

Protagonist Corner

Prophets in Toyotas

James S. Lowry

Orange Park Presbyterian Church, Orange Park, Florida

The theological bases for our salaries and all they represent are illusive at best. Like the corporation, we have concluded the only way to motivate and/or reward successful performance is through salary raises.

Statistical data recently released by the Office of Professional Development of the General Assembly Mission Board (PCUS) indicates that the mean level of remuneration for pastors in churches of 250 to 499 members is \$17,300. That is to say half of the pastors in churches of that size are returned more than that amount for services rendered and half receive less. The mean for pastors of churches of 500 to 999 members is \$21,710. The mean for General Presbyters of Presbyteries is \$24,166 and for Staff Directors of the GAMB is \$30,006. The lowest mean is for pastors of churches of 55 to 99 members (\$13,415).

The greater meaning of the statistics shall be left to the statisticians. For purposes here three observations are important.

1. Happily we have passed through the day when clergy were kept humble (and, in some instances, silent) with the lever of low salaries.
2. Even so, if our salaries (and allowances) are compared to other professionals we are significantly underpaid for the contribution we make to the culture in which we work. However, it is far more likely, that the other professionals are overpaid.
3. But still again, at the present level of remuneration, there is little wonder a surplus of capable theologically trained persons exists in our denomination. The established structure of the church quite simply cannot afford to provide salaried fields of service for all who are available. The great tragedy, of course, is that while there is a shortage of places for clergy to serve within the present structure, the world groans in its need for theologically trained leadership. Clearly, salaries, or structures, or both must change.

As important as these issues are, the statistics show several symptoms of a more basic and severe cancer which is beginning to emerge across the church. The cancer, until recently, has gone largely unnoticed as it has gnawed at our entrails.

In my view, the most alarming message of the figures I have quoted is that ecclesiastical structures in general and the Presbyterian Church in the United States in particular are chasing headlong after a value system established and championed not by Christian theology but by a corporate management mindset. The theological bases for our salaries and all they represent are illusive at best. Like the corporation, we have concluded the only way to motivate and/or reward successful performance is through salary raises. As salaries increase,

prices increase and raises serve only as carrots held before jackasses. Additionally, we have established a hierarchical system more complex than General Electric in which the relationship of financial need to salary is secondary to the size of the congregation served and status in the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Again, the theology of such values is illusive.

Alas, salaries are not the only symptom of the pot of diseased gold we seek. We locate new churches more with the wisdom of Ronald McDonald than with the wisdom of the Christian faith. Or does it just appear that in placing new congregations we seek first a prosperous support base rather than a felt need for Gospel? The answer to the question is painful in its clarity.

If the ghost we seek is still not made visible, consider the popularity among our clergy of post graduate degrees in Church *Management*. Tragically enough, the influence on the church of those who have earned such degrees is disproportionate to their wisdom. Again chasing after the corporation, we have been so busy setting goals and managing processes that few goals have been accomplished and ecclesiastical processes, from the local church to the General Assembly, are bogged in their own mire.

To be sure, hidden somewhere in the cobwebs of the corporate management mind there is truth for the church to borrow. Since there seems to be no shortage of those who will glean that truth let me turn to an attempt at inspiring those who would speak against it.

Clearly the day has come when the prophets of the Lord in the pulpits of the PCUS must rise up and boldly suggest alternative "models." We must speak in words understandable to the management mind of those we address. Namely, if we are to be heard we must decline raises; we must, by choice, move to lower cost housing; we must dare to find avenues of ministry as yet undreamed; and we must lead the funeral processions of our departed corporation executives in used Toyota Corollas. In short, we must change the image of the clergy so that we provide leadership in the establishment of sane lifestyles across the socio-economic spectrum in which we are ministers. Shallow, transparent, sweet piety will bring only nausea. Boldly speaking truth with the way we live will bring change.

We have things to learn from the value system of the corporation. However, as Christian disciples, we have truth more profound by far to teach. We are living in a day when the world's resources, if divided equally among the world's people, would leave us all to starve. The prophets of the Lord can no longer afford the luxury of being plastic poets belching at a neon savior. We must speak the truth of God in language that can be understood.