

## Professional Development Task Group Report

### Professional Development Allowance

The Task Group were given the following brief:

SSC20.151 4. ESTABLISH a task group

- a) to discuss the Professional Development Allowance (PDA):  
to define the goal/ purpose of PDA arrangements; and to assess:
  - i. if current arrangements are achieving the objective
  - ii. What changes need to be made in how it is used, reported, paid; and
  - iii. the adequacy of the amount of PDA paid.
- b) The task group will consist of up to 4 members from the:  
Mission, Leadership & Development Board,  
Placements and Safe Church Ministry Centre,  
Stipends Committee  
And up to three members from congregational placements.
- c) The task group will consult widely, with presbyteries and others and report back to Synod Standing Committee at its April 2021 meeting.

### 1. Background

Once upon a time the Professional Development Allowance used to be the Book Allowance and the bibliophiles among us still mourn the name change. The name change signifies the variety of options which ministry agents have for their continued growth. For 2022, the allowance stands at \$2009 on a full time base stipend.

The Assembly Policy for Professional Development is called "Seeking a Heart of Wisdom". This sets out the rationale and expectations around Professional Development. Reading the policy reminds us that there is still work to be done in this space by the various responsible bodies. To find the policy on the Assembly Website:

<https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/454?keywords=Seeking%20a%20Heart%20of%20Wisdom&highlights=eylwIjoic2Vla2luZyIsIjEiOiJoZWYdClsljIiOiJ3aXNkb20iLCI3Ijoic2V0dGluZyJ9&Isk=01a0004defb8555d99d5cb91413add97>

A conversation was had at Stipends Committee in 2019 regarding the Professional Development Allowance in 2019. I am not a member of that committee but I recall being told that the conversation initially revolved around the adequacy of the allowance given the rising costs of study and resources, and whether there should be a significant increase. This then led to a conversation about oversight and accountability of the allowance. This led to the suggestion that before any increase beyond CPI there should be a review.

The first stage was a survey conducted in late 2019. Eighty ministry agents participated in the survey. Most reactions to the survey results has been that this was a reasonable sample and that their responses were encouraging. The vast majority are buying books and attending conferences. There was also evidence of people using the money for other forms of professional development, including paying for supervision (just under 10%). The report will be on Teams.

Standing Committee then requested a Task Group be set up to undertake the tasks listed above. The Task Group has had an initial meeting and reached a reasonable level of consensus. We then brought a preliminary report to the Presbytery Leaders Meeting in March where suggestions were made about the shape of the report but not the content.

## Initial Findings

In a radically changing missional context it is essential that there be continued and sustained reflection on the tradition, context and call of church by the whole people of God. This reflection is broadened and deepened when ministry agents engage in “life-long continuing education”. (The phrase is from Seeking a Heart of Wisdom) The Professional Development Allowance (PDA) is given to assist ministers to engage in such continuing education.

In terms of oversight this leads to two key questions: the appropriateness of the study undertaken (issues addressed in “Seeking a Heart of Wisdom) and accountability for how the money is spent. Given the cost of some forms of Continuing Education this also raised the question of the adequacy of the amount given.

As we thought about these principles of appropriateness, accountability and adequacy then seemed to us three general approaches to the issues.

### 1. **Maintain the Status Quo**

We could continue the model as it is, trust that ministers use the allowance wisely and assume that Church Councils and the three Presbyteries are maintaining oversight of ministry agents’ professional development.

### 2. **Major Reform**

We may think that it is naïve to have that level of trust and assumptions and therefore look at a major reform of how the Professional Development Allowance is paid. The most thoroughgoing reform would be for the Synod to pool the Professional Development Allowance and that ministers then have access to the allowance by requesting funds.

Some Synods have had a similar model. Any such model would need for administration either an individual working within an agreed framework, or a committee to receive the requests. Then there would need to be criteria around how funds would be transferred to avoid anyone rorting the system. Any such model would need consultation with the Synod Finance Department.

This model does give a significant level of oversight on how the allowance is being spent. It may be a way to giving priority to certain courses of study or particular institutions. For example, a higher level of funds being available for Professional Pastoral Supervision or the Leadership Course at Uniting College.

### **3. Improving the Current State of Affairs**

Another option would be to improve the current state of affairs. This was our preferred option. The survey was encouraging. A substantial group of ministry agents report using the allowance well. Information about the allowance and reminders of how it is intended being used seems a good place to start. They could be regular, but not too frequent, repeats of the survey. Although it could be argued that this is the responsibility of the presbyteries and that they are already picking this up.

Resources could be developed for Church Councils encouraging them to have conversations with their ministers about their professional development. Some Church Councils are very active in seeking reports from their ministers regarding their professional development and open to making suggestions about areas to be focused on. It would be good to see the overall competence of Church Councils raised.

It might also be helpful for the presbyteries to have some commonality on what information they are seeking from ministers regarding professional development. Different presbyteries may have different emphases but some basic criteria might well be agreed on.

Two further points. I am not sure who would be responsible for this within current staffing, but having someone (or some people) maintain communication about educational options and opportunities for professional development would be helpful. (The late Rev John Keane did this voluntarily for a considerable period.) Also rather than increasing the Professional Development Allowance across the board and increasing the impost on congregations we wondered about giving thought to informing ministers about current scholarships available for professional development, maybe thinking of increasing the range of scholarships available either from existing funds or from another source down the track. (Some future bequests earmarked for continuing education or the sale of property.)

## 2. Conclusion

The way events developed there has been inadequate time to do justice to all the issues involved. Certainly more consultation could take place. For example, due to the Stipends Committee not having met recently we were unable to meet with that committee.

Our view is that before attempting any major reform of the system work be done to strengthen oversight of Continuing Education by Church Councils and the presbyteries. This is not meant to be an imposition on ministry agents but as part of an ongoing conversation about the development of skills, increased theological and missional understanding, and continuing spiritual growth and wholeness for the sake of the whole people of God in their mission in the world.

### Philip Gardner

On behalf of the Task Group

When the report was received by the Synod Standing Committee the following resolutions were passed:

1. REQUEST the June 22 Synod ASK Rev Philip Gardner EO Placements and Safe Church to set up a Task Group to oversee the strengthening and oversight of Professional Development in the Synod of SA.
2. RECOMMEND the Business Committee consider Table groups to discuss this matter.
3. REQUEST Philip Gardner writes a Discussion Paper for the Synod June 2022 Meeting.

Given the events that have transpired since that meeting the space for this conversation at the June 2022 meeting may not be possible. This leaves the first proposal.

If table groups are possible I would invite you to consider:

- a) What would you affirm about the report?
- b) What has been your best experience of professional development/continuing education?
- c) What do you consider possibilities for strengthening Professional Development in the Synod of SA?

### Proposal:

**REQUEST** the June 22 Synod ASK Rev Philip Gardner EO Placements and Safe Church to set up a Task Group to oversee the strengthening and oversight of Professional Development in the Synod of SA.