

Guest editorial: How much should churches pay their ministers?

March 21, 2016

Each story below is true. The names of the churches and ministers have been changed to avoid embarrassment.

Ryan was coming out of seminary back in the 1980s. He had interviewed with Cornerstone Church to be the assistant pastor. When asked by the pastor what he “needed” by way of compensation—which, by the way, is a grossly unfair question—Ryan, thinking of his wife and children, answered, “I have to have \$25,000.” Assured that was no problem, he accepted the call to the church.

Examining his first paycheck two weeks into his new job, he was baffled at how little the “take home” amount was. Sure there was a mistake, he went to the pastor to get it corrected. The pastor must have known the question was coming.

He said, “\$24,000 was as close as we could get.” Pulling a three-by-five notecard from his pocket, he handed it to Ryan. The card said: “Salary & Housing, \$20,000 and Benefits, \$3,900, a total of \$23,900.”

The reality is that Ryan got a salary \$5,000—or 20 percent—less than he was promised.

Why do churches do this?

Less than half

In 2014, Evan interviewed with a small church with limited resources. He

liked the people and saw a lot of hope in Chapel in the Pines. They told him his salary would be \$40,000. With his wife working full time, they felt they could meet all of their needs for them and their growing family of three children.

Evan assumed benefits were on top of the \$40,000. In a subsequent conversation with chair of the search committee, he asked for clarification on the matter. The chairman told Evan \$40,000 was all they had. He would have to deduct all benefits and costs from that.

With health insurance for him and his family at nearly \$15,000 by itself, when he deducted \$4,000 for a contribution to his retirement account and added in the cost of disability and life insurance as well his Social Security offset, his actual salary was down to less than \$20,000. He also was told he would have to take his car allowance, the cost of convention and continuing education expenses and any books or publications out of his salary. With great disappointment, Evan turned down the call.

Talking past each other

Janet was the executive pastor at Trinity Church. In a meeting with the personnel committee, she made a request for a modest 1 percent increase in the amount the church contributed to each minister's retirement account. The chair of the committee commented it did not make any difference how much was contributed, since the retirement amount was the same. Baffled by this logic, Janet tried repeatedly to make her case, but to no avail. Every single member of the committee challenged her argument.

All of a sudden, she realized the dilemma. All five members present at the meeting, or their spouse, worked in some form of government service, and each of their retirement plans provided a "guaranteed benefit" amount. They all were stunned the "denomination" didn't have a guaranteed benefit for ministers. They were not trying to be cheap. They simply were working

from a huge misunderstanding of the reality.

Not every church tries to put the “squeeze” on its ministers. So many small churches have limited resources, and they simply cannot pay any more than they do. Many churches have budgets constrained by declining membership or diminished giving. Communities all around America have suffering economies. A lot of church families have been hit hard from the economic side, too.

Fair and equitable

None of that releases us from the obligation to compensate our ministers in a fair and equitable way. They should not have to bear the burden of all budget cuts in a church.

Perhaps the most disingenuous thing churches do to ministers is offer a “package” and say to the minister, “You get to divide it up any way you like.” I am sure there may be other examples of compensation being calculated this way, but for virtually everyone I know, benefits are in addition to your salary—not part of it. Offering a “package” lets the church talk about how much it pays the ministers, but it often is a misleading number.

No one goes into ministry to get rich. But they do deserve to be treated fairly.

So, if you serve as an elder, deacon or some such office or perhaps sit on a personnel or finance committee, be an advocate for your staff. They understand they may have years where they must forego a raise. They understand when money is tight. But they and their families should not have to suffer the consequences of their calling.

How much is enough?

That is a really good question each church needs to answer.

Mike Queen is a retired pastor and consultant with the [Center for Healthy Churches](#).