

# Supporting ministers who experience ill health: checklist for superintendents

## Phase 1 - when the minister first notifies you they are away from work due to illness

1. If the absence is for more than seven calendar days ensure that they obtain a fit note from their GP and send it to you.
2. Is there any immediate action you should take on reading the 'reason for absence' on the fit note (for example, if the reason given by the GP is "work-related stress" this must be addressed by a conversation with the minister about issues such as work load)?
3. Think about whether the absence is part of a pattern or related to a known medical condition – has this condition worsened?
4. Make appropriate arrangements to cover the minister's work – do you know what the critical events/issues are that need to be covered by someone else? If not, how will you find out?
5. Does the minister wish to have contact whilst on sick leave? Is it helpful to 'keep an eye' on her/him or would it be better to ensure they have some space away from ministry for a time? How will you do this in a way which meets both their needs and those of the circuit?

## Phase 2 - during ongoing or long term absence

1. Are you or a colleague meeting or having contact with the minister regularly to provide support (practical and pastoral) for them? Is this adequate? Does the minister feel isolated or in need of space?
2. Is this support sufficient? Here are some examples of support that might be appropriate:
  - Looking over diary appointments – are the demands being made on the minister's time realistic?
  - Has the minister scheduled any 'down time' or time off for reflection or to recuperate from a long distance travel or a particularly difficult pastoral visit?
  - Has the minister scheduled in regular holidays/ sabbaticals and time off on a frequent basis in order to recharge and refresh, and would they like to receive guidance to assist them with this?

- Looking at coping mechanisms for stress-related activities - how may they be improved?
- Identifying any reasonable adjustments that could be made in the way they are carrying out their ministry. For example, starting later in the day, having regular short breaks during the day, etc.
- Arranging for the provision of counselling support via the Churches' ministerial Counselling Service.
- Informal support by the person nominated by the superintendent, district chair or MDO warden. This may range from providing a 'listening ear' (which is informal and not to be confused with counselling); helping the minister with practical matters such as rearranging services, appointments and other circuit business; supporting the minister in prayer; making local arrangements for the diversion of telephones and emails; communicating with congregations about the minister's absence; helping the minister to identify and access sources of support and advice for themselves and their family.
- Access to a trained mentor or other suitable person. This is particularly useful where the minister has issues to address such as how they deal with conflicts within the circuit, pastoral responses to difficult situations, and support with managing workload pressures or related stress.
- The opportunity to work with a spiritual director. This will be particularly important where the absence relates to issues such as a spiritual crisis, questioning the call of God, or the practice of an individual's faith, or what it means to be a minister. It is worth noting that working with a spiritual director is part of the rule of life in the Diaconal Order.
- Access to independent occupational health advice (See the *Good practice guide (part 1)*, Section 9.

3. What are the on-going implications for the life of the circuit of the minister's absence? How are their duties to be covered in a long term and sustainable way and what support does the circuit need? Here are some areas where support might be appropriate for the circuit:
  - Assisting in providing resources from outside the circuit to help cover some of the absent minister's responsibilities;
  - Helping the superintendent and circuit stewards to decide what work will not be done in the minister's absence;
  - Supporting the superintendent in their increased responsibilities and being a 'listening ear' to ensure that they do not try to cover too much;
  - Looking through diaries to reschedule appointments and rearrange the chairing of meetings;
  - Meeting with the absent minister's church stewards who may be able to identify lay people to cover gaps;
  - Supporting the superintendent in making decisions about how work across the circuit needs to be re-arranged
4. Do you have a good understanding of the progress of the minister's illness and likely prognosis? If not, how will you obtain accurate information?
5. Is the minister making appropriate arrangements for you to receive fit notes in a timely manner? If not, what will you do about this?
6. Are you meeting the timescale requirements of the *Good practice guide (part 1)* for providing support? As a minimum, support should be provided when the following periods occur:
  - Any continuous absence of one month's duration during any 12-month period, or
  - Any absence of between 7 and 14 days duration, where this occurs twice in any 6-month period
7. Are there any issues about how the minister works on a daily basis that may have contributed to their absence, for example, not taking holidays, long working days, lack of sufficient space for breaks and refreshment, always being available by phone or email?
8. Are stress/burnout or mental health issues a feature of the absence, or of the minister's known prior experience of ministry? If so, how will you sensitively approach these with the minister, and when would it be appropriate to do so?

### Phase 3 - preparing for a return to work

1. If the minister is ready to return to work, is this supported by fit note? If this is not needed how will you ensure that the minister is actually well enough to return to ministry?
2. If a phased return to work is appropriate, is there a fit note to support this? If not, the minister should be asked to obtain one.
3. If the fit note recommends a phased return to work, how will you arrange this? See Section 7 of the *Good practice guide (part 1)* for help with this.
4. What are the practical implications for the minister and others in the circuit of a phased return to work?
5. Do you need to seek advice about the support a minister may need on returning to work? For example, should a medical report be obtained? Would the opinion of an occupational health adviser be useful in establishing parameters for a return to work?
6. Does the minister have a disability which means that reasonable adjustments to the work are both desirable and should be considered on legal grounds?
7. How will you obtain information about any disability the minister may have, and arrange for appropriate assessments to take place?
8. What communications are in place within the circuit to ensure that information about the minister's return is conveyed and handled well?

### Phase 4 - monitoring the return to work

1. What arrangements are in place to monitor how the minister is coping after a lengthy absence?
2. Is the support to be provided on the minister's return actually in place and how long will it be needed?
3. What arrangements are in place to ensure the circuit is appropriately aware of the minister's ongoing support needs (if any) and that these are met?