

A Reflection on the Non-Stipendiary Ministry (2)

The following article is the second in a short series drawing on a Report written by Tim Key during a sabbatical, October and November 2004, from his 'usual' duties as a stipendiary minister in the United Reformed Church in Huddersfield. It takes a particular look at NSM within the URC but uses much wider experience, making it an excellent reflection on the experience of Ministry in Secular Employment. Tim has agreed to publication in "Ministers-at-Work", and well worth reading it is too!

*This part looks at the **Questionnaire** and responses. I have left it in Tim's own language, expressing as it does his reactions to the replies received. As you read this please consider what your own answers would be and why.*

I sent out 146 questionnaires (to all those NSMs in the URC who were thought to be active by the URC's Ministries Committee) and I received 73 back (exactly 50%). The following is a summary of the responses I received and some initial reflections. The questions in italics are the questions that were posed in the questionnaire.

1. How would you describe your role as a minister in the URC?

Although I did not directly ask the question regarding people's employment status, I was able to gather the following:

29 were in paid employment (mostly full-time, but some in part-time work). Of these, most were in secular jobs, though 4 or 5 were in either paid chaplaincy work or theological education.

35 were either retired or not in paid work.

9 were of unknown status regarding their work.

A wide variety of roles were outlined, many of which a stipendiary minister (SM) could have undertaken. There were a total of 11 people involved in a chaplaincy role of some sort.

Observations:

There was a larger proportion of people (NSMs) in secular work than I would have imagined. I had thought that MSEs (Ministers in Secular Employment) were a rarity in the URC and, though some NSMs in paid employment would not necessarily see themselves primarily as such, it was clear from the responses of many that this was a very important aspect of their ministry.

2. Does your particular ministry fit into any of the following generally accepted models of non-stipendiary ministry in the URC and, if so, which one?

a) Service in a congregation as part of a team (the former Churches of Christ model).

b) In pastoral charge as part of a team.

c) In sole pastoral charge.

d) Exercising a ministry at District or Synod level.

e) Ministry in secular employment.

Or: f) None of the above.

Many people ticked more than one box here. The numbers shown with an asterisk indicate that this was chosen along with at least one other category. 5 people chose 3 or more categories here.

a) 5 (6*) b) 10 (8*) c) 19 (11*) d) 9 (17*)
e) 2 (12*) f) 4 (1*)

Observations:

It was interesting to note that a large proportion of people ticked more than one category in answer to this question. A number of people also added their own comments here, clarifying their own particular ministries and how they did (or often did not) fit in with the five models outlined in the

question. NSMs are engaged in a very wide variety of tasks (as are SMs, I suppose) within their ministry. Yet while there are certain expectations of SMs, there is generally less for NSMs and they therefore have a certain freedom to develop their ministry in ways which suit them.

Of those who only chose one category, most people were in sole pastoral charge of a church or churches. A good number also exercised their ministry at District or Synod level. Generally, fewer people were involved in a team ministry than I might have expected, which I found surprising.

3. *Would you say that your ministry is a) understood and b) valued by the URC, both locally and in the wider church?*

a) Understood

Local church:

Yes - 37

No – 9

Yes & no – 13

Wider church:

Yes - 30

No - 16

Yes & no - 18

b) Valued

Local church:

Yes - 48

No – 3

Yes & no – 11

Wider church:

Yes - 35

No - 11

Yes & no - 18

A significant number (19) simply answered 'yes' to this question. I have taken these to mean 'yes' in each of the above four categories.

Observations:

I wish that I had asked this question in a different way, at least splitting it more obviously into two parts! It was not always easy to categorise what people were saying here, which explains why the above figures do not exactly add up. However, it is clear that far more people felt that their ministries were valued and understood by the church than not. It is, though, also noteworthy that people felt more positive about the local church than the wider church in this regard. Revd John Proctor (Tutor at Westminster College, Cambridge and highly qualified statistician) commented thus regarding the above figures: 'Roughly speaking, the overall feeling of local church affirmation is about a third better than the overall feeling of wider church affirmation, and the overall awareness of one's ministry being valued is about a fifth higher than the overall sense of one's ministry being understood.'

There were, however, some very definite negatives voiced here which also need to be noted. These were not solely reserved for the wider church, either. Locally, there are still some churches that still have a lot to learn about the value and importance of their NSMs.

4. *Does the fact that you are an NSM present you with any particular opportunities for mission that may not be possible for SMs?*

I split the responses into two main sections, i.e. those with another paid job and those without.

With employment:

Yes – 22 No – 3 Sometimes, maybe or don't know – 3

Without employment:

Yes – 12 No - 16 Sometimes, maybe or don't know - 10

Some also (9 in all) in this second category said that, although it was now 'no', when they had had a job it would have definitely been 'yes'.

Unknown status:

Yes – 2 No – 7 Sometimes, maybe or don't know - 0

Observations:

The obvious thing to note here is that those with employment (or those recently retired) see their work as a place where mission can and does take place. Of course, it might be said that the way I asked the question was encouraging this response, but I genuinely believe that NSMs in employment have a firm footing in the world outside the church and this colours and effects their ministry in a very valuable way.

So often I think that SMs can, if they are not very careful, lose touch with the world outside the church. We (SMs) are so busy with church matters and church people (at so many different levels) that we can begin to lose sight of the fact that the prime focus for the church is, or should be, away from itself to the world outside – a world so in need of God's love.

As the church continues to shrink (at least in terms of the numbers of people dedicated to its life and mission), so the temptation is to retreat into the church's self, to hide behind our humanly created structures and put all our energy into the maintenance and survival of those structures, which are wrongly seen as being all-important. Ministers themselves can fall into this trap, especially full-time SMs. I think it is far less likely that NSMs will do this, simply because they naturally have another focus in life and that focus is directed away from the church.

5. What (else) makes your ministry distinctive from the stipendiary ministry?

From the many and varied responses given to this question, I note particularly the following:

From those in employment:

'We are a good example to the laity, because they see us sharing in the pressures of the work-place, yet managing also to make a full commitment to church life.'

'We have lots more contact (often very positive) with the un-churched. We are seen to have a firm foot in the real world.'

'There is less expectancy of us as the minister to do everything. Our churches are more enabled because of this.'

'Of course, our financial independence is matched by our geographical limitations - we are not usually in a position to be able to move easily to another area because of our work commitments.'

From those not in employment:

'We carry less 'baggage' and can therefore be more objective in our work.'

'We are able to offer to the church skills acquired through our involvement (past or present) in the secular world.'

'We often have a much better awareness of the local situation than an incoming minister, assuming that we have lived in the local area for a long time.'

'We have a certain freedom due to the fact that we are not paid by the church. We are not really employees of the church as SMs are, therefore we can be more unconventional, radical and perhaps truly 'non-conformist'.'

Observations:

There are some interesting words and phrases that are very often used by NSMs and many came to the fore here in answer to this question. Words like 'freedom', 'contact', 'understanding', 'independence' and 'commitment', for example, reveal the specific flavour of the NSMs ministry. I am not, of course, saying that these words could not also be applied to a stipendiary ministry's ministry –

they might well be – but a SM might have to work very much harder for this to be so. A SM can so easily be ‘devoured’ by his or her local church, or the wider church’s structures, such that the world outside of church can become a very scary or, at the very least, unfamiliar place. The minister can then begin to live up only to the expectations of his or her congregation(s) (and be seen to be very successful in so doing), which are, however, often very narrow and inward-looking. I will be looking further into this in the next section of this report.

6. *Would you rather be a stipendiary minister and if so, why?*

<i>With employment:</i>	<i>Without:</i>	<i>Unknown status:</i>
Yes - 2	Yes - 1	Yes – 0
No - 22	No – 28	No – 9
Maybe, not sure – 3	Maybe, n/s – 4	Maybe, n/s – 0

Observations:

Many people did not just give a one-word answer here, but were quite adamant that they so valued their particular ministry they did not want to jeopardise it in any way. It was interesting conversely to see the way in which the SM was viewed by NSMs – they were, very often, sceptical to say the least. Why should this be, I wonder? Is it because too few NSMs work in teams involving other ministers, including SMs, perhaps? Do we really not understand each other to this extent?

Of course, there was a small minority of people who wished to become SMs for a variety of reasons (including the obvious financial one). Yet this was only a very small number in my survey (just 3 out of 73) and perhaps simply reflects the fact that, on average, every year some four or five NSMs do transfer to the SM for, again, a wide variety of reasons. Far fewer SMs transfer to the NSM, however, which again perhaps reflects our limited understanding of the NSM’s role.

7. *What are your support networks within your ministry?*

More than one was given by almost everyone.

Church/Elders - 25
Other ministers/colleagues - 39
Support Group - 8
Family/friends - 30
Special/Spiritual Director/Moderator – 25
None - 3

Observations:

Although there were fewer NSMs working within team ministry situations than I might have thought likely, the majority of people listed other ministers and/or colleague as their most important means of support, closely followed by family and friends. I was surprised by the large number of people who had spiritual directors – I wonder if, proportionately, as many SMs have them proportionally? It was encouraging to see that only 3 people admitted to having little or no support networks in place. This represents a very small percentage of NSMs. I wonder if it would be such a small percentage were the same question to be asked of SMs?

8. *Do you have a proper contract and/or terms of settlement with your District/church and, if so, are you happy with it/them?*

Contract – 5 Terms of Settlement – 13 Both - 3
Yes, but unspecified which – 29
None, or not a formal one – 24

Four people said that, although they had a contract of sorts, they were unhappy with it.

Observations:

As mentioned in the last section, I was encouraged to note that a good majority of NSMs now appear to have a contract or terms of settlement in place. This appears to be different to the findings of four years ago in the URC's review of the NSM, when a recommendation was made encouraging the setting up of such contracts between NSMs, local pastorates and/or District Councils. I am sure that the guidelines set out at the time were helpful.

Those in secular employment or chaplaincy work also had contracts separate from those relating to any specifically church work undertaken.

9. On average, how many hours per week do you devote to your ministry?

0-10 hours	11-20	21-30	31-40	40+
12	23	20	9	4

Observations:

The average time an NSM devotes to his/her ministry is almost exactly 20 hours per week. I am supposing that those working in secular employment did not include their time at their paid work in their answers to this question. However, I think that some very busy NSMs (of which there are doubtless many) did not reply to my questionnaire because they did not have time to do so. I would therefore, somewhat tentatively, suggest that more than thirteen NSMs in the URC work on average more than 30 hours per week.

I also thought that it was encouraging to see that a good proportion (almost one quarter) of NSMs were quite prepared to say that they devoted ten hours or less to their ministry. Not all NSMs are over-burdened by the ministry they carry out, which is exactly as it should be.

10. As far as you are aware, has your District and/or Synod been involved in drawing up plans for 'developing opportunities for non-stipendiary ministry and for challenging suitable candidates to offer themselves for training to enable these plans to be implemented', as recommended in the Ministries Committee's Review of non-stipendiary ministry in the URC – General Assembly 2000? Are you involved in any such plans or discussions?

Unaware or don't know – 63

Aware, but not involved – 8

Aware and involved – 0

Observations:

As commented on above, this initiative has apparently failed to get off the ground at any level within the church, with the exception of one or two Synods that were specifically mentioned. Not one NSM is or has been involved in this process, however, which was a specific recommendation brought before General Assembly in 2000. Is it any wonder that NSMs sometimes feel undervalued and misunderstood by the wider church?

11. What do you think is the future for non-stipendiary ministry in the URC?

Many and varied answers were again given here, but I have categorised them broadly into the following:

Positive about the future – 43

Negative – 4

Unsure - 22

Observations:

It was good that the positives outweighed the negatives by approximately ten to one in answer to this question. However, there was also a significant number of people 'unsure' as well with regard to the future, for a wide variety of reasons. Some of these 'uncertains' simply reflected people's concerns about the church as a whole and were not specifically to do with the non-stipendiary

ministry. There were a number of people who were adamant that the non-stipendiary ministry is an important ministry for the future and it was awaiting rediscovery by the church. They were very keen that further resources be ploughed into it and that only then would we reap the obvious benefits it has to bring us, as well as the whole church.

12. Any other comments?

Again, a great many comments were made, including the following:

'NSMs need to be in employment to develop the role to its full potential.'

'Financial constraints and the reduction in the number of SMs mean that there will be an increasing need for NSMs, but the URC hierarchy has not fully recognised this yet.'

'Becoming ordained as an NSM in the URC enabled me to be recognised by other denominations in a way eldership does not and cannot.'

'There is a need to be aware of the limitations as well as the responsibilities and privileges of being an NSM.'

'If NSMs were paid (or at least given a housing and car allowance), perhaps then there would be more equality between us and SMs.'

'The whole church needs to be reminded about what being 'ordained' means. NSM should never be seen as second-class ministry.'

'There are severe time constraints faced by NSMs in secular employment, a fact which is often unrecognised by local congregations.'

'It is difficult for people in full-time work to train for the ministry. This needs to be accepted and more imaginative and creative ways of training need to be developed.'

'The fact that it is not now so easy for people to take early retirement (as it was in the 1980s and 90s) may make recruitment to the NSM more difficult in the future.'

'The URC should be a church with no SMs, except perhaps at Moderator or District level. This would both encourage more lay people to take up leadership roles within the church and solve the URCs financial crises at a stroke.'

'Payment for NSMs leading of worship still varies considerably across the churches.'

'NSMs are pioneering the way for how to move beyond the walls of our churches to building bridges with the world outside. But maybe the real answer is to have better trained and active church members more generally doing this.'

'I believe that the original vision for non-stipendiary ministry has been lost and that the role needs looking at afresh. In view of the increasing need for NSMs anticipated for the future I think there should be a greater flexibility, not just in the use of such ministry but also in the remuneration for it. This would open up possibilities for such service to many more people.'

Observations:

It was good that so many people felt able to say exactly what they thought here and I think that all the comments above are noteworthy in different ways. There were many other things said in addition to the above that space precluded me from including. Many people commented on the financial

difficulties faced by the URC at the moment and the way in which the non-stipendiary ministry can and does alleviate these pressures. This is one reason why it may well be the model of ministry for the future. At least two people were outspoken enough to suggest that all ministers in the URC should be NSM.

It was interesting that this was the only place where payment for NSMs was mentioned as a possibility. I was very interested in the comment shown above that said that there could be a greater equality between SM and NSM if both were paid ministries (though then, of course, we'd really have to change the name of our NSMs!). The comment about training was an important one (though perhaps surprisingly few people mentioned this), as was the comment made which compared NSMs with elders. The call for greater flexibility in ministry, training and remuneration is a call reflected in the 'Equipping the Saints' report (Recommendations 9, 10 and 11) and I hope that this is something that the church is going to take very seriously in the future.

Summary

So what initial reflections can be drawn from the evaluation of the questionnaire? These are many, but may be summarised as follows:

1. An important part of many NSM's ministry is what they do away from the world of the church. This is so particularly for those who are in secular employment, but even those not in any kind of paid work speak of the 'freedom' they have as an NSM to develop their ministries in ways which many SMs would feel unable to do. Also, those who are retired speak of the importance and value of the skills they acquired in secular employment which they freely bring and use within their ministry. However, it is clear that this is something which is not always valued by the wider church.
2. Many NSMs find themselves in sole pastoral charge of a church or churches, which does not fit in with the original vision the URC had for this particular type of ministry. Does this simply reflect the URC's shortage of ministers, generally, or is this symptomatic of the failure of the URC to view ministry in any other way than the normal model of one minister to one church? Of course, I discovered many NSMs who did not fit in to this 'normal' pattern and who were doing very interesting alternative things, but there were also a surprising number of those that did fit into the perceived norm, perhaps in part because of the constraints they felt the church had put on them.
3. Whilst there are many NSMs who feel perfectly valued and whose ministries are well understood, there is also a significant minority who do not and are not.
4. Less than 5% of the NSMs replying to the questionnaire would prefer to be SMs.
5. Most NSMs have good support networks in place, many seeing other ministers as a good and valued source of support.
6. Most NSMs have contracts or terms of settlement in place with their local pastorates and/or District Councils.
7. On average, NSMs devote 20 hours per week to their ministry.
8. Most Synods and Districts are not currently involved in any kind of recruitment campaign to encourage more candidates for the NSM.
9. Most NSMs are positive about the future for the non-stipendiary ministry in the URC.
10. There are still questions relating to both the training and payment of NSMs that the wider church needs to address. These are often very real, but unspoken, concerns for many NSMs, yet they are important nevertheless.