

Daily Devotions  
*from the United Reformed Church*

The Basis of Union  
part 2



Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> August – Friday 7<sup>th</sup> August 2020

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Introduction

Unlike Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox or Lutheran churches we don't always recite a credal statement in our weekly worship; sometimes leading to a sense that the United Reformed Church doesn't have firm or fixed beliefs. We do, of course, use the *Statement on the Nature, Faith and Order* at inductions and ordinations of ministers and elders and this is reasonably well known in its responsorial form. Less well known, however, is our *Basis of Union*. The *Basis* is a foundational constitutional document which sets out our theology. It was adopted at the formation of the United Reformed Church, can only be amended by the General Assembly after a full consultation process. It is the theological foundation upon which our church is built and deserves to be better known. Over the next few weeks we are going to be reading through the *Basis*, often with a piece of Scripture, and reflect upon each part of our theological foundations.

Prayer

For the elders among us we pray for strength and steadiness,  
to care with understanding,  
to lead with confidence,

to guide the Church wisely and well.  
We pray that in giving they will receive –  
joy in serving,  
the thanks of friends,  
and growth in faith, hope and love.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

public worship by a Minister of the local church (or, during a pastoral vacancy, by the interim moderator) acting with the serving elders. (23)

## Reflection

I thank God for elders – for this pattern of Christian service, and for a host of fine people who fulfil it. Eldership is one of the treasures of the URC. Here are some of the reasons we value it so highly.

Elders are both lay and ordained. With roots and experience in wider society, they lead and care for the church. Appointed as individuals, they work as a team. They are chosen by the local congregation, for a role recognised by the URC as a whole. We ordain them because this ministry – linking church and world, locally rooted, operating as a team – is an ‘essential element’ of our shared life, a key ingredient for healthy Church order.

I notice two practical themes in today’s scripture passage. One is vigilance: ‘keep watch ... be alert’. An elder lives in two worlds – Church and wider society. To stand on the boundary is to see the dangers and the opportunities. The Church is not an island. We belong to the local community, and we represent Christ within it. Elders are well placed to understand this.

The second theme is generosity: ‘God’s grace ... support the weak ... it is blessed to give’. Eldership is demanding. It asks people to offer to God a lot of time, energy and compassion. Pastoring needs patience. Leadership must be given in love. Caring can be costly. Supporting others will stretch us. Yet this is God’s church, brought into being through the suffering love of Jesus. We are not in this on our own. Grace and goodness are behind us, with us and among us.

Eldership is a big ask. I see many people in the URC who have given a big answer to that ask, and I thank God for them.

## Saturday 1st August Basis of Union 18

The Rev’d Michael Hopkins, Minister of a group of Methodist and United Reformed Churches based around Farnham, Surrey, and Clerk of the URC General Assembly.

## Basis

The United Reformed Church, under the authority of Holy Scripture and in corporate responsibility to Jesus Christ its ever living head, acknowledges its duty to be open at all times to the leading of the Holy Spirit and therefore affirms its right to make such new declarations of its faith and for such purposes as may from time to time be required by obedience to the same Spirit. At the same time the United Reformed Church accepts with thanksgiving the witness borne to the catholic faith by the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. It recognises as its own particular heritage the formulations and declarations of faith which have been valued by Congregationalists, Presbyterians and members of Churches of Christ as stating the Gospel and seeking to make its implications clear.

(18)

## Reflection

Words and their meaning change over time. For instance, in the late 14th century, the French word *flus* (meaning ‘a heavy flow’) and the Latin *fluxus* (which generally meant ‘a little loose or slack’) were the roots for the English word *flux*, coined to describe a certain unpleasant condition that kept people hovering near their village cesspit. Fast forward 300 years in 1620 ‘flux’ was recorded as meaning ‘a continuous change’, the definition we are familiar with today.

The same kinds of change are true in the way that we use language to speak of God. The Basis of Union contains a Statement of Faith drafted in the late 1960s, based upon a similar statement agreed by the Presbyterian Church of England in 1956. By the 1990s deficiencies were obvious, such as using “men” when we meant “people”. The first

General Assembly that I attended in 1996 began the process of agreeing a new Statement of Faith, not so much changing the theology but changing the language used to speak of God in ways that were more easily understood by more people.

For some of us today, the ancient Creeds of the Church universal (of which we were a part for the fifteen centuries before the Reformation), and the Confessions that our Reformed ancestors wrote in the seventeenth century clearly speak of God, while others find it much harder to discern God through them. This is why each generation requires, or at least demands, its own ways to speak of God, almost to borrow a phrase from the preface of the Congregational Hymnary (1916). What language do you need to borrow to speak of God today?

### **Prayer**

God, may your Spirit speak to me in language my heart can embrace,  
in language my mind can understand,  
and in the language of silence that sinks deep into my soul.  
God, may your Spirit speak to me  
words of transformation,  
words of empowerment,  
words of grace;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Sunday 2nd August Psalm 8](#)

Dan Morrell, Media for Ministry Consultant (Yorkshire Synod), member of St Andrew's Roundhay, Leeds.

O Lord, our Lord, throughout the earth how glorious is your name,  
and glorious too where unseen heavens your majesty proclaim.  
On infant lips, in children's song, a strong defence you raise  
to counter enemy and threat, and foil the rebel's ways.

When I look up and see the skies which your own fingers made,  
and wonder at the moon and stars, each perfectly displayed;

[Friday 7th August Basis of Union 23](#)

The Rev'd John Proctor, General Secretary of the URC, belongs to Downing Place URC in Cambridge.

Acts 20:17, 28, 31-35

From Miletus (Paul) sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. When they came to him, he said to them: "... Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son ... Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. I coveted no-one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

### **Basis**

Some are called to be elders. They 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 shall be associated with Ministers in all the councils of the church. Elders elected by the church meeting are ordained to their office and are inducted to serve for such limited period as the church which elects them shall determine. All elders are eligible for re-election, and those elected shall enter upon their office by induction. On moving to another local church an ordained Elder is eligible for election by that church to the elders' meeting, and, if so elected, is inducted. The ordination and induction of elders shall be carried out in the course of

think that we may have been heading down a cul-de-sac, I have stayed with them - sometimes reluctantly! When we have found ourselves in unfamiliar territory (never admitting that we could be lost), we have worked out a route together.

Because through the journeying and listening to each other comes the realisation that the answer is and, always has been, right there amongst and within them. After years of being told what is best for them by professionals and despite what messages they may have been given by society and the world around them, they come face to face with the reality that they have the gifts and talents. Gifts and talents that can transform their lives and communities in the ways that they, not others, deem appropriate.

The journeys have always been two-way processes. At times, things have not been easy and there have been many bumps in the road plus a few near crashes. But along the way I have found myself being challenged and changed by the adventures with my co-travellers. Ultimately, together we have been able to discover the transformative power of God - often hidden in plain sight.

### **Prayer**

Boundless and transformative God,  
teach us to be good co-travellers.  
Help us to know when to do justice,  
how to love kindness, and remind us to walk humbly,  
always with You. Amen (Micah 6:8)

then must I ask, “why do you care? Why love humanity?  
And why keep every mortal name in your memory.

Yet such as us you made and meant and meant just less than gods to be;  
with honour and with glory, Lord, you crowned humanity.  
And then dominion you bestowed for all made by your hand,  
all sheep and cattle, birds and fish that move through sea or land.

John Bell © 1993 Wild Goose Resource Group, Iona Community

You can hear a verse of this Psalm here  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCq3bETGz8E>

### **Reflection**

Why do you care? Why love humanity?

I was asked similar questions by commuters when I was part of a project run each Holy Week a couple of years ago in Stockport. We offered free coffee/orange juice and a hot cross bun to commuters on their way to the local station between 6-8am. Within the bag contained a short ‘meaning of Easter’ card and why we’re doing what we’re doing.

It was fascinating seeing the ‘progression’ of people during the week. From hesitancy, to acceptance, to appreciation, despite this progress, still pure confusion at times! Of course, people never really had time to stop and chat. We were well aware of that. The main thing is they knew we care.

It went down in history, people remembered us from one year to the next. A tiny little thing to really brighten up someone’s, inevitably uneventful, commute.

Studies have shown that depression is far more common amongst commuters. Indeed a potentially mind-numbing part of many people’s

day. Of course, we're now in a world where many companies are considering abolishing the commute. COVID-19 has taught us valuable lessons on the productivity of working from home.

But they're not alone, depression and anxiety exists in all areas of our society. As a church we are called to love our neighbour. In a world desperate for prayer, desperate to know someone cares, we must show that.

People are inquisitive. People were genuinely interested to hear about our story. And boy do we (all) have a good story to tell!

We care. We love humanity. And, so important it was mentioned twice: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (NRSV).

## Prayer

Caring God, You love each one of us.  
Even when we feel inadequate, You love each one of us.  
Even when we feel alone, You love each one of us.  
Even when we are at our wit's end, You love each one of us.  
O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth.  
Give us strength to continue to praise you. Amen

## [Monday 3rd August Basis of Union 19](#)

The Rev'd Martin Knight is minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon and South Croydon United Church (Methodist/URC)

## **1 Peter: 4: 7-11**

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace

told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

## Basis

Some are called to the Ministry of church related community work. After approved preparation and training, they may be called to be Church Related Community Workers in a post approved by the United Reformed Church, are then commissioned to the office of Church Related Community Worker and inducted to serve in a particular post for a designated period. This commissioning and induction shall be in accord with Schedules D & F. Church Related Community Workers are commissioned to care for, to challenge and to pray for the community, to discern with others God's will for the well-being of the community, and to endeavour to enable the church to live out its calling to proclaim the love and mercy of God through working with others in both church and community for peace and justice in the world. Their service may be stipendiary or non-stipendiary, and in the latter case their service is given within the area of a synod and in a context it has approved. (22)

## Reflection

The ministry of Church Related Community Work has been like walking numerous Emmaus Roads in all sorts of locations and contexts. I have walked alongside individuals, groups, communities and encouraging the Church to do the same.

Many of these folks, like the disciples were often broken, grieving, feeling that there was little, if anything they can do to change their situation and that of their communities. They have stood still, paralysed, frozen, looking sad, feeling lost and helpless. So, I have travelled with them, listening to and embracing their stories – never denying, correcting or changing any of the narratives and always waiting until their stories come to an end. I have tried (and sometimes failed!) to resist the temptation to interrupt them or tell them what I think they should do. Even when I

about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they

of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

### **Basis**

The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it. This service is given by worship, prayer, proclamation of the Gospel, and Christian witness; by mutual and outgoing care and responsibility; and by obedient discipleship in the whole of daily life, according to the gifts and opportunities given to each one. The preparation and strengthening of its members for such ministry and discipleship shall always be a major concern of the United Reformed Church. (19)

### **Reflection**

I am particularly drawn to the vision of 'Jesus continuing his ministry in and through the Church'. Perhaps it would do us good to reflect, at regular intervals, on this truth.

Do we see Jesus continuing his ministry in the churches we are part of? Are there areas of our church life where we most certainly do not? Might the answers to these questions give us enough impetus to change where needed?

The global pandemic has given many areas of our human life a necessary wake-up-call. We have discovered, as we humans do when pushed, that we can indeed change and adapt when it is clear we need to – or when we are left with no choice!

Surely asking ourselves if Jesus' ministry can be seen in and through our local churches, is just the kind of stimulus we need to stay focused on our 'worship, prayer, proclamation of the Gospel, Christian witness, care and discipleship in our daily lives'.

As I engaged with this section of the Basis of Union, I heard words from 1 Peter reflected back to me: 'Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.' You and I are stewards of God's grace. We are guardians and enablers of Jesus ministry in the church. Whilst that is a whole lot of responsibility, we are empowered with the unique and glorious gifts that God has given each of us. All of us, in our technicolour variety are important to the flourishing of the church.

In the last sentence of this section, we are reminded and encouraged as a denomination, to build-up, cherish and embrace the amazing array of gifts that we each possess: gifts that God has given so that we can indeed continue the ministry of Christ.

There is real excitement and creative hope in these words.

Take a moment to look inward: to seek and know what amazing and unique God-given gift you can bring to the ministry of the church.

### **Prayer**

Ever-creating God,  
we pray that we may find and own the gifts you have given us.  
We pray that, once found, we may be brave to use them, even if they are surprising and unappreciated.  
We pray that we will continue to build each other up and to recognise the gifts of others as we are church together.  
Make us brave to continue the ministry of Jesus and creative when change is needed to follow him more closely.  
Call us again and inspire us through your Spirit, we pray. Amen

the self-aggrandizement of a holy and select guild, but the equipping of every believer for their own unique ministries and the growing up of the whole Church to the spiritual and missionary maturity Christ teaches and yearns for in us all. Yes, a thousand times, we believe in the priesthood of all believers. But Paul, as our Basis, is equally clear that God calls some, and wants some, prepared to be God's agents in this equipping and nurturing. We have always, and must continue, to test and refine how we do such calling and preparing in response to the leading of the Spirit. New circumstances and changing contexts demand our most passionate dreaming and our most energetic reinvention again and again and again. I do not know what future Ministry of Word and Sacraments will be for the URC. But neither do I believe that we have no further need of it, or that God has ceased to call people into it.

### **Prayer**

Thank you, dear God,  
for the call of the Spirit  
in the name of your Son.  
Thank you for all who minister amongst us  
and throughout our communities and institutions.  
Thank you for those who have helped us to follow you.  
Bless them this day.  
Bless us as we, too,  
discover your claim and calling  
in our lives today. Amen.

[Thursday 6th August Basis of Union 22](#)

Marie Trubic is a Church Related Community Worker serving the Shawlands and Priesthill project in Glasgow.

### **St Luke 24:13-35**

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other



## **Basis**

Some are called to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. After approved preparation and training, they may be called to be Ministers of local churches, or missionaries overseas, or to some special and approved ministry, and are then ordained and inducted to their office...They are commissioned to conduct public worship, to preach the Word and to administer the Sacraments, to exercise pastoral care and oversight, and to give leadership to the church in its mission to the world. Their service may be stipendiary or non-stipendiary, and in the latter case their service is given within the area of a synod and in a context it has approved. (21)

## **Reflection**

Fifteen years of my ministry have been at Westminster College, and this combination of Paul's teaching and these invitations from the Basis have seldom been far from me, or, I suspect, from any of us devoted to the URC's education, training and formation for ministry. The ways in which we deliver and plan it have changed dramatically (within a year of arriving at Westminster I was at the General Assembly that withdrew ministerial training from many ecumenical partnerships to focus upon Cambridge, Manchester and the Scottish College). The expectations, aspirations, demands and deployment of ministry remain in constant flux across our Synods. Congregations wrestle with many histories and much memory of previous ministries that often jar against what, now, is either possible or even useful. I have always thanked God that the URC has consistently devoted tremendous resources to equipping and sustaining ordained ministry.

None of this, I believe, denies the rightful wonder and significance of everyone who wants to follow Jesus. None of this should let us trip ourselves up by imagining that the overwhelming majority of Christians who are not ordained to these ministries are in any way lesser Christians of less significance before God. Paul's ultimate focus in Ephesians is not

## Tuesday 4th August Basis of Union 20

The Rev'd Sarah Moore is Transition Champion for the National Synod of Scotland and Assistant Clerk of the General Assembly.

## **Ephesians 4.11-13**

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.

## **Basis**

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 on 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 part 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. (20)

## Reflection

‘So do you feel any different?’ was one of the first questions I remember family and friends asking me once we got back to the manse after attending the worship service at which I was ordained as a minister and inducted to my first post. I don’t remember feeling any different and my memory of that day is a bit of a blur.

Reading through this section of the Basis of Union I am struck by the concept of ‘total ministry’. A ministry that no one individual is able to carry or fulfil alone. Each individual has a unique constellation of abilities, interests, and talents; and what’s more all of those are needed for the Church to fully live out its mission and witness. The idea of ‘every member ministry’ is a popular one in many denominations; the idea that everyone has a part to play in living and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in the places we live out our lives. As the Church once again shifts its shape this is an important idea to remember and to try to live out.

And yet, the URC is a church that does set people aside in particular ministries. The largest body of ordained people in the URC are the people we name elders. According to the 2020 Year Book there are 8079 serving elders - far more than Ministers. All of these are people who have been called in some way to serve the Church and this has been solemnly recognised through prayer and the giving of authority. We name this solemn setting apart ‘ordination’ for Ministers and elders, and ‘commissioning’ for Church Related Community Workers. Ordination (and Commissioning) is an act of the whole Church and is an act that almost irrevocably changes the relationship an individual has with the Church, with the wider community, and sometimes even with family and friends.

More recently someone asked me what I thought about something ‘not as a Minister’. I found their question impossible to answer. Why? Because I am a Minister. It showed me how ordination means something but doesn’t itself change anyone. Ordination and Commissioning is a

form of naming. It points out something already present, sharpened and polished through training and experience identifying who someone is but not changing who they are. Part of our task as Christian people is to continuously be alert to who we are called to be and what are we called to do. This is true for everyone, for the few who are ordained and commissioned, and for everyone else, called to play their part in the total ministry of Christ’s Church.

## Prayer

We will grow together  
in humility, gentleness and patience;  
we will nurture each other in faith;  
we will bear with one another in love;  
we will make every effort  
to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit  
in the bond of peace,  
so that we may faithfully proclaim the gospel of Christ.

*(from the Ordination and Induction of Elders, Worship from the United Reformed Church, 2004)*

[Wednesday 5th August Basis of Union 21](#)

The Rev’d Neil Thorogood is Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge, until he returns to local URC pastoral ministry at Trinity-Henleaze (Bristol) and Thornbury in summer 2020

## Ephesians 4: 11-13

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 the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.