

It's time to equalize pastor salaries

By [David Lewicki](#)

August 31, 2015

Not a day that goes by that I don't wonder if I chose the wrong profession.

Friends who went to graduate school for disciplines other than theology—law, business, or medicine—pull in six figures; their lifestyles make me a bit envious. I heard a story on the radio recently of a CEO who makes \$13,000 an hour (not, it turns out, an unusual CEO pay rate) and my first thought was, “Damn. I’m young ... *I could still do that.*”

Instead, I’m a pastor. I love the work I do and how my job asks me to use my gifts and energy. **Aside from occasional moments of financial envy, I’m content with what I do to make a living.** And, with a household income of more than \$80,000 a year, our family makes an excellent living. I’ve served two churches in two states, and each paid me well. Our family has a mortgage, some savings, we pay the bills, and take vacations. We’re blessed. We’re upper middle class.

But when I scan the church landscape, I wonder about the financial well-being of my pastoral colleagues. **How do you make it in a church where they pay you the judicatory minimum, half of what I make? How do you pay school loans, afford a mortgage, make car payments, save for college or retirement, and occasionally enjoy a night out?** God forbid you have a health crisis. How is scarcity of money not a constant fear for my colleagues ... and a constant push toward seeking a higher-paying job?

I wonder if my colleagues look at me the way I look at my friends, or at the CEOs. Do they envy me?

It’s time to stop the envy, and provide a foundation for pastors to see one another as equal co-workers, not competitors. And further, it’s time to provide incentives for pastors to serve long and productive terms in churches located in low-income communities. It’s time to equalize pastor salaries in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Pastor salaries in the PCUSA—my church, and the one I know best—are set by the local church. The denomination provides guidance, mostly at the low end of the pay scale—there is a minimum salary, and requirements for health insurance and benefits. These guidelines prevent churches from financially abusing their clergy.

There are no similar guidelines at the top end of the pay scale. Pastors serving large, thriving churches easily make six figures. Salary calculations depend on which kind of benefits you count, but large-church pastors easily make \$200,000 and up. Perhaps it's only in the church that this amount of money seems excessive, but when you've got a colleague on the other side of town making one-fifth of that—a colleague with *the same training, same credentials, and same basic job description* ... something seems off. Many times I've heard large-church pastors defend this arrangement: "My job is harder—my church is bigger and the organization is more complex." Or, "I have greater responsibilities in a church of 2,000 than does a pastor in a church of 200." I've even heard, "This inequity rewards pastors with special gifts—those who are most gifted and most productive deserve to be paid more."

There's weight in these statements, mostly derived from market-based logic. **But pastors don't serve the marketplace. We serve the Lord.** A Lord who preached against covetousness and greed, who challenged the radically unequal distributive "logic" of the marketplace. Our Lord created a community of diverse disciples who accepted equality with one another—they all became poor and they all served those who were poor together.

I'm not saying vows of poverty are a necessary precondition of ministry—we aren't all called to be Franciscans. But pastors are called to both modesty and mutual support and care for one another. We are sisters and brothers in service to the same Lord. It's inconceivable that the pastor of a large church deserves twice the salary of the pastor of a small church.

My concern, however, isn't only about envy. It is also about how salary differentials warp the motivations of pastors. When pastor salaries in small urban or rural churches aren't enough to survive, it creates a pervasive structural incentive for clergy to move up and out of those neighborhoods—not seeking riches, but simply seeking a livable wage. Ironically, wealthy churches often hire "mission" pastors, whose job is to connect congregants living in distant suburbs with meaningful service opportunities in poor communities. Wouldn't it be wiser stewardship to place those same pastors in churches *actually located in those poor*

communities, pastoring and living and working there?

Four solutions are immediately available to the church:

1. **Pastor salaries should have a minimum and a maximum.** The acceptable maximum would be no more than twice the minimum, accounting for experience and making accommodation for the cost of housing so that every pastor can afford to live in the community in which s/he works.
2. **Salaries should be paid by the presbytery, not by the congregation.** Church personnel committees can work with the presbytery to adjust the salary annually, according to performance and experience, as they do now.
3. **The denomination should expand its [loan forgiveness program](#),** offering incentives to pastors who choose to serve in low-income communities by reducing or removing entirely their student loan debts.
4. **Every presbytery must have a strategy to offer strategic support to plant and sustain churches in low-income neighborhoods,** deciding which churches stand the best chance at thriving given such support. Not every small, struggling church can stay open. But if the presbytery has a strategy to develop churches in low-income neighborhoods, larger churches can be invited to walk alongside as partners. The pastors of small churches won't be "charity cases" or beneficiaries of "socialist redistribution," but they become co-workers in the gospel, allowing resources from thriving churches to support the growth of churches in communities where human needs are greatest.

Will this salary equalization plan discourage creative and effective ministry by reducing the incentive for pastors to strive for "excellence"? Would we struggle to attract the "best and brightest" to serve our churches? I don't think either fear is likely to be borne out. **We in the church abide by different incentives and we have a different definition of "excellence" than those used by CEOs in the marketplace.** Jesus' ministry was "excellent" to the extent that it served the purposes of God—in as much as the ministry was "good news to the poor." For the PCUSA to embrace a gospel-infused standard of excellence in ministry would attract all the right kinds of people to serve our churches—those whose call is not to wealth and comfort, but to the riches of a life well-lived, with colleagues and friends, committed to solidarity and life together, building the beloved community for all.

"Blessed are the poor," Jesus said. And then he practiced what he preached. A salary equalization plan would better allow pastors of the church of Jesus Christ to do the

same.

Originally posted at [A Minister's Life](#)