

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *We hear that clergy are not the best paid people in the world, but, come on, there must be some tasty perks somewhere stashed away in your job, Neil?*

Answer: Well, one of the nice things about being a vicar is that one is never short of an umbrella! In fact, the congregations of Holy Cross Church have left a strange assortment of things in the church over the years: spectacles, water bottles, diaries, toys, (both hard and fluffy) items of clothing including tights, shirts, a pair of underpants and a pair of knickers.

To claim these items, please apply to the Church Wardens.

However, on a more serious note, a perquisite or perk for short, may be defined as a tip that is customary on some occasions or something considered to be an exclusive right or a benefit given to an employee in addition to a salary, for example, the use of a car or membership in a club.

Here we enter the rather confused waters of clergy matters. Are they employees? In fact, although they are technically self-employed, clergy bear some of the marks of the employed.

So what are the perks?

The obvious thing is to point to the three aspects where clergy differ from most other people in work- a stipend which is spectacularly low (it hit £20K for the first time in 2006) backed up by a house (often a fine house) free from rent, rates or repair bills, and a non-contributory pension scheme which, because it is linked to stipends, is also spectacularly inadequate.

The main perk in any clergy household is the income of the spouse which keeps the C of E ministry going and without which many clergy with families would struggle to make ends

meet in a world of rising costs and spiralling house prices.

The official perk which feels good is the parsonage house. It is a reflection of the low income that the house is looked after by the Diocesan authorities, and in my experience, their level of care for the house has been very good indeed.

However, this perk has a sting in the tail! At retirement the house remains put for the next incumbent and the clergy have to find a house elsewhere and then look after it. Without the income to make significant savings over the period of a working life, many clergy retire with little chances of good retirement housing.

There is a scheme for poorer clergy whereby the church authorities help them, but this is not popular because the service charges involved in such schemes are often significantly high and the sums involved make finding a decent retirement house very difficult, especially in London.



Its odd how such a fine perk as Greenford Rectory can also be a disadvantage in the long-term.

If we are thinking wider than the official perks, then one of the great privileges, and so something of a perk, is that as the parish priest, I am welcome in virtually every house in the parish, whatever the faith of the residents. I am also privileged to be with families at very significant times of joy and sadness, with baptisms, marriages and funerals in particular. This is one of the enduring joys of the work and I never feel tired of this work and often I am amazed and humbled at the extraordinary human stories revealed at such times.

Living in the fine Rectory and serving the community as its parish priest has been an enormously satisfying privilege for me.

Neil Richardson