

Economic Justice and Professional Compensation: Some Guiding Reflections for Congregation Councils

Bishop Wayne Miller

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Although our synod has had a long standing tradition of providing compensation guidelines for professional leaders in the church, on a practical level, I have found that the guidelines, in and of themselves, are not always adequate to address the complex challenge of structuring just and fair compensation parameters for their leaders.

The difficulty arises from the fact that fairness and justice are, to a very high degree, comparative or relative values rather than objective ones. And there are several “axes” of comparison that often compete with each other, but which must all be considered in the process of structuring compensation fairly.

This reflection is not designed to solve the problem, but rather to assist rostered leaders and congregation councils by identifying and responding to some of these comparative axes.

Axis I: Horizontal Profession Comparison

This axis is the primary consideration of the official synod compensation guidelines. In a synod with wide wealth disparity, the compensation charts allow pastors and lay leaders to be compensated fairly on the basis of education, experience, and role expectations, regardless of the socio-economic context of the ministry and mission. The compelling ethical value is that we do not want our church to value its leaders based on the same socio-economic caste system prevalent in our society; a caste system that may encourage leaders to select positions on the basis of wealth rather than vocation.

Suggested Guidelines: Church professionals must maintain a peer relationship with all professional leaders in the church regardless of socio-economic context. Congregation councils are asked to keep base compensation calculations within a narrow deviation from the published compensation guidelines.

Axis II: Intra-Congregational Comparisons

1. Congregations do their ministry within specific demographic and economic contexts. If church leaders are compensated at a level that is markedly LOWER than the household incomes of those who support the ministry, leaders are likely to develop a sense of resentment and even resistance and depression that is unhealthy for them and for the congregation. On the other hand, if church leaders are compensated on a level that is markedly HIGHER than the household incomes of those who support the ministry, the people in the congregation are likely to develop the same sense of resentment and feelings of exploitation.

The disparity between leaders and people is further heightened by the fact that most professional leaders in the church hold themselves accountable to the Biblical guideline of “tithing” their income back to the church, while the average proportion of giving in our congregations is much closer to 2% than to 10%.

Suggested Guidelines: Compensation for professional leaders should reasonably approximate the median household income of the congregation. Professional leaders should lead in generosity and stewardship both by their personal example and by teaching and preaching stewardship as an essential mark of faithful Christian discipleship.

2. In congregations with multiple professional leaders it is also important to consider comparative compensation levels within the staff itself. Senior pastors carry considerably more burden of responsibility than other professional leaders and this should be reflected in comparative salary levels. On the other hand, too much disparity can lead to indifference and a lack of personal responsibility and committed engagement from the staff.

It is a further complicating factor that even though our theology of a “priesthood of all believers” suggests parity between ordained and lay professionals, in practice no such parity exists. This lack of parity fosters a climate of dependency upon ordained staff and devaluation of other Christian vocations to the detriment of general leadership development in the congregation.

Suggested Guidelines: Senior pastors who function as “heads of staff” should be compensated at a premium of 7% to 10% above staff members with similar educational and experiential credentials. Non-ordained staff should be compensated at a level within 10% of the compensation level of pastors with analogous time and responsibility commitments.

Axis III: Congregation- Community Comparisons

For congregations to be effectively engaged in mission, professional leaders must be involved in the life of the congregation’s “mission field.” If pastors are engaged relationally with other leaders in the community, their compensation should allow them to participate at an appropriate peer level with these leaders, without this engagement causing hardship to the leader’s family or personal well-being.

Historically, these external comparison benchmarks for pastors have trended downward. Pastors were once compensated comparably with public school district superintendents. Later this dropped to being in parity with school principals. Now, most pastors are compensated at a level that compares unfavorably with classroom teachers, even though pastors may carry significantly greater burdens of responsibility and time commitment.

Suggested Guidelines: In designing position descriptions for professional leaders, congregation councils should discuss expectations for general community or mission field involvement. Professional leaders should then be compensated with consideration for the general peer relationships that they are expected to maintain in that extra-congregational role.