



Northern Synod Vacancy Briefing

Finance and Property Questions

This paper is intended to help local churches approaching a ministerial vacancy, by answering various frequently asked questions about finance and property.

- **Do we get a reduction in M&M?**

Unfortunately not. Some District Councils had different policies before 2004, when they were harmonised across the Synod.

The Plan for Partnership in Ministerial Remuneration (currently accessible from <https://urc.org.uk/images/Finance/Plan-for-partnership.pdf>) explains the principle that “the whole ministry of the URC is to be made available to the whole of the Church and the financial responsibility for this ministry is to be shared throughout the whole of the Church.”

Churches’ contributions to the Ministry & Mission Fund are not based on ministry received, but represent each local church’s contribution to the ministry and the mission of the whole Church. By spreading the cost across the whole of the United Reformed Church, it makes it more affordable. If churches were to pay the full direct costs of ministry actually received, it would cost a good deal more than at present.

- **What’s the going rate for pulpit supply?**

Travelling expenses should be offered at 30p per mile (as long as the preacher claims for less than 10,000 miles a year from all sources) and a preaching fee of £30 per service for lay preachers, retired ministers, non-stipendiary ministers and ministers of other denominations (our own stipendiary ministers are already on stipend so need not be offered a fee).

- **Do we pay the interim moderator/pastoral friend?**

No, that is not necessary. Travelling and stationery expenses (and where appropriate preaching fees) should be offered, but that is all. Synod requests that travelling expenses for interim moderators be paid at the ministers' rate of 45p per mile.

Churches may wish to thank those who have come and helped them through a vacancy, and this may be done by way of a small gift after the induction, raised by voluntary donations. (No more than a nominal amount should come from general church funds).

- **Who's responsible for the manse?**

Ordinarily, each church is responsible for managing its own manse, which includes repairs, improvements, buildings and public liability insurance, Council Tax, water, sewerage, electricity, gas, oil, etc.

When churches are in a group, there will likely be an agreement for each of the churches to contribute to the cost during ministry. It is advisable to specify whether this will also apply to periods of vacancy.

If the manse is let, then the tenants would take on responsibility for Council Tax and utilities.

- **What exemptions are available from Council Tax?**

Unoccupied dwellings owned by a charity and last used for charitable purposes can benefit from a short-term exemption for up to 6 months (class B). Dwellings held vacant awaiting occupation by a minister of religion are exempt indefinitely (class H). Class H is the more valuable, but of course if you intend to let the manse during the vacancy, it can affect the availability of these exemptions.

- **Should we let the manse, and how do we do so?**

There can be advantages in letting the manse, if it is likely to be vacant for some time. Most vacancies tend to last for more than a year, given the time involved in thinking about the church's future direction and needs, preparing a pastorate profile, declaring vacancy, considering and interviewing potential candidates, inviting them to preach with a view, issuing and concurring a call, the candidate giving notice in their existing post and arranging to move.

Insurers tend to require properties to be visited on a weekly basis whilst they are vacant, to ensure they remain secure and in good condition. An occupied property is more secure, and would be heated, avoiding deterioration over winter. It is worth bearing in mind that an assured shorthold tenancy must last for at least 6 months, and can be terminated on 2 months' notice.

The procedure for letting manse is to pass a Church Meeting resolution and request Synod Executive to concur. It is recommended that a reputable estate agent be used to ensure that the letting is on the best terms reasonably obtainable. They would be able to check the identity, references and financial standing of potential tenants, as well as their eligibility to live in the UK. Synod would require that rental income be held by the church in a separate fund, to be used for manse maintenance. This would help to offset the costs of maintaining the property. Once a balance of £5,000 was built up, any surplus could be spent on general purposes.

It is recommended that the estate agent manage the tenancy on an ongoing basis, which should take some of the burden off the local church. They should be asked to provide copies of annual gas safety certificates and five-yearly electrical safety certificates. They can also hold any deposit in one of the statutory schemes.

In almost all cases, the landlord will be the United Reformed Church (Northern Province) Trust Limited of 4 College Lane, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8JJ. The Trust is willing for local churches to make arrangements with estate agents, as they have the advantage of being local. Agents may find it helpful to have brief details of the property (such as number of bedrooms, presence of a garage, gardens, double glazing, burglar alarm, smoke alarm, gas, electricity, water, telephone, cable or satellite TV, type of heating, council tax band).

You will need to take meter readings and advise utility companies and Council Tax office of the change of tenancy. Insurers should be kept informed of when the manse is occupied (premiums tend to be higher and cover restricted when unoccupied).

- **Should we do repairs and improvements on the manse?**

It is worth considering doing works on a manse whilst it is vacant, as it is easier to get access, particularly where it could be disruptive or might incur income tax liabilities if done whilst a minister is in residence.

The Trust's Manse Subgroup visits manses periodically, and can give basic advice and suggestions on maintenance, repairs, and possible improvements. You can contact the Trust Officer, Andrew Atkinson, at Synod Office if you would like further advice or a fresh visit.

Estate agents can also advise on works that might make a tenancy more attractive. However, some works may be better done at the end of a tenancy, to avoid wear and tear before a minister comes. On the other hand, churches should bear in mind that it can take time to organise a programme of works to a property. It may be advisable to have plans in hand so that you are ready to put them into operation once you know a minister is coming.

Andrew Atkinson, Trust Officer
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