

Orientation for Incoming Ministers to Methodist and United Reformed LEPs

Introduction

LEPs can be among the most exciting churches in which to serve as a minister. At their best, they are growing and developing situations that enable congregations and community to see the church fulfilling Christ's prayer "that they might be one." However, each LEP has a different constitution that almost invariably takes precedence over "normal" denominational practice, and allows for creative development. It is therefore necessary for incoming ministers of either denomination to understand the practice of the specific LEP to which they have been called, or in which they have been stationed. This means that it is necessary to understand:

- the relationship of the LEP to the sponsoring denominations – the Methodist and United Reformed Churches - and the ways in which in which an LEP is different from either a Methodist or a United Reformed Church;
- the expectations the wider church has of the LEP;
- why the original Constitution and Sharing Agreement say what they say and how they are implemented.

The orientation process

This document provides an orientation process that should result in ministers gaining this understanding. The process involves the support of a colleague from the other denomination, a person appointed by the local congregation, and reading essential documents.

A colleague from the "other" denomination who has no ongoing or previous involvement in the LEP, will be identified by the District Chair or Synod Moderator. When a minister of the United Reformed Church is called, the Synod Moderator will initiate the process in consultation with the District Chair, and vice versa.

The colleague from the "other" denomination will be active in ministry, be in touch with developments in his /her denomination and understand the theology, tradition and practice of his/her own church. His / her role will be to help you:

- explore the areas of difference between the Methodist and United Reformed Churches;
- reflect on the way the theology, tradition and practice of both churches, have or have not, been incorporated into the LEP;
- and make decisions about your wider involvement in church structures.

His / her role is not to make value judgements about the LEP and it does not matter whether or not s/he has been in a similar LEP.

It would be helpful to meet regularly (perhaps quarterly) during the first year. It is hoped that the relationship might provide you with an ongoing sounding board, but in subsequent years, meetings could be less frequent.

Reading essential documents. The LEP's leadership should provide you with these before your arrival. They include:

- The Constitution or Declaration of Intent.
- The Sharing Agreement. (NB: Please be aware that Sharing Agreements are drafted according to the Sharing of Buildings Act 1969. They are legal documents and might not appear to reflect the dreams and hopes in local situations for equality and goodwill.)
- Practice Documents. Where these exist they might include terms of reference for committees, processes for electing Elders / Stewards etc.
- Annual Reports
- Minutes of meetings with powers of governance such as Elders and Church Meeting, Church Council, and Joint Councils.
- "How to Make it Work" is a pack of advice, produced by the Methodist / United Reformed Church Liaison Committee, for locally united Methodist and United Reformed Churches. This is available on the Methodist and United Reformed Church's Websites: www.urc.org.uk and www.methodist.org.uk

A person appointed by the congregation to help orientate you (e.g. the Church Secretary or Senior Steward). You may need to ask for someone to be appointed! S/he should help you to understand the LEP and how local practice has evolved. You should meet with him / her regularly in the first year, probably monthly initially, but reducing in frequency as seems appropriate.

Understanding the practice of the "other" denomination

If you are to move beyond stereotypes and learn to value the other tradition as much as your own, it is essential to have an understanding of the nature of the church that underlies the normal practice of the other denomination. This will enable you to establish the extent to which the local practice of the LEP has developed from the practice of its constituent denominations.

Identify the ecclesiology and practices of your own tradition that you particularly value, and with your colleague from the other denomination, seek to understand the practice of the other denomination. Ask for an explanation of **how and why** the church works as it does at all levels. The major areas of difference between the Methodist and United Reformed Churches are:

1. The different processes used for "calling" (United Reformed Church) and "stationing" (Methodist Church) ministers.
2. The different roles and understandings of leaders and ministers in the two churches at congregational, Circuit and District levels. This should include, ordination and authorisation in relation to the eldership and the

role of the Church Secretary in the United Reformed Church, and Superintendents, Circuit Stewards, Local Preachers, Pastoral Visitors and Stewards in the Methodist Church. It is also important to understand the effect of the differences in the relationship between the minister and the local congregation.

3. The different understandings of local church governance and authority in relation to decision-making, pastoral care and worship.
4. Different accounting and church years have implications for local decision-making and the relationship of the local church to the Circuit and District. The United Reformed Church works on a calendar year (January to December), while the Methodist Church uses the “Connexional” Year (September to August)
5. Different rules, practices and laws concerning property.
6. Worship is where the life of the two churches looks most similar, but there are significant differences around communion practices (for example: how, and by whom, the elements are served to the people and lay presidency), baptism, and transfer of membership. It would be helpful to explore the use of “set forms of worship”, the status of hymn and service books and the minister’s role in leading worship.
7. The relationship between the local church and the wider structures and the different roles, status and authority of leaders. (Methodist Circuit, District and Connexion, Methodist Superintendent, Circuit Stewards and the District Chair; United Reformed Church Focus Groups / Clusters, Synod, Assembly, and Synod Moderators.)

You might also find it helpful to attend one of the local or national courses run for ministers new to LEPs. These are currently organised by the United Reformed Church and some County Ecumenical Officers.

Understanding the practice of the LEP

The following should be set out in the Constitution and Sharing Agreement.

- Church Governance / Decision Making and the roles of church leaders and meetings
- Ministry including calling or stationing
- Worship
- Finance
- Property
- The relationships between the LEP and its minister and the wider structures of the denominations
- The relationship with Local Sponsoring Body

Churches with Constitutions may have negotiated them carefully and they therefore require sensitive and careful attention. Some follow more closely the

pattern of either the Methodist or the United Reformed Church. But churches differ in the extent to which these are adhered to and it is likely that constitutions will have been adapted with time. For each of these areas you will need to understand:

- 1. What was originally agreed and why.**
 - a) Read the documentation.
 - b) If it is possible, develop an understanding of the history of the LEP by talking with people who were members in the churches that came together to form the LEP.

- 2. Current practice.**
 - a) Observe.
 - b) Read current documents.
 - c) Ask the person appointed by the church what they understand current practice to be.

- 3. How and why practice has developed from the original intention.**
 - a) If possible, talk with those who have been involved in making the changes, especially local church leaders, past and present.
 - b) Ask what were the primary reasons for the change? Were they practical or ecclesiological?
 - c) Find out who / what were the most significant influences on these changes (e.g. previous ministers, previous or current members, changes in the theological emphasis of the church, positive or negative interactions with the Methodist Circuit, the local and regional structures of the United Reformed Church, or local "Churches Together" group)?

- 4. The distance of the LEP from its constituent denominations.**

The intention of this exploration is not to re-establish the forms that originally existed, but to understand what was originally agreed and how far the LEP had developed from the ecclesiology and practices of the Methodist and United Reformed Churches with which you will normally be more familiar. This should enable you, at least in the early stages to understand what expectations the LEP has of you, and to adapt their own practices accordingly.

 - a) Reflect on your findings in the light of what you know about the Methodist and United Reformed Churches.
 - b) What are the advantages / disadvantages of the practice of this LEP.
 - c) Identify the issues raised by the different expectations for you as a minister in your own tradition.

The expectations of the wider church structures on the minister of the LEP

The expectations of the wider church are also varied and normally depend on factors such as the membership and original make up of the LEP, the extent

of the minister's responsibilities (e.g. other churches, responsibilities, hours worked. etc), and the previous history of relationships with both denominations.

1. Ensure you have developed an understanding of the ecclesiology and practice of the "other" denomination so that you are aware of normal practice. The areas that frequently cause tension are:
 - Leading worship: the effect of the Circuit Plan on United Reformed ministers and the expectation that a minister in United Reformed single church pastorate would normally lead worship each week.
 - The number of meetings: getting a good balance that reflects the size of the job in relation to the "other" denomination and enables useful participation.
 - Attendance at meetings.
 - Administration requirements including the different accounting and church years and the differences in who is legally responsible for managing property.
2. Establish an understanding of the LEP's expectations of the minister's relationships with other church structures. The Constitution may have some information about how the relationship between minister and the wider church structures was envisaged. If this is the case, establish whether or not this is the current position, or seek to understand what the church's current thinking and expectations are.
3. Establish an understanding of the wider church's expectations of the minister's relationships with them.
 - a) During the calling / stationing process there should have been some conversation about the expectations of the incoming minister. These should normally have included the District Chair, Methodist Superintendent and the Chair of the United Reformed Church Pastoral Committee (or its equivalent) and / or the Synod Moderator, and sometimes representatives of the Sponsoring Body.
 - b) If these are not clear, or appear to be unreasonable, you may wish to discuss this with ministers in other Methodist / United Reformed Church LEPS, and if / when appropriate, with the leaders in the local congregation. If it is believed that changes are necessary, these will require further discussion with the Methodist Superintendent and Circuit Stewards / or Synod Moderator.

Methodist / United Reformed Church Liaison Committee
March 2007