

Paper C9

URC Reasonable Adjustments Policy for Ministers of the Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, and those in training

Ministries Committee

Basic information

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Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 25 General Assembly adopts the URC Reasonable Adjustments Policy for Ministers of the Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, and those in training.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	This policy establishes a clear, consistently grounded framework for the provision of reasonable adjustments for Ministers of the Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, and those in training. It reflects the United Reformed Church's commitment to justice, compassion and mutual care, recognising that ministry flourishes when all are enabled to serve according to their gifting and capacity.
Main points	<p>In compliance with the Equality Act 2010 and the Church's understanding of vocation, this policy affirms a shared legal and pastoral duty to remove barriers arising from disability or health conditions, with adjustments based on appropriate professional evidence.</p> <p>It makes clear that reasonable adjustments do not lower expectations or change the essential nature of ministry, but enable it to be exercised faithfully, safely and sustainably. Guided by principles of dignity, partnership, flexibility and stewardship, decisions are made collaboratively and on a</p>

	<p>case-by-case basis, balancing the wellbeing of the minister with the Church’s mission and resources.</p> <p>The policy sets out a clear process for requesting, agreeing and reviewing adjustments, supported by occupational health advice, and affirms that seeking such support is a sign of responsible and healthy ministry.</p>
Previous relevant documents	N/A
Consultation has taken place with...	Synod Moderators Legal Advisor

Summary of impact

Financial	N/A
External (eg ecumenical)	N/A

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The United Reformed Church affirms the calling of every minister as a gift entrusted to the whole Church. Ministry is lived in the round: spiritually, physically, emotionally, practically, intellectually and relationally. It is a vocation that touches every corner of a minister’s life and is sustained not only by the minister’s personal faith and resilience but by the support and care of the wider Church.
- 1.2 This policy arises from our conviction that the Body of Christ flourishes when all its members are enabled to contribute according to their gifting and capacity. In the same way that congregations tailor their ministries to context, so too must the Church ensure that ministers with disabilities, long-term conditions or temporary limitations may continue to serve faithfully and safely.
- 1.3 The policy reflects the United Reformed Church’s theological commitment to justice, compassion, and mutual care. The law provides the framework; the Gospel provides the heart.

2. Purpose and Scope

- 2.1 This policy applies to both Ministers of the Word and Sacraments and Church Related Community Workers (hereafter “ministers”) as well as those in training as student ministers.
- 2.2 Its purpose is to provide a consistent and transparent framework for identifying, discerning, and implementing reasonable adjustments where barriers – physical, procedural, attitudinal, or practical – impede a minister’s ability to exercise their ministry.
- 2.3 Reasonable adjustments relate to disability which is supported by professional evidence. While the Church listens carefully to a minister’s own account of their experience, reasonable adjustments under this policy are ordinarily grounded in a professionally identified condition or need (for example, through medical or

occupational health advice), so that discernment may be informed, proportionate and consistent.

- 2.4 The Church recognises that disability and ill-health are not understood solely through a medical lens. Many barriers arise from systems, environments, expectations and patterns of ministry rather than from an individual condition alone. At the same time, the Church must sometimes consider medical or occupational health evidence in order to discern what adjustments are reasonable, safe and sustainable within the exercise of ministry.
- 2.5 The policy seeks to ensure that adjustments are approached thoughtfully and consistently rather than informally or reactively.
- 2.6 Reasonable adjustments are not about lowering expectations or creating alternative categories of ministry. Rather, they enable ministers to exercise their calling in ways that are life-giving, realistic and sustainable.
- 2.7 Reasonable adjustments may be temporary, permanent or subject to review according to the circumstances of ministry and wellbeing.
- 2.8 The scope includes adjustments relating to:
 - ministry environment
 - patterns of ministry
 - expectations of role
 - deployment arrangements
 - pastoral and practical support

3. The Legal Framework: Equality Act 2010

- 3.1 The Equality Act 2010 imposes a positive duty on “employers”¹ to make reasonable adjustments where a disabled person is placed at a substantial disadvantage by:
 - a provision, criterion or practice (PCP);
 - a physical feature of the premises; or
 - the absence of an auxiliary aid.
- 3.2 This duty applies to office holders as well as employees, and has been interpreted broadly within religious organisations.
- 3.3 The URC therefore holds both a legal and moral responsibility to consider and implement adjustments where appropriate.

4. What “Reasonable” Means in Law

- 4.1 The Act does not define “reasonable” numerically. Tribunals apply a contextual balancing exercise guided by the Equality and Human Rights Commission Code of Practice.
- 4.2 Factors influencing reasonableness include:
 - effectiveness in removing the disadvantage;
 - practicality of implementation;

¹ Ministers are not employed but enjoy the status of office holders.

- cost relative to organisational resources;
 - disruption caused;
 - availability of external funding (Access to Work etc.);
 - impact on colleagues or service users;
 - health and safety considerations;
 - whether essential requirements of the role remain achievable.
- 4.3 The Church will, where appropriate, explore external sources of support such as the Government's Access to Work scheme or other grants and funding streams which may assist in meeting the cost of reasonable adjustments. Such support may include specialist equipment, communication support, travel assistance, workplace adaptations, or other practical aids which enable a minister to exercise ministry more effectively. The availability of external funding does not remove the Church's own responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, but forms part of the wider discernment regarding what adjustments are reasonable, proportionate and sustainable within a conciliar Church.
- 4.4 Student ministers are not eligible for Access to Work but may apply for Disabled Students' Allowance.
- 4.5 No single factor is decisive: reasonableness emerges from the balanced consideration of all relevant circumstances.

5. What the Duty does not Require

5.1 The URC is not required to:

- create a fundamentally new role;
 - remove essential elements of ministry;
 - lower essential standards;
 - implement adjustments that are unworkable or disproportionately costly;
 - provide indefinite or open-ended arrangements with no realistic prospect of ministry.
- 5.2 However, the URC must demonstrate that it has:
- considered options carefully;
 - consulted with the minister;
 - sought appropriate professional advice;
 - explored creative alternatives;
 - documented its reasoning.

6. Core Principles of the policy

- 6.1 **Equality and Inclusion.** Ministers have the right to participate fully in ministry without discrimination where reasonable adjustments can remove disadvantage.
- 6.2 **Dignity and Respect.** Conversations concerning health or disability may involve vulnerability. All discussions will be conducted with pastoral sensitivity, confidentiality, and respect for the minister's lived experience.
- 6.3 **Dialogue and Partnership.** Adjustments are discerned collaboratively between the minister, Synod (normally through the Moderator), local church representatives, and the Ministries Office. Solutions are discerned together rather than imposed.

- 6.4 **Flexibility and Creativity.** Ministry takes many forms. Adjustments may involve imaginative reshaping of practice while remaining faithful to the nature of ministerial office.
- 6.5 **Stewardship.** Decisions must balance the:
- wellbeing of the minister;
 - sustainability of the pastorate;
 - responsible use of denominational resources;
 - mission of the Church.
- 6.6 **Legal and Pastoral Responsibility.** The URC is committed to fulfilling its legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010. However, our motivation goes beyond compliance. As a Christian community, our pastoral responsibility compels us to seek the wellbeing of all.
- 6.7 **Case-by-Case Approach:** Each situation will be considered individually, balancing the needs of the individual with the mission and resources of the Church.
- 6.8 **Confidentiality:** Sensitive information will be shared only where necessary and with the minister's informed consent.

7. **What counts as a Reasonable Adjustment?**

- 7.1 Reasonable adjustments vary according to need and context. What is modest in one pastorate may be significant in another. Adjustments may include but are not limited to:

Physical environment changes: A manse or church building may need minor or major adaptation to ensure accessibility e.g. ramps, widened doorways, accessible bathrooms, improved lighting or hearing loops. In some cases, adaptive technology such as screen readers, digital dictation tools or ergonomic office furniture may be required.

Flexible working patterns: Health conditions or temporary impairments may necessitate adjusted working hours or schedules. Flexibility may include spreading out demanding tasks, incorporating rest periods, remote attendance at some meetings, or adjusting the rhythm of the minister's week. Flexibility is not permission to withdraw, but an enabler of continued service. See the Plan for Partnership guidance.

Role or duty adjustments: Ministry is multifaceted, and some aspects may be more physically or mentally demanding than others. Adjustments may involve shifting responsibilities within a ministry team, temporarily relieving a minister of certain duties (such as extensive travel or late-night meetings), or re-negotiating the scope of ministry within a given context. Such adjustments honour both the minister and the congregation by ensuring that expectations are realistic and sustainable.

Support for communication or mobility: A minister may need interpreters, mobility aids, drivers, assistive technology or modified liturgical resources.

Health-related support: A minister may require time for medical appointments, treatments or therapies. After significant illness, a phased return to ministry may be the healthiest route for all. Occupational health assessments provide professional insight into what is needed for safe and sustained ministry.

The guiding question is: What enables this minister to serve safely, faithfully and sustainably?

8. Temporary Reasonable Adjustments

- 8.1 Such adjustments may arise in response to changes in health, personal circumstances, or particular phases of ministry, and are intended to provide appropriate support for a defined period.
- 8.2 Temporary reasonable adjustments should be kept under review to be determined according to the Occupational Health advice, with clear points for reflection and discernment, so that they remain proportionate, effective, and appropriate to the minister's context.
- 8.3 Temporary adjustments do not diminish the value or integrity of ministry, but rather enable it to be exercised faithfully and sustainably within changing circumstances.

9. Distinguishing Adjustments from Capacity Issues

- 9.1 The key legal question concerns whether a minister can perform the essential functions of ministry with reasonable support.
- 9.2 Adjustments remain reasonable where they enable core ministerial responsibilities to be undertaken, potentially through reconfiguration, support, or delegation.
- 9.3 An adjustment may become unreasonable where it would:
- fundamentally alter the nature of ministry;
 - remove essential duties such as worship leadership or pastoral oversight;
 - permanently transfer core responsibilities to others;
 - create a materially different role;
 - undermine safeguarding, wellbeing, or mission.
- 9.4 Where essential functions cannot be fulfilled despite reasonable adjustments and fair trial periods, the matter may move from adjustment considerations to capability discernment.

10. Process for Requesting Adjustments

- 10.1 **Initiating a Conversation.** A minister may request adjustments at any time by approaching their Synod Moderator. Synods also hold a pastoral responsibility to initiate supportive conversations where concerns arise.
- 10.2 The responsibility for considering reasonable adjustments does not rest solely with the minister. Where a Synod Moderator, the Ministries Office, or another relevant council of the Church knows, or could reasonably be expected to know, that a minister may be experiencing a disability or health condition which places them at a substantial disadvantage in ministry, the Church holds a responsibility to initiate appropriate and supportive conversation regarding possible

adjustments. Such conversations should be approached sensitively and collaboratively, recognising that ministers may not always identify themselves as disabled, may be reluctant to request support, or may not yet recognise the extent to which adjustments may assist them in sustaining ministry wisely and sustainably.

10.3 **Assessment.** Once a request is made, the Synod Moderator will:

- gather the information needed to understand the situation;
- consult with the Ministries Office;
- seek appropriate medical or occupational health advice where necessary;
- consult with the Elders/church as appropriate.

10.4 **Agreement and Implementation.** Agreed adjustments will be recorded in writing and placed on the minister's file under Health, so that all parties – including the Synod, minister and Elders' Meeting/local church – are clear about:

- agreed actions;
- responsibilities;
- funding arrangements;
- communication expectations;
- review dates.

10.5 **Review.** Adjustments will normally be reviewed:

- after 3 months;
- after 6 months;
- periodically thereafter as required.

They will be reviewed regularly by the Synod Moderator and the Ministers Support and Wellbeing Committee (joint Maintenance of the Ministry sub-committee and Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee). Adjustments are dynamic and may change as circumstances evolve.

11. Guidance and Awareness for Synod Moderators

11.1 Synod Moderators hold a significant pastoral, legal and conciliar responsibility in relation to reasonable adjustments. The Church therefore recognises the importance of appropriate guidance, support and awareness training for those exercising oversight within this policy.

11.2 This includes developing awareness of:

- the Equality Act 2010 and the duty to consider reasonable adjustments;
- visible and non-visible disabilities;
- the difference between illness, disability, capacity and conduct;
- the impact of ministry patterns and church culture on wellbeing;
- the appropriate use of occupational health advice.

11.3 The purpose of such guidance is not to turn Synod Moderators into medical professionals or human resources specialists, but to enable wise, compassionate and legally informed pastoral oversight within the conciliar life of the Church.

11.4 The Ministries Office will seek to provide guidance and support to Synod Moderators in the implementation of this policy so that practice across the Church is as consistent, fair and pastorally grounded as possible.

12. Responsibility for Funding Reasonable Adjustments

- 12.1 The United Reformed Church is a conciliar Church in which ministry is shared, discerned and sustained collectively. Responsibility for reasonable adjustments therefore does not rest solely with the individual minister, the local church, or the Synod, but is held corporately across the councils of the Church according to their respective responsibilities, resources and capacities.
- 12.2 In considering the funding of reasonable adjustments, the Church seeks to act both lawfully and pastorally, recognising that the cost of enabling ministry should not fall unfairly upon an individual minister. Equally, the implementation of adjustments must take account of proportionality, stewardship and the realistic resources available within the wider Church.
- 12.3 Where reasonable adjustments relate primarily to the local context of ministry, for example minor adaptations to church premises, practical support within the pastorate, local equipment, or adjustments to working arrangements, responsibility will ordinarily rest with the pastorate or local church, supported where appropriate by the Synod.
- 12.4 Where adjustments relate to wider deployment, significant property adaptations, denominational processes, specialist equipment, occupational health recommendations, or matters extending beyond the capacity of the local church, funding responsibility may be shared between the Synod and the wider denomination through the Ministries Office or other appropriate Assembly structures such as the Ministers Support and Wellbeing Committee.
- 12.5 In determining how costs are to be apportioned, consideration will be given to:
- the nature and purpose of the adjustment;
 - the extent to which the adjustment arises from the minister's deployment;
 - the financial capacity of the local church and Synod;
 - the availability of grants, external funding, or Access to Work support;
 - the anticipated duration of the adjustment;
 - the benefit to the minister's ability to exercise ministry safely and sustainably.
- 12.6 Agreed funding arrangements should be clearly recorded as part of the adjustment plan, including:
- the agreed contribution of each council or body;
 - any time limitations or review points;
 - responsibility for ongoing maintenance or replacement costs;
 - arrangements for review should circumstances change.
- 12.7 Where agreement cannot be reached regarding funding responsibility, the matter should be referred to the Deputy General Secretary (Ministries) for further discernment and resolution in consultation with the relevant councils of the Church.

13. Support for Local Pastorates

- 13.1 Local pastorates often carry a deep desire to support their minister but may feel uncertain about what is realistic or appropriate. Synods will support pastorates in understanding and implementing adjustments and may assist through:
- guidance and mediation;
 - pulpit supply;
 - additional pastoral support where necessary.

Clear communication helps prevent misunderstanding or resentment.

14. Relationship to Good Standing

- 14.1 Requesting reasonable adjustments does not imply diminished competence or commitment.
- 14.2 Seeking support is understood as an expression of responsible and healthy ministry.

15. Dispute Resolution

- 15.1 Concerns should first be raised with the Deputy General Secretary (Ministries).
- 15.2 Where informal resolution is not possible, the complaints procedure (Section Q) may be invoked.

16. Monitoring and Review of Policy

- 16.1 This policy will be reviewed by the Ministries Committee every three years, or sooner if legislation changes, in consultation with the Synod Moderators and EDIB Committee.