

A Theology of Ministerial Stipends

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1.1 The nature of stipend

In the church a stipend is a form of payment provided to ministers to permit them to devote themselves to ministry. Normally the ministry will be full time. The stipend is given to enable the person to be free of avoidable anxiety about having to obtain food, clothing, shelter and other necessities. The stipend is a 'monetary allowance' rather than a salary or fee for services rendered.

There is an important difference between the terms 'stipend' and 'salary'. A salary is remuneration for work carried out, usually on the basis of an assessment of the value of the kind of work in question. A stipend, while paid to ministers in a general way for their ministerial work, is not to be construed as a payment for particular work. It is not paid for particular duties or hours of work. The relationship between an employer and a salary earner is contractual. There are contractual obligations on the part of each which are enforceable in law. The relationship between a congregation, or other responsible body for a placement, and a minister is covenantal. A congregation, or other body, covenants to pay a stipend to a minister but that minister is, strictly speaking, not accountable to that congregation, or body, but to the presbytery or other council of oversight. This, of course, is not to suggest that there is no sense in which a minister is accountable to the congregation or body in which he or she exercises ministry. The covenant between the responsible body and minister, involving concern for justice and care, means that the stipend will always be the first charge on any church budget.

Underlying the difference between a stipend and a salary is the distinctive nature of the ordained ministries of the church (Minister of the Word and Deacon). Although ministers may describe the Uniting Church, or their congregation or other responsible body, as their 'employer', their ministry is not simply a form of employment. It is grounded in a call from God to ministry, confirmed by the church. Although in a general sense ministers serve their congregation, or the particular group or community of people to whom they minister, and are responsive to it, they are not 'paid' or 'remunerated' for particular services to the congregation or other group involved. There is always a broader vision and a broader range of needs to be considered, and their calling makes them responsible to God and the whole church for their choices. They are ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ serving God's reign not simply carrying out prescribed responsibilities. Congregations and ministers negotiating for a call share their expectations and the presbytery or other council of oversight has the responsibility to deal with issues or problems.

There are some pressures on the notion of stipend, such as the acceptance of part time ministries (see below) and the professionalization of ministry. Ministry does require high levels of competence and conduct, high personal and 'professional' standards. However the idea that this should mean a highly remunerated ministry stands in tension with the basic understanding of ministry as grounded in God's call to serve through the church by the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed. It is a mistake to treat the stipend like a salary package. Ministers themselves need to appreciate this difference concerning their remuneration especially in an aggressive capitalist culture.

1.2 Full-time and part-time

There are now many ministries that are part time rather than full time. This includes ordained ministries as well as many paid lay ministries. This makes it look as though a part time stipend is payment for hours worked. The part time minister may or may not gain income in some other way. Nevertheless, the idea of ordained ministry is grounded in a call from God recognised by

the church. The resultant relationship between ministers and those among whom they minister remains fundamental. To move from the concept of a stipend to the notion of a salary package for part time ministries would adversely affect both the relationship between ministers and their people and the approach of ministers to their work.

1.3 Guidelines

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania makes use of the following principle: “The traditions from which we come expect a great deal of ministers. They are to become and remain Biblical scholars, articulate interpreters of current events, pastors with competence in the professional skills of psychology and human relations, as well as developing a quality of spirituality which ‘both by life and doctrine sets forth God’s true and living word.’ It is unreasonable to expect this order of contribution to the life of the church if ministers are preoccupied and anxious about money, or are spending their time in an effort to save or earn money.”

The principles for setting the minimum stipend stem from the biblical concept of **justice** which is covenantal. It is concerned with the right relationship of people with God and with one another. Micah says that what the Lord requires is that people do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). God’s goodness and justice means fair dealing with people in daily life and treating those who are poor and needy with justice and compassion.

This biblical concept of justice requires that the stipend should be fair and reasonable. A fair stipend should relate to the economy of the nation and to the national wage level and reflect the national economy. Without implying that the ministry should be recompensed as a profession, the qualifications and competencies expected of the ordained ministry should be given some consideration in setting a fair stipend.

The stipend should be adequate. The stipend paid should be sufficient to cover the living expenses of a minister and his or her family living and sharing in the life of the community. While ministers are in active ministry their remuneration includes not only stipend but also travel, housing or residence benefit. It should be recognised that ministers do have to provide their own housing for retirement.

The stipend should be appropriate. The stipend is intended to cover the minister’s needs and responsibilities common to all church families. When the work of a minister has particular expenses and obligations which are undertaken on behalf of the church, it is appropriate that consideration be given to meeting these in the shared fellowship of the church.

Judgments therefore have to be made by the appropriate council of the church, the synod in the case of the Uniting Church, about a fair and reasonable minimum stipend and allowances for those in the area for which it has responsibility.

1.4 Contextual considerations

From the beginning of the church it has been a fellowship that has been committed to sharing its poverty and wealth. One factor in determining the level of stipend is the ability of the church to pay. For particular reasons the minimum stipend may be beyond the means of a local congregation. However the determining factor is not only the ability of a congregation to pay but the capacity of the synod as a whole to meet the cost of the stipend. The synod and presbyteries have responsibilities to ensure that ministers are provided for as per their terms of placement. Ministers should not be expected to bear the shortfall in particular situations.

The level of stipend is related to the community in which the minister lives. It should be at a level that would meet the costs of living in that community and fulfilling the ministerial responsibilities. This involves the church in making judgments as to what is fair and reasonable, adequate and appropriate for ministers and their families.

The attitudes of Christian people to possessions and wealth are not limited to the community standards in which they live. The Christian standard of living is also to take into account the world situation which includes being conscious of the needs and poverty of people in other countries. As the church decides upon appropriate levels for the stipend this broader perspective is to be taken into consideration.

If ministers are in part time placements the proportion of the working week to be devoted to ministry needs to be agreed upon and reflected in the proportion of the full time stipend to be paid. This should not mean any departure from the essential notion of the stipend.

The family situation of ministers varies greatly including whether or not the spouse earns an income. If a family has particular needs then other ways of addressing them should be provided and not through the stipend. Ministers whose family income is greater than their needs have the responsibility of exercising stewardship concerning their income.

There is no national stipend. Nevertheless, the Uniting Church has seen fit to write into its regulations certain provisions regarding ministerial entitlements. Regulation 2.7.1 (a) states, "A Minister called to serve in an approved placement under the jurisdiction of the Church shall be paid a stipend: (i) if full time, not less than the minimum rate determined by the Synod; (ii) if part-time, calculated on a proportionate basis of the minimum rate determined by the Synod." There is a regulation that allows less than the minimum stipend to be paid as agreed upon in exceptional circumstances (2.7.1 (b)). There are also regulations concerning such matters as housing and retirement. The Beneficiary Fund functions according to a theology of stipends.

Each synod sets its own level of minimum stipend taking into consideration community standards and also with reference to the decisions of the other synods. There are some differences between what is paid and provided by 'wealthy congregations' compared with other congregations. There are loadings in some placements, especially non congregational ones. The Victorian synod has a 30% limit on this. Complete parity is unrealistic as there are contextual reasons for providing loadings due to the nature of particular ministries. Nevertheless, ordained ministers should not commence a placement on the basis of its financial rewards but out of a sense of call. The church promises to provide for their living needs.

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This paper has drawn on papers prepared for the Synod of South Australia 1984, the Queensland Synod 1998, the Synod of Victoria 1999, and the Assembly 2009.