

URC Disciplinary Policy for Office Holders

Agreed by Business Committee July 2026

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Discipleship is about relationships. A disciple is simply a learner, someone who is learning to follow Jesus, growing in their relationship with him, with other people and the wider world. The words 'disciple' and 'discipline' have obvious common roots. From time to time, disciples go astray and require discipline to remind them of the expected standards they have agreed to, to correct them and bring them into renewed commitment.
- 1.2 The Disciplinary Policy for Office Holders describes the process to be put into effect when office holders (not Ministers of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers or paid employees) are alleged to have committed a breach of discipline.
- 1.3 Whilst the process is rooted in the local church there is provision for the synod to start the process where the local church is unable or unwilling to do so. For the avoidance of doubt, where the Synod has initiated the process on behalf of the local church, the Synod will see the process to its conclusion including having access to the full range of sanctions available under the process.
- 1.4 The Disciplinary Policy for Office Holders recognises the need to be fair and impartial when dealing with disciplinary issues. The process must always be conducted with courtesy and sensitivity towards those involved, and that pastoral care must have within it a degree of firmness and fairness, as well as compassion.
- 1.5 The Christian Gospel is rooted in forgiveness, reconciliation and the possibility of new beginnings. Through Christ, God offers forgiveness to all who repent and seek to amend their lives. The Church is therefore always called to be a community of grace, seeking restoration rather than punishment wherever possible.
- 1.6 Forgiveness, however, does not mean that harmful behaviour is ignored, nor does it remove the responsibility of the Church to protect others, learn from past events and exercise proper oversight. There are occasions when concerns, warnings or disciplinary findings must be recorded, not as a barrier to forgiveness, but as part of the Church's duty of care, accountability and stewardship. A record may be necessary to identify patterns of behaviour, to safeguard individuals and

communities, to ensure fair decision-making and to maintain confidence in the integrity of the Church's processes.

- 1.7 The purpose of keeping such records is therefore not to deny the possibility of repentance, growth or restoration, but to enable the Church to exercise its responsibilities wisely and faithfully. Records may be required to assist the Church in assessing whether behaviours have been addressed, whether patterns of concern remain evident, and whether an individual may continue to present a risk to others, to the Church or to the proper exercise of office. The Church believes that forgiveness and accountability belong together: forgiveness offers the possibility of renewal, whilst accountability helps ensure justice, protection and the wellbeing of the whole body of Christ.

2. The Policy

- 2.1 The United Reformed Church requires its office holders to live as persons of prayer and integrity, for the health and welfare of themselves and all those whom they serve. 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'.
- 2.2 No matter what the structures in the local pastorate or synod may be, there may be times when the performance or conduct of an office holder falls below what is expected. The normal route for concerns about performance to the expected standard for a particular role would be a capability process except in the case of misconduct.
- 2.3 However, having a clear and established disciplinary process in place for unacceptable actions of misconduct will prevent misunderstandings and seek to protect all. This should be shared with all office holders of the local pastorate during their induction.

3. The Purpose of the Policy

- 3.1 The United Reformed Church is committed to creating an environment where all office holders are able to perform to their best ability.
- 3.2 The United Reformed Church recognises that there will be occasions when disciplinary and / or performance problems arise. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that if such problems do arise, they are dealt with fairly and consistently across the denomination. This policy sets out the action that will be taken when problems occur.
- 3.3 For the avoidance of doubt, where an individual against whom an allegation of a disciplinary nature is made is a Minister of Word and Sacraments or Church

Related Community Worker, Section O: the United Reformed Church ministerial disciplinary process for Ministers of Word and Sacraments or Church Related Community Workers shall apply.

3.4 For the avoidance of doubt, where an individual against whom an allegation of a disciplinary nature is made is an employee, the employer's disciplinary process shall apply.

3.5 Definitions For the purposes of this process, an office holder shall be:

- A lay Synod Clerk (not an employed person)
- An Elder of the United Reformed Church, either serving or non-serving
- A Church Secretary or equivalent
- A Church Treasurer or Assistant Treasurer
- A Synod Local Church Leader
- An Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher
- A Locally Recognised Worship Leader
- An Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneer
- An Interim Moderator A Church Safeguarding Co-ordinator or Deputy
- A Church Safeguarding Co-ordinator or Deputy
- A Children's and Youth Worker (not an employed person)
- A Pastoral Worker (not an employed person)
- A General Assembly appointed, or synod appointed, Committee Convenor
- A Trustee (not an Elder)
- A member of a Local Church Council in an LEP
- Or any other such role as General Assembly might determine as holding office within the United Reformed Church.

4. Expectations of office holders

4.1 It is expected that, during the process of candidating / nomination / recruitment / selection and / or election:

- office holders will not have misled the Church or those who, on its behalf, assessed their readiness to exercise a particular ministry
- those who make the affirmations at ordination or commissioning do so honestly
- that their conduct before and after taking up office will accord with the affirmations made at membership or, in the case of elders, at their ordination and/or induction, and any code of conduct applicable to their role
- have completed any safer recruitment process, or equivalent, prior to taking up post.

4.2 It is also expected that if allegations are made of a safeguarding or criminal nature or they are to be interviewed by the police, arrested on a criminal charge, convicted of any criminal offence by a court, or accept a police caution in respect of such an offence, they will report that fact to their Synod Safeguarding Officer,

who will inform the Minister, or Interim Moderator in the case of a vacancy, and Moderator of the Synod exercising oversight of them. A failure to do so may amount to misconduct See Good Practice Section on Gross Misconduct.

- 4.3 If the disciplinary behaviour is one of potential criminal activity, the disciplinary process will be paused at this point until the criminal matter has been dealt with.
- 4.4 If the disciplinary offence is of a safeguarding nature, the process will be paused at this point until the safeguarding process has been concluded. See Good Practice Section on Gross Misconduct.
- 4.5 Where safeguarding concerns are of such a nature that precautionary action is required, the Synod Moderator, or their nominee, may invoke the Precautionary Suspension provisions contained within paragraph 5.9. Any such suspension shall be a neutral act designed to safeguard individuals, protect the integrity of investigations and uphold the Church's safeguarding responsibilities, and shall not be taken as an indication that any allegation has been proven.

5. Principles

- 5.1 Whilst it is intended that this policy is rooted in the local, it is recognised that, on occasions, invoking the disciplinary policy will be too difficult because of the relationships of individuals involved in the process. In these cases, the local pastorate may delegate the responsibility to the Synod Pastoral Committee or equivalent to act in its stead.
- 5.2 Whilst it is intended that this policy is rooted in the local, it may be necessary for the Synod Moderator or their deputy to invoke the policy where a local pastorate is unable or unwilling to invoke the policy.
- 5.3 The normal route for concerns about performance to the expected standard for a particular role would be a capability process, except in the case of misconduct.
- 5.4 If the office holder is subject to disciplinary action, the following procedure is designed to establish the facts quickly, and to deal consistently with disciplinary issues.
- 5.5 At every stage of the process where a disciplinary meeting is to take place ,whether informal or formal the office holder will , no later than 14 days before the meeting be advised of the nature of the complaint , sent a copy of the evidence to be referred to and given the opportunity to prepare and state their case in response in a at the meeting for consideration before any decision is taken on whether there has been misconduct or whether to impose a warning or other disciplinary sanction.
- 5.6 The office holder will be given the opportunity to be represented or accompanied at any disciplinary meeting by a friend or colleague.

5.7 In some cases, an investigation will be required before any final decision is taken on whether to impose a warning or other disciplinary sanction.

5.8 There is a right to appeal against any disciplinary action taken against an office holder.

6. Confidentiality

6.1 The Church's aim is to deal with disciplinary matters sensitively and with due respect for the privacy of any individuals involved. All must treat as confidential any information communicated to them in connection with a matter which is subject to this disciplinary process as confidential and should not be discussed with anyone outside the process, except where information needs to be given to statutory agencies the trustees of the Church, safeguarding or, synod, pastoral supporter URC press office or other URC process in order that they can appropriately manage their legal responsibilities, including reporting to the Charity Commission, OSCR or Disclosure Scotland.

6.2 The office holder, and anyone accompanying them (including witnesses), must not make electronic recordings of any meetings or hearings conducted under this process.

6.3 The office holder will normally be told the names of any witnesses whose evidence is relevant to a disciplinary hearing if one is appropriate, unless the Elders Meeting believe that a witness's identity should remain confidential.

7. Precautionary Suspension¹

7.1 In certain circumstances it may be necessary to suspend an office holder from exercising some or all aspects of their office whilst concerns are investigated or disciplinary proceedings are ongoing.

7.2 Suspension is not a disciplinary sanction and does not imply that any allegation has been proven. It is a neutral act intended to protect individuals, the local church, the wider Church and the integrity of any investigation or disciplinary process.

7.3 A decision to suspend may be taken by the Synod Moderator, or their nominee, following consultation with such persons as they consider appropriate.

7.4 Suspension may be considered where:

- the allegations are of a serious nature;
- there are safeguarding concerns;
- there is a risk of harm to individuals;
- there is a risk that evidence may be lost, influenced or interfered with;
- the continued exercise of office may undermine confidence in the Church or the

¹ Authority to suspend can be found under The Manual Section B Synod Functions xxvi and Elders' meeting functions 2(2)xv;

disciplinary process; or

- it is otherwise considered necessary in the interests of the Church.

7.5 Any suspension shall be confirmed in writing, setting out the reasons for the suspension and any conditions which apply.

7.6 Suspension shall be reviewed regularly and shall remain in place only for so long as is reasonably necessary.

7.7 An office holder who is suspended shall continue to receive appropriate pastoral support throughout the period of suspension.

Informal Process

8. Informal Meeting

8.1 Before any policy and procedure is invoked, the local pastorate², through those appointed by the Elders Meeting (namely two people) will conduct an informal meeting to which the office holder will be invited to attend. Most problems can be resolved by informal discussions, and often this can avoid the need for formal disciplinary action. This may include mediation or additional training or support for the office holder. An informal meeting would not be recorded as disciplinary action and would be seen as a process of constructive dialogue.

8.2 If the problem cannot be resolved informally with the office holder, it might then be appropriate to invoke the formal disciplinary process upon guidance being sought from the synod moderator or their deputy.

Formal Process

9. Stage 1 – formal verbal warning

9.1 A formal verbal warning may be given to the office holder if, despite informal discussions or training, the conduct or performance still does not meet acceptable standards. This should follow a further disciplinary meeting convened by the person within the church/pastorate / synod who is most relevant – this may be the Minister, CRCW, Church Secretary or Ministry Support. They should be accompanied by a member of the Synod Ministries Committee or equivalent to form a panel.

9.2 At the conclusion of the meeting or a short period afterwards the office holder will be told

- that a verbal warning is being given, the period of the warning and the reason for the warning;
- what the office holder needs to do to improve the situation;
- a time frame within which the conduct or performance needs to be improved;

² Where there is a Synod role, the Synod Pastoral Committee takes on the role of the local pastorate

- about any support or training the United Reformed Church might provide to support the volunteer;
- that the verbal warning is the first stage of the disciplinary procedure.

9.3 A brief note of the warning shall be kept by both the local church and the Synod in line with GDPR and Good Practice 6. Subject to satisfactory conduct and/or performance, the warning shall be regarded as spent after three years and will not normally be relied upon as the basis for further disciplinary action. The record shall, however, remain on file indefinitely in order to assist the Church in fulfilling its safeguarding, governance and pastoral responsibilities.

10. Stage 2 – Formal Disciplinary Hearing

10.1 Convening a Formal Disciplinary Hearing

A Formal Disciplinary Hearing shall be convened where:

- concerns remain unresolved following a verbal warning;
- further concerns arise following a previous warning;
- the alleged misconduct is sufficiently serious that a written warning, final written warning or removal from office may be an appropriate outcome;
- the nature of the allegations makes it inappropriate to deal with the matter through the informal process.

The purpose of the hearing is to establish the facts, consider all relevant evidence, hear the response of the office holder and determine whether misconduct has occurred and, if so, what action is appropriate.

10.2 Constitution of the Hearing Panel

10.2.1 The hearing shall be conducted by a panel of three persons appointed by the Synod Clerk ensuring diversity where possible. The panel should normally include:

- a Minister of Word and Sacraments;
- two elders or other experienced office holders;

10.2.2 The Synod Clerk, or their nominee, shall attend the hearing to provide administrative support, assist with the recording of proceedings and ensure the orderly conduct of the hearing. The Clerk shall not be a member of the panel and shall take no part in the decision-making process.

10.2.3 Where appropriate, a person with relevant expertise relating to the nature of the case may attend the hearing in an advisory capacity. Such a person shall not be a member of the panel and shall take no part in the decision-making process.

10.2.4 No member of the panel shall have had prior substantive involvement in the matter or have a conflict of interest.

10.2.5 The panel shall appoint one of its members to act as Convener.

10.3 Notice of the Hearing.

10.3.1 The office holder shall be given not less than fourteen calendar days' notice of the hearing.

10.3.2 The notice shall include:

- the allegations to be considered;
- the grounds upon which those allegations are based;
- copies of any documentary evidence to be relied upon;
- details of any witnesses the panel intends to hear;
- copies of any witness statements to be relied upon, unless there are exceptional reasons why a witness's identity should remain confidential;
- the names of the panel members;
- details of the time, date and place of the hearing;
- information regarding the right to be accompanied by a friend, colleague or representative;
- a copy of this disciplinary process;
- details of the possible outcomes available to the panel.

10.3.3 The office holder shall be given a reasonable opportunity to submit written material in advance of the hearing.

10.4 Conduct of the Hearing

10.4.1 The Convener shall ensure that the hearing is conducted fairly, respectfully and with appropriate pastoral sensitivity.

- The hearing shall normally proceed as follows:
- The Chair shall explain the purpose of the hearing and introduce those present.
- The concerns or allegations shall be presented together with any supporting evidence.
- The office holder shall be given the opportunity to respond fully to the allegations and present any evidence they wish the panel to consider.
- The panel may ask questions of any person appearing before it.
- The office holder or their representative shall be given a final opportunity to address the panel before it retires to consider its decision.
- The panel may adjourn the hearing if additional information is required or if this would assist the fair consideration of the matter.
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10.4.2 Where the panel considers it necessary, witnesses may be called to give evidence. The panel may question any witness and may permit the office holder, or their representative, a reasonable opportunity to ask questions through the Convener.

- 10.4.3 The panel may receive written witness statements where it considers it fair and appropriate to do so.

10.5 Decision Making

- 10.5.1 The panel shall seek to reach its decision through prayerful discernment and careful consideration of all the evidence before it.
- 10.5.2 In determining its decision the panel shall consider:
- the seriousness of the conduct;
 - whether the conduct represented a breach of the standards expected of an office holder;
 - any mitigating or aggravating circumstances;
 - any previous disciplinary findings;
 - the impact upon individuals, the local church, the wider Church and the reputation of the United Reformed Church;
 - whether there is evidence of reflection, repentance, learning or willingness to address concerns.
- 10.5.3 The panel shall determine matters on the balance of probabilities.

10.6 Outcomes Available to the Panel

- 10.6.1 Having considered all the evidence, the panel may determine that:

a) No Further Action

Where the allegations are not substantiated or where disciplinary action is not considered necessary, no further action shall be taken.

The panel may nevertheless make recommendations regarding support, supervision, mediation, training or pastoral assistance.

b) Written Warning

Where misconduct is established but is not sufficiently serious to warrant a final written warning or removal from office, the panel may issue a written warning.

The written warning shall:

- identify the conduct giving rise to the warning;
- explain the standards expected in future;
- specify any actions required of the office holder;
- identify any support to be offered;
- specify the period for which the warning shall remain active;
- explain the consequences of any further misconduct.

c) Final Written Warning

Where the misconduct is serious, where there has been a failure to respond to previous warnings, or where confidence in the office holder has been significantly undermined, the panel may issue a final written warning.

The final written warning shall:

- set out the findings of the panel;
- identify the improvements or changes required;
- specify any conditions or requirements imposed;
- explain that further misconduct may result in removal from office;

- specify the period for which the warning shall remain active.

d) Removal from Office

Where the panel concludes that the misconduct is sufficiently serious, that trust has broken down irretrievably, that the office holder is no longer able to exercise the office appropriately, or that the protection of others or the reputation of the Church requires it, the panel may remove the office holder from office.

In reaching such a decision the panel shall be satisfied that removal is proportionate and necessary response to the findings made.

Where removal from office is imposed, the written outcome shall specify:

- the reasons for the decision;
- the effective date of removal;
- any consequential actions required;
- the right of appeal.

10.7 Written Outcome

10.7.1 The decision of the panel shall normally be communicated in writing within seven calendar days of the hearing.

10.7.2 The written outcome shall include:

- the findings of the panel;
- the reasons for those findings;
- any sanction imposed;
- any recommendations or requirements arising from the hearing;
- details of the appeal process..

11. Gross misconduct

11.1 Where an office holder's behaviour is found by the panel to amount to gross misconduct, they would normally be subject to summary removal from office (instant removal without notice) and the above procedures regarding progression of warnings will not apply.

11.2 The following are matters that are normally regarded as gross misconduct:

- 11.2.1 Fraud, forgery, theft or other dishonesty, including fabrication of expense claims;
- 11.2.2 Actual or threatened violence, or behaviour which provokes violence;
- 11.2.3 Deliberate damage to Church buildings, fittings, property or equipment, or the property of a colleague, contractor, customer or member of the public;
- 11.2.4 Serious misuse of our property or name;
- 11.2.5 Serious safeguarding incident or concern;
- 11.2.6 Repeated or serious failure to obey instructions, or any other serious act of insubordination;
- 11.2.7 Unlawful discrimination or harassment;
- 11.2.8 Bringing the Church into serious disrepute;
- 11.2.9 Being under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs or other substances during working hours;

- 11.2.10 Causing loss, damage or injury through serious negligence;
- 11.2.11 Unauthorised use or disclosure of confidential information or failure to ensure that confidential information in an individual's possession is kept secure;
- 11.2.12 acceptance of bribes or other undisclosed payments or gifts;
- 11.2.13 Conviction for a criminal offence that may affect suitability to continue to work for the Church;
- 11.2.14 Harassment of, or discrimination against, employees, contractors, or members of the public, related to gender, marital or civil partner status, gender reassignment, race, colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, disability, religion or belief or age.

This list is intended as a guide and is not exhaustive.

12. Appeals

- 12.1 If an office holder wishes to appeal against any disciplinary decision, this should be made in writing within 14 working days of the decision being communicated to them, to the Clerk of General Assembly using the General Assembly Appeals process.

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