

# Clergy, laity see windfall differently

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A survey of Protestant ministers and churchgoers shows significant differences in the ways the groups would spend an unexpected surge in income in their churches.

The top priority for ministers was to improve church facilities. About half as many laypeople agreed, but they also would want to retire church debt and help the needy.

The studies, conducted by Ellison Research, compared responses to companion surveys of 504 Protestant pastors and 1,184 congregants who attend church at least once per month.

The survey found 31 percent of pastors would spend a “sudden financial windfall” on buildings or facilities, compared to 17 percent of lay people.

Ron Sellers, president of Ellison Research, said the differing priorities reflect perspective, with “the typical layperson (having) very little idea of what it takes to run a ministry, and ministers sometimes (losing) sight of what’s important to people in the congregation.”

Published in the a recent edition of Facts & Trends, a magazine produced by the Southern Baptist Convention's LifeWay Christian Resources, the study provided options for ministers and churchgoers to select their priorities for spending a sudden swell in the budget.

The choices included spending money on building/expanding /updating facilities, increasing evangelism activities, paying off debt, adding staff members and increasing social programs, such as for homeless outreach.

Eighteen percent of churchgoers and 12 percent of ministers chose paying off debts as a main concern. Laity and clergy from larger churches were more likely to stress this than those from small or medium-sized churches.

Spending on social programs was a priority for 18 percent of laity but just 6 percent of pastors.

Evangelism was identified as a primary concern for both groups, with 26 percent of clergy and 25 percent of laity saying money should go toward those efforts. However, pastors leaned toward focusing evangelism on the local community (16 percent) over international (7 percent) or domestic programs (3 percent). Laity were equally divided among the three, with 8 percent favoring community evangelism, 8 percent foreign and 9 percent domestic.

"Each group probably needs to understand the priorities of the other group more clearly," Sellers said.

The survey also concluded only 1 percent of ministers would raise staff pay or benefits. Sellers noted "virtually all ministers are thinking first about their church, their community or the world at large before their own needs."

The survey carried a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points for clergy and plus or minus 2.7 percentage points for laity.

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