

Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee

General Report

Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd David Grosch-Miller david.grosch-miller@urc.org.uk
Action required	For information only
Draft resolution(s)	None

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To report the work of the committee and its oversight of welfare funds.
Main points	The work of the committee is necessarily confidential, but the report seeks to make the wider church aware of the increasing requests for support from ministers and their families.
Previous relevant documents	Report to General Assembly 2018
Consultation has taken place with...	Finance committee and Synod Moderators as required

Summary of Impact

Financial	No proposed changes to existing provision.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	None

Introduction

This committee considers the cases of ministers who are referred to it, usually by synods, often at times of difficulty. It also deals with welfare and emergency matters including the use of welfare funds. Its work is necessarily confidential, and is reported in general terms only, directly to the General Assembly.

Committee members: Convenor: the Revd David Grosch-Miller (from 2018) Members: the Revd Richard Church (DGS Discipleship) (secretary ex officio from May 2015), the Revd Dr David Pickering (from July 2018), the Revd Bridget Powell (from July 2019), the Revd Camilla Veitch (from July 2016), Professor Malcolm Johnson (from July 2018), ex-officio: URC Treasurer (or Deputy Treasurer) and the General Secretary

1. Pastoral reference work

- 1.1 The committee responds to requests to support ministers and their families that are received from Synod moderators and Assembly Officers. In the last year requests have included the short term payment of stipend and housing costs for ministers at the end of fixed-term appointments and the payment of grants to assist ministers and families in financial distress; increasingly, this has included retired ministers.
- 1.2 The committee has also been asked to intervene when relationships have broken down between ministers, congregations and Synods.
- 1.3 The churches' ministerial counselling service is a confidential support available to all ministers. The service has been appreciated by a number of ministers, and was supported by grants of £9,139 in 2018 and £9,069 in 2019.
- 1.4 The existing Terms of Reference of the committee restrict the work of the committee to the assistance of ministers in service, and amendments to better reflect the needs of the Church and the work of the committee will be proposed when appropriate.

2. Welfare Grants

- 2.1 PRWC has oversight of historic funds that are held for designated purposes and available to stipendiary ministers of the United Reformed Church. The level of grants available is set from time to time by PRWC, and these are paid on application for the following purposes: education fees for children in URC-affiliated independent schools, musical instruments for children, school uniform and equipment, public transport travel costs for school attendance. Further grants are paid at bereavement, as a Christmas gift to widows and widowers, and as a contribution to the housing costs of a minister's spouse following divorce or separation. The committee also receives requests for financial assistance to ministers for purposes not covered by the historic funds.
- 2.2 Welfare grants totaling £44,000 were paid in 2018, and £49,200 in 2019. The income from historic funds was supplemented by grants from the Assembly budget of £10,000 in 2018, and £15,000 in 2019.

3. Future Trends

- 3.1 The existing sources of pastoral support are severely stretched at local church and synod level. It is likely that the need will increase as the speed of change unsettles already strained relationships, and as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic forces further changes on individuals and communities. PRWC will respond where it is able, but there is a need for issues to be addressed as locally as possible.
- 3.2 It has become a normal practice for retired ministers to continue to receive pastoral and financial support beyond retirement. Where retired ministers are not members of a local URC, because of geography or other factors, needs may only become known when a crisis occurs.
- 3.3 Ministers and their dependents are living longer and physical needs often outstrip their financial resources.
- 3.4 The resources of finance and personnel varies considerably across the synods, and in some situations, such as with the Northerly synods, resources might possibly be shared. It would be helpful, for instance, if advice from Age UK, Citizens Advice Bureau, Lady Hewley Trust and other grant making bodies could be accessed at an inter-Synod level.
- 3.5 As resources become more stretched, the importance of financial planning by ministers is a priority. While each individual will have different needs and a differing ability to plan ahead, the Committee is unable to respond to every financial need made known to it. Conversations have begun as to how financial planning may become part of the lifelong learning culture of the church.
- 3.6 Resources vary from synod to synod, and where welfare funds are available to a synod it is expected that they will be used to respond to any request for financial assistance from ministers under their care and oversight. Where the funds do not exist and where the need is confirmed by the Synod, then PRWC may be approached for assistance.

4. With thanks

- 4.1 We have welcomed Bridget Powell and David Pickering to the committee. Pam Sharp completed her term of service, and we are grateful for her contribution to the work of PRWC. Richard Church will retire from his appointment as Deputy General Secretary in July. Richard has served the committee with diligence and sensitivity to the benefit of all our work. We wish him well as he explores other opportunities. We continue to value the administrative support given by Samantha Bircham.