

Review of SO 111(3)

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1. Standing Order 111(3)

- 1.1 Standing Order 111(3) is in place for the times when a minister's marriage is breaking down. It currently reads,

"The President shall be informed by the Chair of the District of every case of the breakdown of the marriage of a minister. The President shall annually appoint one or more persons to be responsible, on behalf of the President, for ensuring that arrangements are made for such pastoral and material help to be given as may be possible and appropriate in the circumstances, particularly to the wife or husband and family of the minister."
- 1.2 Once notice has been received from the Chair, the process of enabling the arrangements necessary are actioned by the Conference Office, acting on behalf of the President.
- 1.3 A President's representative is assigned to provide support to the spouse of the Minister. Currently there are four President's representatives. The representative then keeps the Conference Office informed of the case and requests assistance as appropriate. As the Standing Order suggests, the assistance might be financial (see 1.4 below) or take the form of additional pastoral or emotional support. In the case of the breakdown of a marriage where both parties are ministers, a President's representative should be assigned to each to provide pastoral care.
- 1.4 The Director of Finance and Resources should be notified of the breakdown of the marriage and the payment of a half stipend. The Director of Finances and Resources will delegate the processing of the half stipend payment to an individual within the Finance Team. Currently, spouses are entitled to a half stipend to assist them through the situation. The policy is that a maximum of 50% of the annual stipend is paid from the Auxiliary (Special Purposes) Fund.

2. Going forward

- 2.1 The current arrangements were put in place following a report to the Ministerial (Presbyteral) Session of the Conference in 1986 on 'Ministers and Matrimonial Problems'. Subsequent recognition that District Chairs and Superintendents might not always be best placed to support both minister and spouse, the current Standing Order (with the intention of creating an 'ombudsman') was introduced. The current Standing Order is little different from that adopted by the 1989 Conference and it is thought that this process for when a marriage breakdown occurs has not been looked at for many years.
- 2.2 It would be beneficial for the procedure to be reviewed. Many societal factors have changed since it was introduced. For example, the provision of half a stipend appears to be to support a spouse who would suddenly lose her or his home and income; it is less common now than it was 30 years ago for spouses of ministers to have no financial independence or even to be the partner with the lower income, though similarly it may well be that a sum of c£13,000 would be less than generous for someone who had no resources of her/his own on which to draw.

- 2.3 In a number of other ways, the SO as currently worded seems to be out of date. There is no clear guidance in it for what happens when both parties are ministers at a time when a significant number of deacons and presbyters are married to deacons and presbyters. Neither has any provision been made for those who live in the manse and are economically interdependent but are not married.
- 2.4 A more fundamental question is whether this sort of provision should still be in the SOs at all. There was a time when ministers usually resigned in the wake of a marriage breakdown; occasionally there are resignations and/ or discipline cases related to the inappropriate behaviour that was part of the story but in other cases the marriage has come to an end for other reasons. The 2019 Conference in receiving *God in Love Unites Us* recognised the reality of divorce and the way in which the attitude of the Methodist Church in Britain changed in the latter part of the 20th century. A Standing Order requiring that the President be informed might not now be the most appropriate pastoral response for a District Chair to have to follow.
3. **Next Steps**
- 3.1 The Ministries Committee considered a version of this paper last year and agreed that a review would be timely. The Council is therefore invited to establish a small working party to examine the process of what happens when a minister's marriage breaks down and to explore if and in what way this SO should be revised. A suitable working group would comprise a representative of the Conference Office, one of those currently serving as a President's representative, a District Chair, a representative of the MDO, and one or two ministers with particular experience in this area.
- 3.2 The terms of reference for this group would be to:
- Consider SO 111(3) in light of recent Conference reports and experiences of those affected.
 - the group should report to the Council with recommendations for any changes in October 2022.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 22/1. The Council receives the report.**
- 22/2. The Council establishes a small working party to examine Standing Order 111(3) regarding cases of the breakdown of the marriage of a minister, to report back to the Council in October 2022.**