

# Paper C4

## Revised Active Ministers Policy – Fitness to Practise

### Ministries Committee

#### Basic information

<b>Contact name and email address</b>	Mary Thomas <a href="mailto:dso-s@urcwessex.org.uk">dso-s@urcwessex.org.uk</a> Nicola Furley-Smith <a href="mailto:nicola.furley-smith@urc.org.uk">nicola.furley-smith@urc.org.uk</a>
<b>Action required</b>	Decision
<b>Draft resolution(s)</b>	<b>Resolution 20</b> <b>General Assembly adopts the revised <i>Active Ministers Policy – Fitness to Practise</i> and directs its implementation.</b>

#### Summary of content

<b>Subject and aim(s)</b>	This policy establishes a coherent and theologically grounded framework for the recognition, authorisation and accountability of <i>active ministers</i> of the Word and Sacraments, and Church Related Community Workers, within the URC. It responds to the practical and pastoral need for authorised ministry across the Church, particularly in times of vacancy, transition or increased demand, ensuring that worship, sacramental life and pastoral care are exercised with confidence, consistency and proper oversight.
<b>Main points</b>	<p>It clarifies what it means to hold active status, simplifying categories to support consistency across the Church, and affirms that all active ministers remain under the oversight of the councils of the Church. Rooted in the Reformed understanding that Call is both inwardly discerned and outwardly confirmed, the policy emphasises that authorisation is ongoing, supported by continuing formation, regular review, and annual confirmation of ministerial status.</p> <p>The policy places accountability at its heart, presenting it as a safeguard for both ministers and those they serve. It defines Fitness to Practise as a continuing, relational discernment, supported through supervision, development and early pastoral intervention where needed.</p> <p>Clear expectations are set for active ministers in relation to conduct, safeguarding, participation in conciliar life, and ongoing development. Provision is also made for retired ministers who continue in authorised ministry. Safeguarding</p>

	<p>responsibilities and the Church’s commitment to ministerial wellbeing are embedded throughout.</p> <p>Overall, the policy seeks to uphold the integrity and good order of ministry while enabling ministers to serve faithfully and sustainably within the life of the Church.</p>
<b>Previous relevant documents</b>	Paper H5 Active Ministers Policy 2021
<b>Consultation has taken place with...</b>	Synod Moderators

## Summary of impact

<b>Financial</b>	N/A
<b>External (eg ecumenical)</b>	N/A

### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 This policy exists so that the United Reformed Church can respond faithfully, wisely, and pastorally to the needs of its people and communities. Across the United Reformed Church there are times of vacancy, transition, illness, and increased local demand when congregations require the support of authorised ministers who can lead worship, celebrate the Sacraments, conduct weddings and funerals, and offer trusted pastoral care. This policy therefore provides a clear framework for authorisation, accountability, safeguarding and oversight so that such ministry may be exercised with confidence, consistency and proper support.
- 1.2 It also clarifies what it means for Ministers of the Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers to hold active status within the United Reformed Church. It describes how good standing is expressed, how accountability is exercised within our conciliar life, and the responsibilities that accompany recognised office-holding ministry.
- 1.3 This policy is intended not only as a regulatory measure, but as a pastoral safeguard promoting the wellbeing of ministers and CRCWs and those among whom they serve.

Failure to adhere to its requirements may result in disciplinary, capability, safeguarding or other formal processes being initiated.

### 2. Definition of “Active Minister”

- 2.1 Active ministers are Ministers of the Word and Sacraments or Church Related Community Workers serving in a ministry, appointment, placement, or pastoral role authorised by Synod or Assembly.
- 2.2 General Assembly 2021 Paper H4 defined nine categories, from pastorate ministry to the leading of public worship.

- 2.3 A retired minister may hold active status where authorised to exercise ministry within the life of the Church.
- 2.4 Active ministers remain under the pastoral care and oversight of the Councils of the Church appropriate to their ministry context.

### 3. Categories of Active Minister

- 3.1 General Assembly 2021 Paper H4 defined active ministers as being in one of nine categories as in the table. However, these categories have caused confusion for Synods in determining whether a minister is active or not.
- 3.2 The following table is considered more appropriate and is offered as a guide to assist discernment and consistency of practice across the Church:

Category	Former Category	Definition
1	1, 3, 4	Stipendiary minister
2	2	Non-stipendiary service in a recognised ministry post
3	5-9	<p>exercising an occasional ministry providing recognised voluntary service on behalf of the URC at the invitation of the councils of the Church:</p> <p>Interim Moderator;</p> <p>serving on a Synod or GA committee;</p> <p>representing the URC on an external body;</p> <p>leading worship, including weddings and funerals.</p> <p>This list is not exhaustive.</p>

### 4. Ministerial Accountability

- 4.1 Ministers are in a position of trust. They are entrusted with people’s stories, vulnerabilities and spiritual wellbeing, and they represent the Church’s witness in the world. Accountability ensures that this trust is honoured with integrity, transparency and responsibility. It protects congregations, upholds the credibility of the Church’s ministry, and provides ministers themselves with a clear framework within which they can serve faithfully, confidently and safely.
- 4.2 Ministerial accountability within the URC is rooted in our Reformed understanding of Church governance and the priesthood of all believers. The Church recognises that, while ministers hold particular offices and responsibilities, they remain accountable to God through the community of faith in the councils of the Church. This theological principle shapes every aspect of how accountability is structured and exercised within the denomination.
- 4.3 The Basis of Union emphasises that ministry is a calling that comes with both privileges and responsibilities. Ministers are servants of the Church, called to specific tasks of preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and leadership, and CRCWs

are called to the specific task of community development as an outreach and mission of the Church, but always within the context of mutual accountability and shared responsibility with the wider Christian community.

- 4.4 Such accountability reflects the denomination's commitment to both pastoral care and professional standards. The multi-layered structure of accountability, operating through the councils of the Church (from local church through Synod to General Assembly), provides comprehensive oversight while maintaining the flexibility needed to address diverse ministerial contexts
- 4.5 The emphasis on shared responsibility, funded support through pastoral supervision, mandated training, ongoing development and, where necessary, additional support, creates an accountability framework that serves both ministers and the churches they serve.

### **5. Ministerial Authorisation**

- 5.1 Ministerial authorisation is the means by which the Church discerns and affirms God's calling of individuals to ministerial service, ensuring that such service is exercised with proper authority, accountability and support within the life of the Church.
- 5.2 It is fundamentally grounded in the Reformed principle that an inner sense of calling must be confirmed by external discernment, namely the councils of the Church. The principle of concurrence to Call is an essential part of this process.
- 5.3 Once authorised, ministers are entered onto the Roll of Ministers or CRCWs upon ordination or commissioning. Ministers are categorised according to this Policy (Section 3 above), which defines different categories of ministerial standing and responsibility.
- 5.4 Authorisation in the URC is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. Following ordination or commissioning, ministers enter Education for Ministry Phase 2 (EM2), a post-ordination/commissioning period lasting typically three years. This ensures continued development and accountability in ministerial practice. Following this, ministers enter Education for Ministry Phase 3 (EM3) where ministers are expected to engage in on-going professional development of their skills.
- 5.5 The authorisation is a sign of the Church's continuing trust in the minister and recognition of their good standing within the denomination.
- 5.6 To this end, the Ministries Office shall write to each minister on its Roll on an annual basis to confirm whether they hold active status or not.
- 5.7 Responsibility for responding to this contact will rest with the minister, and the ministerial records and database will be updated accordingly. This is one demonstrable way of ensuring accountability.
- 5.8 Synods shall be informed annually of those recognised as active ministers.
- 5.9 Where a minister fails to respond to reasonable and repeated correspondence concerning their engagement in ministry, this will be treated as a matter of

accountability. The appropriate council of the Church may proceed to review the minister's status and, in the absence of sufficient engagement, may determine whether the minister should be regarded as active, inactive, or subject to further process in accordance with the discipline of the Church.

### **6. Fitness to Practise**

- 6.1 The question of Fitness to Practise in the Church cannot be reduced to a single test or moment. It is a continuing, relational and accountable discernment, held within the Church's theological convictions about vocation, grace, responsibility and the care of God's people.
- 6.2 At its heart, Fitness to Practise flows from the Church's understanding of ministry as a gift and a trust. Ordination (or commissioning) affirms a calling, but it does not remove the need for ongoing discernment to establish whether a minister is currently able to exercise ministry safely, faithfully and fruitfully.
- 6.3 It arises from the Church's understanding of ministry as a gift and a trust. Therefore, it is important that the Church is explicit about what is expected of those who minister in its name.
- 6.4 Fitness to Practise includes:
- theological competence and faithfulness to the Church's doctrine;
  - appropriate pastoral boundaries;
  - safeguarding compliance;
  - emotional maturity and self-awareness;
  - capacity for collaboration, accountability and participation in conciliar life;
  - ethical conduct, including honesty and transparency;
  - willingness to engage in learning, supervision and review.
- 6.5 Fitness to Practise must be assessed against clear and explicit expectations.
- 6.6 The Church discerns it over time through:
- initial and ongoing ministerial formation;
  - structured continuing professional development;
  - regular reflective review (e.g. ministerial reviews, appraisal (Local Mission and Ministry Review), or pastoral supervision);
  - opportunities for feedback from peers, councils and those served;
  - a pattern of reflective practice that is itself a key indicator of fitness.
- 6.7 Where questions arise about Fitness to Practise, the Church should distinguish carefully between:
- support needs (e.g. burnout, skill gaps, health issues);
  - capability issues (where competence or capacity is temporarily or persistently impaired);
  - conduct or safeguarding concerns (which may require formal procedures).
- 6.8 Fitness to Practise processes work best when early pastoral intervention is normalised, rather than waiting until matters escalate into a disciplinary matter.
- 6.9 Early pastoral intervention is always preferable to delayed formal action.

- 6.10 Any formal finding affecting Fitness to Practise must be proportionate, evidence-based, transparent and subject to review or appeal.
- 6.11 The purpose of such discernment is restoration, good order and appropriate support wherever possible. Sometimes this will mean adjustment, retraining, or a time-limited pause in ministry; occasionally it will mean concluding that a particular role can no longer be exercised.

### 7. Responsibilities and expected standards of Active Ministers

7.1 Active ministers are expected to:

- **Live out their Call:** preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, offering pastoral care, engaging in community development and leading in ways that reflect Christ's love. They only do this in posts and roles authorised by the Church.
- **Keep the vows** they make at ordination/commissioning and subsequent inductions and uphold the various expectations the Church places upon them.
- **Safeguard the Vulnerable**, complying with Church safeguarding policies and statutory requirements, undertaking regular training, and acting promptly on concerns.
- **Maintain Professional Boundaries**, treating all with dignity and respect, and avoiding conduct that may cause harm or bring the URC into disrepute.
- **Commit to Ongoing Formation** through theological reflection, ministerial education, spiritual practice, and professional development.
- **Recognising the mutual accountability of Reformed ministry**, they demonstrably participate in our conciliar structures, which provides the ministry of oversight by engaging positively with local church, Synod and Assembly policies, systems, and training such as ministerial reviews, support networks, safeguarding protocols, mandated training, pastoral supervision, and interconnected responsibilities and obligations.
- **Attend to Wellbeing**, caring for their own health and spiritual life so that they can sustain long-term ministry.

7.2 See the Ministries Policy on Expected standards.

### 8. Retired Ministers Holding Active status

- 8.1 Ordination and commissioning are lifelong. Retirement alters responsibility but not ministerial identity.
- 8.2 A retired minister may exercise ministry only where authorised by the Church.
- 8.3 Such ministry remains subject to safeguarding, accountability and oversight.
- 8.4 It is normally good practice for ministers to take a period of 6–12 months away from active ministry at retirement. During this time they remain with the designation of active.

### 9. Safeguarding

- 9.1 Safeguarding is a sacred trust and a legal responsibility. The URC is committed to safeguarding in every area of its life and ministry. Safeguarding is the action taken to promote and protect the wellbeing and human rights of individuals. This means we will:

- Do all we can to create and maintain a safe and caring environment for all people;
- Respond promptly and effectively to any form of abuse and neglect, including reporting abuse to statutory agencies as necessary;
- Seek to prevent abuse in any form from occurring (See *Good Practice 6*).

9.2 Active ministers, therefore, must

- hold the appropriate current safeguarding clearance (e.g. Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)/Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) check) and follow URC safeguarding procedures;
- not minister without their safeguarding training being up to date;
- and any breach of safeguarding responsibility shall be addressed through agreed safeguarding and disciplinary processes.

9.3 All active retired ministers will be required to undertake a shortened training course in line with the Safeguarding Training Matrix, equating to one half day on the topics of attitudes and values and grooming.

## **10. Support and Care**

10.1 The Church recognises that ministry can be both rewarding and demanding. Therefore, the Church, whether through the local pastorate, the Synod or the Offices of General Assembly, commits to providing pastoral support; and by encouraging regular rest, retreat, pastoral supervision and sabbatical opportunities, and considering ministerial wellbeing in deployment, workload, and role expectations.