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Hodges: Financial strains and the embezzlement problem

Corey Hodges
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Pilfering by priests is the most recent crisis affecting the Roman Catholic Church.

Time magazine reports that the Rev. John Skehan and the Rev. Francis Guinan, both former pastors of St. Vincent Ferrer Catholic Church in Delray Beach, Fla., allegedly misappropriated \$8.6 million over a 42-year period. Although this is perhaps the worst known case of embezzlement in the U.S. Catholic Church, a study by Villanova University researchers Chuck Zech and Robert West showed that 85 percent of the Roman Catholic dioceses responding to their survey reported cases of embezzlement in the past five years, with 11 percent reporting more than \$500,000 being stolen.

Financial scandal is not exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church.

Protestant TV evangelist Jim Bakker spent five years in prison for allegedly defrauding his followers of \$158 million. In 2003, a former church treasurer of the First Church of Christ, Scientist church in Portsmouth, N.H., pleaded guilty to stealing \$1.6 million from the church over a period of six years. In 2004, Rev. Charles E. Betts Sr., former pastor of Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church in Jamaica, Queens, N.Y., was charged with theft of nearly \$500,000 of church funds. Countless other cases go unreported.

Churches and other faith-based organizations are particularly vulnerable to embezzlement.

Volunteers and staff are usually allotted high levels of trust with very little accountability.

Staff compensation is usually well below congregation members' median salaries.

Skehan served in a parish of affluent members, yet he remarked to the police that he felt he was "never properly paid."

According to a 2001 *Pulpit and Pew* research study by Becky R. McMillian and Matthew J. Price, the median salary for Catholic priests in medium-sized churches was \$24,170, \$49,835 for pastors in churches of denominations including Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian, and \$41,051 for pastors in churches such as Baptist, Pentecostal and United Church of Christ. Increases have not been significant.

Embezzlement is indefensible, but proper compensation should be required for a job that requires 24-hour, on-call ministry, family sacrifice, public scrutiny, church demands and emotional, physical and spiritual fatigue.

Some hold that pastors should be paid a salary in equal proportion to the median income of the congregation; it would indeed be unethical for the pastor to live in the lap of luxury while congregants live in poverty.

Certainly, clergy compensation should not be below the congregation's salary median, but compensation should also be proportional to the church's income. As the church grows, it seems unreasonable to maintain a lower pay rate as work and responsibilities increase.

Lazarus Ministries reports that 1,500 pastors a month leave the ministry, many simply because they cannot afford to pay their bills. Those who stay are sometimes forced to find supplementary employment, making it difficult to fulfill their duties as pastors.

The apostle Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:17, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well, are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching."

It is unclear what drove Skehan and Guinan to have allegedly committed such inexcusable acts. Proper compensation may have deterred them.

* COREY J. HODGES writes about current events and ideas from a moral perspective. Hodges, the senior pastor of the New Pilgrim Baptist Church in Taylorsville, welcomes comments at coreyhodges@comcast.net. You also may send comments to religioneditor@sltrib.com.