



The  
United  
Reformed  
Church



*Am I being called to the*  
**Ministry of  
Word and  
Sacraments?**

# *Am I being called to the* **Ministry of Word and Sacraments?**

## **Introduction**

The booklet has been primarily written for those who are exploring a call to ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacraments (hereafter ‘minister’) in the United Reformed Church (URC).

This booklet, specific and limited in its scope, is in two parts. Part one explores ‘call’ and the discernment process and also describes the URC’s candidating and assessment processes. Part two details the expected characteristics of ministers, provide an overview of the role and its core responsibilities and looks at the various working patterns for ministers.

In the United Reformed Church ministers can be stipendiary or non-stipendiary and the information in this booklet applies to both; see page 10 for information on the four models of non-stipendiary work.

We hope this booklet will be a useful tool in your discernment process.

## **Part One**

### **Discerning a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments**

*“The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening.’”* 1 Samuel 3:10 (NIV)

As Samuel learnt, if God is calling you, the calling won’t stop; and when you hear and recognise God’s call, it’s quite likely that you’ll feel surprised, maybe scared and daunted, perhaps irritated by this unwelcome intrusion into your existing life. Call has been described as “a voice in your head that

won't go away" and "a deep inner conviction that God wants me to devote my life to their work in a very specific way". Call is often first heard in the words of other members of the Church "have you ever thought that ...?", "Do you know, I could really see you as ..." If you've heard those words of challenge, and find that the thought does not go away, perhaps you need to explore a little further...

So, what to do after beginning to wonder if you might be experiencing a sense of call?

Discovering your vocation requires paying close attention to what is going on inside you as well as what the Holy Spirit may be saying to you through the voices of the church in the mouths of our sisters and brothers.

*"Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."*

*Frederick Buechner*

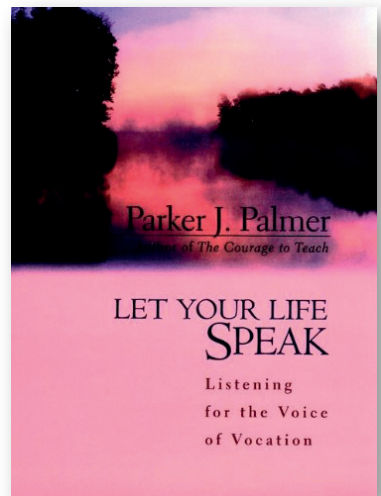
So, prospective candidates will want to draw closer to Jesus, spend more time practising the spiritual disciplines of prayer, personal Bible study and worship as they start to understand their calling and begin to explore it with those they trust.

As prospective candidates "go public" and begin the more formal process they will find that both they and the Church are jointly engaged in working out what is right as, together, they test the call to the ministry of Word and Sacraments (hereafter ministry).

### **Further reading:**

*Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker J Palmer

For a wider perspective on 'call' see this paper from the October 2016 meeting of Mission Council: **Understanding call and its practical implications**



# The candidating process

## The pre-assessment phase

Candidates must satisfy the **pre-assessment criteria** before embarking on the formal candidating process. Key among the criteria are:

- Be in membership of the URC for at least two years
- Be at least 18 years old when training starts (noting that the discernment process can start before this)
- Formally apply for training before your 53rd birthday – with ordination to stipendiary ministry taking place by the age of 58 (noting that there is no upper age limit for non-stipendiary service)
- Demonstrate ability to undertake the academic aspects of ministerial training.

This pre-assessment phase is an important stage in the process of becoming a minister and shouldn't be hurried – it may take two or more years and

will be undertaken with the support and cooperation of the local church and Synod.

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## The enquiry stage

Those exploring a call to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments should arrange to meet with their local church minister or interim moderator – this will be an exploratory meeting, and precedes a meeting with the Synod Moderator or their representative.

The initial meeting with the Moderator will be informal and will include checking the prospective candidate fulfils all pre-assessment criteria. If there are criteria that the potential candidate does not meet the Moderator will either discuss any steps that could be taken to help the candidate fulfil the criteria, or, where this is not applicable/appropriate, may discuss other suitable forms of service the candidate may offer the Church.

During this enquiry stage all potential candidates are encouraged to attend an Enquirers Event – these are held twice a year – one of them is online and one is face-to-face – and organised by the Ministries department at Church House. Contact your Synod office or the Ministries office for more information.

Potential candidates then move on to the formal assessment stage.

## **The formal assessment stage**

There are three key stages to the formal assessment process

### **The Church Meeting interview and decision**

If the decision is not to recommend the candidate will not proceed to the Synod stage.

### **The Synod interviews and decision**

Synods oversee arrangements for the candidates assesses services, any placements or ‘shadowing’ of ministers. The Synod interview will have access to information and reports from the Church Meeting and all information will be used in helping the Synod make its decision. If the decision is not to recommend the candidate will not proceed to the Assessment Conference.

Prospective candidates must receive the commendation of both local Church Meeting and Synod before they will be invited to attend an Assessment Conference.



### **The Assessment Conference**

In the URC Assessment Conferences take place twice a per year – normally in March and in November and each lasts two days (from a Friday lunchtime to a Sunday lunchtime).

During the Conference prospective candidates can expect to speak on/ be questioned about a very wide variety of topics including: their Christian journey, their sense of call, their understanding of the Bible, their awareness of the variety of ministerial situations and their willingness to serve in them, their awareness of the attitudes and skills needed in pastoral care; their own character and commitment to personal development, their awareness of issues around local/national ecumenism, their understanding of the Church's mission and how their ministry could contribute to it and, and, and ... the list really does go on.

And that's, in part, because ministry is not 'just' a job with a tightly defined job description, it's a response to being called by God.

The Assessment Board makes the final decision as to whether a prospective candidate is accepted for training. If accepted the candidate will become an ordinand and will study at one of the three URC Resource Centres for Learning.

More information on the candidating and assessment process can be found [in this paper](#).

More information on training – including information on the URC's three Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs) – can be found in [Education for Ministry Phase One](#) booklet.

## Part Two

### The expected characteristics of Ministers

Spend just a little while talking to a group of United Reformed Ministers and you will soon discover that the Ministry of Word and Sacraments is very far from a 'one size fits all' affair. Those whom God has called to this specific ministry will have shared common characteristics – but, as they will also be bringing the essence of their self to their ministry, there will obviously be differences in the way each minister operates.



These core expectations, or 'Marks of Ministry' are listed below. It's quite a list – but don't be too daunted. Fulfilling God's call is always made possible by the grace of the Holy Spirit – and you will be trained! The pre-assessment process makes it clear it looks for potential and character in prospective candidates – not what they already know.

- A faithful disciple of Jesus Christ: committed to continually seeking to live a holy life in private and public and sustained by a rhythm of prayer, Bible reading and worship.
- A person of integrity and resilience: self-aware. Willing to seek support when needed. Ready to deal with conflict when necessary and committed to their own lifelong learning.
- A contextual theologian: rooted in the Reformed tradition and delighting in Scripture and able to communicate their own faith with others
- A worship leader and preacher: with the ability to both craft and lead worship and effectively 'break open' God's Word in preaching.
- A pastor: making time to walk in love alongside others; listening deeply, prayerfully supporting, rejoicing, and grieving – and wise in knowing when those you are pastoring need additional or specialised help from others.
- A leader and collaborator: someone who can work in and lead teams, who is aware of their own leadership style and open to learning with

and from others – and able to identify and nurture leadership abilities in others. Willing to take responsibility for one’s own mistakes and seek restoration where necessary – and committed to demonstrating God’s love for people.

- A missionary and evangelist: Passionate about and active in sharing the Gospel and equipping others to share the Gospel and live Christ-filled lives.
- A public figure: representing the Church in ecumenical, community and other settings; committed to speaking truth to power when needed.
- A clear communicator: someone who can write and speak well and who is committed to helping other find their voice
- A committed participant in the councils of the Church
- A reformer: wise, bold, and humble in helping individuals and congregations discern and respond to the leading of the Spirit.

For more detail on the Marks of Ministry please see pages one and two of **Section K** of *The Manual*.

## Roles and responsibilities of ministers

Or, to put it another way, what do ministers do? Well, it’s varied! (The information in this section refers to ministers working in pastoral charge – ministers working in other roles will be working to a separate and specific job description.)

Some uninitiated outsiders may look at a minister’s life and think that their main role and focus is leading and preaching at Sunday worship; but that’s obviously very far from the truth! The skills and attributes detailed in the ‘Marks of Ministry’ (see above) provide excellent insight into the role’s scope and breadth – but are there key responsibilities that shape the working life of ministers in pastoral charge? One minister identified two:

**“Perhaps the first responsibility is to pay attention to what’s happening in the congregation and the community: supporting the congregation as they work out what God is calling them to do, helping them articulate and action their vision and purpose. Standing with the congregation,**





**even holding them to account as they seek to deliver on their vision, and encouraging them to be the faithful people of God whatever the situation. And, right from the start, look to build relationships with the congregation(s) and communities ... without relationships you won't get anywhere. The congregation needs to feel loved – aim to love your congregation as much as you love God (and that's not always easy).**

And of course, alongside everything ministers do to facilitate congregations to flourish, there are dozens of other activities and meetings that take a minister's time.

What appointments might be in a Minister's diary? Any or all of the following: meeting members

of their congregation for pastoral reasons; involvement in building projects; personal prayer and Bible Study; attending Church Meeting or an Elders' meeting; preparing for a baptism, wedding or funeral; leading a Bible Study or school assembly; running a Messy Church session; meeting with other ecumenical/secular community leaders to discuss joint working or local issues; preparing for worship and writing a sermon. (And this just gives a flavour ... almost anything can and does come across a minister's desk!)

*'ministry doesn't just happen inside local churches'*

As you explore your call, we'd strongly recommend speaking to one or more URC ministers – such conversations will be strongly encouraged as part of the pre-assessment process.

## **Working patterns of Ministers**

### **Local church ministry**

Local church ministry is usually exercised in joint or group pastorates with one minister serving a number of churches. They will always be working alongside the Elders and may also be working with ecumenical partners or in a team with Church Related Community Workers and/or other local church leaders.

### **Special Category Ministers**

The United Reformed Church recognises that ministry doesn't just happen inside local churches and so has a number of Special Category Minister (SCM)

posts for wide-ranging more specialised posts which cover everything from hospital, student and industrial chaplains to working as a pioneer minister with a focus on city nightlife or ... A maximum of 8% of the total number of stipendiary ministers can be designated as SCM posts – and at the time of writing (autumn 2020) that equates to 25 SCM posts.

## **Working overseas**

URC ministers, after a period of specialised training, may serve abroad, most often on limited-term appointments in local churches or theological colleges in six regions: Africa, Europe, East Asia, SE Asia, and the Caribbean. If working overseas is of interest please contact the Global and Intercultural Ministries office at Church House for more information.

## **Other opportunities**

Administrative and management roles at Church House and across the Synods are also open to ministers – and of course some ministers are called to be Synod moderators.

## **Non-stipendiary service**

Many prospective candidates choose to serve in a non-stipendiary (paid) capacity and, in the URC, there are four main models of non-stipendiary service:

- 1) Service in a congregation as part of a team – limited in scope and nature.
- 2) Pastoral charge of a small congregation or serving as part of a team of ministers looking after a group of churches.
- 3) Ministers in secular employment focussing on serving in their place of work (or leisure). Such ministers relate/are connected to a local church or Synod.
- 4) Locally ordained ministry based in a local church or mission project. Ministers serving as such will have had locally focussed training – normally lasting two years – designed to meet the needs of that congregation and community. Each such post needs to have a clear job description and person specification for the role and locally ordained ministers are not able to transfer to another type of NSM ministry. For more detail on locally ordained ministry please read Paper H2 from the November 2018 meeting of Mission Council – it can be found on pages 67-71 of the [full set of papers here](#).

## Transferring between non-stipendiary and stipendiary service

Although General Assembly recognises that there will always be ministers who want/need to move between the two types of service it advises that “ministry according to the initial training (should) be exercised for a reasonable period first”.



Decisions about transfers are taken by the Assessment Board at an Assessment Conference and responsibility for any changes to a candidates training lies with the Education and Learning panel at the Assessment Conference.

### A prayer for those exploring God's call

Loving God  
guide me as I seek your way for me;  
When I am overwhelmed by the thought of my future  
help me to search openly  
and listen for your call.  
Set before me the example of Jesus Christ;  
Fill me with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit  
that I may respond generously in loving service  
with the special gifts you have given me  
trusting in your grace.  
Amen.

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This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those who have been asked to consider taking on a role in the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at [www.urc.org.uk/ask](http://www.urc.org.uk/ask)



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