

# Guidance in the event of a breakdown of a minister's marriage or civil partnership

MC/24/52

Date of meeting	13-15 April 2024
Contact name and details	The Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, Secretary of the Conference soc@methodistchurch.org.uk
Action required	For approval
Resolutions	52/1. The Council receives the report. 52/2. The Council approves the draft guidance in relation to a breakdown of a minister's marriage or civil partnership and recommends to the Conference that it should be included in the guidance section of CPD.

## Summary of content

Subject of aims	Guidance in the event of a breakdown of a minister's marriage or civil partnership to be included in CPD.
Main points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This guidance is in relation to a breakdown of a recognised marriage or civil partnership that involves legal commitments between the parties.</li><li>• Highlights the role of the Connexional Support Officer and the relationship with the Connexional Team/ Conference Office.</li><li>• Outlines practical, pastoral and financial support available.</li><li>• Offers guidance for communication with the local church and circuit.</li></ul>
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	Review of SO 111(3) was undertaken [see MC/23/32] The Council accepted the recommendation that SO 111(3) be removed from CPD and replaced with guidance and directed the Working Party to produce draft guidance.
Consultations	SO 111(3) Working party: Mrs Liz Gamble, Mrs Kate Little, the Revd Japhet Kabilu, Deacon Gail Morgan, the Revd Kerry Tankard

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This guidance is in relation to a breakdown of a recognised marriage or civil partnership that involves legal commitments between the parties. This guidance relates to the marriages/ civil partnership of any minister (including probationers).
- 1.2 It is important to remember that all cases of a breakdown of a marriage will differ and the response will therefore need to be tailored to each situation.
- 1.3 All ministers have the benefit of reflective supervision as a place where risk and vulnerability can be discussed. The minister's relationships will contribute to the effective exercise of ministry and to the minister's own wellbeing, so it is advisable for ministers to be open with their supervisors if reference to this guidance is likely.

- 1.4 When a minister's marriage or civil partnership seems to be in difficulties, the minister is advised to discuss the situation with the District Chair in the case of a presbyter, or the Warden in the case of a deacon. The Chair and/or Warden will be able to advise on sources of counselling and other help.
- 1.5 The Chair must be informed whenever it appears to a minister that the breakdown of the marriage/ civil partnership is irrevocable, as must the Warden if either party is a deacon. When a minister informs the District Chair or Warden that the breakdown of the marriage appears to be irrevocable, the District Chair or Warden shall inform the Conference Office and indicate to the parties involved what support is available. All support is offered to both parties. In all cases the Secretary of the Conference, via the Conference Office, will appoint a Connexional Support Officer for each party.
- 1.6 There will be a panel of Council-appointed Connexional Support Officers to support ministers and spouses in these circumstances.

## 2. Connexional Support Officers

- 2.1 The role of the Connexional Support Officer (CSO) is to ensure and check the correct level of support has been provided. CSOs will assist both parties to identify any needs they may have, for instance: pastoral, housing, spiritual, independent financial advice, therapeutic etc. The CSOs will, if necessary, signpost them to appropriately qualified persons (or services).
- 2.2 The Conference Office shall maintain a list of CSOs. Where possible, ministers, spouses and civil partners will be allocated a CSO within an accessible geographical area.
- 2.3 The Connexional Team shall be responsible for ensuring that the CSO officers receive appropriate training, supervision and support to carry out their role on behalf of the Church.
- 2.4 The Connexional Support Officer shall report any safeguarding concerns to the District Safeguarding Officer and the Secretary of the Conference as soon as they have been made aware of them.
- 2.5 A role description for the Connexional Support Officer should be agreed by the Ministries Committee and held by the Conference Office, to be obtained on request.

## 3. Practical Support

- 3.1 Practical support should be available for the minister(s), spouse, civil partners and any children. The Connexional Support Officer shall outline to the minister, spouse or civil partner concerned the support available. In cases where children are involved appropriate support will be highlighted.
- 3.2 The Connexional Support Officer should enquire if urgent alternative accommodation is needed for either the minister or the spouse or civil partner. If such accommodation is needed, the CSO should work with the District Chair to identify suitable options.
- 3.3 If a minister is leaving the manse (temporarily whilst the spouse or civil partner finds alternative accommodation or as part of a partnership in which both are ministers), the Connexional Support Officer should work with the circuit or other body to ensure that their ministry can continue safely and provisions are put in place to support their work outside of the manse.
- 3.4 As far as possible, provision should be made for the children of the manse to continue their education and other activities with minimal disruption.
- 3.5 It is recommended that compassionate leave is offered to all ministers involved in the breakdown of the marriage. The length of time required shall be determined by the District Chair in consultation with Connexional Support Officer in each situation and with the Warden where one of the partners is a Deacon.
- 3.6 The CSO should discuss with the spouse or civil partner any wish to continue to attend public worship. It should be recognised that, following a marital breakup, the non-clergy spouse or civil partner may

struggle to identify a new supportive community in which to worship and may need assistance to be able to do so. Support should be given to ensure both parties are able to find suitable places to worship. The District Chair and/or the Superintendent should be alerted to the couple's intentions in this regard in order to provide appropriate guidance to local churches involved.

#### 4. Pastoral Support

- 4.1 There should always be an identifiable line of pastoral support available. For a presbyter, spouse and civil partner, whether ordained or not, this will be the Chair of District or another person appointed by the District Chair. Where a Deacon is one of the parties, the Warden of the order will work with the District Chair. It is not appropriate for the same person to offer pastoral support to both parties.
- 4.2 If both parties are ministers it is appropriate for the District Chair to appoint alternate pastoral supporters to both parties.
- 4.3 Within the appropriate limits of necessary confidentiality, those offering pastoral support should be made aware of any discipline cases or concerns that may have an effect on the situation.
- 4.4 Counselling is available for both parties including support for children. The cost of six sessions and up to twelve sessions is covered by the Methodist Church Fund. This does not have to be used in the immediate term but will be made available until the parties are legally separated. The Connexional Support Officer shall have discretion to authorise additional counselling.

#### 5. Financial Support

- 5.1 The Church recognises the obligation it has to ministers, spouses and civil partners, in particular when the manse is the family home. The Connexional Support Officer should therefore discuss with the minister or partner what additional costs they anticipate incurring.
- 5.2 Where the spouse or civil partner is not a minister, total payments of up to half a stipend may be made available to assist them financially. The grant should be paid in full to the spouse or civil partner and the minister advised to declare it on their tax return.
- 5.3 The Resourcing Committee should have discretion to authorise additional benevolent funding to either party where appropriate.

#### 6. Communication to the local Church and Circuit

- 6.1 When it has been agreed that the breakdown of the marriage is irrevocable and one or more of the parties is leaving the manse, a communication should be made to the Circuit or places of worship where the minister(s) has/ have pastoral responsibility. The information will include details about the covering of pastoral responsibilities. The form of words used and the time the information is shared needs to be agreed, as far as possible, with both parties. This may be different in each case but needs to be clear, timely and in consultation with the Superintendent, District Chair and Circuit Stewards.
- 6.2 The Superintendent (or in the case of a Superintendent's marriage breaking down, the Chair) should ensure that pastoral care is offered to the affected Local Churches and Circuit.
- 6.3 If required, the District Chair should find suitable cover for the minister's work. Financial support for this cover, if required, should be made available from the Methodist Church Fund.
- 6.4 In each case, the District Chair should explore with the minister(s) and the Circuit Stewards (or equivalent) the wisdom of the minister continuing in ministry in the current appointment and whether there is a need for the invitation or deemed invitation to be curtailed.

## 7. Conclusion

- 7.1 At the appropriate time, usually after six months, and by agreement between the parties and their CSOs, the CSO should cease to offer support. The CSO should report to the District Chair and, where appropriate, the Warden that their support has now come to an end. The Chair and/or Warden should arrange for any continuing support to be offered in the District as necessary.
- 7.2 The Connexional Support Officer should then notify the Conference Office that the support has come to an end. Any records that have been kept should be sent to the Conference Office for correct disposal, in line with Data Protection principles.

### **\*\*\*RESOLUTIONS**

**52/1. The Council receives the report.**

**52/2. The Council approves the draft guidance in relation to a breakdown of a minister's marriage or civil partnership and recommends to the Conference that it should be included in the guidance section of CPD.**