

## Churches in Vacancy

1. This paper concerns the relationship between Synod and pastorates where a vacancy has been declared. It is to be read in conjunction with the paper on Ministerial Transition headed *Interim moderators, pastoral representatives and pastoral care of churches in times of ministerial transition*, approved by Pastoral Committee in 2008, and downloadable from the members' area of the synod website.
2. That paper spells out the role of the Interim Moderator who is appointed when the vacancy is declared. The role is to
  - 1) Guide the churches in the drawing up of the pastorate profile and terms of settlement.
  - 2) Communicate with the Moderator and Pastoral Committee on progress.
  - 3) Oversee the introduction of a candidate in conjunction with the Moderator.
  - 4) Oversee the induction of the incoming minister and ensure the signing of agreed terms of settlement.
  - 5) The day to day pastoral work of the churches would not normally be part of this role.
3. It is now recognised that this "light touch" interim moderatorship may leave churches in vacancy with a sense that they are not well supported by Synod – though not through any failing on the part of the interim. It is simply the case that once the initial work of drawing up the pastorate profile is complete and the pastorate is on the moderators' list, the church may have very little contact with Synod, whether through moderator, interim moderator, or anyone else.
4. To counter this we are suggesting that the interim moderator and the synod moderator liaise with one another, and ensure that at least regular telephone conversations take place which can assure the church that they are not forgotten – even if no candidate has emerged to view the vacancy. It may also be desirable after a pastorate has been on the moderators' list for a year or so for the synod moderator (probably in the company of the interim moderator) to visit the pastorate, to allow an open exchange of information and ideas.
5. We also suggest that more thought be given to the role of other Mission Partnership Ministers. The Ministerial Transition Paper states that "it is assumed that churches in vacancy will call on the other ministers in the Mission Partnership, both serving and also active retired, as well as ministers of ecumenical partners, to cover particular pastoral needs". So far as ministers who are in post are concerned, it would be helpful if rather than waiting to be called on, they were to take initiative (in consultation with one another) in keeping contact with the vacant churches, and offering at least a little of their time.
6. To enable this to happen, when a church is liable to find itself without ministry it should be the responsibility of the Pastoral Committee, acting through its Designated Group, to call together the Mission Partnership ministers and ensure that between them they will be prepared to keep the vacant church's needs in mind.
7. It has also been suggested that as well as an Interim Moderator Synod, through Pastoral Committee, might also appoint a Pastoral Visitor who will keep contact with the vacant church on a quite regular basis (eg attending worship once a quarter, and attending two or three church meetings and elders meetings in the course of the year). This individual would be able to act as the eyes and ears of the moderator, and ensure a sense that the church is still supported by Synod. It may be that as a programme for Local Mission and Ministry Review is rolled out across the synod, the already appointed LMMR Partner would be prepared to take on this responsibility.
8. We hope that in these various ways churches in vacancy might feel less unsupported by Synod. However, it is important to bear in mind that Synod is not a body of officials ranged at some distance from the local church, but is the corporate expression of the life of our Church in this Region which may be recognised in the concern and encouragement of a whole variety of people. On a practical note, where individuals are offering support in the semi-structured ways outlined here, their travelling expenses should be met by the pastorate in the same way as the interim moderator's.

*(this paper has been rewritten in light of discussion in Pastoral Committee, 25-Feb-09)*