

**A Brief History of the Compensation Guidelines for Ministers  
Within the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes  
Written by Howard Moths**

Each year the Finance Committee of the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes prepares a report for the annual Great Lakes Region Assembly called, "Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word And Sacrament." None of the members of the Finance Committee are ministers and the seven members are appointed by the seven classes in the regional synod. While preparing this report, the Finance Committee reviews data from the Employer's Association in Grand Rapids about changes in salaries and benefits and increases in the cost of living in the area. The Finance Committee considers this information and makes changes to the minimum salary and benefits guidelines based on their best judgment of what will fulfill the promise contained in the Call to a Minister of Word and sacrament: "to free you from worldly avocation while you are dispensing spiritual blessings to us, to pay you the sum of \$\_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_ payments yearly and every year, and to consider annually whether such payments are adequate, as long as you continue to be the minister of the church..." (*BCO*, p. 126)

Each year the board of elders (or consistory) of every RCA church answers the following question as part of the Constitutional Inquiry from the classis: "Do the salary, housing, arrangements for professional development, and all other benefits received by the minister/s meet the terms of the original call or contract, subsequent revisions thereof, and the minimum standards of the classis?" (*BCO*, 1.II.7.1n) This question grants the classis (and the classis alone) the authority to impose minimum salary standards for ministers serving in the churches within the classis.

Then why does the regional synod provide compensation guidelines? A little history might be helpful. Before the advent of ministerial compensation guidelines, debates in General Synod on this subject were common. Here are a few examples from Schuppert's Digest of the Minutes of the General Synod of the RCA: "In view of the increased costs of living and the fact that the salaries of ministers remain in general the same as they were 20 years ago, resolved that the GS earnestly recommend to the consistories ...the careful consideration to the salaries of ministers with a view to making the salary...equable with the higher cost of living." (1914) "Recommended that no call be issued to a minister for less than \$1,000 and a parsonage." (1919) "Recommend a minimum salary of \$1,500 and a parsonage for married men and \$1,200 and a parsonage for single men. (1920) After experimenting with the appointment of salary committees for the East and West (recognizing regional differences), the General Synod in 1948 decided that it would be better for each classis to consider this matter. After questions arose about the authority of the classis, the General Synod ruled in 1956 that the classis has the right to set a specific minimum salary, since the classis has the authority to approve or disapprove a call to a minister.

Our regional synod first considered taking a role in the establishment of a minimum salary for ministers in 1960 in response to an overture from the Classis of Lake Erie: "Due to the fact that a number of Classes have currently established a minimum salary of \$5,000 plus car expense and utilities...the classis overtures to establish a salary supplement fund to be secured by a voluntary assessment made on all the churches of the synod." In response, the regional synod committee

recommended that since “various Classes are working at the minimum salary levels and have varied minimums throughout our Particular Synod...that at this session the Particular Synod set a uniform standard for the entire Particular Synod, which will take into account not only the salary but also the other additional reimbursements such as car allowance and utilities.” This recommendation along with a recommendation to establish a salary supplement fund was referred to a study committee to report at the next synod session. (1960 Particular Synod of Michigan Minutes, p. 39)

At the regional synod meeting in 1961, the report of Committee on Minimum Salary recommended to each classis that the minimum salary for all ordained ministers in full time service be \$5,000 plus parsonage and utilities along with “favorable consideration” of a car allowance. In addition, it was recommended that each classis be responsible for its own minimum salary program, and that a Synod Salary Committee of laymen be appointed to consult with the Classis Salary Study Committees for the purpose of continually studying the salary scale of ministers. This recommendation was adopted and implemented on January 1, 1962 (1961 Particular Synod of Michigan Minutes, pp. 43-44) In 1962, the committee reported that each classis had adopted the minimum salary recommended by Synod.

The authority of the regional synod to set a minimum standard was tested in an overture to the General Synod in 1973 regarding the right of the regional synod to legislate a salary schedule. The General Synod ruled that the regional synod “may not legislate a minimum salary for pastors within its bounds nor make it binding on the congregation.”

It is clear that the current Compensation Guidelines for Ministers of Word And Sacrament of the regional synod is only a recommendation. The classes are not required to approve the recommendations of the regional synod. However, our current practice of approving compensation guidelines has a number of advantages: 1) a discussion of the salary and benefits offered by a church are of less concern during the calling process when they are generally uniform across the region, 2) a regional committee gives attention to the question of increases in the cost of living so that salaries keep pace with inflation, 3) a recommendation from the regional synod reduces the work of each classis in making a decision, and 4) classes are still free to set their own guidelines and are not bound by the recommendation of the regional synod.

What happens if the classis does not approve minimum standards for compensation for its ministers? Since the annual Constitutional Inquiry required by the Classis (*BCO*, 1.II.7.1n) and the Call to a Minister of Word and Sacrament (*BCO*, Formulary 5) makes reference to the “minimum standards of the classis,” it is assumed that the classis has approved some minimum standard for compensation. If a classis fails to adopt a new standard in any given year, the previous minimum adopted by the classis is still in effect. Since the regional synod recommends a new standard each year to the classes within the region, the classis should consider this recommendation and decide whether or not to adopt it. Choosing not to act on the recommendation of the regional synod, creates some confusion, since some will assume that the recommendation of the regional synod is the minimum standard for compensation, even though the regional synod has no authority to set the standard.