

THE MINISTER'S HOUSE

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For many ministers the key issue is not so much the stipend they receive, but rather the house they live in. Traditionally most ministers live in a church house – the manse, the vicarage, or the rectory.

For young ministers living in a church house is often an undoubted perk. At a stage when most of their peers are in small homes, they may well have a four if not five-bedroomed house, with often one or two reception rooms. Our first manse, for instance, included four bedrooms, a large reception room, a dining room, a nursery, a huge kitchen, and large cellars to boot. It was a great place for our children to grow up.

However, with the passing of the years the situation begins to change. Increasingly one's peers are all in comfortable homes of their own. Apart from some of the younger members of the congregation, few church members will be renting property – and even those living in rented accommodation will have chosen where to live. Not surprisingly the manse couple begin to want to live in a home of their own. Although they recognise that Christians are called to be pilgrim people, nonetheless there is something special about being able to call a place 'ours'. Furthermore, although the minister is not financially responsible for the upkeep of the church house, most ministers do not appreciate always being dependent upon others for repairs or improvements to the house in which they live. They would much prefer to be free to choose to do their own thing.

Furthermore, in a time of rapidly increasing house prices, it makes financial sense to live in one's own property. Indeed, one can argue that there is a degree of injustice that while the church continually profits from rising house-prices, the minister continually loses. The upshot is that when retirement comes, there are huge problems for the minister. True, some ministers inherit houses from their parents, but this may not happen, especially if they have many siblings. In any case, should we expect to provide the future housing of ministers from the financial prudence of their forbears? Some ministers are able to get onto the property ladder by buying perhaps a holiday cottage courtesy of their wife's salary and then renting it out – but not all ministers' wives are able to earn large enough salaries to make that possible. The only certain way for ministers to ensure that they have a house of their own is to enter ministry in mid-life, having already gained sufficient equity in a house, which then in turn they can let out to continue the mortgage re-payments.

Of course, there are arguments in favour of church manses. The provision of a church manse facilitates the moving of ministers – particularly if the minister is moving from lower-priced areas in the North, shall we say, to more expensive-priced areas in the South. Indeed, without a church manse, the provision of ministry in places like Kensington or Chelsea would be well-nigh impossible. But at the end of the day it is not the minister who normally benefits from the provision of tied accommodation, it is the church.

Fairness demands that churches should make it possible for ministers to own their own homes. Jesus himself said that "the labourer deserves his pay" (Luke 10.7//Matt 10.10). Similarly the Apostle Paul wrote: "If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?" (1 Cor 9.11: see also Gal 6.6). The

thrust of these passages is that Christian workers have a right to be well-treated financially, and this surely includes appropriate housing! Certainly we do not honour Christian workers (see 1 Tim 5.17) by putting them at a disadvantage as far as housing is concerned.