

West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod
Pastoral Compensation/Expenses/Benefits Package Expectations For 2026
4 August 2025 (revised 6 September 2025)

The typical pastoral compensation/expenses/benefits package, as contained in most congregational budgets, usually looks something like this:

Defined Compensation:

- (1) Base Salary _____
- (2) Housing Allowance, Utilities, Furnishing Allowance _____
- (3) Educational Debt Reduction _____
- (4) Social Security Allowance _____

Expenses:

- (5) Travel Allowance _____
- (6) Continuing Education Allowance _____
- (7) Publication & Media Resources _____
- (8) Official Meetings _____

Benefits:

- (9) Pension & Other Benefits _____
 - (10) Additional Benefits _____
- (e.g. Optional Pension, annuity, additional life insurance)

(1) **Base salary** recommendation by Synod Council for pastors (minister of Word & Sacrament) starting in 2025 in a first-call, congregation setting is \$44,101.17. This is the minimum recommendation. Please review the second and third primary bullets below for seniority adjustments and alternatives.

- **Rationale:** This represents a 3.23% increase from 2025 (more than the estimated COLA at the time of Synod Assembly of 2.3%). This recommended 3.23% increase is a response to estimates for the Social Security Administration's Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) for 2026 coupled with recommended increases going back to 2021 that were significantly below both estimated and actual COLA. For 2024, two base salary numbers were included: one representing compensation fully adjusted for COLA over the years, and the other (the minimum) at a lower rate. For 2025, the fully adjusted base salary was provided, and the lower rate was incrementally increased. The same pattern is presented for 2026 with the goal of eventually equaling the fully adjusted base salary. For a complete historical review, see the article on the Clergy Compensation page.
 - Congregations wanting to keep pace with COLA should set the base salary at \$44,552.25. Of course, a congregation unable to match the \$44,101.17 level but able to do more than the minimum recommended base salary is free to select a figure in between.
 - For the first decades of this synod, a practice of annual 3% increases were followed. COLA was sometimes higher, sometimes lower, but it tended to average close to 3% over time. This eliminated wild swings. In response to financial pressures on congregations caused by The Great Recession (2008-2009), the Synod Council's no-increase recommendation broke with that practice. When compensation increases resumed, Synod Council began following COLA estimates. The effects of the recent pandemic resulted in the largest 2-year COLA since 1978-1980. The estimate for

2022 was a shock to our system, and the attempt to blunt that shock compounded the shock of 2023. Moving forward, consideration of returning to a consistent 3% (or whatever number makes sense) will be on the table.

- It must be acknowledged that the challenges faced are not primarily a matter of inflation. If it were simply a matter of COLA, congregations would, theoretically, be able to keep pace with inflation. Setting aside the question of stewardship, the problem becomes one of diminishing membership. Per capita giving might keep pace with inflation or even exceed it, but a lower headcount will quickly undermine a congregation's ability to maintain pastoral compensation in whatever its current pastor-parish configuration happens to be. Stewardship is, of course, something that should be addressed. Rethinking pastor-parish configuration may also be necessary in some settings.
- Synod Council publishes our compensation guideline based upon projections for COLA. We do this because many congregations begin budgeting processes before SSA announces the COLA for the upcoming year (anticipated in October for 2026).
- Seniority: When reviewing an experienced pastor's package, also consider the years of service the pastor has given to the congregation. \$400 per year of active ordained service should be added to the base salary for first call recommended above. Periodic recalculation, especially for a pastor that has been in place for several years, should be done to make sure that salary is commensurate with guidelines.
- Alternatives: Increases to compensation (whether COLA or seniority) may not always be realistic for the congregation. Alternatives such as (but not limited to) additional vacation time and/or other benefits (tangible and intangible) should be considered in cases of fiscal hardship on the part of the congregation.

(2) **Housing** is an expectation of the Synod Council, but there is no one way to provide this. Traditionally, housing was provided through a parsonage, and that parsonage included utilities, any fees (e.g., fire fees, trash removal, *etc.*), major appliances, and repairs & maintenance. When a parsonage is not provided, the housing allowance should reflect parity with a parsonage.

- Parsonage: A parsonage is a property owned by the congregation with the associated expenses normally covered by the congregation.
 - Special notes about a parsonage:
 - When a parsonage is provided, the Synod Council recommends that part of the pastor's cash salary be designated as a furnishings allowance, if desired by the pastor, by reducing the cash salary and setting the furnishings allowance at that value. *N.B.*, when this is done, remember to reinstate the original values when calculating the next year's budget and compensation agreement.
 - In some rare cases, a congregation opts to provide a utilities allowance rather than cover the cost of utilities; this approach is not recommended by Synod Council. When this is done, the amount provided as a utilities allowance should be sufficient to cover the reasonable expenses associated with the parsonage.
 - When a parsonage is provided, the congregation might also consider providing an equity allowance.
 - Total housing value when a parsonage is provided is the sum of the fair market rental value of the parsonage plus furnishings allowance (if any) plus utilities allowance (if any).
- Housing allowance: When a housing allowance is provided, Synod Council expects that allowance to be equal to the fair market rental value for an unfurnished residence

appropriate to the pastor's household size including utilities in the congregation's community.

○ Special notes about a housing allowance:

- The housing allowance must be explicitly set through either the budget action of the congregation or special action of the Congregation Council. It may not be set retroactively.
- The housing allowance, even when set by budget, may be adjusted by mutual consent of the pastor and the Congregation Council by reducing the cash salary and increasing the housing allowance by the same amount. *N.B.*, when this is done, remember to reinstate the original values when calculating the next year's budget and compensation agreement.

○ Total housing value when a housing allowance is provided is the amount of housing allowance provided.

(3) **Educational debt reduction** of \$1,000 a year (if applicable) has been identified by the Synod Council as an option for a congregation to consider. An educational debt allowance is applied to existing loans for past education. It is not to be confused with continuing education allowance and expenses. *N.B.*, if a congregation establishes this allowance, it is considered taxable income by the IRS.

(4) **Social Security allowance** for pastors, assuming the pastor's engagement follows the normal pattern of self-employment, is expected by the Synod Council. Social Security allowance is 8.2837% of the sum of the base salary and total housing value.

- Rationale: For Social Security purposes, most pastors are considered self-employed, thus requiring the pastor to pay a self-employment tax that essentially mimics the sum of an employee's and employer's shares for Social Security contributions. The Social Security allowance figure above is algebraically derived to replicate what would be an employer's contribution were the pastor an employee.
- Total housing value: Total housing value is discussed above in greater detail under the "housing" heading. While, for the most part, the value of housing provided in connection with pastoral engagement is not subject to federal income tax, it is subject to self-employment tax.
- When the pastor is an employee: As mentioned, the assumption is that the pastor is considered self-employed, but there are some rare cases when the pastor is considered an employee. In such a case, the congregation must withhold FICA from the pastor's paycheck and submit the withholding as the employee's contribution along with the required employer's contribution, following all applicable IRS rules. A Social Security allowance is not provided when the pastor is treated as an employee.

(5) **Travel support** is also expected by the Synod Council, as travel is an integral part of providing pastoral ministry in most situations. The form of travel support may vary from congregation to congregation.

- Reimbursed road travel by POV: A congregation and pastor may agree to reimburse mileage driven by the pastor in his/her personal operating vehicle. The pastor must submit an account of the miles driven that is then reimbursed at the prevailing IRS business rate at the time the travel took place.
- Allowance for road travel by POV: A congregation and pastor may agree to the providing of an annual allowance for road travel. In this case, the pastor receives the allowance and

is responsible directly to the IRS for justifying travel expenses with appropriate documentation. When determining the amount of the allowance, the congregation should consider travel expectations associated with the discharge of the ministry. Distance to hospitals, parishioner residences, anticipated frequency of visits, mileage for polity functions such as synod/conference/cluster meetings, *etc.* should be factored in. If the IRS changes the business rate at any point during the year, the congregation should adjust the allowance accordingly.

- Company vehicle: Some congregations opt to provide a company car through either congregation ownership or lease.
- Travel other than by POV: There can be occasions when a pastor may need to travel by air, rail, bus, *etc.* Examples may include accompanying youth to Youth Gathering, attending Camp Luther as a staffer, or a PRT to support transit between the WVU campuses. Such expenses should be reimbursed if reasonably associated with the duties of the office. If anticipated, it may be included in the travel allowance.

(6) **Continuing education support** is also expected by the Synod Council.

- Routine continuing education: At minimum, the congregation should provide at least \$2000 and 14 days for continuing education purpose annually for routine continuing education. It is common to allow unspent funds to carry over for three years. It is also recommended that a carryover of 7 days for one year be included. It is the expectation of the ELCA that pastors engage in a minimum of 50 hours of continuing education each year (or 150 hours over the course of three years).
- Sabbaticals: The 2000 Synod Assembly adopted a Sabbatical Policy (Guideline) applicable to all clergy (revising it in 2001). The expectation is that each congregation/parish will adopt a Sabbatical Policy for itself, using the synod policy as a guideline.
- First Call Theological Education: Clergy, in their first three years of ordained ministry, are required by the ELCA to participate in First Call Theological Education. In this synod, this includes an annual regional retreat as well as monthly meetings. The congregation is expected to pay \$300 toward the annual regional retreat; the synod matches this amount and covers any excesses associated with registration, boarding, and lodging. The \$300 is to be included as part of the \$2000 annual support recommended above.

(7) **Publication and media resources** allowance is provided by some congregations. Such resources may include professional journals, specialized worship resources, *etc.* It is an option.

(8) **Official meetings** sometimes have registration fees attached to them. For those meetings that are constitutionally mandated, *e.g.*, Synod Assembly, coverage of registration fees and associated expenses not built into other lines of the package is expected by the Synod Council.

(9) **Pension contributions** to support clergy retirement are expected by the Synod Council. The Synod Council's recommendation for congregational contribution rate to the ELCA pension plan through Portico is 12%. As this number may be different than the default setting on the Portico interface, be sure to select/enter 12%.

- Special notes on pension:

- The pension contribution is calculated on Total Defined Compensation (TDC). TDC is the sum of base salary, total housing allowance (or parsonage), and social security allowance.
- If the congregation is providing a parsonage, do not include fair market rental value; select instead the parsonage option on the Portico interface.
- The congregation may elect a higher contribution rate than 12%.
- The pastor and congregation may agree to augment Portico pension through various instruments such as 401(k), IRA, *etc.*
- The pastor and congregation may agree on a lower contribution rate with the difference being invested by the pastor in an alternate instrument such as 401(k), IRA, *etc.*
- When a change of total defined compensation occurs, be sure to adjust the nominal pension compensation accordingly through the Portico interface.

(10) **Other benefits** may be included in the compensation package. For example, one congregation purchased a health club membership. Another congregation maintained a membership at the local golf course for the pastor. Congregations are free to consider benefits beyond those outlined here.

(11) **Health insurance** for clergy and clergy family is also expected by the Synod Council. Portico is the principal health insurance provider for the ELCA. Annually, congregations and pastors have to select the level of health plan.

- **Special notes on health insurance:**
 - The metallic plans (platinum, gold+, silver, and bronze) are being discontinued by Portico. New plans are being offered. The Synod Council advises congregations and pastors to review and compare the various plans being offered, encouraging both to attend Portico webinars related to the new plans, access Portico's online resources related to the new plans, contact Portico Customer Care, and take advantage of services provided by Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota when making decisions about health plan selection. Resources are also available on the synod's Clergy Wellness page (<http://wv-wmd.org/clergy/wellness.html>).
 - In some cases, a pastor may inform the congregation that he/she does not need full coverage because primary health coverage is provided through a spouse, military, Medicare, *etc.* In such a case, the congregation and pastor might agree on a supplemental health insurance plan. When health insurance costs are significantly lower as a result of another source of health insurance coverage, the congregation may consider some increase in salary or some other benefit.
- **Disability:** Portico's health plans include disability insurance, but Portico's disability plan kicks in at two months. The congregation is expected to provide full compensation (though allowances may be prorated) for the first two months of an illness or injury that results in either temporary or permanent disability. The pastor should, at the first suspicion that such an illness or injury (even if temporary) may qualify for disability, file a disability claim. Disability takes time to process. Waiting until the beginning of the second month is waiting too long.
- **Sick leave:** When asked about sick leave, the Synod Council stated, "Illness and family emergencies do arise. Our Synod Pastoral Compensation Guidelines address such situations with the strong recommendation that sick leave and family emergencies be

granted without docking pay and within a reasonable period of time that does not take time away from the granted vacation time (SC22.04.16).”

(12) **Paid vacation** time is also expected by the Synod Council in the amount of four weeks, including four Sundays. Congregations should consider giving one additional week of vacation for each 10 years of rostered service. As mentioned previously, additional paid vacation time in lieu of an increase in compensation may be considered. Vacation arrangements and policies may vary from congregation to congregation (*e.g.*, some congregations allow accrual of unspent vacation time, some have caps on the amount that may be accrued, a congregation might allow unpaid vacation/leave, or a congregation might offer to cash out unspent vacation time); whatever agreement is reached between congregation and clergy, it should be clearly recorded in the policies of the congregation or the minutes of the Congregation Council or Congregation Meeting.

(13) **Comp time, unpaid leave, and special situations** may also need to be included in a congregation’s agreements. Pastoral service is unpredictable. Pastoral emergencies are not scheduled events. Because a pastor may be called out in the middle of the night or at some other time when the pastor might normally be expected to be “off duty,” there should be a reasonable assumption that the pastor will take comp time. Though unusual, there may be times when the pastor needs to take unpaid leave; this should be negotiated with council leadership. Lastly, situations such as bereavement should be met with generosity.

(14) **Family leave** is expected by the Synod Assembly. Such family leave may be reasonable in cases of maternity/paternity, major illness on the part of a family member, *etc.* Synod Assembly adopted a policy (guideline) on family leave that can be reviewed on the synod’s website. The expectation is that each congregation/parish will adopt a policy for family leave, using synod policy as a guideline.

(15) **Mutual Ministry Committee** is recommended in the Model Constitution for Congregations. Synod Assembly 2021 recommended that all congregations establish a mechanism for mutual ministry work, commending the *Driesen Manual* as a resource. Contact your conference dean or the Synod Mutual Ministry Committee for more information.

On behalf of the clergy of the synod, the Synod Council expresses its appreciation to those congregations who have been taking the Council's recommendations seriously each year and who have sought to implement them.

Frequent Questions

Who should decide the pastor’s salary?

In most congregations, the final recommendation to the congregation regarding the salary for the pastor will be made by the church council. Resource material for this decision should include the synod expectations, a local survey of pastors’ salaried in the surrounding area, and any data one can find on merit increases currently being given in local industry. **Please**

285 **keep in mind that in calculating base salary for the pastor, housing allowance is NOT**
286 **included.**

287
288 If it is the practice for the pastor not to be present at the Finance Committee or Congregational
289 Council meeting when the pastor's compensation is discussed or voted upon, the congregation
290 should have a Pastoral Support or Mutual Ministry committee (which usually does not include
291 members of the council), where the pastor would have an opportunity to indicate fully and
292 confidentially any concerns in the area of his/her compensation. The Pastoral Support Committee
293 can then pass on these concerns to the Congregational Council.
294

295 **How do we use the synod expectations?**

296
297 The first thing to recognize is that the expectations are designed to indicate minimum salary.
298 Such things as average worship attendance, number of congregations served, years since
299 ordination, cost of living in your area, the knowledge and skill needed by the pastor, and the
300 current salary of an incoming pastor should all be factored in to decide where your pastor should
301 start. **These expectations only give you a starting point.**
302

303 **If we cannot afford the current expectations, what should we do?**

304
305 First, recognize that paying your pastor below the synod expectations often results in friction
306 between the pastor and the council. Turnover may result, and you will be faced with difficulty in
307 replacing your pastor. The best advice is to lay out a two-to-three-year plan and work toward
308 bringing your pastor's salary in line with synod expectations. Sharing this plan with the pastor
309 will create an open environment based on trust and understanding; then, follow through with your
310 commitment to the ongoing relationship. Of course, such a plan may involve retooling (or even
311 beginning) a stewardship program.
312

313 **How do we get feedback from the pastor regarding his/her compensation?**

314
315 The first thing to do is to build an atmosphere of trust and openness. We suggest that you form a
316 mutual ministry committee, which includes the pastor. The purpose of this group is to look at all
317 issues such as working with the congregation, spiritual needs of the pastor, physical needs, and
318 family needs. A mutual ministry committee can be the advocate for the pastor and provide
319 recommendations to the council. However, it is assumed that matters discussed with the pastor
320 remain with the committee, and confidences must not be violated.
321

322 **We have members in our congregation who believe that the total package is too high. How do** 323 **we explain a total package in a way that makes sense?**

324
325 You need to distinguish between cost to the congregation and what the pastor receives. A large
326 part of the cost to the church comes in the form of pension, medical benefits, and travel expenses.
327 For those of you who worked in industry, you probably received these same items but never
328 considered them part of your compensation. These are expenses to the congregation much like
329 the expense a corporation has for the work of an employee. Therefore, it is not fair to consider

330 them part of the pastor's salary. Base pay plus housing constitutes the bulk of what your pastor
331 actually receives.

332
333 **How do we reward the pastor for holidays worked or missed days off or days off interrupted by**
334 **congregational emergencies?**

335
336 1) Insist that your pastor take days off to compensate for the lost time. Make sure the
337 congregation respects this time off. Pastors need time away to refresh themselves, and we need to
338 respect that. Inform your congregation of the pastor's personal time and ask them to respect this
339 need for time away.

340
341 2) Insist that your pastor take a sabbatical leave on a regular basis.

342
343 3) An alternative not preferred or to be encouraged, is to consider pay in lieu of vacation days.

344
345 **In case of an illness longer than 20 days, but not catastrophic, what should we do?**

346
347 Every case needs to be reviewed on its own merits. Your church council should be the final judge
348 of what is right. They know the pastor best and the effort he or she extends on behalf of the
349 congregation. Decide based on what is fair and appropriate for the circumstances and for
350 everyone involved. Nothing can substitute for good judgment.

351
352 **Do clergy expectations apply to Associate Pastors?**

353
354 The basic intent of the expectations would stay the same, but the specifics need to be modified or
355 factored to reflect the differing roles each staff member has in the church.

356
357 **What about Deacons?**

358
359 At present, the synod has no deacons serving in congregational settings. We also have no
360 congregations currently seeking to engage a deacon. There have been conversations about what
361 this might look like and where it might make sense in our context with our contingent situation.

362
363 **What about non-congregational settings?**

364
365 It is unreasonable to develop guidelines for non-congregational settings as the type of work can
366 vary wildly and the required skill sets, and experience can vary as well. The secular employment
367 market, considering comparable work for the setting, should be examined.