.
- 3.6.2 The Church is invited to consider which structures or practices are maintained by conviction, and which by habit; where simplification may strengthen formation; and what risks the Church is prepared to take in order to remain faithful.
- 3.6.3 A final question may be held alongside this work: *If we were designing formation from first principles today, what would we do differently?*

4. Structure of the Three-Year Review

- 4.1 It is proposed that this work be undertaken over three years, allowing for careful discernment, consultation, and development.
- 4.2 **Year 1: Listening and Theological Grounding (2026–2027)**
This phase will map current provision, gather evidence from across the Church, and articulate a theological framework for formation. It will include engagement with Synods, Resource Centres for Learning, and those currently in formation and ministry.
- 4.3 **Year 2: Design and Development (2027–2028)**
Building on this work, a coherent framework will be developed, identifying shared core formation and differentiated pathways. This will include proposals relating to validation, delivery structures, and the integration of EM1, EM2, and EM3.

4.4 **Year 3: Implementation and Proposal (2028–2029)**

Detailed proposals will be brought to General Assembly, including structures, pathways, and financial implications, together with recommendations for implementation.