

It's time to change the way pastors get paid

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Many of us held our annual meetings yesterday. For some, this is what happened...

The meeting was held after the morning service. Some churches have a short gathering in the sanctuary. Others go to the fellowship hall. If you're a fellowship hall sort of church, hopefully there was food, because people feel a whole lot less cranky on a full stomach.

The committees got to tell all of the amazing things that they did over the last year. It was fantastic. Incredible stuff. Habitat Houses were built. Food pantries were stocked. Domestic shelters were supported. Children were loved. Not to mention all of the care and commitment that the pastoral staff put into the church—worship services, hospital visits, counseling sessions, and things that cannot be named or enumerated. We kind of take it for granted, because we've been doing all of this for so long.

Then comes the tricky part. We look at the budget, including the staff salaries. The income has gone down. We had a number of funerals, and the people who died were extraordinarily generous. We had an impressive increase in giving during the last stewardship campaign, but it didn't make up for the funerals in December.

Then, diligent folks begin to look at places where we could cut.

We can't cut the electric bill. We can't cut maintenance. The church has to be cleaned. We stopped sending out newsletters last year... But look at the pastor's salary.

Why on earth does s/he get paid so much? Often, people who haven't been in the workforce for ten years, or who haven't kept up with mortgages and student loans, can't believe that we need to be paying that amount for insurance, books, or continuing education. Housing should definitely not cost that much. They start shifting in their seats and raising their concerns.

(I don't mean to sound ageist, and I apologize if I do. It's not an just age thing, but when a person is starting out, and their salary is being evaluated by people thirty to forty years older, sometimes there are different expectations of what fair pay might be. Younger pastors have student loans and higher

mortgages, for instance.)

The personnel chair gets up and informs the gathering that the pastor is already at the minimum salary, and there is no way to cut the salary any more. Unless, of course, the pastor goes to part time, for instance. The pastor begins looking to see if there is an insurrection brewing.

The budget passes, with a reluctant majority. The pastor sweats as the whispers continue. No one knows how they're going to keep their pastor. The pastor becomes very anxious, but doesn't know how to respond, because the minister has not done anything wrong. There has even been growth and vitality in the last years. But that still can't make up for the last couple decades of decline or keep people alive. The pastor has mouths to feed and loans to pay. The message is clear. The church will not be able to afford their leadership for long. It's hard to focus on ministry, so the pastor begins putting energy and effort into looking for another call.

The problem is that there are so many churches in this same position, a call to a stable congregation is becoming more rare. There are some really cushy positions. In fact, the income inequities are quite startling—even on the same church staff. But those positions are getting fewer.

So what do we do? Do we go the way of attrition? Do we allow pastors to be starved out, until we all get jobs as baristas? Should churches all hire lay pastors? Then what's the role of our seminaries? Will we close them down? What about our historic commitment to theological education? Do we just turn our backs on our historic commitments? Is there another way out of this?

I think there is. You see, a lot of denominational bodies have money. It's just that the resources are not in the local church. In my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), churches close and the money goes back to the denomination. Often, that money and property is used to start new churches. Sometimes governing bodies are sitting on piles of cash, and those piles will keep growing. So how about this?

- Seminaries can put more energy into practical education.** I didn't have one class on how to start a new church in seminary. Church planting wasn't even mentioned. We ought to be focusing on it, with certificates and degrees.

- Denominational bodies can hire new church development pastors.** New churches are reaching people who are [younger and more diverse than our traditional congregations](#). Our population is becoming [younger](#) and [more diverse](#). So any long-term strategy will need to include starting new churches. This will take a commitment of time and money on behalf of the denominations. I know we want churches to be completely financially stable within three years, but our expectations don't align with reality. So, we should plan on a church taking ten years to be stable. And plan on half of the new churches closing. We can just go ahead and add that to our projections. Think of them as Research and Development churches.

- Denominational bodies can pay pastor's salaries.** I think there should be some difference between salaries, based on experience, education, or church size. But we've gotten to the place where

we have created some terrible discrimination against people of color and/or women. Having salaries come from a denominational body can help that. It can also help the inordinate stress and anxiety we're putting on pastors during our congregational meetings. It will allow pastors to focus on their jobs.

Having a pastor has often been a determining factor of whether a church survives or not. If we have healthy, paid pastors in churches, then how do we know when to close the church? I'm not sure. Perhaps we could let the pastor, the church, and the denominational leadership make that decision.