

Called to be an Elder is this for you?

What does it mean to be called?

Since you have been given this leaflet, it either means that your potential colleagues on the elders' meeting, and/or your own congregation and minister, have seen you as being a possible elder within the life of the congregation and the whole United Reformed Church. Or it may be that you have become aware that God is calling you to new or other service in the Church and you wish to know more about eldership.

So the first thing to say about being an elder is that it is a ministry to which you are called by God. This call can come through others because of what they discern about you and within you and it can also be something which you feel within yourself. So you have to ask,

Is this a call to which I can say no?

Being an elder means you are also called to be part of a 'team', since an elder is someone who joins with others to form the elders' meeting of the local congregation.

So you might want to ask yourself,

How do I feel about being a team member, and can I commit myself to working with the others who are elders in this congregation?

What do elders do?

The answer to this will depend very much on the particular life and circumstances of your own local congregation, and even the size of your elders meeting.

The functions of eldership in the United Reformed Church have been laid down in the Basis of Union as follows:

- 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 for the congregation, in which the minister is joined by elders having 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 ... 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, 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 general oversight of all 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.

The elders will together already be fulfilling these responsibilities to a greater or lesser extent, and you are being asked to join them in continuing with this work. You might like to ask a serving elder to work through this list with you to see how the elders' meeting deals with these duties. Some responsibilities are ongoing, others are more dependent on circumstances. Some may be done by small groups, some by everyone. Every congregation will deal with them in different ways. Remember this is a collective work and not all to be done by you alone, nor do you have to be gifted in all the areas suggested!

What would I do as an elder?

Within your elders' meeting and in the life of your congregation there are particular and specific roles and ministries which need to be undertaken. It could be that others are wanting you to take on one or more of these because of the gifts and skills they have already seen within you. This could be worth talking about with others and asking them what they felt your particular contribution could be within the context of being an elder in your congregation or within the wider denomination.

It would also be worth examining what you think are your strengths and weaknesses. It may be helpful to choose from the following descriptions of the elders' role, suggested by elders themselves, the words which you would feel most confident in fulfilling as far as being an elder is concerned.

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

Are there other words which you would add to describe how you see this ministry for yourself?

Can I give the time and energy to it?

Only you can answer this. However, after exploring what it means to be called to be an elder and thinking about what you might do if you responded positively to that call, this question then needs careful consideration.

It would be wrong to suggest that being an elder does not mean a commitment of time, energy and a sharing and giving of self. All ministry within the church is in some way costly.

This is something to talk over with your potential colleagues or whoever has approached you about the eldership. What you do as an elder and the length of time or specific service that you give depends on your own local circumstances. Congregations and elders' meetings can see their role in different ways and local churches vary in what is asked of their eldership. Elders' meetings are usually held monthly, and would be seen as having a priority over most other things in terms of attendance.

In addition, being an elder might mean spending time with your colleagues over and above the normal elders' meeting. In many churches elders take part in study days, training days and even residential retreats are not uncommon. So ask yourself,

*Is this a priority I can make
and to which I am willing
to give my time and energy?*

You also need to ask:

*Are there other things
which I need to give up or let go of,
to enable me to say yes to this new
ministry of eldership?*

Does your church have a policy which releases people from other responsibilities when asking them to carry out another piece of ministry, in order to avoid the 'too few doing too much' syndrome? Whatever your own commitments at present, it would be right to check with colleagues, elders and others just what would be involved in terms of time and priorities related to this calling.

Is there training for eldership?

In recent years the URC has begun to take this matter more seriously. In 1989 the General Assembly asked each synod to ensure that someone be responsible within their own synod for the development of eldership training.

Do you know who that is within your synod?

Synod or your own congregation might already be providing some kind of training for elders, so it would be of value to make some enquiries about this.

How long will I serve as an elder?

It's worth recalling that if you say yes to this call to be an elder you become an elder of the United Reformed Church and not just an elder of your own congregation. Your eldership will be recognised throughout the denomination, even if you move to another congregation. In fact you become an elder for life.

This may fill you with some apprehension, and make you wonder if you could sustain such a ministry throughout your life! However, there is a difference between being an elder for life, and exercising the ministry of eldership, which may only be for a specified length of time or in a particular given situation. It might well be that while you will remain an elder; you will not necessarily be called upon to be active in that ministry. Indeed, for the sake of your colleagues on the team and the life and mission of the church, you should be willing to be released from eldership responsibilities when your circumstances no longer allow you to give the proper time and energy to fulfil your initial calling.

Have I the faith to be an elder?

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 is an extract from the URC book of services, *Worship from the United Reformed Church* (p255), which outlines the denomination's present understanding of eldership, and the affirmations which you would be asked to make if you were willing to respond to this call.

'The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service. To equip them for this ministry he gives them particular gifts, and calls some of his servants to exercise them in offices duly recognised within the Church. Some are called to the ministry of Word and Sacraments; some are called to be elders.'

The Statement concerning the Nature, Faith and Order of the United Reformed Church is read ...

'Do you accept this statement and confess again your faith in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

I do.

In dependence on God's grace do you reaffirm your trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and your promise to follow him and to seek to do and to bear his will all the days of your life?

I do.

Do you believe that the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people?

I do.

After the ordination, the minister asks the members of the church to accept the ministry of all the elders to be inducted:

Do you, the members of this local church, accept and receive (name/s) to serve as an elder/elders among you?

We do.

Will you encourage and support him/her/them, and respond to his/her/their ministry acknowledging that it comes to you from God?

We will.

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.

So, what do you think?

Is this a calling and a ministry to which you might respond by taking a step in faith and saying 'Yes'?

A Prayer

Loving God, guide me now as I seek to find your way for me.

Create in me a renewed dedication to your service.

Set before me the example of Christ Jesus.

Fill me with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

This I pray, trusting in your grace.

Amen.