

House-hunting clergy balance personal, ethical concerns: Housing arrangements run the gamut

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The basketball hoop bends forward in front of the two-story house in Ashtabula, Ohio, where newly named Lutheran bishop Elizabeth Eaton raised two children, sent them to public schools and lived while she pastored a small church.

Leaving will be hard, but Eaton wants a house closer to her office as the Northeastern Ohio bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. And she wants to be closer to the church where her husband, Conrad Selnick, serves as pastor.

In addition, they want a home that makes the right impression because a bishop is, in theological terms, a servant of servants. Her lifestyle as the spiritual leader of a region that includes America's poorest city is part of the church's witness, she said.

So Eaton doesn't expect to buy anything too lavish. She said her new house may not even be as big as her current four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath home, valued at \$140,000. "I hope we don't get into conspicuous consumption," she said.

For many clergy, choosing a residence can be a balancing act between biblical and theological emphases on a simple lifestyle on the one hand and personal and practical considerations on the other. "It doesn't do anyone any good to live in a shack," Eaton noted.

The issue is complex for religious leaders, especially in America's heartland.

Cleveland's Catholic bishop, Richard Lennon, lives with four priests in a downtown rectory. Meanwhile, Episcopal bishop Mark Hollingsworth Jr. owns a suburban home on 2.4 acres that he bought for \$1.66 million in 2004.

Lennon said he tries to follow church teachings that encourage clerics "to set aside every appearance of vanity in their possessions"; Hollingsworth said he wants a place where he can entertain and host events for the diocese.

The visible fortunes of religious leaders have ebbed and flowed throughout church history. The earliest Christian leaders were poor carpenters, fishermen and tentmakers. In a well-known biblical passage, Jesus advises a rich young man: "Sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come, follow me."

As Christianity gained social cachet in later centuries, displays of opulence were considered by some to be a sign of the respect due the church and its leaders. Financial excess and corruption produced a backlash move toward simpler lifestyles, said Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary, author of *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*.

Today spiritual leaders are challenged by different theological imperatives. At one end is the "prosperity theology" movement that sees individual wealth as a sign of God's favor. At the other end are theologians who say spiritual leaders called to serve the poor should live with their flocks.

“If people are looking for nice, simple, neat formulas, they don’t exist,” Blomberg said. “It’s probably best discerned community by community.”

Cleveland’s Catholic bishops had lived in a lakefront mansion on 18 acres until it was sold in 1977. Lennon now has a bedroom and a sitting room totaling about 200 square feet in the rectory at St. John Cathedral.

The modest living quarters suit the bishop, who said in written responses to questions that he strives to live by the Vatican II directive urging priests and bishops to embrace voluntary poverty, “by which they are more manifestly conformed to Christ.” His evening walks take him among the poor and the homeless.

Lennon said clerics are encouraged in their lifestyle not to jeopardize their ability to “evangelize the poor.” For the bishop, that means having a home that will not “appear unapproachable to anyone, lest anyone, even the most humble, fear to visit,” he said.

More than 50 miles away in Plain Township, United Methodist bishop John Hopkins lives in church-assigned housing, on a corner lot in a development that borders a golf course.

Hopkins said the four-bedroom colonial, with a market value of \$327,000, lets him provide guest housing to missionaries and their families and other visitors such as college presidents. But he also said, “As you live in nicer neighborhoods, you’ve got to work doubly hard to be in touch with your constituencies.”

When Hollingsworth was elected bishop in 2003, he, his wife and his four children were offered housing by the diocese. Hollingsworth chose instead to buy a \$1.66 million home with seven bedrooms, seven full and two partial bathrooms and five fireplaces across from a park in Shaker Heights.

The bishop bought the house with what he would only describe as his “personal resources.” No church money was used, according to the diocese.

“The elements that went into deciding where to live were primarily personal and had to do with finding a home for our young family that had access to schools and proximity to my office and also a place where we could offer hospitality to the diocese,” Hollingsworth said. —*David Briggs, Religion News Service*