

A time to stay or a time to move?
(a ramble on the old chestnut of manses)

I have to admit that I, along with many colleagues in ministry, am on the side of selling all manses and allowing ministers to live in their own homes. It allows ministers to live in property appropriate for them (ie, size of family) and allows them a foothold in the property market for longer-term security, either from the point of view of retirement or for a spouse and family in the event of something happening to the minister. This is not a new debate. But as the good ship Titanic slowly sinks, is it not time to head for the lifeboats and charter some new territory?

To follow this line would result in major tax implications for ministers and this has been the main reason why this has never really got off the starting blocks nationally. It is still the norm for the minister to live in the manse - only in exceptional circumstances can a minister be allowed to stay in his/her own home and even then it must meet the criteria laid down by the Inland Revenue. The Board of Ministry has previously stated that it "undertakes to provide interested parties with details of the full workings of this alternative method of manse provision" - in reality, there are few details and certainly no encouragement to pursue this option at present. Tax implications are only one side of the problem - there are many other issues which could arise - what if a minister marries and needs a bigger house? What if he/she wants to extend the house but the congregation don't agree? What if the next minister that comes to the charge wants to live in a provided manse again? etc. etc. etc. There are, of course, many instances when a manse would really be necessary - for example, where the minister is not in a financial state to buy or where any house in the area would be well outwith a minister's budget. Because of these problems the Church has tended to throw its hands up in the air and say it is not possible. Some say it would affect mobility of ministers but that is surely a red herring - mobility is already an issue these days for ministers now, more than ever, have to take into consideration the work of his/her spouse and family circumstances as a real part of their call.

Now there are many ministers who like living in manses and would therefore support that view - the rest just have to accept the situation. It has to be said, however, that ministry must be one of the few remaining jobs in which a tied house is compulsory. Given the statistics facing the Church over the next 20 to 30 years, is it not time to be adventurous in our thinking and provision of housing, with some form of mixed economy? Is it not time to work seriously with the Inland Revenue to strike some form of deal that could be widely used? We are encouraged to be a Church without walls, ready to think out of the box, yet where manses are concerned, and many other issues facing the central Church, we are simply unwilling to move out of the conservative mould - restrained by the structures of an ageing institution. This has been the case for years and no amount of special commissions, committees, etc, etc, have been able to change that, despite some profound findings and great ideas emerging from them.

Ministers rarely have the wherewithall to furnish and carpet a manse, let alone deal with the sometimes astronomical bills associated with heating them - and whilst a manse should allow room for a study/office, who furnishes this and provides all the office equipment? - you guessed it! (And, no, the disturbance allowance doesn't come close to covering all costs of a move!) And what lovely large gardens are often found - great if

you're a gardener. There is also the question of suitability of the interior - some are kept well, others are a disgrace - there is a view that ministers should just be content with what they get - a free big house! Upkeep or improvements are often left to chance - again some are well maintained, others simply neglected, either by the minister or the Fabric Committee or both. And if there is no money to do the necessary improvements in our cash-strapped Churches of today, then it seems acceptable just to leave them, which can lead to frictions within the manse family at the situation, whilst the minister is still expected to smile and do the 1000 tasks expected. Can a call be restricted because the manse is not good enough - of course it can! Shake the dust off and search, still with God, for people with their heads screwed on the right way - chances are that if they cannot see reasonable sense with a manse then how will they view other important matters that are facing the Church today, which need to be addressed with risk and courage and a very real moving out of comfort zones! And who exactly is restricting the call - the minister or the congregation?

Why do we still insist on such large houses? If you are married with lots of kids running around then the space is just great - and you don't have to pay the Council Tax - an extra boon! There are advantages but, for me, the disadvantages outweigh them. A minister once arrived to look at a manse, parking his people carrier outside. The manse interior was in serious need of upgrade - not to a state of luxury, just acceptability. The back garden was such that if a bomb had gone off there, it would have resulted in serious improvement! Concerns were relayed to the vacancy committee - a group of people often with no clue about the manse, what it's like, what improvements are being considered etc - after they looked, some agreed that it needed thousands of pounds spent on it - others thought the prospective candidate had a cheek - "and he comes up in his big fancy car to tell us about it!" Little did they know that the bank had the major shareholding in the car for the next five years, but then they don't need to know the minister's personal circumstances. A minister is expected to smile and be grateful, and to put up with whatever is offered, whilst often those around retreat to their own homes, comfortable, and just the way they like them! It doesn't help either if retired ministers acting as locums or over-stretched interim moderators say "it's just lovely" when it is simply not, just to keep the troops happy.

And is there not something uncomfortable about living in what might be described as one of the best houses in the area, as many ministers find themselves? A minister can find himself or herself surrounded by people on incomes way above them, despite the excellent strides made in this regard by the Board of Ministry. Manses worth a quarter to half a million - real solidarity with the people, don't you think?

Most ministers don't need a large manse for work purposes. Most meetings can be held in Churches if we bother to make the interiors of them a little more comfortable and homely, instead of accepting something less than second best there. Others within congregations are often happy to take a turn at hosting a small meeting in their home. An office in which to work is possible in many circumstances, if we bother to take it seriously. A caller to the manse doesn't need a large public room to speak to the minister - a smaller room will do, even round a dining table in the kitchen - nearer the coffee too! Need the manse always be in the parish? If a minister lived in a manse or his/ her own home outwith the parish, would it be to the detriment of that ministry? - perhaps it would in some circumstances, but in reality it would often not matter a jot, for in these days of

gathered congregations many of the members come from outwith the parish and yet their ministry as part of the Church is not affected. Double standards?

In today's world our new ministers are coming through University with even greater debt than before. How can they afford a mortgage? I would guess that it is sometimes easier than trying to furnish and carpet a mansion that, in the end of the day, will never be theirs. Oh, you could buy and rent for future security - great idea - who pays the mortgage when the place is empty? Who pays for the maintenance and meets the stringent requirements in the letting business? What happens when the tenants run a bunk and shoot off leaving the house a real mess?

One might say that ministers are lucky souls- after all, many of the poor of this world live in squalor - that argument is real, but not realistic. Everything is relative. Let's think for just a moment about the sums we have in reserves and the amount of money we spend on upkeep of Church buildings (often situated close to one another in many towns and yet rarely half-full) instead of isolating the minister for personal glory in enduring hardship for the sake of the poor.

We could, of course, just let the minister and family live in a fairly ordinary home of their own choosing. But that would be to grasp a nettle, wouldn't it? To the lifeboats!

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