



Studies shed new light on clergy compensation

EARLY FINDINGS FROM AN ENDOWMENT-FUNDED STUDY SUGGEST FINANCIAL PROBLEMS CAN ERODE A PASTOR'S SENSE OF WELL-BEING, AND GUILT OFTEN COMPOUNDS THE SITUATION.

"I'm a servant of God, and so I should be satisfied with whatever God gives me," an Indiana pastor told University of Notre Dame researcher Matt Bloom. "Shouldn't I be happy?" asked another pastor. "Shouldn't I be able to make do with whatever financial blessings come my way?"

Bloom's study is attempting to identify conditions that enable clergy to flourish in ministry or cause them to languish in their calling. Compensation, depending upon its adequacy, can do either.

"We haven't determined the degree to which economic stability matters as compared with other factors, but we know it's very important," says Bloom, an associate professor of business. "We also know that pastors seem to lack ways of dealing effectively with financial challenges. It seems the nature of their work makes it difficult for them to get the help and support they need. They seem reluctant to say to their congregations, 'I'm underpaid,' or 'The benefits I receive aren't adequate' or 'You've required me to get a seminary degree, but the amount you pay me isn't enough to retire my student-loan debt.'"

A second study, supported by the Endowment and based at Duke University, is looking at clergy compensation from a different perspective. Mark Chaves is leading a team of researchers in discovering the decision-making processes that congregations use to determine pastoral salaries. Chaves, professor of sociology, religion and divinity, is surveying clergy and lay leaders who represent a range of faith communities from 14 denominations. Unlike previous research that focused on the amount of money that pastors earn, this study will answer such questions

as: Does the pastor participate in the salary-setting process or is that outside his or her purview? To what extent do churches take into account what neighboring congregations pay their clergy?

Views from pulpit and pew

"Because we're interviewing lay leaders, we're able to ask about the values and assumptions that the leaders bring to the process," explains Chaves. "What expectations do they have for their ministers? How much do they think pastors should make? Do they feel that pastors are overpaid or underpaid? Should a congregation take into account a pastor's life situation or just job effectiveness?"

When completed, Chaves believes his study "will fill in a couple pieces of the puzzle" that no previous project has addressed. He's particularly interested in learning if a pastor and lay leaders from the same congregation view their church's salary-setting process in similar ways. "Will we get the same picture or will the pastor and lay leaders say very different things about the process and the values driving the process?" asks Chaves. "We don't know that yet."

Besides sharing their studies' results with seminaries and denominational leaders, researchers intend to reach out to persons in the pews. "I hope our findings help congregations understand the financial challenges that their pastors face and realize that the challenges are real and not necessarily of the pastor's making," says Bloom. "Just because individuals are doing God's work doesn't mean they shouldn't be fairly compensated."