

Resourcing our elders

Introduction

There is so much to say about elders and eldership. This is an attempt to put together some resources to help elders and/or prospective elders to think about some of the important issues.

The areas of learning can be taken in any order and used in whole or in part. They may be used with either a local church eldership, or as a synod, or in a more localised training event. The intention is to provide a range of resources from which people can select the ones which will be most helpful to them. The resources are available online and can be easily downloaded and adapted to local circumstances. They will be kept updated online and will be supplemented as new resources emerge.

There is a mixture of individual reading and group exercises in the various sections of this set of resources. Group exercises could be led by the minister, one of the elders, another local leader or ministry enabler such as a church related community worker, or an external resource person. The assumption throughout is that the presentation and timing of the material will be tailored to fit the local need.

We would be delighted if you decided to use the feedback sheet which comes with this resource. It will help to ensure that the material is updated and revised in response to the experience of users.

The resource covers the following areas:

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 - how things might work in ecumenical contexts
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Online [Feedback Sheet](#)

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The synods and synod training officers (or equivalents)

Westminster College

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Area 1: Exploring eldership

1. Eldership. What is it?

For the United Reformed Church, the eldership of a local congregation is a significant ministry. The eldership as it has come to us over the centuries has importance within the Reformed tradition, having been significantly shaped by the reformer John Calvin. Eldership is a distinctive part of Reformed identity. In 1972 when the Congregational Church of England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England united to form the United Reformed Church it was agreed that elders would have responsibility for the spiritual and pastoral oversight of the local church, alongside Ministers of Word and Sacraments. The 'elders meeting' was conceived in the very real hope that it would become a distinctive and vital part of every congregation. Elected by the local church meeting, elders are people in whom others have recognised the spiritual gifts that can aid the leadership of the church. At its best the elders meeting is at the heart of every local congregation, regardless of size, offering the impetus and leadership required for mission, witness, and service. Elders have an essential part in enabling the congregation to live a healthy and fruitful life as God's people.

All of this may sound rather daunting if you are being asked to explore a call to becoming an elder but it is important to remember that the elders work as a team. Together with Ministers of Word and Sacraments they have responsibility for the life of the local congregation, but no one person is expected to have been given all the gifts required. In working as a team it is beneficial for there to be a wide range of gifts within the eldership to allow them to function effectively. It is also, where possible, good to have a wide age range including a youth elder to ensure all voices in the church are being heard. Many people speak of being part of a team as a great blessing. It is something which allows them to continually develop and use the gifts which God has given them, as well as exploring new areas of service and strengthening their weaker aspects.

The responsibilities of eldership in the United Reformed Church have been laid down in the Basis of Union, with the main functions being to foster in the congregation concern for witness and service to the community, evangelism at home and abroad, Christian education, ecumenical action, local inter-church relations and the wider responsibilities of the whole church. They are also expected to ensure that public worship and the sacraments are regularly offered alongside pastoral care and welfare of the congregation.

Clearly in an ecumenical setting the role of elder or equivalent may look and operate differently. However all Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) have lay people who share with the minister of word and sacraments in the pastoral oversight and leadership of the local church. They are the equivalent of United Reformed Church elders, although they may have a different title. Often an LEP will have a church council which is the equivalent of the elders meeting. It is worth a conversation with your synod moderator or synod ecumenical officer to gain clarity in these situations.

2. Why ordain?

The United Reformed Church decided from its inception in 1972 that it would ordain its elders for life. This reflects the view that elders are an integral part of the ministry of the United Reformed Church, sharing together with ministers of word and sacrament in the leadership of the local church. In 2006 this subject was revisited in a major consultation and a re-commitment to the ordained eldership was made.¹ Indeed ecumenical partners present at the consultation: "*Urged the United Reformed Church to continue in faithfulness to their understanding of Elders, as a contribution to the wider ecumenical scene*".²

Ordination is an outward sign of God's call and is a symbol of the special role that elders play in the leadership of the church. It recognises the spiritual role of the eldership and a calling that is often exercised alongside that of a minister of word and sacraments. As both are ordained this is a powerful symbol of partnership.

This means that you are ordained as an elder of the United Reformed Church for life. However this does not mean you are committed to always being a serving elder. The term of service is usually for a three year period which is renewable by agreement of church meeting and the elder concerned. Many churches deploy a mandatory sabbatical period of at least a year after serving six years. However this is different from church to church. Those who are not currently serving are referred to as non-serving elders. It is clear that in practice many elders continue to support the work of the serving elders in a variety of ways once they step back from that role themselves.

3. Being an elder of the denomination

Ordination as an elder means that you become an elder of the United Reformed Church, and not just an elder of your local congregation. This means that your ordination is recognised across the denomination so if you move to another part of Britain in the future and join another United Reformed Church congregation your ordination is still valid.

4. Could it be for me?

The fact that you are reading this module probably means that either the elders meeting, congregation, or a minister have seen gifts in you that they consider would be of benefit to the local church. They have probably had a conversation with you suggesting that they see you as a good candidate for the ministry of elder. It is now for you to discern if this feels like a calling to you. The first thing to say is that it is God who calls people into any ministry and eldership is no different. Clearly along the way others may discern gifts in you that lead them to suggest a possible role, but you also need to feel this call within yourself. To become an elder is a privilege but also a responsibility.

¹ The outcomes of the Consultation can be found on the [United Reformed Church website](#).

² Paragraph 3 of the report from the Consultation

A key feature of eldership is being called to be part of a team. It is therefore important to ask yourself the question *"how do I see myself as a team member?"* There may be individual tasks for you to perform, but the major discussions and outworking of the decisions made at church meeting will happen within the elders meeting. This means that it is vital that an elder can listen well to other people's views as well as offering their own. Once the meeting has discerned the will of God it is important to be willing to accept the view of the majority even if it is different to your own. Our denomination's way of coming to decisions is based upon discerning the will of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit across the councils of the church. Some people are more at ease with this way of working than others.

As you discern whether this is right or not for you, it's a good idea to seek the counsel of somebody whose judgement you trust within the congregation to talk and pray things through with. Do not feel pressurised to make a quick decision. It is far better to take your time and get it right. Ideally the chosen person will have been, or is, serving as an elder, so will have some first-hand experience to help answer the questions you may have.

Where possible it is a very good idea to be able to shadow an elder for a month or two before making a decision. This will give you an idea of what is involved, both time-wise and in the duties undertaken, and will also provide opportunities to ask questions. It would be hoped that this shadowing would also include you attending an elders meeting. Whilst you would not be able to take part in the decision making, parts of the meeting you would get a feel for how an elders meeting in your local context is conducted and how the elders interact and come to decisions. This practical exposure is likely to give you a feel for the role you are considering.

You may wonder whether you have the faith needed to become an elder. Whilst this is a genuine concern, it is worth remembering that most Christians feel inadequate or unsure of their abilities at times. Indeed we follow in a long line of such people starting from biblical characters through to the present day. However this should not stop you offering yourself for the role. It is the local church who are discerning the gifts and who will support and help you to fulfil the role of elder. There should also be ongoing opportunities for development for elders as needs arise. Many local churches hold elders' away days or study evenings so that the eldership can have time to study, think and pray together. These events may also be led by an outside speaker on a specific subject from time to time. There are also synod and Assembly events offered for elders in the United Reformed Church. Your synod office will be able to point you to the people who can tell you more about such opportunities.

It is worth saying that to be an elder is a commitment of your faith, gifts and time. Often a person being asked to be an elder is already busy, both in the life of the church and beyond. You are asked to consider what God may be calling you to relinquish in order to become an elder.

5. For reflection and prayer

It is worth asking the following questions as part of your deliberations:

- Is being an elder a priority to which I feel called and am willing to give my time and energy?
- What will I need to give up or let go of, in order for me to say 'yes' and to do justice to this new ministry?

The only person who can ultimately answer these questions is you, but it is important to ensure that you can fulfil this role within your work and domestic circumstances. Placing undue pressure on various relationships during the time of being a serving elder will help neither the eldership nor yourself.

6. Some practical tips

- Take time to pray
- Ask those who have approached you why they believe you will make a good elder
- Seek counsel from a trusted elder/minister/member of the congregation
- Take the time to shadow a serving elder to discover more of what is involved
- Ask yourself: 'Is there a good reason why I should not allow my name to go forward for this role?'
- Trust the church meeting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discern God's will and confirm if this calling is right for you.

7. A scripture verse to reflect upon

"I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you do it". 1 Peter 5:1-2³

³ All Bible passages are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless stated otherwise. [Scripture quotations are from] New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Area 2: God calls elders

1. What is an elder?

The ministry of elders, as we have it today, has its origin in the New Testament, which witnesses to the variety of models of service in the early Church. Eldership is often a characteristic of Christian traditions which have their roots in the Reformation.

Elders share with the minister of word and sacraments in the pastoral care and spiritual leadership of the local church, taking counsel together in the elders' meeting for the whole congregation, and each having a group of members entrusted to his or her pastoral care. They also represent the local congregation in the wider councils of the church at synod, General Assembly and ecumenically.

Eldership is a calling of God and a ministry of the Church and elders are ordained. They are inducted to serve in a particular congregation, sometimes for a fixed period of time.

Elders engage in their ministry alongside many other commitments including paid work, family life, voluntary work or study. They are faithful Christians, and are also pilgrims on the way. They are trained and supported in their ministry, and continue to be 'learners in the Kingdom of God'.

Some practical ideas

- a) Is there one of your eldership who might take on the role of 'teaching elder', helping the whole eldership to reflect on the Bible, and to develop your ideas about what it means to be an elder?
- b) Have you tried an 'away day' as a group of elders together?
- c) Can you share experiences together in ways which help you all to be learners and teachers on eldership in God's church? Eg just 10 minutes at each elders meeting to talk about 'what we have learnt as elders, through reading, prayer or experience, in the last month or so?'

2. The origins of eldership

For the group leader

Arrange for the eldership to view the [digital presentation](#) dealing with eldership from a biblical and historical perspective, which is available shortly to download as part of this online resource. Alternatively, or additionally, you may find it helpful to provide the content in printed form (Handout 1, page 12).

For discussion

What do these biblical and historical examples tell you about eldership?

How helpful or otherwise do you find them to be?

Are there other places (in the Bible, in history or in experiences) which have given insights into what it means to be an elder?

What is your eldership's picture of an elder from the exploring that you've done together so far?

3. Eldership in the Bible

Eldership is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament elders are those who give council and advice – eg they are called to help Moses in his work (Numbers 11:16-17), and this role continued in the time of the gospels – although some elders of the day are portrayed as being against Jesus (Matthew 16:20-21).

In the letters (the epistles) there is a shift to elders/deacons/overseers who are to preach, to heal, and to give advice. However, there is almost as much about the kind of person they should *be* as what they should *do* (1 Timothy 3:1-13)

The ministry of eldership in the early church included:

- *Pastoring*: taking care of the church
- *Overseeing*: giving order and direction to the church
- *Healing*: bringing the wholeness of Christ to the church
- *Teaching*: instructing the church.

For individual reflection

Which one of the four roles above best describes you as an elder?

Which one least describes you as an elder?

To what extent do the four roles match how you see eldership in your church as a whole?

4. A group exercise on some key New Testament texts

Read the four texts below, and then discuss the questions given at the end of them.

Romans 12: 1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12: 27-31

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Peter 5: 1-4

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

Ephesians 4: 11-16

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

For discussion

- Look for the key ideas in the passages. You may find it helpful to view a 'wordle' – a word picture which highlights the most commonly occurring words in these passages.
- What strikes you about these passages, taken as a whole?
- Are there key ideas here about being an elder which, if removed, would damage the core of your being?
- What do these words say about the difference between being an elder and being a 'steward of resources' or 'manager'?

5. Elders and spiritual leadership

The concept of spiritual leadership may be said to have two key elements:

- Leadership *by* the Spirit
- Leadership *of* the Spirit

When elders are ordained we ask the Holy Spirit to empower these people, through the authority of the church, to undertake a ministry in the church. This reference to leading by the spirit highlights that the role involves much more than taking care of practical issues relating to buildings and finance, although the spiritual nature of these activities should not be overlooked.

As well as being led by the Spirit, elders are also expected to lead the mission of their local church by the power of the spirit. They need to be people of prayer, who believe that through reading the Bible and through sharing together, God's people are able to discern God's will for them. They also need to be servants of the church, along with any minister of word and sacrament.

Look at the ordination prayer and words from the United Reformed Church Basis of Union below and ask yourselves:

- What do these words say to us today?
- Are there any surprises?

Ordination prayer

Thank you God, for the various gifts
which you give to your people
and for the varieties of ministry in the Church.
Thank you for all women and men of faith and integrity
who have served this local church.
Thank you now for (name).
Empower him/her with your Holy Spirit.
Give him/her humility and grace
so that by his/her faithfulness
he/she may show your love to your people:
In the name of Jesus Christ.

From the Basis of Union

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. The United Reformed Church recognises that Christ gives himself to his Church through Word and Sacrament and through the total caring oversight by which his people grow in faith and love, the exercise of which oversight is the special concern of elders and ministers. Those who enter in such ministries commit themselves to them for so long as God wills: the United Reformed Church having solemnly acknowledged their vocation and accepted their commitment shall appoint them to their particular ministry and give them authority to exercise it within the church, setting them apart with prayer that they shall be given all needful gifts and graces for its fulfilment, which solemn setting apart shall in the case of ministers and elders be termed ordination and in the case of church related community workers be termed commissioning. In the United Reformed Church all ministries within the life of the Church shall be open to both men and women. Appropriate affirmations of faith shall be made by those entering upon all ministries within the life of the Church.

For discussion

Elders are expected to be people who will ask themselves:

- What is the Holy Spirit saying to us?
- How does the Spirit speak to the whole church through the church meeting?
- How can we grow together in the gifts God has given us?
- How can this eldership provide spiritual leadership to the church?

Are these questions you are comfortable asking yourselves?

If so, what are your answers?

If not, what help do you need to gain this confidence?

Area 2: Handout 1

Some notes on the biblical and historical roots of eldership

Elders in scripture

Exodus 12:21

"Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover lamb..."

Numbers 11:16

"So the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.'"

Matthew 21:23

"When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?'"

Acts 15

The apostles and elders gather in Jerusalem and come to a common mind on how to respond to a deeply divisive issue.

1 Timothy 5:17-19

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain', and, 'The labourer deserves to be paid.' Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses."

St Cyprian and the threefold ministry

- Bishop
- Priest
- Deacon

The Genevan Reformation

Sought a 'return' to New Testament patterns of ministry:

- Pastor
- Teacher
- Deacon
- Elder

Scottish Reformation

1st Book of Discipline – 1560:

- Elders elected every year.
- Primary function is discipline of people and of the ministers:
“The elders being elected must be admonished of their office, which is to assist the minister in all public affairs of the church: to wit, in judging and discerning causes; in giving of admonition to the licentious liver; in having respect to the manners and conversation of all men within their charge; for by the gravity of the seniors, the light and unbridled life of the licentious ought [to] be corrected and bridled.”

2nd Book of Discipline (1578)

- Elders elected for life
- Ministers and doctors (teachers) are also elders
- Elders had clear roles:
 4. Their office is, as well severally as conjunctly, to watch diligently upon the flock committed to their charge, both publicly and privately, that no corruption of religion or manners enter therein.
 5. As the pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people.
 6. It appertains to them to assist the pastor in examination of them that come to the Lord’s table: *item*, in visiting the sick.
 7. They should cause the acts of assemblies, as well particular as provincial or general, to be put in execution carefully.
 8. They should be diligent in admonishing all men of their duty, according to the rule of the *evangel*. Things that they cannot correct by private admonitions they should bring to the assembly of the eldership.
 9. Their principal office is to hold assemblies with the pastors and doctors (who are also of their number) for establishing of good order, and execution of discipline. Unto the which assemblies all persons are subject that remain within their bounds.

Congregational Deacons

- The church meeting as the primary place of discipline.
- Deacons elected to serve at table and in the business of the Church.

A Handbook of Congregationalism (1924) by Ernest J Price:

“The Church meeting also appoints a number of Deacons to assist the minister in the spiritual oversight of the Church and to serve at the Lord’s Table. The office of Deacon is justly honoured throughout Congregationalism. It is open to every adult member of the Church, and from the beginning has been served by a succession of noble and consecrated Christians...”

Mere routine details of finance and so forth are usually left to the Deacons or to a special finance committee..."

The Churches of Christ

- Ministers of the Word were primarily peripatetic
- Some elders were 'presiding elders' and presided at Holy Communion
- The tradition also had Deacons.

Area 3: A team of elders

1. The function of the elders' meeting

There are 12 responsibilities for the elders of a church, listed in the [United Reformed Church Manual](#).

- (i) to foster in the congregation concern for witness and service to the community, evangelism at home and abroad, Christian education, ecumenical action, local inter-church relations and the wider responsibilities of the whole Church;
- (ii) to see that public worship is regularly offered and the sacraments are duly administered, and generally to promote the welfare of the congregation;
- (iii) to ensure pastoral care of the congregation, in which the minister is joined by elders having particular responsibility for groups of members;
- (iv) to nominate from among its members a church secretary (or secretaries), to be elected by the church meeting, to serve both the church meeting and the elders' meeting;
- (v) to arrange for pulpit supply in a vacancy;
- (vi) to keep the roll of members and (as an aid to the discharge of the congregation's pastoral and evangelistic responsibility) lists of names of adherents and children attached to the congregation, and in consultation with the church meeting to maintain standards of membership and to advise on the admission of members on profession of faith and by transfer, on the suspension of members, and on the removal of names from the roll;
- (vii) to be responsible for the institution and oversight of work among children and young people and of all organisations within the congregation;
- (viii) to call for the election of elders and advise on the number required;
- (ix) to consider the suitability of any applicant for recognition as a candidate for the ministry or for service as a CRCW and to advise the church meeting about its recommendation to the synod;
- (x) to recommend to the church meeting arrangements for the proper maintenance of buildings and the general oversight of all the financial responsibilities of the local church;
- (xi) to act on behalf of the church meeting and bring concerns to the wider councils of the United Reformed Church;
- (xii) to do such other things as may be necessary in pursuance of its responsibility for the common life of the Church.

This rather daunting-looking list needs to be tackled by a team of elders – including the minister of word and sacraments where there is one. Elders are there for the sake of the body, the church, to be the team that enables ministry to happen.

2. Understanding elders as a team

How does God make you a team? It comes down to the importance of the Holy Spirit. In the United Reformed Church we believe that the Spirit is in charge of any church meeting. We speak of seeking the mind of Christ together. The Spirit is also 'in charge' of who is made an elder, which is why we ordain people to the eldership. Praying together and sharing and learning together is vitally important. It is through allowing the Spirit to infuse the elders' meeting that good team working will develop, combined with a healthy dose of ideas on good practice drawn from helpful sources.

There is increasing emphasis on teamwork in the commercial world, voluntary sector, and the church. In order to gain insights into the eldership as a team you could try the following:

- a. Each elder could bring an image which they think describes the sort of team you are, or the sort of team you want to be (eg a 'tug of war' team, all pulling in the same direction; a football team, each with different positions and gifts; or a tag wrestling team, handing over to others when necessary). What do all these images say about you as a team of elders?
- b. Looking at the 12 functions of the elders meeting, how are these functions carried out by your elders? Would it help to take on specific roles if you don't already do this, eg children and youth elder, worship elder, buildings sub-committee, finance team?
- c. Someone in your church fellowship might be able to help you, as an eldership, to look at Belbin team roles. This can be a useful way of exploring how teams or groups of elders interact. For further information see www.belbin.com

3. Being an effective team

Look at this list from a 'team building' handout for industry:

- Learn to work as a team
- Reassess your team's goals and direction
- Communicate better as a team
- Give your team a boost of energy
- Create trust amongst team members
- Recognise individual strengths, styles and skills
- Keep lines of communication flexible
- Ensure tolerance
- Encourage sharing of ideas
- Allow for differences.

Can you 'translate' these aims, so that they are suitable for teams of elders? Can you produce a list headed 'our elders' meeting is here to...'? How could you share this usefully with the church meeting?

4. Developing your team, recognising your gifts

Look at the list of responsibilities of the elders meeting taken from the Manual.

There are two golden rules from the list:

1. Everything has to be done
2. Everything does not have to be done by everyone.

So how does your eldership ensure that all the functions are fulfilled?

The key questions, which the following exercises are designed to address, are:

- What are the gifts I have seen in myself and others have seen in me that show a calling to eldership?
- What gifts would I like to develop?
- What help and support do I need to develop this?
- What do we do as a church that helps leadership emerge and develop?
- What do we do already to help the elders work as a team in this church? How could we do more of this? What are the new habits which would help?

Exercise 1: About me

First choose two words (or create your own) from the list below of descriptions of elders suggested by elders themselves.

- First word: Something you think is a particular gift that you bring to the eldership
- Second word: A particular gift you would like to develop to help you in your ministry of eldership.

server exemplar carer outreach diplomat peacemaker enabler sorter
out administrator channel initiator encourager counsellor planner
listener manager minister's support teacher proposer discipler shepherd
overseer minister communicator nurturer helper visionary representative

Think about these two words for a moment and prepare to share a few thoughts.

Share them together in the group...

Then ask everyone to put their name on a piece of paper and put it in a hat.

Go round the group with each person picking another elder's name from the hat. When everyone has picked out a name, they should choose a word for their named person that they see as a gift they have or could have that they might not see in themselves. How could the named person be encouraged to develop this gift?

Share in the group...

When everyone has spoken, go on to explore together what this church does to help people develop their gifts.

Exercise 2: About us

What do elders do? How do we do what we do?

In pairs:

- Look at the list of functions of the elders meeting and explore how the elders ensure that they are fulfilled in this church
- Consider how the gifts that were identified in exercise 1 help this eldership in their work together.

In the group:

Consider how the elders work as a team in the church

- what strengths emerge?
- what areas for work and development emerge?
- how will the eldership use what has been found from this exercise?

5. Choosing Elders

Elders are:

- There for the sake of the church
- Spiritual leaders – praying, caring, learning
- Ordained and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

In the light of those three principles, how does your elders' meeting respond to the following imaginary candidates for eldership?

Mary is a good worker for the church. Her husband has physical disabilities so she can't come to church or church meeting but can do day-time meetings. She keeps the lunch club, coffee morning and jumble sale going.

Vera has served for 40 years as an elder but can't manage the steps up and down to the communion table to distribute communion anymore.

John believes that we should just get on with it and not bother with long discussions at meetings.

Geoffrey never says anything in church meeting, insists that he 'can't visit people or pray with them', but understands the church heating system when no one else can.

What do your responses to these four imaginary people tell you about how your church should go about choosing elders?

6. Helping the local church to think about choosing elders

One United Reformed Church congregation has provided a leaflet about how elders are chosen (Handout 1, page 21). Would it help your church to produce something like this?

7. Children and youth elder

Might it help your church to look at this example of what it could mean to be an elder for children and youth?

Someone to ensure that:

- Your church considers its strategy for work with children and young people
- Children's and youth work issues are discussed at elders' and church meetings
- Links are maintained with all youth and children's groups who use the church premises
- Young people and children are represented where appropriate in the committees of the church
- Your elders' meeting knows what is happening in your church or in other churches in relation to children and young people.

Some things your children and youth elder may already be doing or could do:

Congregation focused

- Read a book a year relating to young people/children and the church
- Keep a cradle roll in your church
- Advocate a proper budget for youth and children's work in your church
- Take time to speak with children and young people and encourage the pastoral care of youngsters and their families
- Have a regular spot at elders' and church meeting
- Encourage praying for youngsters and youth and children's workers
- Encourage the discussion of issues relating to children and young people
- Be aware of new opportunities such as mid-week worship, alternative worship, Pilots, new resources and funding possibilities
- Visit all the youth and children's groups connected with church
- Ensure that all major youth and children's events at your church are attended by at least one elder
- Maintain links with all children's and youth leaders
- Encourage the congregation to hold an annual dedication service for your children's and youth leaders.

Links with the synod

- Develop links with your synod youth/children's work secretaries and regional Pilots officer
- Contact your children and youth development officer (cydo) and organise training for the youth and children's leaders at your church
- Consider applying for a [child friendly church award](#).

Access to resources

- Regularly check out the [children and youth web pages](#)
- Visit the [Pilots website](#)
- Subscribe to a monthly magazine relating to young people or children through your local Christian book shop
- Obtain the United Reformed Church [Good Practice pack](#) and discuss it with your church link person for safeguarding, elders and leaders
- Attend local, regional/national or Assembly training events and organise for others to attend.

Area 3: A Handout 1

What method of electing elders most faithfully reflects our understanding of eldership?

Ministry

If eldership is a ministry, then selection and appointment should be undertaken with great seriousness. To appoint someone to a ministry which is not theirs may cause great discomfort and pain both to the person concerned and to the community. To appoint those who volunteer has dangers too! It isn't the case that everyone should have a turn. But it is also true that we often don't look carefully or far enough. We need to find ways to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that we can discern gifts where they may have been hidden or overlooked. It can be easy to assume that God is calling the articulate, 'successful', professional, healthy and confident people. Remember there was a time when most people thought women wouldn't make good elders! As a church meeting and as individuals we need to find ways of encouraging and enabling one another to discern gifts with imagination and wisdom. You don't have to be able-bodied, educated, or completely happy and well-adjusted to be an elder! But you do need to be faithful in worship, committed to Christ, sensitive to the needs of others, trustworthy and caring. Also, we need to recognise that training is an important part of any preparation for ministry – so in thinking about those who might have the right gifts we may bear in mind that gifts can be encouraged and developed.

A corporate ministry

If elders have a ministry together, as a corporate body, then it is appropriate to think about how the group works together. Not every elder needs to have the same responsibilities or gifts, but the group as whole needs to be aware of the whole task of eldership. The dynamics of the group will be important and will affect the ministry of the whole eldership. The right balance of skills and gifts needs to be kept within the group and this is best achieved if the members of the group have a high level of awareness about themselves and of the whole group. It is important to avoid fixing people in particular roles ('Sharon always does the pastoral work' – 'Amy always wants to be practical', 'Xavier is always reminding us what the Bible says'), but equally elders bring different strengths to the group. An eldership entirely made up of visionaries would be exciting, but ineffective! Equally, an eldership which was all practical and task oriented would be impoverished. This is just common sense really, but it makes a difference if you think about eldership as a corporate ministry, or of the elders' meeting as a mission community rather than a collection of gifted individuals. Thinking

corporately ('the body') will imply a new approach to electing elders. The church will need to look together at the whole ministry of the elders and ask: What further gifts does this group need? Then look for them within the congregation. The emphasis then is not upon 'favouring' individuals, but enriching the community. Thinking corporately also implies thinking about the number of elders – 12 is an effective working group which can talk with a fair degree of openness – 20 is more like a public meeting and the dynamics change. A large church might need a larger number of elders, but will find ways to divide into sub-groups which can work effectively.

The Sabbath principle

As with human life generally, all ministry benefits from rest and change. Ministers of Word and Sacraments are entitled to a three month sabbatical every ten years – not a long holiday – but a time for standing back, thinking and praying. Elders should also have such opportunities, alongside opportunities for training, development and even assessment of their ministry. In many churches, elders are elected to serve for a fixed term with the promise, encouragement or even enforcement of a sabbatical period before serving again. This reflects a belief that ministry of any kind is never something fixed and unchanging. Elders who stand down for a year or more are not doing nothing. They are taking time to take stock and to explore further possibilities for ministry. They might spend more time praying and searching for where God is calling next. They might concentrate on one particular area of the church's life. They do not stop being elders, but simply stand back for a while from being part of the corporate ministry of the elder's meeting. They do this, not 'to give others a chance to have their say', but in order to examine and enrich what they have and will have to offer the ministry of the whole church.

Area 4: Elders and mission

1. Mission

The United Reformed Church Manual states as function one of the elders' meeting:

"To foster in the congregation concern for witness and service to the community and evangelism at home and abroad."

The mission of a local church lies at the heart of the role of the eldership. Local churches are, by nature, missionary bodies that exist not for the benefit of the members but for the communities they are set in and the people who make up those communities. It is therefore important for the elders' meeting to make a conscious decision to be missionary in all of its life and decision making. This should be supported by the church meeting having a similar view and outlook.

The times we find ourselves in has made this even more important. People no longer naturally look to the church for guidance, and for many people the church seems to be an outdated and irrelevant organisation with no connection to their daily lives. As members of our local church we beg to differ, being able to see how the Gospel has much to say to the situation in which the world finds itself. The challenge is to find ways for the local church to reconnect with the communities it serves. The elders' meeting will form an important part of this conversation and discernment.

The purpose here is to offer some thoughts and resources to help the elders' meeting with the mission focus of its work and service.

An eldership needs to ask of itself and the local church: Are we ready to be missionary in all we do? Whilst this may seem a strange question, given that the church exists to engage in God's mission, the reality in a lot of situations is that there is a need to spend some time in prayer and reflection before launching into new mission initiatives. To illustrate this point think about when you need boiling water. You can flick the kettle switch or boil a pan of water. Do the first and the results are quick, although the water cools quickly again as the kettle switches itself off. The saucepan takes longer but once the water has boiled it can be kept at the same temperature by continuing to apply the same heat. Sometimes our impetus for mission can result in a sudden desire to do something such as a one-off event, with the heat going off again until the next event. What may be needed instead is constant engagement with the community, which requires a steady heat.

2. Listening to and including the voice of children and youth

It is important for elders to ensure that the place of children and young people in the life of the church as equal partners is lived out. This means that where there are young people in the church their opinions are sought and they are genuinely included and listened to in any mission initiatives. The United Reformed Church's [Charter for Children in the Church](#) should be known within each church and used by elders as a reference point.

Looking to obtain the Child Friendly Church Award is also a good way of keeping a focus on the [needs of the young people](#).

Your synod children and youth development officer (cydo) or equivalent can help you with this. If you have young people in the church and do not already have a cydo, consider appointing a youth elder who can represent the views of younger people in the elders meeting. Even if you have no young people there is still a need to have one of the elders with the responsibility to represent the needs of younger families and children if we are to be a fully welcoming and inclusive church. As part of a mission survey in a local church it could be good to reflect on the following questions at an elders meeting:

1. What is happening in this church in relation to children?
2. What is currently provided for young people?
3. What experience/gifts exist amongst the eldership and wider membership to enhance this work?

3. Moving forward

As a tool to help the elders' meeting reflect upon the work of elders in mission it may be helpful to consider the following in one, or if need be, several elders meetings.

For reflection and discussion

There are three areas that need to be looked at before a local church steps out into its mission.

1. Know yourself
2. Know your community
3. Know what it is God is asking you to be a part of.

A local church should be aiming to be a life transforming and enhancing community, enabling those within the church and those it engages with to be more Christ-like by the encounters it has. This is a two-way process. We hope that people will see Christ in our words and actions, and we find, often to our surprise, that we meet Christ in them – it should not be surprising if it takes some time to be ready for such life-transforming and community-changing relationships. A

local church which is being mission-focused rather than maintenance-focused will keep all three points above under constant review. As a leadership team the eldership are in a good position to ensure this is the case.

4. Some biblical thoughts on being missionary

To help us think about the church's mission in the 21st century let us concentrate on Jesus' first miracle in the gospel of John, where, at a wedding, he changes the water into wine. There are discussion questions included at various points of this reflection. The reason for choosing this particular reading is that there are many parallels in these verses for where the church finds itself today, and also for the response that God is looking for from us in how we view and enact our mission. Individuals may agree or disagree with the thoughts presented here, but hopefully what follows, at the very least, provides a lively and fruitful engagement with Scripture.

a) Read John 2:1-11 together and discuss your initial thoughts

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Jesus and his friends have been invited along to a wedding where his Mum is a guest. It is interesting that a wedding where the wine is running out should provide the setting for Jesus' first miracle and the first clear sign that Jesus is the Son of God. It would have been wonderful to be a fly on the wall for the conversation that took place between Jesus and his mother. It would appear that it was she who drew Jesus' attention to the fact that the wine was running out – and that she wanted him to do something about it to save her friends from embarrassment. Was it a case of a mother pulling rank on her son or was Jesus a willing participant? Surely Jesus could not have envisaged that the first sign that he was indeed the Son of God would be played out at a party and in such a frivolous way as turning water into wine so that the party might continue. Did he wonder: Is this really the way my God-given powers should be used?

- b) What do you think about what Mary asks her son to do?

Whatever our views on alcohol, and there was certainly plenty being consumed here, we find Jesus stepping in where a situation seems hopeless. It is here that we find the first parallel for the current situation many churches find themselves in. The wedding celebrations could last anything up to a week and so these events clearly take place towards the end of that time. The hosts and the servants are tired. In a society where failure to offer proper hospitality was seen as a serious offence it looks as if things are going to end in tears, despite all the effort they have made. Roll this forward to the 21st century and does not the western church have the same fears that the wine may be running out? Many are feeling tired, overworked, disappointed, slightly embarrassed even, by the church's current state and anxious as to what is coming next.

- c) Honestly reflect upon your local church's current state and how you see the future.

We continue to see relevance for our current situation as the story develops. Action by others is required in order for Jesus to do what is needed. In this case the already tired and weary servants are called upon to draw masses of water from the well to refill the jars. We can question why on earth they agreed to do this rather than to say to Jesus: We have done everything we can, we have nothing left to give, we give up. Yet, they do as Jesus asks, despite their feelings that this would probably be a waste of their time and energy. We can only imagine the conversation that went on between them as they were filling the jars, but it was probably not: What a great idea this is! More likely, it was something like: The guests want wine and we are going to give them water? The man is mad and will incite a riot. It would not be surprising if they were expecting a disaster and just wanted to get it over with.

- d) Have you ever been in a situation where you saw a new initiative as being pointless or even foolish? How did you react and what was your response?

It is very easy for us to take on the attitude of the wine having run out and seeing the party as drawing to a close. We find ourselves in a situation where we cannot rely on past habits and structures to help us cope, let alone to flourish. We live in a secular, individualistic and materialistic society with little interest in corporate or community activity. In large parts of society, often media led, churches are considered irrelevant and a hangover from a previous era. Sometimes there may be some justification for this view. The situation we find ourselves in has changed dramatically over the past 75 years. Has our church life always and everywhere shown signs that recognise this?

- e) Think about your local church. How much has it changed in the last 20 years? Why and how?

However, let the good news begin. The miracle Jesus performs is to produce new and high quality wine from this unpromising situation. The challenge of how we can respond in prophetic and creative ways to needs and challenges in our contemporary society is for all church people to consider. For a church that believes in the priesthood of all believers this should come as no surprise. Different people may use their gifts in different ways. What is needed is the right people to be used in a new mission. This means that the priceless gift of people's participation and commitment should be released from other responsibilities where appropriate, so we do not burn people out. As Chris Stoddard writes: This is a time for faithfulness to the Gospel and for adventures in faith. When you have nothing to lose it is a time to be daring and to go for it.⁴

- f) How might your church respond differently to people in your current local context?

In the past, the Church has been seen as a powerful force alongside governments and monarchs – a part of the establishment that helped to control the masses. To a large extent this view has now gone and the Church is on the edges of society. This means that a new opportunity is opening up for the church of the 21st Century. In our Bible reading, the only way that Jesus could perform his miracle was for the servants to take a risk and make themselves vulnerable. Once they had done that, Jesus was able to do the rest.

Perhaps it is time for churches to admit that we are made up of fragile, vulnerable people so that we may better identify with others who are broken or find themselves on the edges of society. In acknowledging the weakness and vulnerability of the church as a human institution that is seeking the will of God, we may find that we can relate to people in society who find themselves on the edges of society. We may be better able to trust each other and find that, as well as offering good news of God's love, that we can learn from them and grow with them in mutual relationship. Perhaps then the Church will find its relevance in society once more.

As the servants took the risk of being obedient to Jesus' instruction, they opened up the opportunity for God's Spirit to do a new thing. Those at the party found that the best was still to come and the party went up to a new level. From the edge of crisis they became open to a new possibility of God working in their lives. Shorn of past securities as part of the establishment, the church can look at the Gospel afresh and embrace the freedom and radical thinking that this allows.

Each local church needs to decide if they can put their trust in the teachings of Jesus, face the reality of our broken state and be ready to relate to society in a new way. This will take an immense amount of grace, but then again God pours it out in abundance just as he did the new and high quality wine.

4 p.14 *Church on the Edge. Principles and Real Life Stories of 21st Century Mission* by Chris Stoddard and Nick Cuthbert. (2006): Authentic Media

For reflection and discussion

- How do you respond to the insights given on this Bible passage?
- Do these insights have anything to say to the mission of your church (present or future)?

5. Resources to help you

Local mission and ministry review

The local mission and ministry review (LMMR) is a resource being used across the United Reformed Church. It came into being as a replacement for District visits after the reorganisation of synods in 2008. The aim of LMMR is to create a pastorate profile which becomes a regularly updated description of the life of the church and, hopefully, a useful tool for mission. A review partner is appointed to accompany churches in undertaking this task, occupying the role of a critical friend. Every situation is unique and so this process allows the local church to develop its own mission manifesto and in doing so to give a focus to the mission of the local church. As the document will need to be endorsed by elders, church meeting, and any group set up to produce the paper, this should provide guidance and some clear mission objectives that can be owned and pursued by the whole church.

Ideally the local church will have a mini review two years after producing their mission manifesto, and then revisit the paper two years later to see how the mission priorities have progressed over four years. The elders' meeting needs to look at this and then encourage a full discussion to take place at church meeting at each stage.

Where it has been used, LMMR has been a very successful tool for giving focus to the mission of a local church, repaying the investment of time and attention given to it by the church. Elders are encouraged to use this resource with support from their synod. The people to contact in the first instance are the synod moderator, training and development officer or mission enabler whilst some synods have a dedicated LMMR advocate. Support exists, in whatever form, to help elders' meetings to prepare to undertake what should be a constructive and helpful mission audit.

Vision2020

Vision2020 materials have been produced by the General Assembly mission committee to provide a framework for mission in the United Reformed Church. They can be a helpful resource in the LMMR process and are good tools to help the eldership and the local church in their conversations around existing and future mission priorities. The resource is organised under 10 statements and, after reflecting upon them, a local church chooses one or two as immediate priorities for their congregation and local context. More details and downloads are available from the [United Reformed Church website](#) or ask your synod office for assistance.

Vision4Life

Vision4Life is a collection of resources on the Bible, prayer and evangelism which can be downloaded and adapted by for use in any congregation. It was developed through a three year programme within the United Reformed Church and has assisted a wide variety of congregations to reflect [on their life and mission](#):

Radical welcome

Churches which start to look closely at the context in which they now find themselves may find it helpful to seek external support of a facilitator who can help them to engage with the communities around them. Material has been produced by the United Reformed Church for download and use by such facilitators or by congregations [directly from the online library](#).

Area 5: Elder as pastor

1. Pastoral care

The United Reformed Church manual states function three of the elders meeting as being:

“to ensure pastoral care of the congregation, in which the minister is joined by elders having particular responsibility for groups of members”.

This statement can be a source of great joy to some elders and put fear into others. This module will explore the real meaning of the statement and offer some thoughts and ideas to help the pastoral care of people to be the best that can be offered.

There is a difference between ensuring that pastoral care takes place and doing it. It is the former for which the elders’ meeting has collective responsibility, whilst the latter is a matter of appropriate strategy, agreed by both the elders’ meeting and church meeting. This does not necessarily mean that serving elders and the minister(s) are the only ones who exercise pastoral care within the agreed system.

Churches have become increasingly aware of the need for a wide range of gifts to be shared in the elders’ meeting in order to best represent the interests and needs of the local church. This will mean that some elders will be better suited to pastoral care and visiting whilst some will have their gifts lying elsewhere. However, by accepting the role of elder all of an eldership will be involved in the offering of pastoral care. All will benefit from taking time to ensure that pastoral skills and good practice are a natural part of the elders’ relationship to the church and its members and adherents. Good practice will ensure that pastoral care is offered in appropriate ways to children and young people and vulnerable adults, and that the care that is offered meets the standards that are expected of a congregation which seeks to be the body of Christ.

It is also important to remember that we live in a multicultural society and that churches are expected to be able to meet and welcome people from many different backgrounds, help them to find a home in the church and learn from them. It is therefore a good idea for elderships to make themselves familiar with the United Reformed Church resource *The multicultural ministry toolkit*⁵ and to talk to their Synod racial justice and multicultural advocate. Further information [is available](#) and the radical welcome facilitators’ toolkit [is also helpful](#).

⁵ Available through the Racial Justice and Multi-Cultural Ministry office of the United Reformed Church.

2. Why is pastoral care important?

A healthy Christian community is a safe place of mutual care, where those within the body of Christ and those in the neighbourhood and world beyond feel valued, loved and respected. Such valuing contributes to individual well-being, which in turn builds stronger communities and is a witness to Christ. It is the church's belief in this that places pastoral care at the heart of Christian communities.

In reality all people need to be cared for physically, emotionally and spiritually. At different times we are all called upon to both receive and offer care. Love is at the heart of the Christian faith. Love of God and love of each other was shown to us in Jesus Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us that God's love and care of humanity is without limit. In turn God calls on us to show the same love, care and compassion to those with whom we live with or have contact. Two verses from scripture that reinforce this are:

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience". Colossians 3:12

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". John 13:34

Christian care goes beyond one group of people ministering to another (usually seen as practical help for the sick and needy). As good and important as this is, Christian caring should also be about empowerment, support, nurture and liberation for individuals and communities. It must not be paternalistic nor a means to meet needs within ourselves, but should be a genuine offering of ourselves to be channels of God's grace.

For reflection and discussion at an elders meeting

- a) Take some time to read and reflect silently upon the hymn *Brother, sister let me serve you* (Rejoice and Sing 474). This is a well-used, much loved hymn in many congregations. It speaks about how we may offer and receive pastoral care and of our expectations of it. After reflecting upon it take time to discuss the implications for pastoral care in your setting.
- b) You may find it helpful to debate the following statement:

"By caring for people the church mirrors the nature of God and plays out the will of God for us. So the kind of care we offer will tell people what kind of God we follow."

3. Pastoral care is “of God”

Love is the very nature of God. *Hosea 11:1-4* shows the image of God as a compassionate and loving parent. In the New Testament, pastoral care is seen in the actions of Jesus and then expected to be seen in his followers. In *John 13:34-35* Jesus reminds us to love one another just as he has loved us. Indeed for Jesus pastoral care came before religious duties as we are reminded in a number of places. So *John 5:1-18* has Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath, and in *Luke 8:40-56* he makes himself ritually unclean by healing a haemorrhaging woman.

For discussion

What other stories from the Bible speak to you of Jesus’ way of offering empowering care?

Pastoral care can and does transform lives, often for all who are involved. Pastoral care is inseparable from mission as it always has the potential to be life changing. Pastoral care placed alongside word and sacraments displays the church as the body of Christ, equipped by Christ and behaving as Christ to each other and to the wider world. At its best pastoral care is one of the places where Christians learn who and what they are called to be, and thus what they need to do. It is for this reason that this area of the elders’ responsibilities always needs to be high on the agenda of the elders meeting.

The rest of this module will set out some thoughts on how to enhance our pastoral care and offer some resources to help do so.

4. A Bible study to help in thinking about how pastoral care is offered

Read John 4:1-30 which tells of the encounter that Jesus had with a woman at a well. Discuss your thoughts on the story. You may find the notes given below a helpful starting point.

Notes on the passage

This is a favourite Bible passage and one that offers us a model of pastoral care. It is significant that the story breaks all the accepted norms of the day and yet provides the opportunity for refreshment, encounter and relationship. The quality of the conversation and relationship means that the Samaritan woman sees Jesus for who he is. There is real dialogue as each seeks out what they can offer to, and receive from, the other.

Jesus opens a conversation with a woman with whom he should have no contact according to the social customs and rules of that time. Not only a woman, she is a Samaritan, and one with low social standing due to having had five husbands and now being with a man who would not take her for his wife. She is someone with whom Jesus, as a Jew, should not even have been speaking let alone asking her to give him a drink. Yet it is through this initiative that the woman's perceived views of the Jews are challenged and she comes to a point of asking, "have I just met the Christ?"(vs. 29)

There are four key points on relationship development that give us good principles of pastoral care.

- a) In initiating a conversation, Jesus shows acceptance of the woman, within the particular context and situation. He starts by receiving from her, in a simple drink of water. He does not place any judgement upon her.
- b) They identify, work through, and go beyond divisions that were recognised between them.
- c) Jesus shows great confidence in the woman. He believes in her even when she does not believe in herself. In this atmosphere of acceptance she is able to recognise her needs and Christ can speak into them.
- d) The Samaritan woman then goes away energised by what she has seen and heard – to tell others. She now becomes a missionary capable also of being the pastoral carer. As we build Christian community so we are more able to care for each other.

To discuss together

- How does this story reinforce or change the way that as elders and as a church we might offer pastoral care?
- What are our expectations when we offer pastoral care? Do we see it as life changing and missional both for the visitor and those being visited?

5. Skilled listening

One of the most important aspects of being a pastoral carer is to be able to truly hear what somebody is saying to us. This includes being able to hear without bringing our own agenda to bear on how we respond.

An exercise in listening

Break into pairs with one being the storyteller and one the listener. Ask the storyteller to speak for about three minutes on something that has been significant to them in the last few weeks whilst the listener remains totally silent. Then get the listener to repeat back to the storyteller as accurately as possible the story they have just heard. Then get people to reverse roles and repeat the exercise.

Gather people back together and discuss how the exercise felt. How easy or difficult was it, and what made it so?

Some thoughts on how we listen

It can be very hard for us to remain silent, as it is natural for us to want to share our point of view. It can also be difficult to listen attentively when not joining in the discussion. However, good listening is not the same as maintaining a conversation. It is a way of listening to others by letting them speak, to know that they have been heard, allowing them to explore their situation and to find their own answers to it. The listener enters into the situation of the other and is able to make appropriate prompts as they seek solutions. This skill is often known as 'empathic listening'. This can be quite a difficult thing to practice for people who want to have answers to questions and solutions for problems but it is important to develop the ability to listen in this way. It not only allows the listener to hear what the person is saying but also gives space and time to hear what God is saying through their words. Prayerful silence and careful consideration are part of the pastoral carer's tools for the task.

A prayer to share

Let there be love and understanding among us;
let peace and friendship be our shelter from life's storms
and may we always hear the voice of the other person.
Eternal God help us to walk with good companions
so that we may live with hope in our hearts,
love enough to share with others,
and a desire to do your will. Amen

6. Pastoral care and discipleship

The modern world is awash with thoughts and ideas about personal wellbeing and a widely held fascination with spirituality. We find all manner of spiritual issues discussed in magazines, with celebrities speaking about the ways in which they are searching for inner peace and well-being. Recent surveys have shown that people of faith are generally happier, more contented and live longer. Alongside this the big questions of life still remain. Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? Where is God in pain and suffering? How should we treat each other and our planet to protect the earth from destruction?

As pastoral care is offered and trust and friendship grow these deeper questions can often come into a conversation. The elder has now moved into the area of having a faith and discipleship discussion, which may be a source of either inspiration or dread, depending on the elder's own confidence in asking the big questions. What follows is a case study and a Bible study to help the eldership to think further about responding to questions around discipleship

a) Case study

A young divorcee in our church often talks with me about her life story and about the many sad and in some cases tragic events that have happened in her life to date. Her faith is strong despite life being difficult, both financially and in working long hours with two children to care and provide for. She has a very limited social life. She has many questions to ask when I visit about big issues such as "Why does God let bad things happen to good people?" and "Why is life not fair?"

For discussion:

- As a visitor how comfortable do you feel about discussing matters of faith, God and discipleship?
- What would you feel you were offering in this situation and what would you expect to receive from the encounter?
- Are there elders who you would see as being particularly gifted to listen and discuss faith matters? What gives them this ability?
- Do you need to have other people you can call upon to help?
- What could the eldership do to equip itself to discuss matters of faith and discipleship with the necessary confidence?

Bible study

Read Luke 24 and reflect together on the reading. The following questions may help:

- What is the situation the disciples are dealing with?
- What/who do they turn to for guidance?
- Would you expect to learn from a stranger?
- What takes place so people can recognise Jesus?

Reflection on the passage

There are several observations that can be noted from this familiar reading that are helpful for our understanding of pastoral care.

The first is that the disciples are grappling with a real and deeply upsetting event that has happened to somebody close to them. Their hopes have been dashed and they are engaging with scripture to try and understand what has happened. There is a real sense of wrestling with scripture and truth.

Secondly the disciples engage in a conversation with a stranger with an expectation that they will learn something from him and allow themselves to have their understanding challenged by him. This leads to a meaningful conversation and to the offer to share hospitality during which Jesus is recognised.

The challenge for those involved in pastoral care is finding the ability to recognise Jesus in our conversations and visits and to find appropriate ways to articulate the truth of the Gospel.

7. Practical help for pastoral visitors

It is important to remember that a helpful visit and conversation does not depend on theological qualifications, or even being very articulate. Sometimes silence is truly what is needed. What matters is “being there” for the other person as a fellow seeker after truth and meaning.

You may find the following advice helpful:

- a) Ask “may I come” and do not outstay your welcome. State clearly that the visits are on behalf of the church.
- b) Work out with the person how regular the visits will be (do not take on more than you can manage).
- c) Be prepared to receive – even a cup of tea is a gift.
- d) If you say you will do something, make sure you do it.
- e) Keep things in confidence unless you have permission to share the information.
- f) If somebody has a criticism of an individual or group encourage them to speak for themselves rather than through you.
- g) Phone calls or a note through the door can be a substitute for a visit, but not all the time.
- h) When appropriate an elder can invite people to come to their home.
- i) For those who find the opening conversations difficult, taking the church flowers or magazine can offer a good start.
- j) If you feel the conversations are moving into areas you feel uncomfortable with or beyond your understanding, ask permission to share this with the pastoral leader/minister and have matters passed on to those with expertise in the areas needed.
- k) Synods offer training and information on safeguarding for children and vulnerable adults, in addition to the [denominational guidance online](#). It is important to protect both visitors and those visited. Make sure that you have seen and understood the information available when setting up pastoral care systems.
- l) Remember that you are a church visitor, not a social worker or state carer. Do not offer levels of support that are not sustainable. If possible help the person to access the support they need from elsewhere. Awareness of, and adherence to, your boundaries and limits is important. An effective pastoral care system will have someone to whom you can refer your concerns so that you are not left to tackle difficult situations on your own.

8. Further resources

Your synod is likely to be able to offer support for equipping elders and congregations in pastoral care. Contact your synod office to see what is available.

The United Reformed Church offers local courses for discipleship development through *Training for Learning and Serving – Local Introductory Training Experiences* (TLS-Lite). Materials for these can be purchased through [the online store](#) and there is a flyer on how to start [a TLS-LITE group](#).

People who develop a deeper interest in pastoral care may want to undertake the one-year *Gateways into pastoral care* course which is part of '[TLS Classic](#)'.

Area 6: Prayer and Spirituality

1. United Reformed Church spirituality

United Reformed Church spirituality arises out of the understanding of the way in which the presence of God is made known. In contrast to traditions which place a central emphasis on the role of a priest, the United Reformed Church emphasizes the possibility of access to God through personal experience – in prayer, in the reading of scripture, in the community of the believers and in the daily round of life, at work or at home.

This spirituality is expressed in a variety of ways:

Openness to the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in an understanding of the Holy Spirit being at work throughout daily life. God is encountered in the home or at work, as well as in the shared worship life of the congregation.

Creativity. The openness to the Holy Spirit in every part of life leads to a development of new patterns of worship and prayer. The annual *Prayer Handbook*⁶, the contribution United Reformed Church writers have made to such publications as *Roots*⁷ and the development of creative liturgies in a number of churches are examples of this. But openness to the Holy Spirit also encourages an exploration of different ways of serving the community. The church related community work programme and the United Reformed Church's strong commitment to social justice are examples of this equally creative movement of the Spirit.

An emphasis on the local. The church has been seen fully in each local gathering of people. This emphasises the way in which God is at work amongst local communities. For example, when a church is without a minister, it is the people who carry the church through a vacancy or time of transition, with the assistance of an interim moderator.

Intellectual grappling with faith. In the Reformed tradition there is a well-rooted emphasis on allowing doubts and questions to be expressed, as part of a grappling with the contemporary issues of faith in each generation. This appeal to the mind and an emphasis on a scholarly tradition has provided another dimension to our understanding of spirituality.

6 <http://urcshop.co.uk/what-s-new>

7 <http://www.rootsontheweb.com/>

Through the scriptures. An emphasis on the importance of scripture has allowed people to order their lives and the life of the church through the reading, meditation upon and reflection on the scriptures. This is achieved through personal and communal Bible study.

For discussion

- Does this description of United Reformed spirituality make sense to you?
- To what extent is your elders' meeting already making use of this variety of ways of expressing spirituality in your worship and prayer time together? Are there further ideas here which you could use?

2. Enough faith to be an elder?

The URC leaflet [Called to be an Elder?](#) says this:

"The elder is no different from any other church member in that we are all called to develop and grow in faith, through prayer, worship, sacraments and learning. The call to eldership is a renewed call to these things as well. So the faith required is the same faith that makes us a Christian. But, at times we all feel lacking in faith, or commitment, or ability. We all feel inadequate in our various callings and service to the church. That is when we need the support and the faith of the rest of the church around us, as well as the grace of God."

The following prayer is usually used at a service where an elder is ordained:

"Eternal God, you have called us all to serve you in the world and to share your love with each other and our neighbours. Through the decision of this local church you have called (name/s) to serve us as an elder/elders. Give him/her/them the promised blessings of your Holy Spirit and fill him/her/them with fresh vision and courage, to lead us in the work you have called us to do. Make him/her/them wise with the mind of Christ, and give him/her/them the gifts he/she/they need to fulfil this service faithfully; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

It is as important for a church fellowship to remember to pray for their elders as it is for the elders themselves to remember to pray. All church members have a responsibility to pray, to read the Bible and other books and to reflect, so that they may grow spiritually. However, there is an additional importance in the spiritual development of elders as they are the spiritual leaders of the church.

Practicing this in your elders meeting

- a) Elders could each explain how they engage with prayer and develop their spiritual life, eg using Bible study notes, practicing a prayer discipline of some kind, belonging to a prayer fellowship or community.
- b) The elders could decide, as a group, to try doing something together, eg Using the same set of Bible study notes for a period of time, studying a book or using a web resource together.
- c) Many churches use a 'favourite hymns/songs of praise' type format for some services, but what about your elders leading a 'my favourite/ most powerful Bible verse' service, as a way of sharing together?

3. A Bible study

The United Reformed Church has produced *Guidelines on conduct and behaviour for elders* which can be found here as Handout 1. The document is also available on the [United Reformed Church website](#).

Questions for individual reflection

- a) Having read Handout 1, how does this document with its requirements for the character and behavior of an elder strike you?

Now compare this document with 1 Timothy 3: 1-7

“It is true that anyone who desires to be a church official wants to be something worthwhile. That’s why officials must have a good reputation and be faithful in marriage. They must be self-controlled, sensible, well-behaved, friendly to strangers, and able to teach. They must not be heavy drinkers or troublemakers. Instead, they must be kind and gentle and not love money. Church officials must be in control of their own families, and they must see that their children are obedient and always respectful. If they don’t know how to control their own families, how can they look after God’s people?

They must not be new followers of the Lord. If they are, they might become proud and be doomed along with the devil. Finally, they must be well-respected by people who are not followers. Then they won’t be trapped and disgraced by the devil.” (Contemporary English Version)⁸

It is interesting that when stating who should be a church official (overseer, elder, pastor) it seems to depend not so much on qualifications, gifts and abilities, but on character. An elder should command the respect of others, in the church, in the family and in the wider world. He or she should also be a person who is in control of themselves, whilst being a servant of the church and of the gospel.

- b) Do you see any relationship between the list in 1 Timothy 3. 1-7 and the *Guidelines for the conduct of elders*?

It can be argued that the character described in 1 Timothy 3. 1-7 is not produced by force of will, but by ‘growing up into Christ’ (Ephesians 4:15). There is a link between our characters and the respect others have for us, and our life of prayer and openness to the Spirit. Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit in terms of character traits or behaviour (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) and concludes “if we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit” (Galatians 5: 25).

- c) Can you think of ways in which your own character has been shaped by your discipleship as you have ‘grown up into Christ’?
d) What has been most helpful to you in your spiritual growth?
e) What most challenges you in this passage?

Now take the discussion into the whole eldership:

- f) Does the whole team of elders feel the same way about what challenges them in the passage?
g) In what ways can you, as elders, strengthen and encourage one another in your prayer and spirituality?

⁸ Contemporary English Version © Copyright © 1995 American Bible Society. All rights reserved.

4. Guidelines for praying with and for people

Many elders undertake pastoral visits to church members or adherents, and one way of building up the spiritual lives of others, assuring them of our care for them, and placing them into God's hands, is to pray for them and with them. Some elders are nervous about this, so here are some practical tips:

- a) Always ask permission before praying! You could start with 'do you mind if I pray for you?' and if the person is happy with this you could follow up with 'would you like me to pray with you right now?'. It is of course important to respect the answer you get. Some people are just not comfortable being prayed with, perhaps because of where they are and who else is around – eg in hospital.
- b) For someone who you know would like a prayer, and whose situation you know fairly well, you could take either a written prayer or a Bible verse with you, and then leave it with them once you have shared it together.
- c) Don't be frightened to use a well known prayer such as the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the Aaronic blessing (the Lord bless you and keep you...) or the Grace.
- d) Even extempore prayers don't need to be long and complicated. Sometimes a simple "Lord we place all that we have talked about into your hands. Bless and keep (name) in your love" will do very well.
- e) You could ask the person what they would particularly like you to pray for, and then use their words as far as possible.
- f) Remember to ask permission from them if you are going to share their prayer request in another place – eg at a church prayer meeting.

5. Developing the whole church's life of prayer and worship

There is a vital role for elders to play, not only to see that the 'pulpit is filled' on a Sunday (ie that a worship leader/preacher is arranged) but also to involve the church fellowship in leading worship according to their gifts. Church members and adherents can be involved in reading the Bible, or presenting it in a dramatic way, in leading prayers, in leading the music through instruments or singing, as well as in producing items for multi-sensory worship such as prayer stations, visual displays, or items for discussion. Don't forget to involve children or young people too, if you have them in the life of the church. It may well be that worship can be offered at different times of the week, not only on a Sunday, and in different ways ranging from traditional to café-style and the wide range of styles associated with [Vision4Life](#). The elders also have a responsibility to receive constructive feedback from the congregation so that the worship offered can grow and develop.

Prompts for thought and action

- In what ways can your eldership support the spiritual and worshipping life of the whole fellowship? Is it tempting to leave everything to visiting speakers and/or the minister?
- What would help or hinder some of your elders visiting another worshipping community to get some fresh ideas?
- Who are the people in your church fellowship who have the gifts to develop the prayer life of others?
- Are you enabling the church fellowship to pray for one another in a way which respects confidentiality?

Further resources

- Many ideas for ways of praying can be found in [Vision4Life](#).
- People who seek to develop a deeper interest in prayer may want to undertake the one-year *Gateways into prayer* course which is part of *Training for Learning and Serving*. Details are available through the [United Reformed Church website](#).
- Ideas for creative worship and much more can be found at the website for alternative ways of being church through [Fresh Expressions](#).

Area 6: Handout 1

Guidelines on conduct and behaviour for elders

1. Introduction

This paper sets down expectations of elders in relation to Ministers of Word and Sacraments and church related community workers (CRCWs) within the United Reformed Church. Parallel papers about the expectations of ministers and CRCWs are to be read alongside this document.

2. Basis of Union

The foundation for the conduct of ministers is in the Basis of Union, summarised in Schedule E paragraph 2, "Ministers must conduct themselves and exercise all aspects of their ministries in a manner which is compatible with the unity and peace of the United Reformed Church and the affirmation made by ministers at ordination and induction (Schedule C) and the Statement concerning the nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church (Schedule D) in accordance with which ministers undertake to exercise their ministry."

The relevant promises in Schedule C are

- a) "to live a holy life and to maintain the truth of The Gospel whatever trouble or persecution may arise",
- b) "to fulfil the duties of your charge faithfully, to lead the church in worship, to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, to exercise pastoral care and oversight, to take your part in the councils of the Church, and to give leadership to the Church in its mission to the world", and
- c) as a minister of the United Reformed Church "to seek its well-being, purity and peace, to cherish love towards all other churches and to endeavour always to build up the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church".

Elders "share with ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the pastoral oversight and leadership of the local churches, taking counsel together in the elders' meeting for the whole church and having severally groups of members particularly entrusted to their pastoral care. They are 'associated with ministers in all the councils of the church'. Elders promise at their ordination to "accept the office of elder of the United Reformed Church" and promise "to perform its duties faithfully".

Elders and members receive ministers at their induction or CRCWs at their commissioning 'as from God' to serve among them and with them in the world. They promise to pray for the minister/CRCW, to seek together the will of God and "give due honour, consideration and encouragement, building one another up in faith, hope and love".

Members promise, "in dependence on God's grace, to be faithful in private and public worship, to live in the fellowship of the Church and to share in its work", and to give and serve, as God enables them, "for the advancement of his kingdom throughout the world". They also promise "by that same grace, to follow Christ and to seek to do and to bear his will" all the days of their life.

3. Standards of Christian behaviour

3a Personal integrity and health

- To live a Christian life as persons of prayer and integrity.
- To be committed to growing in faith and discipleship, and developing the gifts each has been given.
- To be aware of the need of ministers, elders and members to have appropriate boundaries that safeguard personal and spiritual health and welfare, to promote healthy relationships with others and not to do anything to undermine the spiritual health of another.
- To recognise the need for ministers, elders and members to have a healthy lifestyle, and to balance demands on ministers'/CRCWs' availability and accessibility with respect for ministers'/CRCWs' time for family and friends, personal renewal, rest and spiritual growth.
- To maintain strict confidentiality of all matters shared in confidence, except when required by law to do otherwise, eg with regard to the safety of children, and to respect ministers' needs to maintain that same confidentiality.
- To exercise care and sensitivity when seeking counsel from others and in discussion about pastoral concerns, in order that the identity of any person shall not be revealed unless permission has been granted.
- To refrain from using privilege or power for personal advantage or gain, whether financial, emotional, sexual or material.

3b Relationships with ministers

- To work collaboratively with ministers/CRCWs and elders and members in all aspects of the life of the pastorate.
- To support ministers/CRCWs, through prayer, encouragement and partnership, including honouring the terms of settlement with regard to holidays, financial benefits and continuing training.
- To regard all persons with equal respect and concern and not to discriminate against anyone on the basis of gender, race, age, disability or sexual orientation, including ministers/CRCWs.
- To honour the ministers/CRCWs currently called to serve, and not to invite or encourage other ministers to be involved in the life of the church, or to offer pastoral care without the ministers'/CRCWs' consent.

- To refrain from raising pastoral issues with a previous minister/CRCW.
- To respect the work of previous ministers/CRCWs and deal honourably with their records. To welcome retired ministers/CRCWs as members and worshippers in the pastorate.

3c Relationship with elders, members and others

- To regard all persons with equal love and concern.
- To uphold values of faithfulness, trust and respect.
- To share leadership and pastoral care with others called to these purposes.
- To work collaboratively and to safeguard the contribution of the whole church in decision-making processes.
- To seek advice from others if in doubt about one's competence to deal with any issue or situation.
- To consider very carefully taking any position of responsibility and to support the direction of church life initiated through the ministers/CRCWs, elders and church meetings.
- Not to enter a sexual relationship with anyone in their care.
- Not to be alone with a child, children or young people in a place quite separate from others.

3d Relationship with councils of the Church

- To recognise that the pastorate is part of the wider United Reformed Church and that the ministers/CRCWs are committed to play their part in the wider councils of the Church and in ecumenical relationships.
- To engage positively with all the councils of the Church.
- To participate in synod's consultation and review of the pastorate as appropriate.

Area 7: Elder's responsibilities – the nuts and bolts

1. PLATO's wisdom

The Provincial Legal and Trust Officers' (PLATO) handbook is available online through the United Reformed Church website, and can be used as a source on legal, financial and property [matters affecting congregations](#).

Even online information can become outdated, and, as the introduction to the handbook states: *"Its contents have been carefully checked, but its accuracy cannot be guaranteed, neither at the date of preparation nor when viewed or printed. Accordingly, neither the members of PLATO nor the United Reformed Church can accept responsibility for the accuracy of the information the handbook contains."*

Each synod has its own trust officers who are available for advice and consultation. The sections below are not intended to be exhaustive but to give elders a starting point for their responsibilities as charity trustees.

2. Trusteeship

The members of the elders meeting (ie the minister together with the serving elders) are the charity trustees of the local church for the purposes of the Charities Act 2011 and are "the persons having the general control and management of the administration of a charity". They are also responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church.

- a) The Synod
Common questions are: What is the 'synod'? Who is the synod? Synod is the representation of local churches uniting together to establish and implement common policies aims and objectives. In effect, all United Reformed Church members are part of the synod! It has de-facto charitable status, but no 'legal person' so, like the local church, it cannot directly hold or grant interests in property. Most United Reformed Church synods meet twice a year and have an executive to manage business between meetings.
- b) The Synod Trust Company
Local churches and 'the synod' are not 'legal persons' and so neither can hold property assets in law. Historically these assets were held by the Congregational Unions or private trustees, but after 1972, and the formation of the United Reformed Church, ownership was brought

'in house'. To do this, charitable companies were formed called something like 'the United Reformed Church X Synod Incorporated'. Limited companies have a 'legal person' and directors are often the members of the synod executive.

There are other separate charitable entities:

- The Charities Act 2006 currently requires churches to register if their income exceeds £100,000 per annum. Churches with income lower than this count as a local church excepted charity and do not have their own charity registration number. Apart from not having to register, or make annual returns, excepted charities must comply with charity law; their trustees have the same responsibilities as trustees of any other charity.
- Synod Trust Company Charitable Registered Company: This holds assets and is sometimes referred to as the 'Synod Trust' or 'Property Trustee'.

c) So what are the elders' responsibilities?

Section B of the United Reformed Church Manual states that the minister presides at elders' meetings and sets out the elders responsibilities, focusing on the elders' Christian calling [and role in the church](#).

However, elders must also be aware of their legal obligations. Elders in England and Wales should be familiar with Charity Commission publication CC3 'The Essential Trustee' which sets out the qualities and obligations they have as the managing trustees of a charity: the local church. The equivalent document for elders in Scotland would be the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) publication [Guidance for charity trustees](#).

Under charity law, the elders, as trustees, have a duty to:

- act prudently,
- ensure the church is, and will remain, solvent,
- ensure the church is well run,
- deliver charitable outcomes for the benefit of the public,
- fulfil any reporting/accounting regulations,
- act in accordance with governing documents (United Reformed Church Act; church constitution),
- comply with requirements of other legislation – including health and safety, employment of staff, and safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults,
- exercise a duty of care when exercising their knowledge and skills,
- use assets reasonably and in furtherance of the charities' objects,
- avoid putting assets at undue risk, which implies having financial controls in place.

d) Points of reference

The trust officers of each synod are available for consultation by elders, and an early phone call can often sort out issues quickly.

There is also helpful information online:

England and Wales: Charity Commission

All the documents below are available from the [Charity Commission website](#).

CC3 The Essential Trustee: Identification, responsibility and role of Trustees

- CC3a Responsibilities of a Charity Trustee: A summary
- CC14 Investment of Charitable Funds: Basic principles
- CC26 Charities and Risk Management: Advice on monitoring and managing risk
- CC Faith in Good Governance: Advice for faith-based charities

Scotland: Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR)

There is an extensive collection of relevant documents which assist trustees with their various responsibilities available from the [OSCR website](#).

- e) Responsibilities of the Synod Trust Company
The Synod Trust Company is the freehold owner and property trustee of local church property and some assets (permanent endowment, manse funds etc). This is why legal documents have to be signed by the Synod Trust Company. This does not alter the fact that the elders control the day to day management of buildings and have responsibility for the care and upkeep of the buildings. The Synod Trust Company directors/trustees may, if they think fit, agree the alteration, disposal, leasing and acquisition of property. The main requirement for the trustees to act is a resolution from the church meeting, and supportive independent advice.
- f) Summary of the roles of elders, synod and the synod trust
The URC Assembly Report, 'Elders as Trustees' (2006), sets out the following useful summary of how the statutory trusts work in practice: "*No one body has sole responsibility, and the carrying out of the statutory trusts is a collaborative exercise in which each has its part to play. As a general guide, the elders' meeting recommends, the church meeting resolves, the synod approves, the trustees implement*". The full report can be found on pages 182-83 of the Reports to [General Assembly 2006](#).

3. What happens if things go wrong?

It is possible that elders can be held personally liable for debts or losses that the local church faces, or even as a result of their own negligence. However, this rarely occurs, and trustees will generally be protected provided that they act within the scope of their authority, within the law, with prudence, and within the terms of the church's governing documents.

Where a liability of the church arises (including where an elder has acted responsibly for the church) the cost of meeting a claim will be met out of church assets, or assets held by the Synod Trust Company on behalf of the church. In extreme circumstances, a Synod Trust Company may make a loan to the local church to cover the liability.

However, it cannot be stressed enough that it is fundamentally because of this latent personal liability that we encourage elders to comply with all legislation and to take professional external advice when dealing with matters where they do not have sufficient knowledge or expertise.

Examples of problems include: A member of the public falling on church property and lodging a claim against the church; and, a church having to compensate a commercial tenant for early termination of a lease due to asbestos.

Most churches have an insurance policy for their buildings and public indemnity/public liability cover. It is also possible to insure separately for trustee liability which covers the cost of settling claims made against the elders as trustees. However, it is more effective to hold public liability cover as experience so far suggests that it is unlikely that a claim would be brought against an individual. Most trustee indemnity insurance policies have clauses to the effect that trustees must act prudently and responsibly, so, having insurance does not mean you are relieved from your obligations – if anything you have to be more diligent, so as not to invalidate your insurance!

4. Likely areas of responsibility

Most congregations of the United Reformed Church have stewardship of buildings, some employ staff on a casual or permanent basis, and all of them are open to the general public. The sections below are intended to act as signposts to the kinds of responsibilities which are likely to find their way on to the agenda of the elders meeting. It does not claim to be a complete list!

Building maintenance

Elders are responsible for the overseeing of all building maintenance, and, where buildings are to be altered, permission should be sought from the Synod Property Committee acting on behalf of the synod and its trust company. The elders are also responsible for obtaining any statutory consents needed (ie planning permission, building regulation approval, conservation area consent and listed building consent). In many synods, listed building consent and conservation area consent is issued by the Synod Property Committee in consultation with the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee. Other consents are dealt with by the Local Authority. So if you want to alter your buildings you should, as a first step contact your Synod Office.

Letting or leasing buildings

Elders can hire out premises and grant licenses as long as exclusive occupation is not granted (ie the premises are shared). Only the Synod Trust Company, as the property trustee, can grant a lease of premises and it therefore becomes the 'landlord'. Elders must take particular care not to allow the exclusive use of part of the premises to others, or to take payment where there is exclusive use, because, after six months' occupation, this can trigger a statutory tenancy (ie a sitting tenant situation arises). Information on this from 2000 can be found in the [PLATO handbook](#), but consult the synod trust officer if in any doubt about a particular situation.

Finances

As trustees of the charity, the elders must ensure that all assets and funds are used according to the stated purposes of the charity. This is a collective responsibility of the eldership, supported by the treasurer.

In order to discharge their responsibilities, the elders need to be made aware of the financial status of the congregation on a continuing basis, and should have measures in place to ensure that the funds are used wisely. The elders are also required to ensure that funds are available to meet unforeseen emergencies.

An important aspect of controlling the funds is the accounts. For any charity whose total income exceeds £25,000 per annum, it is a requirement that the accounts are inspected by an independent person who understands finance. Suggestions are available from the United Reformed Church on [ways of presenting accounts](#) and synod trust officers can give guidance on producing annual accounts. Church treasurers are encouraged to consult the handbook of the [Association of Church Accountants and Treasurers](#) for up to date information. A subscription to its handbook and newsletter has been paid for by the URC for all local URC congregations. The websites of the Charity Commission (England and Wales) and OSCR (Scotland) are also worth consulting.

Gift Aid

Churches are considered to be charities, so have the right to claim Gift Aid on donations. Most churches already do this, but some smaller churches do not. This can add 25% to each pound donated by those who pay tax. HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) also has a *Gift Aid small donations scheme* whereby charities which already claim Gift Aid can submit claims for up to £1,250 per year of small cash donations without undue paperwork. The United Reformed Church gave [guidance on this](#) in 2013.

Annual report

Registered charities are obliged to produce an annual report and to submit it to the Charity Commission website. Excepted charities (ie most churches) are not required to produce an annual report, but it seems that it is a desirable item, since it should ensure that the church looks regularly at its purpose and how well it is meeting that purpose. An annual report need not be long or complex.

Investments

Those churches fortunate enough to have surplus funds or assets need to ensure they are managed wisely. With the low rates of interest on deposit accounts likely to continue for some time, leaving large sums of money on deposit earning around 0.5% interest or less is in fact letting the assets degrade, since inflation is significantly greater than interest rates. Some might see this as negligence.

It is possible to gain significantly greater returns through investments, albeit with some risks to capital. Many investments can return more than 4% without enormous capital risk. The trustees must evaluate the levels of risk and policy related to any investment decisions. The United Reformed Church has a [policy on ethical investments](#).

Employment

Churches which employ staff must take care to remain within the law. Elders are responsible for ensuring that they meet all of the legal requirements in relation to employment law, taxation, health and safety, as well as holiday, leave of absence, parental leave and sick leave. If it is absolutely necessary to employ staff, it is wise to seek advice and ensure that the church can meet all the legal requirements well before starting the recruitment process. In many cases it may be better for small churches to consider providing essential services such as cleaning, caretaking and music by means of a contractual arrangement rather than employment contract.

Risk management

Careful reflection on Matthew 25.14-30 or Luke 19.11-27 might suggest that timidity in engaging with God's mission is one of the biggest risks that churches face. However, elders are responsible for undertaking a risk assessment for the church, looking carefully at all of the possible consequences of actions taken or failed to be taken. Obvious ones are related to building defects, but there are others related to letting the premises and the people who use the building when it is let. There are also issues related to finance, liability for the actions of church members and other elders, and risks associated with the safeguarding of children, young people, and vulnerable adults. Such a list needs to be reviewed regularly and actions taken to mitigate the risks. The Health and Safety Executive provide some very comprehensive information about legislation and Risk Assessments on [their website](#) and recommended reading from there would include the Health and Safety at Work Act and the leaflet, *Five Steps to Risk Assessment*. In addition to keeping spaces clear, tidy and safe, the kinds of areas which elders should have in hand include:

- *Fire policy and risk assessment*
You should have one, and it should be reviewed annually! See 'Fire Safety Risk Assessment – [Small and medium places of worship](#)'.
- *Gas safety certificates*
Must be obtained annually for all let property, including manses and ideally for all other premises – don't just rely on a servicing receipt.
- *Electrical safety testing*
A safety certificate should be obtained every five years for the property wiring and fixed appliances. Portable Appliance Testing (PAT) should be undertaken biannually on all appliances over three years old.
- *Safeguarding policies*
Policies regarding child protection and care of vulnerable adults should be reviewed annually. Advice is available from most synod offices and the [United Reformed Church](#).
- *Quinquennial property survey*
Elders have a duty to maintain the premises and keep them safe. The quinquennial survey is important and is applicable to all churches, not just those that are listed. Contact the synod office for details where necessary.
- *Asbestos survey and management plan (if applicable)*
The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 (part of the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974) applies to all non-residential properties. Elders are obliged to ensure that any asbestos is identified, and the only way this can be done

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is by an independent surveyor (so, any liability resulting from an error or omission is covered by the surveyor's professional liability insurance). If asbestos is present then a management plan is required, which is, in effect, a risk assessment with advisory notes relating to maintenance. All contractors on site should be asked to acknowledge that they have read the survey and management plan.

Area 8: Next Steps

Further development

A glimpse of the United Reformed Church's commitment to being a church in which all people learn and grow [is available](#).

It is important for elders to have opportunities to continue deepening their faith and building the skills needed to be an effective elder. Sometimes people can get so engrossed in the jobs given to them within the church that faith development gets pushed to the margins due to time constraints. Clearly, as part of the leadership of the local church, this must not be allowed to happen for elders. Building time into meetings for joint study and prayer, and holding away days are good ways for elders to learn together. However, as individuals carry out their role as an elder, they may become aware that there are certain areas that could be developed further for the good of the church and their personal discipleship. This may come from a sense of their strengths, or an awareness of a potential weakness. What's important is that they know where to seek the relevant support for growth.

As part of its commitment to the eldership, the local church needs to make sure that an elder has the opportunity to address these areas so that they carry out their role with confidence and to the best of their ability. Elders often invest time and energy in the church at sacrificial levels, and a corresponding investment of encouragement and resources in elders will see benefits for the church.

Where to look?

- a) *Talk to the minister/interim moderator and other elders;* they may know of suitable learning opportunities such as courses, local events, or skilled people who can give tuition. Sometimes a carefully recommended book is what's needed, or a couple of hours sitting with the right person can transfer skills and ideas that move matters forward disproportionately. Eg are there elders within a congregation who could become proficient in using emails and social media if they were willing to be shown the ropes by one of the young people in a neighbouring congregation?
- b) *Seek out local provision.* The skills and knowledge needed by elders as trustees often overlap with that of voluntary sector providers, so look out for appropriate courses offered by community groups and/or local councils. Churches are not the only bodies which have to manage buildings and volunteers, ensure good practice in safeguarding, or prepare accounts correctly. Taking part in a course that is run by a secular body can be a good way to meet people from outside the church and to have some interesting interfaith conversations.

- c) *Consider setting up a Training for Learning and Serving –Local Introductory Training Experience (TLS-LITE) group.* Sometimes there is a hunger for deeper knowledge of the Bible and greater involvement in leading worship as part of the spiritual responsibilities of elders. Materials for TLS-LITE can be purchased through the [United Reformed Church online store](#) and there is a flyer on [how to start a TLS-LITE group](#).
- d) *Contact the synod office.* The officers of the synod will be able to advise on ways of developing a variety of skills and knowledge, whether that is to do with leading worship, effective pastoral care, keeping accounts or maintaining buildings. They know who looks after such areas in local parts of the synod and will be able to suggest which of their colleagues is the most appropriate to respond to each request.
- e) *Contact the synod training officer.* Most synods have someone who fulfils the role of a training officer, even though their job title may vary from education and learning enabler to training and development officer; they can give advice to individuals and are also available to come and lead local churches elders' events. Do make use of this resource – they are there to help.
- f) *Participate in an event organised by a resource centre for learning.* The Windermere Centre, Northern College/Luther King House in Manchester, Westminster College in Cambridge, and the Scottish College all offer a range of learning opportunities of relevance to elders. Contact details can be found on the [United Reformed Church website](#).
- g) *Enroll in [Training for Learning and Serving \(TLS\)](#).* There are a variety of ways of using TLS for individual development, ranging from taking a one-year course without assignments, to enrolling for three years and being eligible for recognition by the synod or accreditation by the Assembly in some form of lay ministry. There are examples where an individual has enrolled on a one-year course in pastoral care or prayer with the express intention of leading a group on the subject in their local church at the same time.