



# Guidelines for Elders on the Provision of Worship (and practical ideas for “Pulpit Supply Secretaries”)

**Edition 1 – April 2026**

For circulation to Area leads, Pastoral Committee convenors, Church Secretaries, Pulpit Supply Secretaries – both online and as a paper booklet. Comments welcome.



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**Contact** - Comments Questions? Updates welcome

Sue Eardley Secretary to Synod Ministries Committee [secretary@StPaulsURC.org.uk](mailto:secretary@StPaulsURC.org.uk)

## 1 Aim and purpose

This document is for elders and those who organise local preaching within URC and LEP churches in Southern Synod when a Minister is not available. It provides guidance, tips and support so local worship complies with the core principles of the URC. Where relevant it aligns with the URC Lay Preachers Handbook<sup>1</sup> published in April 2025.

## 2 Responsibility for Worship

The elders are collectively responsible for ensuring that public worship is offered, the sacraments (Baptism and Communion) are celebrated and the word is preached<sup>2</sup>. This is within their overall responsibility for URC principles of theology and safety and cannot be delegated

In practice identifying and arranging people to preach and lead worship in URC churches in the absence of a Minister is usually undertaken by one or two church members, reporting to and overseen by the elders meeting. This booklet refers to them as Pulpit Supply Secretaries (PSS)

### **Churches with a Minister**

For churches with an ordained URC Minister of Word and Sacrament (MWS), they would usually lead Sunday worship according to their “scoping”, or proportion of time allocated to the church. For all other services or during sabbatical a suitable ordained or lay individual would need to be identified.

### **United churches and Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs)**

United churches with Methodist links often operate within a circuit, with Methodist preachers (Ministers, Deacons or Local Preachers) being assigned for a proportion of the Sundays. United churches linked with Baptists or CofE may operate in other ways. Please discuss with your elders/minister if unsure of the local arrangements.

### **Churches in transition (no Minister in post)**

For these churches, arranging pulpit supply is a significant role, particularly if the church meets every Sunday rather than sharing worship with another church. The PSS must ensure that the Sacraments (Baptism and Communion) are led by an appropriately authorised individual, and deal sensitively with requests for weddings or funerals. (see section 4)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/A-Handbook-for-Lay-Preaching-and-Worship-Leading-v.2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Manual Schedule B 2.(2)). <https://urc.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/The-Structure-of-the-URC.pdf>

The URC has guidance on practical aspects

- When visitors lead worship in local churches<sup>3</sup> and
- URC Guidelines on safer recruitment for those who lead worship in our churches<sup>4</sup>

### 3 Finding preachers

With fewer Stipendiary Ministers available churches are increasingly drawing on retired Ministers or lay preachers to lead their Sunday worship, bringing fresh ideas to stimulate discussion, offering new insights for congregations to deepen their relationship with God.

Most churches have a few individuals who preach regularly and are known to, or from the congregation, but filling gaps can be done in a number of ways

- Inviting a retired Minister – from the URC or another recognised denomination<sup>5</sup> who is designated as “active” by URC General Assembly. This means they must have an up-to-date DBS certificate and completed mandatory safeguarding and other training. Details of URC ‘Active’ Retired Ministers are held by Synod Office, and your Area Administrator.
- Elders or members of your congregation leading worship themselves.
- Joining with another church one Sunday instead of your own building
- Seeking a speaker from a recognised charity<sup>6</sup> supported by the church; they may not always be a Christian so members may need to lead prayers and choose hymns
- Inviting lay preachers in your area.

The Secretary to Synod Ministries maintains a list of those who have undertaken training for lay preaching and are willing to preach outside their home church within a reasonable travel radius. They may be

- Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers (AALP),
- Locally Recognised Worship leaders (LRWL) or
- Synod Recognised Lay Preachers (SRLP)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/your-church/guidance-support-for-churches-synods/when-visitors-lead-worship-in-local-churches/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Guidelines-on-safer-recruitment-for-those-who-lead-worship-in-our-churches-H11-GA-2024.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Recognised Denomination means membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. <https://ctbi.org.uk/how-we-work/membership/>

<sup>6</sup> Several organisations will supply a speaker to lead worship with a theme of their charity – details in Appendix 2

<sup>7</sup> Synod Recognised Lay Preachers are no longer being trained. They undertook a one-year course similar to the current LRWL modules.

The individuals on the list are contacted at least annually to check their status and willingness to remain on the list.

**CAVEAT FOR ELDERS** Some churches have been approached by individuals or members of non-URC churches seeking an opportunity to preach on a Sunday and/or build links with the URC congregation. They may or may not be in membership with any recognised denomination. Whilst this may seem like a prayer answered it is important to take time to explore their theology proposed and message, and prayerfully question why such an approach is being made. General Assembly 2024 guidance on [safer recruitment of lay leaders](#) is here

New churches are being established all the time, many by one or two enthusiastic and charismatic individuals who set up as pastors and gather followers or break away from established churches. Public worship in a URC church represents the whole URC church to the wider community so must reflect the values and theology of our denomination. In recent years the URC has been careful to use inclusive language about people and to expand our range of Biblical images to give better expression to the truth that God is beyond all our notions of sex and gender<sup>8</sup>.

Those leading worship should be in “Good Standing”<sup>9</sup>, and be an active member of a recognised church. Seeking references from another trusted and established church can provide assurance. Check particularly that the new preacher is aware of URC theology and beliefs, particularly around equality and diversity issues, that they have a current DBS certificate and have completed safeguarding training. If their denomination is a member of Churches Together in England<sup>10</sup> that is a helpful start

Agreement to invite new worship leaders should be gained from elders, who are together responsible for provision of suitable worship and any concerns should be checked with the pastoral committee or Synod representatives

### **Payment for preachers and worship leaders**

This is a sensitive area that needs to be handled carefully. It is appropriate to offer to reimburse travel expenses and a fee to visiting preachers although some churches may struggle to afford this. A recent poll by Synod Ministries committee suggested an average fee

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<sup>8</sup> see GA 1984 Record of Assembly p22 requiring URC publications to use inclusive language about people and GA 2014 Record of Assembly page 24 asking that leaders of worship explore and give intentional consideration to their use of inclusive and expansive language and imagery in worship.

<sup>9</sup> Good Standing is a flexible term, please make contact for more details

<sup>10</sup> <https://cte.org.uk/about/whos-who/member-churches/>

of about £45 although some paid up to £65 and many just offered expenses. Many preachers will not take a fee or will donate it to charity but that cannot be assumed – there is a lot of time put into training and preparing to lead worship and this should be respected as for any professional person. This is a conversation between the church and the visiting worship leader and should be had early before any misunderstandings emerge.

## 4 Presiding at Communion or Baptism

The URC has clear carefully written guidance around who leads communion or baptism which derive from the 1972 Basis of Union. They are set out in the Presiding Policy discussed at Synod Together in October 2025<sup>11</sup> and also in the Lay Preachers Handbook<sup>12</sup> If a URC Minister is not available then Elders/Pulpit Supply Secretaries should invite

- An 'Active'<sup>13</sup> retired URC minister, or a Minister from another denomination that permits them to preside in URC churches – or failing that
- An Authorised elder (nominated by your church meeting and authorised by Synod)
- An Assembly Accredited Lay Preacher with links to the church– although prior authorisation should be sought from the Pastoral Committee
- An authorised elder or URC trained lay preacher from another church within the pastorate or group of churches, who has completed the Sacraments course and with strong connections to the inviting church

The Sacraments are a public Act of Worship and should be led by an ordained member of the URC. Ministers, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers and Elders are ordained. The individual presiding at Communion does not need to lead the whole service, just that element. If nobody can be found then the communion should- be re-scheduled for another Sunday.

The Area/Pastoral committee should maintain records of those who are Authorised to preside at Communion in their own churches and ensure they remain updated.

## 5 Safeguarding

Preachers are in a position of authority and trust by the nature of their invitation to lead worship. It is vital therefore that they have undertaken appropriate safeguarding checks and

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<sup>11</sup> Policy for presiding at the Sacraments (link to be added)

<sup>12</sup> Ref Lay Preachers Handbook <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/A-Handbook-for-Lay-Preaching-and-Worship-Leading-v.2.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Active in this context is defined by URC General Assembly as being up to date with Safeguarding checks and training

training, For Ministers and Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers this is managed by URC Head Office at Church House.

For other worship leaders it is perfectly acceptable to ask whether an invitee has undergone a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check within the last 5 years and if they have completed safeguarding training for the denomination or congregation with whom they would worship, normally. Your own church safeguarding policy would usually say something about this too.

- [Click Here for details](#) of who should have a DBS check and who is responsible for undertaking these checks
- Guidance about training is available on the [Synod website here](#)
- And a handy table of who should be trained at what level is [available here](#)
- Guidance about safer recruitment of lay worship leaders is [available here](#)

## 6 Alternative arrangements

Sometimes it's just not possible to find someone to preach, or you have a last-minute cancellation or no-show. Here are some options depending how much notice you have – remember the elders are responsible for worship, it should not just be left to the pulpit supply secretary!

### a) On the day – have a pre-prepared service

Ask one of your regular preachers or your Minister to plan a ready-to-go service and keep it in a folder that is easily accessible. It should include orders of service, well-known hymns (either printed or referenced to your usual hymn book) and the prayers and sermon written out. If you use audio-visual a slide set on a stick could also be included. In theory any of your congregation members could lead worship using the pack, and your organist may be able to sight read familiar hymns. Make sure you commission another one if it gets used.

### b) A day's notice – URC resources

The URC produce a range of pulpit supply materials on their webpage [here](#). This includes a ready-to-go Sunday worship pack which is easy to download and comes with full instructions – just follow the link. These are put together by URC Ministers and lay preachers and follow suitable theology and usually the lectionary. Some are truly ready to go and some have just bullet points for the sermon so would need some preparation. You would still need to prepare orders of service and/or slide

presentation and check for the music. The downloads include PowerPoint slides and require a projection system linked to a laptop and audio system.

Alternatively there is a podcast-type service which arrives by email at about 9.30 on a Sunday including order of service. The link is also on the URC Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/TheUnitedReformedChurch> Training is being designed to help with service design based on this material

The orders can be printed and the service played over your audio system if you have the facility. Well worth setting it up in advance when you are calm if you think this might be needed.

c) A few days notice URC Worship notes

These are resources to help lay preachers to plan worship, including all elements of a service, prayers, sermon, readings, but enabling a personal touch or relevant reflections on the readings. See [details here](#)<sup>14</sup>

d) Regular gaps - Sharing worship with another church

You may wish to have a congregational outing to another URC church for worship. This helps to bring congregations together and for small congregations with very few “turnup” worshippers a note on the door with a welcome, contact details and advice on where you are this morning is perfectly acceptable.

e) Regular gaps – online worship with another church

Several churches regularly offer online worship, if your church has an audiovisual system and decent Wi-Fi you can hook into another church’s service without leaving your building. Mission grants are available for congregations interested in upgrading their audio-visual equipment if they can demonstrate how it will enhance the mission and vision of the church. Mutually sharing preachers with another church through online worship is a helpful way to link with others and stimulate your worship.

f) Regular gaps – empower your congregation

Support members to develop their skills to lead worship, by sharing intercessions, choosing hymns, leading the family talk, etc so they can step up gradually and lead a

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<sup>14</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/your-faith/prayer-and-worship/worship-notes/>

full service. This may encourage them to dig deeper and consider a lay preaching course. More details of all the training opportunities are on the Synod website <https://southernsynodurc.org.uk/training-and-development/>

## 7 Music in church

Often it is the pulpit supply secretary who arranges for an organist or other music in church – although some churches sing a Capella which can be refreshing! Many churches have regular organists or pianists or use a hymnal or Spotify but if you are struggling, here are some ideas. The going rate for a professional organist was [researched in 2017](#) but has increased since then to about £60 for a single service.

- a) Ask around – can your regular organist or pianist recommend anyone? Members of the congregation may know people willing to play occasionally. Don't be shy of using social media but do check those responding are supervised and do the usual checks you would do for visitors to the church. New pianists/organists may need time to practise on the instrument beforehand so offer to arrange access for this to happen
- b) Professional players – there are agencies that can match you to an organist in your location such as <https://organistsonline.org/>
- c) A simple web search for organists can find local groups or freelance payers. Or ask at nearby churches (without poaching!). You could support a student organist and provide practice space in exchange for playing some Sundays.
- d) Digital Hymnal – many churches invested in these to play organ music sorted for verses, tempo, tune, etc. Whilst groundbreaking in their time they can be fiddly to use compared with searching online for music or using Spotify or similar. However they do not require copyright permission as that comes with the software.
- e) Digital music – the internet provides a wide range of music that you can download and play through your church audio system or even Bluetooth speaker lined to your phone. You can find PowerPoint slides with words and music for many hymns at a pace and tempo that works for your worship. You will need a licence to play downloaded music – [see the CCLI website](#) for more details and for support with wider copyright issues [see the URC website](#) . When downloading from Youtube or other casts there can be a problem with adverts. Seek advice if you are uncertain, and we would suggest downloading using a reputable site such as 4kdownloader.

## 8 Weddings and Funerals

Your church building needs to be registered for conducting weddings; there is separate registration to conduct same sex marriage in a church. Whilst it is not essential for a Minister to conduct a wedding in a URC church there must be an Authorised person (registered with the local Council) in attendance to ensure clear legal procedures are followed. Standard URC wording must be used<sup>15</sup> in order for the marriage to be legally conducted.

Funeral services can be led by a lay person, and there is helpful guidance from North Western Synod here<sup>16</sup>. Again, there are standard URC Prayer suggestions and Orders<sup>17</sup> for a funeral and committal<sup>18</sup> which should be followed.

## 9 Sources of help and advice (more links welcome!)

Thank you for all that you do. If you have a question or concern there is plenty of support available from

- Your elders, Minister, local church leader
- Your [Area Lay Preaching Co-Ordinator](#)
- Synod Lay Preaching Advocate
- Your Pastoral or Area Committee
- Synod [Ministries Committee](#)

Reference documents are linked in the footnotes or text within this document. Key reading includes:

URC national guidance <https://urc.org.uk/your-church/guidance-support-for-churches-synods/when-visitors-lead-worship-in-local-churches/>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-10-29-URC-Worship-Wedding-service.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://urcyorkshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Preparing-and-Leading-a-Funeral-Service.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Services-for-a-Funeral-%E2%80%93-One.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-10-29-URC-Worship-Services-for-a-Funeral-%E2%80%93-Two.pdf>

## Appendix A – Checklist for inviting visiting preachers

### Upon making the booking

- Give date and time of service, location of church and name of contact person.
- Enquire if the visitor requires transport.
- Give details of size and type of congregation, numbers and age range of children, where they sit and when they go out/come in.
- Advise on the 'normal' order of service and if people are prepared to take part (e.g. Bible readings, leading intercessions), by whom.
- Provide information on what material is followed (Roots, Lectionary) and send relevant section immediately indicating to what extent this can be varied.
- Indicate if there is a Children's Address/introduction to theme at the beginning or sharing what has been done in Children's or Young People's Group and if anyone else will be involved in presenting that.
- Give information on hymnbook(s) used, copyright licence, whether learning a new hymn is a possibility, availability of a music group.
- Specify what equipment is available (data projector /laptop, sound system etc)
- If the service includes Communion/Baptism explain the Synod policy.

### Within a month of the service

- Confirm by letter the date, time and postcode of the church, giving details of how to get there & parking arrangements, plus an emergency contact number for the day.
- Enclose an Order of Service (if required) details of hymnbooks used and deadline dates for hymns/service sheet, including arrangements for sending hymn numbers/titles.

### On the day

- Make sure that someone is waiting so that the visitor is received and shown to the vestry.
- Invite the visitor to check any requirements in the church.
- Indicate whether the visitor is expected to give the notices and, if names of church members/friends are to be mentioned in prayers, provide them in writing.
- Inform the visitor about procedure at the start and close of worship and whether coffee is served after the service.
- Explain the sound system set up including who is responsible for switching microphones on and off (e.g. during hymns), and whether roving microphones are available.
- Make preparation for the appropriate expenses in advance and produce a thank you slip in readiness.

## Appendix B – possible sources of worship leaders – charities

- LICC
- Salvation Army
- Commitment for Life
- Christian Aid
- Churches together (in your local area)
- Spinnaker
- London City Mission

## Appendix C – templates

### C1 – Draft order of service

#### DRAFT ORDER OF SERVICE

*(Please feel free to alter/amend as you see fit)*

**10.30 am Morning Worship**

**on Sunday.....**

**Worship Leader.....**

Welcome and Notices - Church Secretary or duty elder  
Lighting of the Peace candle (if you do this)

Call to worship and Prayer of approach

Hymn .....

Prayers of praise, confession and The Lord's Prayer (words of which are on the screen)

Introductory talk – usually suitable for any children present – although adults also enjoy

Hymn (suitable to appeal to children) .....

Offertory – by two members circulating pews then bags to the front laid on plate  
Dedication by preacher  
Prayer for the children as they leave for Church of Youth

Bible reading(s) Please indicate if reader required. Words will also be on the screens.

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Hymn (optional) .....

Sermon, talk, reflection

Hymn .....

Prayers of Intercession

Hymn .....

Blessing followed by The Grace (words of which are on the screens)

- Communion can be at any point in the service but at this church it is usually .....

## **C2 Example guidance for visiting preachers (amend to suit your worship)**

### **Information for visiting worship leaders for a service including communion**

Our service starts at 10.30 am and finishes by 11.30 (followed by coffee/tea and chat). Our congregation size is very variable but averages around 25 adults and a few children who are mostly primary school age. Unfortunately, there are sometimes no children present at all.

Our services are generally relaxed and informal and we are very accepting of varied approaches so please feel free to do your own thing.

**Participation by the congregation** - We enjoy participatory worship and Bible passages are normally read by members of the congregation. The Bible in the back of the chairs is the Good News Bible but if you would prefer a reading to be from a different version, please let us know.

We prefer the first part of the service to be accessible to all ages, with the children involved as much as possible, and there is usually a family time. Please do not direct questions to individual children (some are outgoing but some are very shy). If the children don't respond there are plenty of adults who will be happy to answer! If you are able to include a reading appropriate for younger members of the congregation before they go out this is appreciated. Please make the first part of the service fairly brief to give the children time in Junior Church.

It is very helpful to Junior Church Leaders if you can make the theme of your Family Talk clear so that they can build on this in Junior Church.

Communion (usually the ..... Sunday )

The invitation to Communion is to all, regardless of age. This means that very young children may take bread and wine (grape juice). For this reason, we have communion during the first part of the service before the children go out to their session (they still appreciate having family time). We leave it to you to decide on the style of this but it is helpful if the language used is straightforward so it can be understood by the children present. Once the congregation has been served the elders will bring the elements back to you and sit down. Will you please then serve them. If you wish to be served, please then sit down and one of the elders will serve you.

**Hymns and Projection** - We have (detail digital organ software) and can access most hymns. We do enjoy learning new ones. The hymns, generally four or five, are projected on to the wall at the front of the church. They will be accompanied by the digital hymnal or guitar/violin. If you wish to have pictures or video clips projected, we can do that. **OR**

We have a weekly rota of organists/pianists. Very occasionally we may be reliant on pre-recorded organ music to accompany the hymns using a 'MIDI-box'. It is therefore essential that **the worship leader contacts our co-ordinator of music**, before they submit the service plan to (email) We will be happy to advise on which hymns/tunes are possible, if there is no organist, or to offer suggestions

Every element of the service is announced or displayed on 2 large LCD screens during the service, including the words of the hymns and any prayers with congregational responses.

WLs are welcome to use video clips and so on as part of the service, as long as they are submitted in advance with the Order of Service.

**Order of Service** - We do/don't print a congregational service paper, however, please let me have your order of service (including readings and hymns and anything you want projected) not later than the Wednesday preceding your visit. Please send them to me, (details)

Please feel free to email or ring me if you have any queries. (There is a sample order of service at the end of these notes for you to use if it is helpful, but you are free to create your own order as seems to best fit the theme and content of your service.)

**Parking** There is parking in the road outside the church and also in the main road on the other side of the green. The spaces available fill up fairly quickly as there is another church in the same road. The church is usually open by 30-45 minutes before the service starts.

**Start of the service** – You will be welcomed at the door. The Church Secretary or an elder will meet you in the vestry before worship 10.30am and will offer prayer. On entering the sanctuary, please take a seat at the front on the right whilst the welcome and notices are given from the reading lectern. This is followed by a short period of quiet preparation with music.

**Offertory** – We pass bags for the offertory which is generally taken by children who will bring the bags up to you at the Communion table and will wait until after the offertory prayer.

**End of the service** - After the Benediction or The Grace and a brief silence, the person taking the service generally walks to the entrance door to greet people who leave straightaway (although most will stay for coffee).

**C3 Fee offer template**

**PREACHERS FEE AND EXPENSES**

Thank you so much for coming to our church to lead our worship and to preach God’s word among us. We value you and your ministry and believe a worker to be worthy of their hire.

If you are not an active URC minister in a stipend then we would like to bless you with a fee of **£xx.00** plus your expenses for being with us (mileage, parking, public transport etc.) Please list your expenses below:

**Date of Service:**

**Mileage**  @ **£0.xx** per mile = **£** **p**

**Parking** **£** **p**

**Public Transport** **£** **p**

**Any Other Expense:**   
(Please Specify e.g. Music) **£** **p**

**TOTAL including**  
**£50 Preaching Fee** **£** **p**

Your Bank Details please, for a BACS transfer to be made:

Account Name:  
Sort Code:  
Account Number:

**SIGNATURE:**  
(or type)

**DATE:**

*Once completed, please pass to an Elder or email to .....directly. Thank you*