

Paper A8

Creating a Retired Ministers' Benevolent Fund (RMBF)

Business Committee

Basic information

Contact name and email address	Vaughan Griffiths, Deputy Treasurer deputy.treas@urc.org.uk
Action required	
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 5 General Assembly accepts the recommendations in points 4 (a) to (f) of the Reflections and Proposals section of this paper and agrees to establish a Retired Ministers' Benevolent Fund with an initial budget of £39,000 per annum.

Summary of content

Subject and aim(s)	To report further on work done in assessing the need for a benevolent fund for retired ministers and to present resolutions for consideration by Assembly.
Main points	General Assembly 2023 paper G3 and its Resolution 23 were designed to promote discussion about the need for, and resourcing of, a URC Retired Ministers' Benevolent Fund. In the event the lack of time available precluded the paper from being presented so the investigation was delegated to a working group to gather further information and present proposals to General Assembly 2024, if possible.
Previous relevant documents	Paper G3 for General Assembly 2022 and Paper G3 for General Assembly 2023.
Consultation has taken place with...	Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee (PRWC), Secretary for Ministries Committee, Synod Moderators, Ecumenical partners and Finance Committee.

Summary of impact

Financial	No immediate additional cost and we are investigating what resources may be available in Restricted Funds whose terms meet criteria related to retired ministers' support.
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Commentary – Paper G3 (2023)

1. Paper G3 tabled to General Assembly 2023 reported on a GA 2022 instruction to the Finance Committee create a working group to consider:
 - a) whether a benevolent fund might be the right way to provide support to retired ministers in particular financial difficulties; and if so
 - b) in what circumstances might ministers be eligible for support from such a fund, and
 - c) what should be its nature and size, and how it might be resourced.
2. Research carried out suggested sources of support, both within the URC and externally, were patchy.
3. The paper reported that it was difficult to describe in generic terms what difficult situations might be incurred by retired ministers, but it was felt that there was a need for a benevolent fund.
4. It was reported that it was not possible to determine the size of the fund that might be needed until the population requiring support had been clarified. A further working group was therefore convened to develop principles and criteria for determining eligibility. Paper G3 (2023) included an appendix setting out the draft principles and criteria.

Subsequent action

The Business Committee took oversight of this work, and having received feedback as requested by the Treasurer at General Assembly 2023, formed a further working group to consider the questions raised by Paper G3 and the feedback. This group comprises:

- Chair – the Revd Dr Elizabeth Welch
- Moderators – the Revd Geoffrey Clarke and the Revd Steve Faber
- Secretary to Ministries – Nicola Furley-Smith
- Deputy Treasurer – Vaughan Griffiths.

The group gathered anecdotal information from the Moderators and Secretary to Ministries, and then decided to widen the information gathering by sending a survey to all Synods. The results of this survey are given in Appendix I to this Paper.

Reflections and proposals

1. We believe all retired ministers should be treated fairly and equally wherever they live in the UK, and as far as possible, Synods should act similarly.¹ We also believe that the purpose of a retired ministers' benevolent fund is to seek to give a compassionate response to cases of need, within the constraints of available resources.
2. We commend the work done by the small group who prepared the statement of principles and criteria for the report to General Assembly 2023. We largely re-affirm those principles, but with certain changes. The revised principles and criteria are shown in Appendix II.
3. Following a consultation with Synod Moderators, a survey was sent out to them to gather information on the need for a benevolent fund for both serving and retired ministers. This indicated a variety of support, and a variety of resources.

A more detailed commentary on the results is given in the appendix to this paper.

4. Our proposals for a way forward are:
 - a) We adopt the principles reported by the working group to GA 2023, as amended (Appendix II).
 - b) Annual Christmas gifts to retired ministers or their widows/widowers should be administered at Synod level. The Synods are best placed to support retired ministers etc in their area, and can better assess their wider needs than a central committee or secretariat could do. Income from central funds (URC Trust) for retired ministers' welfare should be distributed annually to Synods on the basis of the estimated number of ministers/widows /widowers eligible. The amount distributed is to be encouraged as a UK nationwide standard amount to be paid out, as an expression of the 'no postcode lottery' principle and aiming to be fair to all who are eligible.
 - c) A benevolent fund for supporting retired ministers should be run centrally for the kind of exceptional situations outlined in the principles in Appendix II. The application will be prepared by the Synod to demonstrate eligibility and need, and the central input (see paragraph (d) below) will be only to judge the fairness and consistency of applications, and to hold to the budget for each year's maximum distributions.

¹ For example, a Synod with separate trust funds for supporting retired ministers might be encouraged to consider meeting a need from such funds in line with the RMBF principles.

- d) We recommend that the work of administering this Fund be undertaken by the PRWC.² This will need the agreement of the PRWC and the Business Committee for this to go forward. The RMBF working group will take this consultation forward, and report back to Assembly Executive.

- e) The funding of this benevolent fund will be via a designated fund opened for this purpose, and funded (if possible) from existing designated or restricted funds. An annual budget is tentatively proposed at £39,000, thereafter as agreed by the Resources Committee annually.

- f) It is inevitable that experience will refine the operation of the RMBF. We therefore propose that a first review is carried out in Autumn 2025.

² Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee

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Appendix one

Some observations on the Synod survey

Responses

1. Responses from Synods were varied; some provided answers in detail, some were unable to do so, but indicated principles or structures for supporting ministers in need.
2. In some cases, welfare benefits are under the control of the moderator alone, so if there was a moderator vacancy, nothing much happened. Alternatively, in some cases, the administration of benefits was out of the Moderator's hands.
3. Some Synods have separate trusts which hold funds for benefit purposes. Where these could be identified, we did look for further information (eg via Charity Commission), but without any great success.
4. Most Synods have resources for benefits to be paid to both serving and retired ministers.

Numbers

1. The largest gift reported appears to be £3,000 as a contribution towards removal expenses; the background circumstances were not reported.
2. All other reported gifts appear to be £750 or less.
3. In the majority of Synods, the main area of support is towards serving ministers, sometimes very markedly so.
4. On the other hand, two Synods spent more supporting retired ministers; one spent £24,469 over three years on housing repairs, and another spent £64,450 over three years, but predominantly over 2022 and 2023. We surmise this was supporting ministers' fuel bills.

Christmas gifts

1. A minority of Synods reported regular Christmas gifts to widows and widowers.
2. Centrally, the Christmas gifts are only paid to widows / widowers of stipendiary ministers; qualification applies to ministers who die in service or when retired.

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Appendix two

Appendix to General Assembly Paper G3 (2023) – amended

Principles and criteria for Retired Ministers' Benevolent Fund:

1. The Fund must be equally applicable and accessible across the whole URC family (no postcode lottery).
2. The Fund should be a last resort: all statutory sources of benefits etc normally should be explored and claimed where possible.
3. The Fund must be for exceptional cases of hardship. It is not there to provide a guarantee of a universal minimum pension for all ministers.
4. Overall household income should be taken into account in assessing hardship (not just the minister's income).
5. The Fund is for making up a shortfall in income over a period of at least a year. It is not for covering one-off needs such as car repair bills or replacement of white goods, for which Synod welfare funds are often available.
6. Awards from the Fund should be reviewed annually: they will not be 'lifetime' payments.
7. Awards from the Fund must be discretionary and decided on a case-by-case basis: eligibility to apply for an award does not equate to entitlement to receive one.
8. There needs to be an income threshold for eligibility (ie income above the threshold disqualifies an application to the Fund). We suggest that this should be the sum of 50% of the current in-service stipend and the full standard state pension.³
9. There should be an annual cap on the maximum payable under the scheme in each case. We suggest that this should be 15% of the current in-service stipend.⁴

The retired minister's Synod of residence must be responsible for assessing eligibility in the first instance, and for supporting and forwarding applications to the Fund.

³ For 2024/25 this would amount to about £27,500 p.a.

⁴ For 2024/25 this would be about £4,800.