

Theology of Stipends

Prepared by Rev Dr Chris Walker National Consultant Theology and Discipleship Received by the ASC in November 2009 (Minute 09.59)

1. The idea of a stipend arises from a theology of ministry, and in particular ordained ministry. The word 'stipend' comes from Middle English: from Old French or Latin, from *stips* 'wages' and *pendere* 'to pay.' It is regular sum paid to ministers. The church has traditionally spoken of it as a 'living allowance' paid to ministers to cover their needs as they exercise their ministry rather than a salary. There is a mutual relationship between the church and the minister, a covenant relationship, in which the church provides for ministers so they may fulfil their calling acknowledged by the church. In what follows this will be more fully explained.

The nature of stipend

2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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 the difference concerning their remuneration especially in an aggressive capitalist culture.

Ordination and stipend

6. While every member of the Uniting Church is “to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant” (Basis of Union par 13) and will provide “for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God’s call to enter more fully into mission” (BU par 13) ordained ministers have a particular responsibility to do so. The Uniting Church “will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise among its members women and men called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world” (BU par 14). It is assured that God “will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word” (BU par 14a). Ordained ministers will “preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church” (BU par 14a).
7. The ecumenical World Council of Churches document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* says that in order to fulfil its mission, “the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity” (BEM p.21). Such persons since very early times have been ordained. “The chief responsibility of the ordained ministry is to assemble and build up the body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating the sacraments, and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its caring ministry” (BEM p.22). It goes on to say that the authority of the ordained minister derives from Jesus Christ, who has received it from the Father and who confers it by the Holy Spirit through the act of ordination. It points out: “the authority of the ordained ministry is not to be understood as the possession of the ordained person but as a gift for the continuing edification of the body in and for which the minister has been ordained” (BEM p.22).
8. The payment of a stipend, rather than a wage or salary, reflects this special relationship between ordained ministers and the church. In the Uniting Church the call to ministry experienced by a person is confirmed by the church and, following satisfactory completion of theological education and ministerial formation and acceptance of a call to an approved placement, the church sets the person apart as a Minister of the Word or Deacon through ordination. This is carried out by a presbytery by prayer and the laying on of hands in the presence of a worshipping congregation.
9. Thereafter the church undertakes to provide such ministers with a stipend so that they are able to exercise the ministry to which God has called them and to which the church has set them apart without being preoccupied with having to provide their own financial support for that ministry. Those who are ordained are not employed by the church and hence are not paid a salary or wage. Rather the church orders its life so that the person whom God has called, and the church has set apart for ministry is able to exercise that ministry in an approved placement and is provided with a living allowance in order to carry out that ministry.

Biblical background

10. In looking to references in the Bible that relate to ministry maintenance, it is important to keep in mind the needs of the whole community and the justice that God calls for. There is also the biblical bias to the poor and marginalised, such as the passages about the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee (Deut. 15:1-8, Leviticus 25).
11. The key Old Testament passage that relates to ministerial support is Numbers 18. It deals with the provision made for the priests. God provided land for the people who in response and gratitude were expected to tithe to the Lord. From these tithes the priests were provided for well for their services. In the New Testament there are the words of Jesus to the seventy as they go on mission which includes the statement “the labourer deserves to be paid” (Luke 10:7). This was interpreted by the Apostolic Church to mean that religious leaders were entitled to be provided for adequately by the people they served.

12. Paul drew on both the Old Testament precedent and Jesus' saying in writing to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:13-14). Similarly, in Timothy there are the quotes "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading the grain" and "The labourer deserves to be paid" (1 Timothy 5:18).
13. Paul therefore held that he and others had a right to be paid for their services for the gospel. He also believed he was free to waive that right when he thought that it would get in the way of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:1-18, 1 Thess. 2:9, 2 Thess. 3:8). He sometimes supported himself by tentmaking (Acts 18:1-3). Although he was not dependent on the church for a living, at times he did receive support (2 Cor. 11:9, Phil. 4:18).
14. Hence there is strong biblical evidence that it is appropriate for leaders to be maintained from the people's gifts to God. Jesus does teach that we are not to be anxious about food and clothing but to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:25-33). Jesus' cautionary statements concerning serving God or wealth still apply as well (Luke 16:13). In Peter there is the warning to elders "to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly" (1 Peter 5:2). So, while preoccupation with material things is inappropriate, this is not an objection to the principle of an adequately paid ministry.

Developments in Church History

15. Throughout the centuries the provision of support for those in ministry has varied greatly. Generally, it has been modest and has been related to the community standards in which the minister, cleric or bishop served.
16. Each of the three church traditions that came into the Uniting Church had provided a stipend to those who were ordained to ministry. The provision of a minimum stipend was taken into the Uniting Church at the time of Union and has subsequently continued in all synods.
17. Historically ministers have been provided with housing (a manse) or an allowance in lieu of a manse. Many ministers, especially those getting closer to retirement age, are living in their own homes. Most ministers are married so provision for the minister and his or her family is required. The needs of single ministers and ministers at different stages of family responsibility, varies greatly which impacts on the provision of suitable housing.

Ordained versus Lay Ministry

18. As indicated above the word stipend relates to ordained ministry. This is not to downplay the value of lay ministry but there is a difference between ministry that comes from a call of God to be a Minister of the Word or Deacon, a call which is acknowledged by the church, including the act of setting apart by ordination, and is life long, and other forms of ministry that are to be exercised in a particular time and place.
19. Nevertheless, even though there is a difference, the Uniting Church strongly recognises lay ministry. The Basis of Union clearly states this recognition: "The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. It acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ" (BU par 13). All members have a role to play. Nevertheless, those members of the church who are set apart to be Ministers of the Word or Deacons have a particular responsibility for preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, exercising pastoral care, equipping people for ministry, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the church (BU par 14a). The training for ordained ministry is not simply to be able to fulfil certain tasks but to be formed for leadership in the Christian community with the responsibility to be faithful to the apostolic tradition.

20. In the Uniting Church ordination service, the person to be ordained as a Minister of the Word is given a charge which includes the following. "Taking Christ, the Good Shepherd as your example, you are called to lead God's people in worship, witness and service; to equip them for their ministry and mission; and to work with them in building up the body of Christ. You are called to strive for peace and unity among all Christian people, especially among those with whom you serve." The words for a person becoming ordained as a Deacon are similar but speak of 'Christ the Servant' and being 'a faithful pastor of God's people'.
21. The questions are introduced with the following. "In this ordination the Uniting Church in Australia acts and speaks within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. God in Christ acts and speaks through all that the Church does and in obedience to God's will. God gives you grace and authority for this ministry." The questions include, "Do you believe you are truly called by God and the Church to the office and work of a Minister of the Word/Deacon?"
22. Ordination then is not just a local matter but links the ordained person with the church universal. There is an authority given for ministry that is to be accepted with both appropriate humility and appreciation for its significance. Providing a stipend has to do with the church recognising ordained ministry as having a particular role and authority and enabling it to be carried out.

Full time and part time

23. 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.

Stipend and other ministries

24. Stipend relates to ordained ministry. Other ministries do not have the same relationship to the church. While the Uniting Church gives emphasis to the ministry of the whole people of God, that does not mean there is no difference between the ordained and lay people in ministry. Lay ministry positions are appropriately more defined in terms of role and payment and the word wage or salary does apply. This is not to reduce the significance of lay ministry but to acknowledge that it does not have the same relationship to the church catholic as that of ordained ministry. This also means that payment for lay ministry can appropriately vary from that of the stipend depending on the nature of the work expected and the skills of the person. Remuneration for those in lay ministry is guided by awards and is determined in relation to the particular responsibilities and experience required for that ministry.

Guidelines

25. The Synod of NSW and the ACT sets its stipend with reference to the following principle: "The stipend of a minister of the Uniting Church shall be such that it will provide the support necessary to allow ministers to devote their whole time and talents to the service of God, and that the income thus provided will enable them to live with a proper sense of economic independence and Christian stewardship, and so reflect through their ministry and family life true Christian participation in the riches, joys, benefits and service of God's creation."

26. 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."
27. 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.
28. 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.
29. 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.
30. 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.
31. 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.

Contextual considerations

32. 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.
33. 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.
34. 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.

35. 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.
36. 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.
37. There is no national stipend. Nevertheless, the Uniting Church has seen fit to write into its regulations certain provisions regarding ministerial entitlements. Regulation 2.4.20 (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 (2.4.20 (b)). There are also regulations concerning such matters as housing and retirement. The Beneficiary Fund functions according to a theology of stipends.
38. 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.

Conclusion

39. The Uniting Church, like other denominations, uses the word 'stipend' to describe the remuneration provided to ordained ministers. The notion of stipend arises out of a theology of ministry in which the idea of a covenantal relationship between ministers and those among whom they minister is central. Ministers are given a 'living allowance' in order to carry out their call to serve God through the church. This distinguishes it from views about remuneration which are appropriate in a contractual relationship. Salary and wage earners are paid for what they do and the amount reflects some independent assessment of the value of their work.
40. The stipend paid to ministers is related to the particular ministry exercised but is not to be construed as remuneration for services rendered. An ordained minister is paid a stipend in order to exercise a ministry to which he or she is called by God and the church. Ministers are accountable to the presbytery, to the church as a whole and finally to God in carrying out their ministry of serving the gospel in word and deed.

* * * * *

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.