

Pastors in poverty

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Most of us have seen this coming for a decade, but it's still startling to read the headlines in the *Atlantic*: "[The Vanishing of Middle Class Clergy.](#)"

None of this is news. We know pastors who feed their children with food stamps.

When disastrous things happen, clergy have learned to give one another money because sometimes we're the only ones in the church (or the neighborhood) who can't go to the church with a financial problem.

We know pastors who covertly stuff the rice from the food pantry in their bag.

We know the frustration when the church ladies begin to say disparaging things about our clothes and offer to take us on a little shopping trip to the outlet mall.

We have stifled the laughter when church members ask us to join the country club or wonder why we're not sending our kids to the private school.

We know the devastation of asking the church for a need-based cost-of-living raise, and have them refuse.

We have seen how people go into seminary debt, but have no church position at the end of their study.

We have watched as churches turn to lay leaders, because they're easier to hire and cost less money.

We have seen how denominational bodies ask for a multitude of requirements of their candidates on top of the M.Div.—additional years of study, psychological exams, clinical pastoral education, or years of internships with no pay—without the knowledge that they are forcing more debt on individuals who are going into poverty-wage calls.

We have had those awkward realizations of the incredible income disparity between pastors with the same experience and education.

We know white men make more than women and racial-ethnic minorities.

But we also know **poverty wages, discrimination, and disparity does not have to be our future.** Our denominations are places of incredible abundance. Look around at the property, buildings, stocks, and assets. Churches close and leave the assets to the denomination. This might be the richest time in our denominational lives. So, why are our pastors in poverty? What can we do about it?

1) **Make our pay more equitable.** My first year out of seminary, a pastor informed me that I was getting paid much less than the janitors at his church, and he was being paid almost 100k more than I was. I know he had skills and experience that I didn't have, but a six-figure disparity is just wrong.

2) **Begin to pay pastors from a centralized body,** with attention to experience and education, and without attention to good teeth and full head of hair.

3) Does that feel like too much to ask? Well, then we could at least **begin having some serious discussions about pay equity** in our denomination's governing bodies.

4) **Think about salary off-sets.** They could work like carbon-trading. If a church wants to pay their pastor over a certain amount, that's great. But then they need to give money to a lower-income pastor in his or her denomination. We should not be mirroring our culture when it comes to the 1% and the 99. Especially since the disparities often exist on the very same church staff!

5) **Call out the discriminatory practices in our denomination.** Graph the salaries of the pastors in your denomination's local area. Note the women, men, and people of color. Can you see unfair distinctions? Can you draw attention to it?

6) **Renew our commitment to educated clergy.** Historically, our denominations required educated clergy. Now, without hardly any discussion, we have quit requiring it and allowed churches to hire lay pastors. And to put this in stark economic terms, this causes higher clergy unemployment and drives down the value of our educated clergy. If a church cannot afford an educated clergy person, then a denominational body can help pay.

7) **Be mindful of ordination requirements.** We often ask people to meet requirements that are way out of proportion to what they will be paid.

8) **Speed up the call process.** In some denominations, it can take 18 months for a church to call a pastor. All along the way, they have the denominational leaders telling them to slow down and not rush it. Meanwhile there's 30 people worshipping on Sunday morning, and the number is dwindling. There's just no reason it should take that long. Often interim ministers last longer than installed pastors. New members are hesitant to join, people begin to slack on their giving. It's a waste of time and money for the church and for pastors looking for positions.

9) **Pay pastors more.** Enough said.