Church of England must pay priests a proper wage

Credo
Emma Thompson



A priest told me that in the Sixties he had a bishop who visited all his clergy in a Rolls-Royce. This fortunate bishop was categorised in the church's records as "WHM" (Wife Has Means).

Nowadays, the Rev John or Jane arriving to take services in a new Mercedes might create an optics problem. Jesus told his disciples to travel lightly (Luke x, 4-6, Matthew x, 10). He ministered for food and lodging like a hired labourer, telling them to do likewise.

St Paul, who while preaching and teaching supported himself by tent-making (Acts xviii, 1–4), warned against greed, writing: "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (I Timothy vi, 10) and "we brought nothing into this world and can take nothing out of it" (I Timothy vi, 7), sometimes paraphrased as "you can't put a roof rack on a hearse".

Nonetheless, paying priests sufficiently is a biblical imperative, referenced in scripture. St Paul's letter-writing, beginning within 25 years of Jesus's death, included exhortations that clergy should be honoured and properly remunerated.

Writing to his younger friend Timothy (I Timothy v, 17-18), Paul advised: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain [which would have prevented it from eating while it was working],' and 'The worker deserves his wages'."

Thus, a current minimum £28,670 "stipend" (or expenses payment) is given, with housing, to Church of England "stipendiary" priests. Stipends are intended to free up clergy to focus on living out their ministry, dwelling like Jesus did among the people.

When in Corinth, St Paul initially relied on other churches' support (II Corinthians xi, 8) to avoid the Corinthians inferring that his ministry to them was financially motivated (I Corinthians ix, 6–14). However, he later charged them: "If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?" (I Corinthians ix, 11).

Elements in the church have recently implied that the Church Commissioners' funds would be wasted on providing stipendiary clergy. Canon John McGinley at a 2021 conference upset priests by describing clergy stipends as "long, costly college-based training" and church buildings as "key limiting factors" for church growth — despite the church's own studies linking stipendiary local priest presence to growth. The church seems to be trying to increase volunteer ministry, although the 2025 Charities Aid Foundation report shows volunteering and giving declining.

Parochial stipendiary priests get housing, but lose it if forcibly retired at 70. The house (often not well cared for) is not necessarily one they would choose. They and their families are required to live "at the office".

Stress felt by overstretched parish priests has been compounded by the stipend's failure to match inflation. A February 2024 Living Ministry study reported above-national average levels of clergy depression, with 42 per cent of stipendiary clergy experiencing financial anxiety and needing financial help in the cost of living crisis, especially younger people and those with families; 34 per cent feared they would have inadequate provision in place for retirement.

Debilitating financial anxiety makes it harder to care for others. I often hear suggestions that clergy should be "hospitable"; yet clergy cannot model charitable and hospitable habits if they themselves are dependent on charity. A clergy benevolent fund trustee witnesses that demand exceeds supply, expressing "no doubt that clergy stipends are inadequate".

This cannot encourage younger or poorer people to apply for ordination and a lifetime of service to others. The church's expenditure feels unbalanced, with too little on frontline parish ministry, which supposedly ranks ahead of all discretionary spending, and too much focus on grants rather than predictable income streams.

The Church of England's Triennium Funding Working Group is expected soon to announce how the returns on the Church Commissioners' central funds will be distributed for the next three years.

Pleas from CEECA (the faith workers' branch of the union Unite), and the financial analysis done by the campaign group Save the Parish, have highlighted the need for a significant reset in attitudes to clergy and intervention to increase resources for parish ministry.

"Save the Parish is really very uncontentiously reminding a charity to spend its money on the core purpose for which the money was given: priests," says a national committee member.

"Arguments made previously that the stipend could not be increased have now been shown to be unfounded," says someone closely involved with the union.

If a rebalancing of funds towards the total cost of parish ministry is announced, as hoped, it will show a welcome shift towards making clergy feel supported, valued and cared about. However, they remain unlikely to make visits in a shiny Rolls-Royce — unless their Spouse Has Means.

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