

URC Ministers' Sickness Absence Policy and Procedure

Introduction

The URC aims to support ministers and Church Related Community Workers during periods of sickness absence, and to provide help and guidance towards returning to work.

This document describes the Church's policy on sickness absence and the procedures to be followed in reporting absence and dealing with extended periods of sickness. Where the term "minister" is used, it should be taken to refer to any minister or CRCW carrying out stipendiary service for the Church. While the text may be taken to imply that ministers are all in pastoral care, interpretation should recognise the range of actual posts filled by ministers and CRCWs.

Responsibility for carrying out these procedures is divided between the individual minister, their Synod Moderator (who may delegate some aspects of the Synod role) and the Maintenance of the Ministry sub-committee (MoM) through the MoM officer. In some situations input will be sought from others, for example in relation to potential ill-health retirement. Where ministers are not deployed within a synod their line manager will fulfil the role ascribed to the Synod Moderator.

A copy of the full procedures is available to ministers/CRCWs upon request.

Sickness Absence Policy

Principles

The policy aims to ensure that during the course of an illness there is:

- Good pastoral and practical support
- Respect for an individual's privacy
- Use of professional medical advice at an appropriate time
- Clarity about the financial implications of extended absence

While individual needs and circumstances differ, the policy aims to ensure that ministers can and do take sufficient time off to recover from illness. For this reason, ministers should not carry out any of their normal duties while they are advised by their doctor that they are not fit for work. Where the doctor advises that an individual may benefit from a phased return to work this should be discussed with the Synod moderator who will normally agree the details of a phased return to work, building up to a full workload over a planned period.

Pastoral care during Sickness Absence

Ministers should notify their Synod Office, pastorate/post and the MoM Office if they are unable to work for more than three days due to sickness and ensure that they are kept up-to-date if the absence becomes prolonged.

Pastoral care will be provided through the Synod Moderator who may delegate some elements of this to others (further references to the Moderator should be taken also to refer to such delegates). Regular contact will be maintained between the Moderator and those whose sickness absence extends beyond four weeks. The preferences of the minister and their family for the frequency and manner of such contact will be respected, subject to the minimum requirements of the procedures for regular Moderator reviews of sickness absence.

It is also the responsibility of the Synod to satisfy itself that the churches within a minister's pastorate are supported, as far as is possible, during a minister's extended absence.

The Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee may become involved where the Synod Moderator judges this to be helpful.

Continuation of Stipend

Stipend will be paid during periods of sickness in such sums as shall be determined from time to time by the MoM sub-committee and will take into account the regulations and benefit schemes of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Under the terms of the current Plan for Partnership (para 6.1.2, January 2016), ministers who are unable to work because of sickness or accident shall be paid full stipend (less any Employment Support Allowance or Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit received) for a period of six months. Any sickness arising in the twelve months prior to the first day of a new period of sickness will be taken into account in the calculation of those six months.

At the appropriate time after the beginning of any sickness absence, the MoM sub-committee shall determine, in consultation with the Synod Moderator and having taken independent occupational health advice, what further help, if any, should be given when the entitlement to full stipend comes to an end. The level of any payments to be made after six months will be notified by the end of the fifth month of absence, in the first instance, and may be reviewed later with regard to circumstances.

Occupational Health Advice

The MoM sub-committee may seek advice about the impact of an illness on the individual and their ability to work from the Church's medical adviser and also from a specialist Occupational Health organisation. This may include a review of relevant medical records and a telephone or personal consultation.

Such advice requires the consent of the individual. Where consent is not given, the decisions of the MoM sub-committee will be based only upon the available information. However, under the terms of the Pension Fund Rules, any application for an ill-health pension may only be granted after obtaining such independent medical advice.

Disability

The URC aims to follow the spirit of relevant legislation such as the Equalities Act 2010 (regardless of whether in an individual's situation the legal obligations apply). Where an illness leaves a minister with a disability, the Synod will work with the individual and the pastorate/post to ensure that appropriate reasonable adjustments are made to allow the individual to work effectively.

Extended Periods of Absence

For some individuals incapacity through physical or mental illness may be judged to be permanent. In such cases ministers who belong to the URC Ministers' Pension Fund may apply for an ill-health pension.

At the point at which payments of stipend cease, some ministers will still feel unable to resume their full duties even though their illness is not considered permanent. Where such a situation is anticipated their Moderator may make reference to the Pastoral Reference and Welfare Committee; they may then invoke the Church's incapacity procedure.

Grievance

Where a minister has a grievance about the way in which the sickness absence procedures are implemented, they are encouraged to make every effort to resolve this informally with those involved. Where an informal approach does not resolve the grievance the URC Grievance Procedure provides a means of seeking a fair and impartial resolution of the grievance.

Sickness Absence Procedures

The pattern of timescales and requirements set out in the following sections may be applied flexibly where considered appropriate. The MoM convener will consider all individual cases and may make adjustments as judged appropriate. A summary of the key elements and timing of the procedures is set out in Appendix 1.

Notification of absence

Ministers/CRCWs should notify their Synod Office and the MoM Office if they are unable to work for more than three days due to sickness. This enables the proper records to be maintained.

The first seven days of sickness may be self certified (by letter, email or telephone) but after that all continuing sickness must be covered by a doctor's statement of fitness for work ('Fit note'). Copies of these notifications should be sent to the Synod Moderator and MoM Office.

Both MoM and Synod offices should also be informed when the minister returns to work after a period of certificated absence.

Record-keeping

The MoM Office will maintain a full record of sickness absence, decisions about the continuation of stipend, including copies of correspondence and notes of any telephone calls. They will initiate the Moderator Reviews, doctor's reports and Occupational Health assessments as required and retain copies of the completed reports.

The Synod will maintain a chronological record of all their contacts with the minister and complete the necessary forms/reports needed by the MoM sub-committee in a timely manner so that decisions about the levels of stipend payable are based upon full information about the individual's situation.

Fit Notes

The "Statement of Fitness for Work" was introduced to replace the old sick note in 2010. Doctors use the note to offer advice about the individual's fitness for work.

The two main options are that the individual is “not fit for work” or “may be fit for work” taking into account the doctor’s advice.

In the latter case the Fit note may contain advisory information from the GP such as suggestions for a phased return, workplace adaptations or temporary adjustment to duties. The information given on the form is advisory and is not binding.

Where a note is received indicating that the minister may be fit for work, the Synod Moderator should take the initiative in contacting the individual to discuss how these recommendations can be put into effect. More details are given in ‘Return to Work’, below.

Actions During Absence from Work

While all doctors’ Fit notes should be sent to the MoM Office, communications with the minister will normally be through the Synod Moderator or their delegate.

It is important to maintain good communications with a minister who is absent due to sickness for more than four weeks. Regular pastoral contact by the Synod Moderator or a representative can demonstrate care and ensure that the Moderator has up to date knowledge of the minister’s condition. This may also enable the Church to provide appropriate support. With some ministers, perhaps in the event of mental illness, there will be a need for extra sensitivity; in such cases the Moderator may agree with the minister that a family member or friend be the Synod’s prime point of contact.

In any event, in order that the MoM sub-committee can carry out its duties, Moderators are expected to complete formal review discussions with the minister as described below.

Initial Moderator Review

Our practice is based upon evidence from research showing that people are more likely to get back to work as their illness recedes when they and their employers talk during periods of sickness and make plans for returning to work. Good practice is to begin to discuss and set a framework for actions towards a return to working when someone has been absent from work for a period of time, probably between 4 – 6 weeks, and review this in the light of the actual course of the illness.

Where a minister’s sickness absence is expected to continue beyond four weeks, the MoM office will ask the Moderator to arrange a visit to the minister and complete a Ministerial Sickness Review Form. The completed form should be sent to the MoM Office who will forward this to the MoM convener. The minister will be sent a copy of this and any subsequent reports by the MoM Office if requested.

Subsequent Moderator Reviews

In the light of the initial review, and the nature of the minister’s illness, the MoM convener will determine a pattern for further reviews. The normal timing of follow-up reviews will be to request one at 10 weeks, and if necessary further reports to be completed by 5, 8 and 11 months. While best practice would be for these to be conducted during a visit, it is acceptable to conduct the reviews over the telephone by mutual agreement.

Medical Adviser's Report

A medical adviser's report will be requested if a fit note is received indicating that the absence may extend to 10 or more weeks or if there are earlier indications that the illness may extend beyond three months.

In such situations the MoM Office will request a report from the Church's medical adviser. When a report is needed, the MoM Office will send the minister a form which includes information about their rights under the Access to Medical Records Act 1988. The minister is asked to give consent and pass the form to their GP, who will forward their responses to the Church's medical adviser. The GP's answers remain confidential to the medical adviser, who will make a report based upon them, including a diagnosis. This report will be sent to the MoM convener.

Occupational Health Assessment

In addition to the medical adviser's report, the Church's appointed Occupational Health organisation will be asked to review the position if the sickness absence continues for more than three months and where it seems possible that absence may extend to six or more months.

It is important that this report is completed and returned to the MoM Office in good time to allow the MoM sub-committee to consider whether, and at what level, any stipend payments should be made beyond six months. This decision has to be made by the end of the fifth month of absence. An additional important benefit of this assessment is that it incorporates an opportunity for the minister to have a confidential general discussion of health issues and receive advice on lifestyle/health management.

The process is initiated by the MoM Office, who will inform the Moderator and the minister of the need for Occupational Health assessment. The minister will be sent an information sheet and the consultation referral form. The referral form will indicate the specific questions on which advice is sought. The minister is asked to complete Section D and send it on to the Moderator for their completion of Section E and return to the MoM Office. The form will then be sent to the OH company who will conduct their consultation with the minister either by telephone or face-to-face.

When the OH company has undertaken the consultation and sent its report to the MoM Office, the contents will be shared with the Moderator and the MoM sub-committee. The report, which is advisory only, will focus upon the work-related aspects of the minister's health, their fitness to work and the practical steps that might facilitate a return to work. Medical information remains confidential to the OH organisation.

The minister may obtain a copy of the OH report from the MoM Office. If they wish to comment on the contents of the report, they may send such comments to the MoM Office, who will forward these on to the MoM sub-committee and Synod Moderator.

A further OH report may be sought at a later date if the MoM sub-committee considers it necessary in deciding whether further stipend payments should be made.

Application for Ill-health Pension

Where incapacity to work appears to be permanent, a minister who is a member of the URC Ministers' Pension Fund may apply for an ill-health pension. The Pensions Executive will consider this request on behalf of the Fund's Trustee.

Their decision will be based upon an assessment of whether the minister is, and will continue to be, unable to carry on his/her occupation because of physical or mental impairment. As the pension fund rules require the Trustee to make a decision based upon advice from a registered medical practitioner, an OH assessment will be requested in these circumstances.

Return to Work

On return to work, the date of return should be advised to the MoM and Synod offices.

Where there has been an extended period of absence a phased return to work may be appropriate. When a Fit note suggests a pattern of increasing duties, the Moderator should initiate a discussion about phased return to work. Such discussions might also arise in the course of regular contact between the minister and Moderator. Any such planned return to work must be agreed between the Moderator, the pastorate/post and the minister in a written plan of increasing involvement towards full duties. The plan would normally last up to two months, and not generally beyond three months.

The aim of phased return to work is to build up the workload in stages, beginning with those that seem easiest to undertake or by limiting working hours/location to those that best suit the minister's condition – and not necessarily beginning with the aspects perceived to be of most importance to the church(es). The approach will differ for different people and illnesses; there are no hard and fast rules.

Some examples of such patterns of return to work are: to begin with only Sunday services with the attaching preparation being undertaken; starting by working only mornings or afternoons with no evening meetings or pastoral visiting; in a multi-church pastorate, return might be limited to specific church(es) for the first few weeks.

Once a planned pattern of return to work has been agreed the MoM Office should be informed of the date of phased return to work. At this point, where stipend has been reduced, the MoM sub-committee will normally agree to restore payments to the full level.

If in practice a return to work does not continue as planned, this should also be notified to the Synod Moderator and MoM Office. In any event the Moderator should report to the MoM Office on progress at the end of the planned phased period of return to work, and monthly if the period extends beyond four weeks.

Where, at the end of the planned phased return to work, the minister has not yet returned to full duties, but is expected to recover sufficiently to do so in future, the MoM sub-committee will decide whether it is appropriate to reduce the stipend payable to reflect the level of work being undertaken. If it is considered unlikely that in the foreseeable future the minister's health will recover sufficiently to allow a return to full duties, the process of formally reducing the minister's full-time service should commence immediately.

(Effective from 5th October 2016)

Summary Table of Sickness Absence Actions

Appendix 1

When	Moderator Review	Medical Adviser Review	OH Assessment	MoM sub-committee
At 4 weeks	Initial Sickness Review Form	Requested if absence looks like continuing to 3 months		Reports copied to MoM convener.
By 10 weeks	Follow-up Review Form	Requested if not already requested		Reports copied to MoM convener.
3 months (unless return to work is confidently expected before 6 months)			Requested <i>for completion at the latest by 5 months</i> . To include opinion on: fitness for work; likely date for return to work – and advice to minister	Report copied to MoM s/ctee.
To be completed by 5 months	Follow-up Review Form		OH report received	Report copied to MoM s/ctee. Decision on whether to continue payments, at what level, after 6 month's absence.
Once every 3 further months if payments continue beyond month 6	Follow-up Review Form		May be requested dependent on individual circumstances	Reports copied to MoM s/ctee. Decision on whether to continue payments, at what level.
By 12 months or when stipend payments cease without ill-health pension, if earlier	Refers to PRWC			

NB. Where a phased return to work is agreed, this will also be reviewed by the Synod Moderator or nominee at monthly intervals