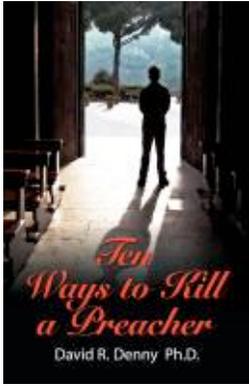


*Ten
Ways to Kill
a Preacher*

David R. Denny Ph.D.



*Preachers get fired more often than NFL coaches. Some sources suggest that as many as 18,000 ministers are terminated or leave the ministry under duress every year. That is fifty a day, every day. String them all together and you have a slow train of misery chugging down a track to nowhere. In *Ten Ways to Kill a Preacher*, the author offers a frank exposé of this epidemic in the often hidden religious culture of churches.*

Ten Ways to Kill A Preacher

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Ten Ways to Kill a Preacher

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First Edition

Chapter Seven: Pay Him Like a Pauper

I'm so broke me and my girlfriend got married for the rice.

Many of the years I spent in the ministry I was broke. I drove an old car, lived in a cramped church house, and ate lots of beans. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't always miserable. In fact, when I was younger and didn't know better, living in poverty seemed somehow romantic. It was like I was a chivalrous leading man in some Irish novel. I was a blend of Clark Gable, Zorro, and Roy Rogers striding in tattered overalls across a bleak Irish landscape. Hunger and uncertainty were but adventurous backdrops for my itinerant life.

This fantasy sufficed for many years. I had a wife, three children and two Irish Setters, one named Reverend and one called Kansas. I served for most of my early years in rural churches where it was common for members to bring by a ham or a sack of potatoes or pecan pies hot from the oven. Suffering seemed somehow charming. When my wife complained about insufficient funds to pay the bills, I shamed her into silence. I considered bills and the rudiments of daily survival mere clutter to be dismissed as unworthy of higher reflection.

I enjoyed standing tall in the pulpit on Sunday morning, my black hair slicked back, my head high, my shoulders stiff. My members knew I was destitute but they too seemed to enjoy the drama unfolding daily before them. Whether I was in small churches in New Orleans, Illinois, or on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, I lived off my gardens, the sea, and charity. I even got a real estate license and sold a few homes. I wrote some articles

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for the local paper and free-lanced for magazines. I made my money one bill at a time and stretched it thin.

During those lean years, I developed severe panic attacks and heart arrhythmias. Often I woke in the middle of night clutching my chest, sweat puddling on my skin, terror in my eyes. The cavalier mannerisms of my spotlight moments couldn't save me in the night. There I worried about my life and my finances and my future and my family. I somehow fought through these midnight panics and rose the next morning determined to keep going.

As time wore on the romance began to wither away and the charm of impoverishment faded. My family was suffering. I couldn't run from it anymore. I couldn't pretend any longer. My kids didn't quite fit in with the middle class kids very well. I noticed that I struggled to hold my head high among secular professionals who lived lives of ease and plenty. Once a woman physician in my church was talking about a pending party her fellow physicians were going to throw nearby at a country club. She let it slip that I wouldn't fit in there. She didn't mean anything by it but I could see that I was a potential embarrassment to her.

After many years of poverty and strain I remember sitting one afternoon on a stool in the middle of my stand of corn just behind the parsonage. It was a great crop and I was shucking the corn for dinner. I had a small transistor radio beside the stool and Simply Red was singing his song, "Holding Back the Years." The lyrics began to peel away, bit by bit, the leading-man fantasy I had built up and protected over the years.

Holding back the years

Thinking of the fear I've had for so long . . .

Holding back the years

Chance for me to escape from all I've known

Holding back the tears

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*Cause nothing here has grown
I've wasted all my tears
Wasted all those years
And nothing had the chance to be good
Nothing ever could, yeah
I'll keep holding on
I'll keep holding on*

It was at this precise moment, with a half-shucked ear of corn in my hand, sweat on my face, my dog Reverend panting beside me that I realized how trapped I was. Thirty-seven years old and where was I in life? I was in a cornfield with a straw hat, two gorgeous dogs and a bucket of fresh corn. No money, no house, no savings, no retirement, no friends who cared enough to tell me the truth or urge me to do better. I remember so clearly after all these years the loneliness of that moment. I sobbed a bit surrounded by the corn and my Setters. I was so isolated out in the hinterland. I wondered if I would ever escape to a promised land that would lift my fortunes.

The ministry is a choice. Ministers step into that choice aware that sacrifice is necessary. Preachers of all backgrounds are driven by a certain intelligent naiveté that in time collides with the roiling realities of life. Only a caring congregation can value these choices and salvage this endangered species. But few do this. Few congregations take off the spectacles of pragmatism to see the prismatic wonders of this higher calling.

This results in the 7th assassin's principle:

Assassin's Principle #7

Tape each puny monthly paycheck to a crimson arrow tipped with the poison of poverty and shoot it straight to the preacher's heart. Eventually the shame will kill him.

Roll Call

It's a *Grapes of Wrath* world out there for many ministers and their families. It's not, however, about dust bowls and Okies going west. It's not about predilections for wanderlust or greed seeking a bountiful life in the glorified fields of California. Ministers are actually content to remain where they are serving their members and their God wherever that might be. But there is daily pain in pulpits and parsonages all across this land. Everybody is either broke or one bill from broke. Here are just a few random samplings of real people expressing heated concerns in the spiritual field of dreams. I'll leave the contributors unnamed but their words are verbatim and their emotions crystal clear.

- **A Presbyterian minister** laments that after 12 years of pastoral work he still doesn't make what he made as a sales rep 16 years ago. Some churches who interviewed him were offering \$20,000 a year. *"Perhaps we need to let some congregations go out of existence rather than create a second class of clergy called Commissioned Lay Pastors who Work Cheap. That's another issue."*

- **A preacher from Ohio writes this:**

"I had one increase in 5 1/2 years in my first parish and one increase in 10 1/2 years in my second parish."

- **A female minister laments on the difficult choices she faces.**

"I think of our church barely able to make the minimum salary for me and wondering if I can afford a root canal next week or if I should just get the tooth pulled and do without, or what."

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It's not that I resent my position. I resent some attitudes toward my position: people say 'I don't have money to give to charity' and they have warm houses and their kids go to private school and such not realizing that the 'charity' they refer to is my living. It makes me feel optional."

• **This minister just wants enough to keep going.**

"I am not talking about being rich, but being able to pay all set bills on time, drive a decent car that doesn't break down once a month or that you have to hold off on repairs because you cannot afford the new brakes this month because it snowed last Sunday and they do not pay you for snow days."

• **An Episcopalian minister resigns in frustration over his salary issues.**

". . . So I have resigned, although still on staff for the next few months, and find myself in the job market. . . . What should I expect in terms of salary -- well, it turns out that most openings in our denomination pay just about the same as I have been making! Here I am with three degrees (actually five, but only three apply to this vocation), 12 years in the ministry, and a whole lot of experience both lay and ordained, and I can only make about \$45,000 annually - - compared to similarly experienced similarly educated folks in lay professions (the ones sitting in our pews) who make two or three times that."

• **Plain, succinct talk from a preacher:**

"I'm broke. That's not a brag—just reality."

• **A preacher's wife chimes in with a tale of bitterness--**

"My husband has been in the ministry for almost a dozen years and he makes about \$2,600.00 per month. He serves a church that includes many wealthy professionals: doctors lawyers, management, etc. many of whom easily make six figure salaries. I think it is this disparity that is frankly making me very bitter. We have two elementary school-aged boys, but even when they were very young, I could not afford to stay home full-time to care for them. I now work full-time, and we are doing a little better financially, but I do not feel that the Ministry is at all friendly to families, and an unfortunate casualty of this has been the erosion of my own faith and relationship with God. I would like to move, but to where? Where would things be better?"

• **So upset he gave his raise back:**

"I do not expect a church to pay more than they are able...but I have served where they could do a whole lot more and argued so much over the little bit they gave me, I turned it back in."

• **A Canadian preacher:**

"It is ridiculous and hypocritical what pastors get paid in most Canadian churches. Plain and simple, they are underpaid given their level of education, complexity of the job, hours worked and the cost of living. Yet churches justify this by saying pastors are servants of God. Well, what are they supposed to live on? The last thing a pastor should have to worry about is money. At least pay them fairly, according to what a similar secular job would be."

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• **An Australian Minister happy not to be starving:**

He says that he makes about \$15,000 a year, called a stipend. *“Ministry is costly and finances give us a cross to bear which our congregations may not always see, but I’m exceedingly glad to be in a connectional church which at least makes sure my wife and I don’t starve for our commitment to ministry.”*

Inventory

What’s a Minister Really Worth?

What’s a preacher really worth? While grappling with this thorny issue, I am reminded of the humble beginnings of the multi-million dollar baseball superstars that pervade modern ballparks. Go back to the turn of the century and you see a unique valuation of sports figures. Then and even up through the Great Depression, ball players made a “working-class scale” for their heroics on the field of dreams. They lived in the neighborhood where they played and often labored at second jobs to make ends meet. Same game then as now. Same number of innings. Same number of hours to prepare for and play the game. But millions of dollars difference in how the players are valued today.

A professor of religious history at Vanderbilt University uses the metaphor of a leaking ship to describe the modern plight of the Methodist minister.

“To cite but one instance of this unstable trend, I found that in the early 1960s the fully-appointed Methodist minister made—by himself—something just over the median household income for a family of four in the United States. Thus, as a sole breadwinner, the Methodist pastor could reasonably expect that his family could be solidly middle-class. But by the mid-1980s, and continuing down to our time, a fully appointed United Methodist minister could expect to make only about half of

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median family income in the United States. Or to state it even more boldly, in less than one working life-time, Protestant clergy have gone from being reasonably well-paid professionals, paid like experienced school principals, to being paid less than beginning teachers."

Pulpit and Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership: "How Much Should We Pay the Pastor? A Fresh Look at Clergy Salaries in the 21st Century," Winter: 2003, p. 28).

Profiles in Courage—A Pastor's Real Value

In order to place the correct monetary valuation on the small church pastor, it is essential that the personnel committee members along with the budget committee and even the church membership as a whole spend thoughtful time reflecting on the merits and tasks of the small church minister. Without this season of thoughtful analysis, the entire process becomes a sham and the minister and his family become prisoners of a higher calling, locked in a cruel battle between the noble adventure of divine service and the brutal reality of survival.

According to a recent Alban Institute survey of clergy salaries across the nation, approximately 60% of ministers live in the tiny world of 100 or fewer members (*Clergy Salaries in Congregations*, Alban Institute, September/October 2002 issue, p. 7). And the vast majority of those remaining are but a small step beyond that.

I fell into that category for most of my ministerial career. My first church was located on Elysian Fields in New Orleans. I was a student at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and this church, a mission of First Baptist, had about 20 members. I had such colorful congregants with local names like Thibodaux and Charbonnet. I loved that little sacred dot on the planet. But I moved on after graduation and from there I took on a full-time pastoral calling outside of Chicago in a small mission that grew to about 40-50 members. I had started with

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ten so 50 seemed enormous. I placed this mission in the Reddick Mansion, an ancient edifice that had tons of history. I still remember fondly exploring the byways of Chicago with its fabulous museums and gorgeous lakefront.

Next came a country church on the Eastern Shore of Virginia with about 80-100 members. Here I learned the intricacies of drum fishing and the joys of solitude walking lonely beaches along the Chesapeake Bay. And then I moved to a city church with a membership of nearly 600. Here I launched a day school and vibrant midweek dinners and Bible studies and a school for adult learning.

After that I began a new career of public school teaching while I continued with a smaller part-time congregation of about 50 members. I began preaching to this group in a tiny member's home. I would stand at the front door and speak to half the congregation in the living room and the other half in the dining room. It wasn't long before we had to move to a union hall where we set up chairs every Sunday.

This vocational path confirms the Alban study. And so it is with this type of small world ministerial servant in mind that we must begin our valuation-reflection exercise. Let's start with a brief survey of a few of the smaller pastor's often overlooked attributes and then move on to the actual tasks he/she performs on a regular basis.

Undervalued skills Most Ministers Possess

Dreamer

For several years I was the owner-president of Davali LLC, a small company in the food service industry. One of my main tasks was to see past the dirty dishes and pile of bills to the possibilities. I bought the store to help my son who was convinced he could make a go of it and run it and make it all

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happen. He cooked and I dreamed. I thought up concepts and plans and products and reasons to go on.

This is one of the skill sets every small church pastor has. We have to have one finger in heaven's electrical socket, feeding on the pulses of the 7th heaven and another finger in mud pies and the other dirty realities of real life. The little pastor knows how to do this, perhaps better than his big church cousin who has a multiple staff to dream for him.

I used to get up early at my Eastern Shore church, gather in Reverend and Kansas, and walk two miles to the Chesapeake Bay just to watch the fishermen preparing their boats. Once ready, they would turn the stern toward the rising sun and putter off toward the crabs and red drum. I would sit and watch until the waves calmed down again and then I would dream about some new scheme I had concocted to assist the poor, some tantalizing mission project to clothe the needy and assist the itinerant Mexican tomato pickers. Then when my heart couldn't bear the excitement anymore, I would gather in the two setters and lope home burning with spiritual desire to change the world.

What is the true value of a man's ability to dream? Martin Luther King Jr. knew. But so does Rev. James and Rev. Watson and Rev. Smith of Little Church USA. And they do it often and they do it when others don't demand it or even seem interested. The dreamer doesn't need a coach. He just needs a little quiet time and a morning walk with the dogs. And that's a skill worth---let's see---how much is that worth? I figure this is worth at least \$120,000 on today's market where companies often hire dreamers to forge new products and predict market shifts and trends. Little preachers do this every day.

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Optimist

(in the crucible of daily pain and doubt).

Most ministers have a genetic inclination toward optimism. But small church guys have perfected it. You can test this anytime. Just walk up to any small time preacher who didn't get a raise—again, who doesn't have the money for that needed root canal, whose shoes have a hole in them—walk up and tell him seriously that the sky is falling. Watch his face carefully. He'll entertain the concept for a few seconds and then he'll smile and reach up and pull out that hidden silver lining. You'll swear it wasn't there but he'll counter by draping it across your shoulder. Now what is that worth? This isn't a skill easily taught. Only a few are born with it in much the same way a unicorn is born with the horn and vistas of open fields and lush valleys.

Laughter is the final face of optimism. Laughter is the surprising summer flower that blooms in the midst of drought. Ministers can laugh in hardship because there are deep roots within them that believe in ultimate victory. The circumstances about them might shout defeat and depression, but the preacher siphons it all through the sieve of unshakeable faith in goodness and somehow it all erupts in laughter. The laughter might not be visible. Some guys are shy and introspective. But it is there somewhere. It is a survival technique. It is a gift God bestows upon the pitiful like he did to the aged Sarah. *“God has brought me laughter; and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me (Gen. 21:5-7).* And, by the way, it always helps when the preacher's wife is laughing.

There were very few parishioners who encouraged laughter during my career. A few here and there but even they eventually succumbed to the scowl in time and turned. This is in part the reason for the high itinerancy rates among ministers. Church folks lack the essence of optimism. They can't see the

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possibilities ahead, the ones just beyond the brewing storm clouds. They panic, call Two Men and a Truck and hustle the dazed minister out of town at the first or second thunderclap.

One blogger, sensing this troubling trend in today's ministerial turbulence, confirms the problem.

"Americans are rallying around the word "change" in this election year, but what is the content of this change? In the itinerancy model, change for laity means, "Just send us a new preacher, . . . But revolving-door itinerancy never gets to the heart of church dysfunctionality"

<http://locustsandhoney.blogspot.com/2008/02/arguments-against-itinerancy.html>.

Many ministers, if given half a chance, can lead a church past the impasse, past the bluster and fisticuffs, to a revival of purpose. It is part of the package that makes him inherently more valuable than most members can properly assess. But if nothing works and he is forced to pack his drawers and socks he will find a way to greet the moving truck with hopefulness. Maybe the past few years were torture but somewhere up the road a few miles, wherever this moving truck is headed—well, there it will be different. And then, standing on his cracked porch for the last time, gazing introspectively at the two trees he planted as seedlings on the parsonage lawn four years earlier, he smiles. And then he laughs. And then he moves on with a new Spirit-driven purpose.

What is this self-motivation worth in today's dead-end world? What is a realistic valuation to place on optimism, a skill few possess and fewer still have mastered? I would say at least \$98,000.

Leader

(When the prevalent mood is doubt and apathy).

Small churches are small for a reason. They are often one entrenched clique with a comet's trail of cousins, uncles and

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aunts and 5th generation neighbors who have bowled together for a century. They watch each other's backs and they watch the preacher. Woe to the *man of the cloth* who dares to breach this parapet or swim this moat without an invitation or a welcoming summons from the inhabitants. It takes an enormous set of life skills to introduce the necessary changes the church is desperate for in this setting. Preachers have this skill packed into a knapsack on their back. Few, however, stay long enough to unpack it.

When I first stepped onto the sacred ground of the Eastern Shore of Virginia, I had no idea of the barriers locals had erected over the centuries against outsiders. But I quickly came to understand that I was nothing more than a “*come here*” and that I would never be more than that. This was usually said with a polite sneer. It was a backhand slap across the cheek, a cannon shot across the bow, a reality check that life here for the outsider would be tough.

I was young and fearless and full of John the Baptist bravado when I came to the Shore in my early 30s. This was my first real church (not a mission). I had the qualities mentioned above. I was dreaming in overdrive and I was brimming with optimism. My leadership, however, was an unknown entity. I didn't know if I had it or not and I didn't lose any sleep trying to figure that conundrum out.

Leadership skills take time to develop but the learning curve is dramatically fast for the small church preacher. He either learns in a hurry what to do and not to do or he gets tarred and feathered and hustled out of town on the night train. But this is the key point—in this post seminary graduate class on real life, most small timers become acute learners, mastering the art of diplomacy and pragmatism. And what is that skill worth in the real world?

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I wasn't in my Eastern Shore church a month before my education began in earnest. Blasting forward on all cylinders, I had flushed out two troublemakers before the month was history. Both were to school me in ways no New Orleans Seminary professor ever thought to do. One was that barrel-chested deacon/boat captain I mentioned earlier who mowed the lawn on his tractor. He looked down imperiously from his old tractor one day and told me to make sure I mowed under the huge azalea bushes all around the church.

I stared at him hard like I was Moses who had just climbed up from the dry Red Sea bottom. Then with a loud fool's voice I told him, "I wasn't hired to be no fool gardener. You do the dang bushes. You got the tractor!"

Buford lowered the idle on the John Deer and spit his tobacco on the bushes. He tilted his straw hat back and contemplated with Shore intensity my outburst. Then he fired up the tractor and just rode off. He gave me hell from that day to the final day six years later.

The second member I confronted was Buford's sister-in-law who sang in the choir. Of course I didn't realize they were linked in the intricate Shore family branches at the moment I bestowed enlightenment upon her. But I learned soon enough. She was a brazen character, emboldened over the years by preachers too smart to talk back. She sang off key but that wasn't the issue. She was getting uppity one night during rehearsal and I decided that part of my heavenly calling was to muzzle and gag all outspoken members. So I told her off after the rehearsal and got the same slow once over Buford gave me. She hated me for six years.

But small church ministers learn quickly. It didn't take me long to grasp the fact that I would never be able to lead this congregation forward at all if I continued to box and spar with them. So I corrected this behavior and grappled with methods

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that would gain their trust and confidence and cooperation. And this desire to enlist followers, to keep the peace if possible, to entice suspicious locals into the fold is the budding of sapient leadership. And that is a big time skill that most preachers develop early. It's a skill set no different than a new president learns in his first 100 days in office or a rookie aviator faces in her first month on a new carrier.

What's this worth in the 21st century world we all live in? Leadership is huge and it's got to be worth at least \$180,000.

Let's see. Where are we now so far?

\$120,000 for dreaming

\$98,000 for eternal optimism

\$180,000 for leadership

\$398,000.

We're not done yet but that's a bargain in today's world of medical specialists earning \$400,000-900,000, athletes in the millions and Wall Street brokers driving yellow Ferraris. (Of course we all know this figure has to be reinterpreted for the church mind but the gross figure should be admired for its integrity before submitting it to the ever-vigilant church budget committee).

The Immutable Tasks Unique to Small Churches.

Now that we've touched in cursory fashion on a few of the illusory elements of the small preacher's psyche and his potential market value, let's move on to the rudiments of the daily tasks. Place your face up against the windowpane of the minister's life and look in with wonderment. In addition to being *dreamer*, *eternal optimist*, *leader*, he has a variety of chores that must be done before he can lie down and rest. Most of these are not written down anywhere. They aren't tasks he is ordered to do; rather, they are but the elements of stardust that

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he gathers together repetitively and weaves into the Calling. The annual value on each of these skills varies from place to place, region to region. But here is the consensus of fair market value (annual figures) after discussing them with many fellow ministers.

Piano player

Small churches often find it tough to finance big name musical talent so they often summon the preacher to the piano bench and hope for the best. I have played *Amazing Grace* and *Just as I Am* at least a thousand times to grateful congregants over my many years of service. And so, heartfelt musical talent offered with the highest level of sincerity---\$978.00.

Morning Announcements

This is a rare task that calls upon all the attributes of the 6:00 o'clock evening news anchor. The minister stands in front of the congregation every Sunday morning and talks extemporaneously about the church news, dropping key names, recounting the big events of the week and of projects yet to come careful not to overlook key players whether worthy or not and striving never to mispronounce their names. He performs this service often with a straight face stifling guffaws and restraining honest commentary as news commentators are trained to do---\$1569.34.

Nursing Homes

Nursing homes smell of death. That might seem to be a cruel statement but after 30 years of walking their corridors, I know they do. There was only one major nursing home on the Eastern Shore and it had an odor that took a week to get out of my clothes. Ministers walk these corridors and sit on the beds and wipe the drool out of countless mouths while helping the

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residents stir up the memories of youth and vibrancy. The small time preacher sees this as one of the highlights of the week. It is the truest form of ministry. And he or she does it without despair. What is that worth?---\$4863.38.

Lie at Funerals

The small town preacher knows he can't tell the truth about Frank. He was the sorriest man alive, but he gave a lot to the church. He harmed my family, but he had connections. It's time to start. The family is staring up at me. The organ is silent. The angels blush and turn their faces. They know what I have to do. Tomorrow is payday. I just do what I have to do. (No charge for this one. I'm too guilty).

Type the Bulletin

The old oily mimeograph machine doesn't work anymore. Can't have church without a bulletin. Who has the computer and the skill to use it? The preacher. There is no secretary. So every Friday night, after returning from the nursing home, I sit alone in my church office clicking the keys and figuring out the hymns. Value for Friday nights away from the family with the bulletin? Priceless.

Plant a Garden for Survival

The nearest Food Lion in 30 minutes away. Can't afford the gas. Got to just go to the garden. 8 rows of corn, 5 rows of potatoes, some carrots, tomatoes and squash. Frank's funeral is over. My family doesn't see the inward turbulence. They are just hungry. I go to the garden. Value for survival gardening?—I have no idea.

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Find the Treasurer

Treasurer didn't give me my check again. He likes me to have to come and ask for it. I've got to hurry. The electric bill is due today. There's only \$45.32 left in the account. I call him. Yes, he's home. I drive out there. He lives in a nice doublewide on a strand of land that looks out over the Chesapeake Bay. He hands it to me at the door with sated eyes. I don't go in. Rush to the bank. Get the receipt. Sit in my old car with my head on the steering wheel, my eyes closed. I've got a flat. Too tired to figure the value here.

Wedding Guru

I love weddings. All small time preachers do. It means a \$50.00 gratuity from the family—maybe. Food Lion money. It's lovely to counsel the young couple and then to have them stand before me dressed in memory's finest garments, eyes wide with love's bright expectations. I smile but fight the tears as I think of my wife sitting in the parsonage without an air conditioner in 100 degree July heat, her dreams dripping down her arms into the freshly shucked corn I just picked from the garden. The ability to play dress up and smile through a broken heart—Don't know how to value this one either.

Oil Day

Ministers usually have to pay the utilities. I did in my small ranch on the Shore. Winter is tough. Once a month he came. He wore big dirty boots that crunched on the hard ground behind the house. He pulled his oil truck right up to the back door. The huge hose belched oil for about 7 to 8 minutes. Each minute I stood silently calculating. He looked down. He knew. But what could he say? He put the hose away. He scribbled and handed me the bill to sign. I signed and wrote out a check. I've got to have a funeral or a wedding soon. What's this task worth? It

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happens every month and somehow the minister goes on without noticeable discouragement or resentment---\$1465.98.

Marriage Counseling

Every minister knows the routine. The couple sits uncomfortably in the office before the big desk. They look down. Emotions are brittle, on edge. It's a small town so the preacher has to be careful. His advice will be public knowledge before the sun sets. But the real skill is having the heart to save a marriage when his own marriage is gasping for air, smothered by lack of hope and few possibilities. He mends a marriage in the office and goes home to a partner who still believes in him and his Calling but whose strong grasp on tomorrow's dream is weakening. She knows all the holy retorts, the sacred aphorisms meant to lift her. But they don't. Still the preacher tries and what is that worth? He saves both marriages for the day and still has a smile---\$8679.45.

Why Churches Just Won't Pay Enough

Here's a simple fact. Any church, anywhere, can pay the preacher more if it wants to. It's simply a matter of will. And it's in this primal zone that things get all twisted up. Lots of church leaders just don't want to do more and so the tradition of the preacher barely getting by limps forward, generation by generation, ruining lives and stunting vocational ambitions. Many called and talented church leaders eventually just leave and go to work for Xerox and IBM. 1500 quit a week, every week. They lose for doing it and the churches lose for allowing Scrooge to remain the treasurer for forty years (the actual situation in one of my churches). So why won't churches pay enough and avoid all this misery? Here are just a few reasons I have observed over the years in my churches and those around me.

Priorities out of Balance

Church people know the preacher is a priority. They know it instinctively. They know they have to take care of him and his family. But it's just that the sanctuary furnace has only got maybe two years left in it. And you can't run a church without a furnace. So there it is, they say. Gotta have a furnace.

This came up in my big city church often. This big edifice had endless huge buildings one tacked on to the next like commuter trains. You could never get to the end of them. They were added on over a century of growth. And the furnace room was bigger than my house. And it was old. The man who knew how to twist, poke, prod and curse at the boiler knew how to raise doubts during budget time. The furnace priority buried the pastoral raise year after year. Funny thing is that old furnace never did quit. It's still going. It never will give out. But the preacher did.

If it's not the furnace it's the central air conditioner for the sanctuary. Can't ask people to come on a hot Sunday in July and sweat through a sermon. And that's true I guess. Attendance would probably drop, for sure. So the priority just got reset again. This game goes on endlessly. It will never change unless the membership locks in the proper priorities and keeps the minister and his family in its proper place. This is a matter of stubborn determination to do the right thing by the membership. Just lock in the preacher's well-being and get creative on the furnace and the air conditioner.

This strategy will pay huge dividends in the long run. Take care of the preacher right and his gratitude will so elevate the church mood that money will come floating down like manna when nobody thought it possible. This happened to me at the big church one Sunday morning. Funds were getting tight and the leaders were getting nervous wondering if they might need

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to reexamine the staff portion of the budget to make ends meet. But one silent member who refused to be on any committees or make any waves stopped me at the church door just after the morning sermon. He told me he appreciated me and he wanted to do something for the church. He pledged to give the church \$35,000 but he wanted to keep it a secret. "You just make a list of things you think need to be done around here and send me the bill. I don't want any fuss. I just to want to help," he said humbly. And so with his oversight, I was able to launch many beneficial projects.

I know firsthand that if churches will just keep their personnel priorities right that the happy minister and his wife will find a hundred ways to solve the other problems and the concomitant optimism in his leadership will spur the silent members to do courageous and noble things.

Jealousy

Everybody knows that most preachers are broke. But that doesn't stop a dedicated few in every congregation from being jealous. I know that sounds perverted and bordering on the insane. But I have confronted this situation countless times in all my churches. The preacher might be broke but he gets lots of attention, a free house, and a car allowance. He often gets a free turkey at Christmas and every so often a pair of tickets to the Norfolk Tides or some other gesture of goodwill from supporters. And so even though the house has mice in the wall, leaky sills that let in winter's drafts and a car allowance that barely covers the month's gas, there are some who are jealous of his position. These are the very ones often chosen to sit on the budget committee or the personnel committee.

Let me stop just for a minute and think back about my pastoral path over the years and see if any of this was true for me. Let's see. My first full-time mission church near Chicago

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had a smalltime businessman on the budget committee. His business was all about converting waste oil into usable oil. He had a small work truck with a huge oil logo on it begging for business. He lived in a matchbox house with two small kids and a wife. Once he was on the budget committee he became a budget wolf, making sure that I didn't get anything that might somehow shift me slightly ahead of him financially.

At another church, I had a couple of poor fishermen guarding the church hen house. No way were they going to let me get ahead of them. They figured my hothouse parsonage was plenty. So they blocked every financial advantage that bubbled up from the congregational floor.

In my big city church, I had a few shipyard workers on the prowl. They pulled the strings to get on the budget team and they made sure my raises were not a penny more than theirs. They were hardcore blue-collar stiffes who could weld all day, drink all night and take a red pencil and mark all over the proposed budget—anything that had “ pastor” in it.

And then after I left this church and was making a transition into teaching, I took a small church placing me into the bi-vocational ranks. And once again, there was a man and his wife who had given up lucrative government jobs only to find that they had miscalculated on their retirement obligations. So they took pick up jobs working in a furniture store without insurance or vacation packages. They did all they could (in the name of Jesus) to strip those juicy items out of the budget for me.

I think that if I had served another ten churches across the land, I would have continued to find this unique brand of congregant. They breed in dark places and surface only occasionally usually to cast a no vote. These members are little more than bed bugs, biting undercover and irritating the hell out of holy servants who merely want to make the world a better place. It's just jealousy and pettiness. And the only real cure is

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for the upper management in any congregation to weigh carefully the abilities of those allowed to serve in sensitive positions.

Tradition

Why won't churches just pay enough to give the minister and his family a good life while they give their lives to the churches they serve? I think one reason is that there are just too many people locked into the patterns, habits, and tradition of the past. Their argument is fatally flawed and runs like an elevator Muzak loop with that tired repetitive refrain, "It's always been that way. The preacher never got much in the past and he's used to it."

This is just too sad for me to dwell on long. It displays an ineptitude that is frightening. It's Galileo signing a recantation before the inquisitional fathers promising never to say again that the earth moves even though Copernicus had proven a hundred years earlier that in fact the sun was the center and the earth did move around the orb. Galileo signed but was heard to mutter under breath as he stormed out of the meeting: "But it still moves, just the same!"

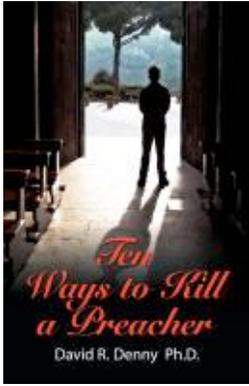
Final Thoughts

Gandhi once said that he admired the Christian God, just not the Christians.

He must have met a Finance Committee. When will they ever awaken to the needs of so many struggling ministerial families? These church leaders seem to be slogging along the muddy trail of timeworn and effete tradition. "We've never paid our preacher much. He chose this life. If he wants to make money, let him go corporate." This is killing preachers. Surely the time has come for this mantra to stop. If it doesn't then thousands of poor servants will stumble along behind the

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church icons like a mule tied to the bumper of a covered wagon
rolling forward to the cemetery of vanquished dreams.



*Preachers get fired more often than NFL coaches. Some sources suggest that as many as 18,000 ministers are terminated or leave the ministry under duress every year. That is fifty a day, every day. String them all together and you have a slow train of misery chugging down a track to nowhere. In *Ten Ways to Kill a Preacher*, the author offers a frank exposé of this epidemic in the often hidden religious culture of churches.*

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