

Immodest proposal: How to ask for a raise

by [Whitworth Ferguson III](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

It was time to sit down with my church's personnel committee and plan a new year, and I was ready. I knew just how to make the case for a salary increase: I asked for a raise to a level equal to 100 times our secretary's salary. I explained that the standard metric for executives is a salary equal to 400 times that of the company's lowest-paid employee. I expected the committee to praise me for my humility and to accept a salary request that was only one-fourth of the accepted norm. But its "no" was fast, fierce and firm.

Undaunted, I moved on to my second request: a low-interest mortgage loan of \$750,000 so my wife and I could move out of the parsonage and buy our own home. Our church leaders agreed that our parsonage is in dreary condition—more welcoming to mice, bats and spiders than to humans—but this request too fell on deaf ears. The committee didn't even give me the opportunity to explain how the church could forgive the loan in its entirety after two years and provide me with an additional cash payment to cover the income-tax liability.

I knew I'd pique their interest with my third initiative. I described our church's need for a retreat center and suggested that we build one in the beautiful mountains of western North Carolina. I envisioned a modest four-bedroom home on five acres, with a pool and a tennis court. But when I got to the part about how the church could give me the home to mark my upcoming tenth anniversary with the church, I saw eyes glaze over. Another dead end.

I forged ahead with a fourth proposal. I was convinced that even the most stubborn member would agree that I would be a much more productive pastor if the church provided me with a car and a driver. With our congregation growing both in numbers and in geographic span, I could make telephone calls and work on my sermons in between visits to parishioners. I was stunned when committee members not only declined my request, but also refused my alternative plan of leasing a Range Rover.

I had one last request. I described the benefit to the church of owning a 50-foot schooner. We could sail the yacht on the nearby Hudson River and use it to entertain prospective members, meet with important donors and—most important—hold meetings of the church's governing board. Somehow I was not surprised by the committee's response.

I went home defeated and deflated. My requests paled in comparison with those made by even the most ineffective corporate executives. And then a light went on, and I realized my mistake. I had been talking to the wrong group.

How could I hope for a congenial response from a board that's composed of elected members from the congregation? Imagine if Ken Lay or Dennis Kozlowski had to face a board of directors made up of customers, employees and representatives from communities where their companies did business.

I have a better plan. I will propose that we amend the constitution of our church so that members of its governing board must be ordained clergy. A year from now, when I sit down with my personnel committee, I will be sitting across the table from peers, clergy serving in churches just like mine, brothers and sisters who understand and will respond generously to my most basic needs.

I'm looking into fractional jet ownership. For business use only.