

The pay gap at church

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Religion News Service photo by Adelle M. Banks

The good news is that there are now enough female clergy for clergy pay to be included in the annual Bureau of Labor Statistics analysis of the gender pay gap. The bad news is that the gender pay gap for clergy is greater than for college and high school teachers, greater than for many positions in the business sector, and greater than for professionals like lawyers and counselors. Female clergy earn 76 cents for every dollar that male clergy earn. Across all professions, women on average make 83 cents for every dollar men make.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not give a breakdown of the kinds of jobs that clergy do or compare the pay gaps in various denominations. The data do indicate that the gap narrows considerably when women are solo pastors. Solo female pastors earn 94 cents on the dollar. But this represents only 8 percent of all clergy—very little change from a 1998 study by Duke University that showed 6 percent of women in solo leadership positions. Anecdotally, clergy women report being hired at lower salaries than their male counterparts, being promoted less often, and receiving smaller raises.

When the subject of disparities in pay between men and women comes up, it's often said that women tend to choose lower paid work and hesitate to ask for raises. Perhaps women are more likely to be told (or to tell themselves), "Well, no one is in ministry for the money." There may be elements of truth in these observations, but they apply as well to professions like teaching and counseling. Why is the disparity greater for clergy?

The United Methodist Church found, in a 2008 study, that female clergy were paid, on average, 13 percent less than their male counterparts. The report's authors theorized that the difference in seniority between men and women explained the gap. But a 2013 report from the Episcopal Church suggests otherwise. This report found that the pay gap widens with experience. A male clergy person with 20 years of experience makes on average \$90,962, but a female clergy person with similar experience earns \$79,568. That's 87 cents on the dollar compared to 93 cents for associates and assistants. This is better than the overall average, but still lagging.

No doubt there are multiple cultural and historical reasons that explain the gap in clergy pay. The fact remains that women deserve equal pay—and the church should do better on this score than employers generally, not worse. The solutions may not be simple, and it may take time to get from 76 cents to the whole dollar. But it is necessary to get there.