



2026 Compensation Guidelines

Rostered Ministers

(Guidelines for Rostered Ministers of
Word and Service and Ministers of Word and Sacrament)
(Updated - 8/7/25)

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The Virginia Synod

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
In Partnership with the New Guinea Islands District of Papua New Guinea



"Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified. Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."
-Joshua 1:9 NIV

TO: Council Presidents/Vice Presidents of Congregations and Rostered Ministers
FROM: Synod Council, Virginia Synod
DATE: July 2025

SUBJECT: 2026 Recommended Minimum Compensation and Reimbursement Guidelines

We are pleased to share with you the 2026 recommended minimum compensation guidelines for all Virginia Synod Rostered Ministers. There are no substantive changes in the policies from 2025 to 2026. The primary update is in the suggested compensation tables.

The Compensation Guidelines were approved by the 2025 Virginia Synod Assembly and suggest that congregations consider giving a **3% to 7% cost-of-living increase and a step increase of 1.75% based on years of experience**. These increases are reflected in the tables included in Appendix A.

The 2026 compensation guidelines include a method to adjust for the local cost of housing and tools to suggest adjustments for related non-pastoral experience, additional education, and complexity of call.

To assist with these calculations, please download and use 2026 Compensation Workbook (Excel) at: <https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>. There are tabs for calculating Compensation for Pastor or Deacons, Reimbursable Expenses, Benefits, and a tab providing July 2025 Housing Data as a reference document to show the median cost of housing around the Synod. The workbook will be updated in early 2026 to include more current cost of housing data.

In addition to the information provided, you will need information from Portico Benefits regarding pension, health, and disability contributions for the coming year. That information, along with guidelines for pension contributions, will be sent directly to each ministry. The Portico website is www.porticobenefits.org.

We encourage the formation of a Mutual Ministry Committee in every congregation. We also recommend *Pastor and People—Making Mutual Ministry Work*, in the [Congregational Leader](http://www.augsburgfortress.org) Series from Augsburg Fortress www.augsburgfortress.org.

If you need any assistance from our Synod Council, please contact the Virginia Synod office at 540-389-1000.

May God continue to bless your ministry, and may you be able to see God guiding you in this process of compensation so that the partnership in your parish helps usher in the kingdom and brings glory to God.

Peace,
The Synod Council



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COMPENSATION PLANNING

It is a special opportunity and responsibility of the Christian community for members of the congregation to work together prayerfully with their pastor to provide fair compensation. Both congregations and the rostered minister benefit when this process is characterized by openness, honesty, and mutual care. The guidelines that follow are presented as an aid to your conversation.

A rostered minister's total compensation package should, as much as possible, be comparable to the compensation received by congregation members in professional occupations, considering their level of education and years of experience. In order to fulfill their calling, it is essential that they receive sufficient financial resources to care for themselves and their families.

The modern context for ministry presents the church with a variety of challenges and opportunities that require creative and informed responses if congregations are going to thrive. It is with this in mind that the guidelines stress the importance of continuing education for rostered ministers. Furthermore, our commitment to modeling a healthy work environment means that adequate vacation time, sick leave, parental leave, family leave, and sabbaticals are included in these guidelines.

The rostered minister's salaries and other benefits should be reviewed annually, and adjustments should be thoughtfully considered.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q1. Why do you use the term "rostered minister"?

- A.** This term includes ordained pastors and deacons who are listed on the official rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Rostered Ministers include Ministers of Word and Service (deacons) and Ministers of Word and Sacrament (pastors).

Q2. Who determines compensation?

- A.** The responsibility for determining compensation rests with the Congregation Council, yet it is difficult for the entire Congregational Council to undertake such a task. The annual appointment of a temporary **Compensation Committee** is recommended, with membership to include:
1. the Council President or Vice-President
 2. two members of the congregation agreed upon by BOTH the rostered minister and the Council
 3. the Chairperson of the Mutual Ministry Committee
 4. the rostered minister

Q3. Should the rostered minister be on the Compensation Committee?

- A. Making your rostered minister a part of the group that deals with compensation will provide for a more satisfactory outcome. While there may be a portion of the discussion in which it may not be appropriate for the rostered minister to be present, there are also matters for which this help will be needed.

Q4. Where does evaluation enter into deliberations about compensation?

- A. In the four to six months prior to the end of the congregation's fiscal year, the Compensation Committee should begin an annual compensation review to determine compensation for the next fiscal year. The Compensation Committee should give consideration to both merit-based compensation increases and cost of living increased.

In formulating a recommendation to the Congregation Council, the **Compensation Committee** should consult with the congregation's **Mutual Ministry Committee**. Regular evaluation of the relationship of the rostered minister and congregation(s) helps to maintain a supportive, vital, growing partnership for both. This kind of mutually supportive relationship between the congregation and the rostered minister will positively affect the quality of the ministry.

Q5. What about the recommended Minimum Cash Compensation Levels for Pastors?

- A. The Compensation Guidelines recommend a minimum "Cash Compensation" that includes salary, housing allowance, and self-employment tax compensation. In determining compensation, consideration should also be given to complexity of call and the cost of living in a community. Please refer to the Virginia Synod's Compensation Workbook to aid in this consideration.

In order to be more equitable in the Virginia Synod, the Synod Council advocates the current synod guidelines as minimum cash compensation. The Synod Council is aware that these recommendations may seem beyond the means of some of our parishes. It is particularly in these locations that the Synod Council strongly encourages movement toward these levels of compensation. In addition to fair compensation for your current pastor, following the recommended guidelines will expand the pool of available candidates in a future call process.

Q6. What about the recommended Minimum Cash Compensation Levels for Deacons?

- A. The Compensation Guidelines recommend a minimum "Cash Compensation" instead of a minimum "Salary" for Rostered Ministers. In determining compensation, consideration should also be given to complexity of call and the cost of living in a community. Please refer to the Virginia Synod's Compensation Workbook to aid in this consideration.

The Synod Council is aware that these recommendations may seem beyond the means of some of our congregations. It is particularly in these locations that the Synod Council strongly encourages movement toward these levels of compensation. In addition to fair

compensation for your current deacon, following the recommended guidelines will expand the pool of available candidates in a future call process.

Q7. What Salary Adjustment Factors need to be considered?

- A. Appropriate adjustment factors include congregational size and complexity, the cost of living in the area, as well as the rostered minister's experience, gifts for ministry, and continuing education. Additionally, previous work experience in the case of second career rostered ministers should be considered.

To assist congregations in determining appropriate adjustments for housing costs, the Compensation Guidelines now provide a means to adjust the Minimum Cash Compensation based on the cost of housing in your area. The current average cost of a house based on a survey of 25 towns and cities on Zillow is \$333,802 and the median housing allowance is set at \$40,056 (12% of the median cost of a home). The formula in the "Cost of Housing Adjustment" section of the 'Compensation Workbook' adjusts the minimum cash compensation by increasing or decreasing the housing allowance amount to match the cost of housing in your area. Please note, the source of the housing data and the date when it was accessed will be referenced on the Housing page in the Compensation Workbook.

The "Additional Compensation Added by Mutual Agreement" section uses a point system to account for years of related non-rostered minister experience, additional degrees, and the number of staff supervised. The rostered ministry completes this section of the workbook. The values entered are added (up to a max of 10 points) and that number is multiplied by \$500. While this additional compensation is not a part of the minimum compensation requirement, it provides a helpful guide for mutual conversation and agreement. Download the Compensation Workbook (Excel) at:

<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

Q8. Is a deacon self-employed or an employee of the congregation?

- A. Ministers of Word and Service are considered employees by the IRS for purposes of Social Security and income taxes and require standard withholdings from their salaries. A standard W-2 is issued. If you have questions about whether or not a Deacon qualifies for a housing allowance, please consult a tax professional.

Q9. Is the pastor self-employed or an employee of the congregation?

- A. The IRS and the Courts have held that ministers are common-law employees for income tax purposes even though clergy are considered self-employed for social security purposes. **Pastors should be given W-2 forms (not a 1099)** by the church for income tax purposes. For more information on the congregation's Federal and Virginia income tax reporting of your pastor's compensation, please contact the Office of the Bishop.

Q10. How are the pastor's income and self-employment taxes figured?

- A. The pastor's **income tax** is figured on the base salary plus the cash allowance for the self-employment tax. The pastor's **self-employment tax** is figured on the base salary, plus the housing allowance or the fair rental value of the parsonage, plus the cash allowance for the self-employment tax.

Q11. How do we determine Base Salary, Housing, and Social Security components from the Minimum Cash Compensation guidelines for pastors with a Housing Allowance?

- A. The Cash Compensation figure should be seen as a "pie" which may be divided in whatever way seems fair and beneficial to the pastor to cover Base Salary, Housing, and Social Security/Medicare. For example, pastors with a Housing Allowance will want to maximize this amount for tax purposes up to the limits that are set by the Internal Revenue Service. Typically, a Housing Allowance Resolution must be passed by the Council each year to set the amount of the housing allowance for the next year.

Regarding Social Security and Medicare contributions, even though pastors receive a W-2 from the congregation, the federal government considers pastors to be self-employed persons who must pay their own self-employment tax at a rate of 15.3% (Social Security 12.4% and Medicare 2.9%). In a typical employment setting, the employer pays 7.65% of these costs and the employee pays 7.65% of these costs. The cash compensation figure includes the full 15.3% for self-employment tax to cover both the employer and the employee portions of the tax. (Reminder: any Social Security Allowance is included as income when figuring income tax.)

Regardless of how the 'pie' is divided, it is helpful to clearly identify how much of the cash compensation is being allotted for Base Salary, Housing, and Social Security/Medicare.

Q12. How do we determine Base Salary and Social Security components from the Minimum Cash Compensation guidelines for pastors with a Parsonage?

- A. The Cash Compensation figure should be seen as a "pie" which may be divided in whatever way seems fair and beneficial to the pastor to cover Base Salary and Social Security/Medicare.

Regarding Social Security and Medicare contributions, even though pastors receive a W-2 from the congregation, the federal government considers pastors to be self-employed persons who must pay their own self-employment tax at a rate of 15.3% (Social Security 12.4% and Medicare 2.9%). In a typical employment setting, the employer pays 7.65% of these costs and the employee pays 7.65% of these costs. The cash compensation figure includes the full 15.3% for self-employment tax to cover both the employer and the employee portions of the tax. (Reminder: any Social Security Allowance is included as income when figuring income tax.)

Regardless of how the 'pie' is divided, it is helpful to clearly identify how much of the cash compensation is being allotted for Base Salary and Social Security/Medicare.

Note: It is recommended that the congregation and the rostered minister to create an 'Equity Allowance' to save for the eventual purchase of a home. For details on establishing an Equity Allowance, talk to a Portico representative.

Q13. How do we determine compensation for part-time rostered ministers?

- A. "Compensation for part-time rostered ministers is typically determined by applying the percentage of call (.25%, .50%, .75%) to the recommended minimum compensation. In addition, the same percentage should be applied in benefits calculations to assist in providing health care and retirement. Please contact Portico Benefits for more information on how benefits are calculated. The congregation may elect to offer full benefits to an individual working less than full-time as a part of compensation negotiations. Those determinations will be made case-by-case by congregation leadership in consultation with the rostered minister and the Office of the Bishop. Please note that the cost of providing full benefits is based on the total compensation of the rostered minister, so reducing the percentage of the call also reduces the cost of the benefits.

Q14. Is the congregation required to provide health care and retirement benefits?

- A. Congregations and other organizations issuing a call to a rostered minister of the ELCA are expected to provide health care and retirement benefits for rostered ministers, and their spouse, and child(ren). The ELCA recommends Portico Benefits, but the use of another provider for health care and retirement benefits can be negotiated by the rostered minister and the hiring organization. In the case of part-time rostered ministers, the percentage of the call should be applied to benefits calculations to assist in providing health care and retirement benefits. Should the rostered minister, in consultation with the congregation, elect to seek coverage from another benefits provider, the congregation will pay the premium or retirement contribution directly or reimburse the rostered minister for that cost.

Q15. How is vacation time granted?

- A. Vacation time (typically four weeks and four Sundays for a full-time rostered minister) is granted on a yearly basis beginning on the first day of the calendar or fiscal year. Vacation time for rostered ministers is not accrued on a paycheck-by-paycheck basis. Policies regarding rolling over vacation time from one year to the next should be addressed by the congregation or hiring organization.

Q16. Why should congregations establish "accountable reimbursement plans"?

- A. An **accountable reimbursement plan** as described on the Expense Worksheet and in **Appendices H & I**, provides the rostered minister 100% reimbursement for professional expenses such as business expenses, mileage, and books. If the congregation provides an allowance for professional expenses, the "allowances" are considered as income, will be

subject to income tax, and must be reported on the rostered minister's W-2. Business expenses, mileage, books are considered business expenses and deductible as miscellaneous itemized deductions, deductible only to the extent that they exceed 2% of adjusted gross income.

Q17. What about Parental Leave?

- A.** A specific **Parental Leave Plan** should be carefully drawn up in open consultation with your rostered minister. Parental leave is directed towards the birth or adoption of a child.
1. Parental Leave: twelve (12) weeks full salary, housing, benefits for both Childbearing and Adoption Parental Leave, including twelve (12) Sundays for both primary and secondary caregivers.

Factors for consideration:

- a) Twelve (12) weeks is needed for physical healing, bonding time, working out feeding schedule, and recognition that day care centers do not accept newborns.
 - b) Primary and Secondary Caregivers Language – If a distinction is going to be made for different parents, please use these terms. The language is preferable to mother/father or maternity/paternity because primary and secondary do not reflect sex or gender.
2. Childcare Leave: A specific childcare leave should also be carefully drawn up in open consultation with the synod, your rostered minister. Childcare Leave is to be used within the first year of a child's birth. Childcare Leave can be used to ease a parent back into full time hours.

Example:

Pastor A is in a fulltime call and is returning from parental leave. Pastor A has 4 weeks of childcare leave (160 hours). For the first two weeks of work, Pastor A works quarter time, using 1.5 weeks of childcare leave (60 hours). For Pastor A's second two weeks of work, Pastor A works half time, using another week of childcare leave (40 hours). Pastor A then returns full time. Pastor A has 1.5 weeks of childcare leave (60 hours) left to use up until the child's first birthday.

Deacon B's child is 6 months old. Deacon B has two weeks of childcare leave, which Deacon B uses to take one extra day off each week for 10 weeks.

Factors for consideration:

- a. Sundays may or may not be included.
- b. Age of adopted child and/or needs of a child may affect length of time (more or less) offered.
- c. Depending on geographic location, paid childcare may not be available until babies are 12 weeks old.

- d. Discussion of bringing a baby to work for a set number of hours during the week or increased hours of working from home.
- 3. If both parents are rostered ministers, (either in the same congregation/agency/synod or separate ones), both should be given the recommended leave.

Q18. What about Family Leave or Bereavement Leave?

- A. A specific **Family Leave Policy** and **Bereavement Leave Policy** should also be carefully drawn up in open consultation with your rostered minister. **Family Leave** is directed towards illness or other special needs for family members, not limited to children. Such leave should include up to two (2) weeks full salary and benefits. **Bereavement Leave** provides time for grieving following a loss. Any other specific conditions should be clearly defined in writing.

Q19. Whom do we contact if we need further information?

- A. **General Assistance with the Compensation Guidelines:** If you need assistance interpreting the Compensation Guidelines or calculating compensation, please contact the Office of the Bishop at 540.389.1000.
- B. **Benefit Information** is available at Portico website: www.porticobenefits.org. The website includes a Benefit Calculation program, updated annually. If you need assistance with specialized questions, like providing benefits for a rostered minister couple, please call Portico telephone at 800.352.2876.
- C. **Financial Difficulties:** If your congregation is encountering financial difficulties and is in danger of missing a payroll or a benefits payment, please call the Bishop at 540.389.1000.
- D. **Cost of living** variances for your county are available at the Bureau of Labor Statistics website: www.bls.gov.

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON COMPONENTS OF COMPENSATION FOR ROSTERED MINISTERS RECEIVING HOUSING ALLOWANCE

Minimum Cash Compensation: The Chart of Minimum Cash Compensation is based on years of service and is capped at 25 years. For pastors, the figures on the chart include amounts for salary, housing allowance, and self-employment tax (Social Security/Medicare). For deacons, the figures on the chart reflect cash compensation for salary. The figures for 2026 should include a cost-of-living increase from 2025.

Adjustments to Compensation: To assist congregations in determining appropriate adjustments for housing costs, the Compensation Guidelines now provide a means to adjust the Minimum Cash Compensation based on the cost of housing in your area. The current average cost of a house based on a survey of 25 towns and cities on Zillow is \$333,802 and the median housing allowance is set at \$40,056 (12% of the median cost of a home). The formula in the “**Housing Allowance**” section of the Excel Workbook adjusts the minimum cash compensation by increasing or decreasing the housing allowance amount to match the cost of housing in your area.

The “**Additional Compensation Added by Mutual Agreement**” section uses a point system to account for years of related non-pastoral experience, additional degrees, and the number of staff supervised. The rostered ministry completes this section of the workbook. The values entered are added (up to a max of 10 points) and that number is multiplied by \$500. While this additional compensation is not a part of the minimum compensation requirement, it provides helpful guidance for mutual conversation and agreement. See Compensation Workbook (Excel) for details:

<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

Housing Allowance: A portion of this Total Cash Compensation for pastors should be designated as Housing Allowance. A housing allowance is a tax-exempt (for income tax purposes) allocation of the pastor’s cash compensation approximating the fair rental value of a home, plus the furnishings and cost of utilities. This allowance should be sufficient to provide adequate housing as well as care for the related expenses of utilities and upkeep. The amount of this allowance that is excludable from gross income is the LEAST of 1) the amount actually used to provide a home, 2) the amount officially designated as housing allowance, or 3) the fair rental value of the home, including furnishings and utilities. To meet IRS requirements, the annual amount of housing allowance must be officially designated **prior to the time period for which it applies**. (See Appendix H)

Retirement: Regarding pensions, we recommend 12% of “Defined Compensation” as calculated on the Portico worksheet. If the congregation is currently contributing at a lower rate, we strongly encourage a movement to 12% as soon as possible at a rate of at least 0.5% each year until the full 12% level is achieved. **Please be sure to read all materials sent from Portico to determine the correct amount to include on this line.** (See Appendix I) Visit www.porticobenefits.org for the 2026 Retirement Calculator.

Health Care: For health care, the total percentage of “defined compensation” (as defined by Portico) will vary according to the selected package. The Synod Council recommends selecting either the Gold+ or Silver+ package in consultation with the rostered minister. The actual figures for 2026 will be mailed by Portico. Should the rostered minister, in consultation with the congregation, elect to seek coverage from another insurance provider, the congregation will pay the premium directly or reimburse the rostered minister for the cost of the premium. **Please use the Portico materials to determine the correct amount to include on this line.** Visit their website at www.porticobenefits.org for their 2026 Health Care Costs Calculator.

Vacation: We recommend four weeks of vacation which includes four Sundays to give your pastor ample time away to maintain personal and family health.

Sick Leave. We recommend two weeks of sick leave per year with full salary, housing, and benefits should be provided for the rostered minister.

Short-term Disability Leave. Short-term Disability Leave of up to two months with full salary, housing, and benefits should be provided for the rostered minister, if needed. The Portico Disability Plan provides for the potential of 2/3 of defined compensation to be paid beginning in the third month. Portico will assist each rostered minister in applying for long-term disability benefits provided by the Lincoln Financial Group. Each application for disability must be made prior to the end of employment.

Continuing Education. ELCA guidelines suggest two weeks (including two Sundays) of continuing education for those in full-time calls.

Download the Compensation Workbook (Excel) at:
<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON COMPONENTS OF COMPENSATION FOR ROSTERED MINISTERS WITH PARSONAGE PROVIDED

Minimum Cash Compensation: The Chart of Minimum Cash Compensation is based on years of service and is capped at 25 years. The figures on the chart include amounts for salary and self-employment tax (Social Security/Medicare). The figures for 2026 should include a cost-of-living increase from 2025.

Adjustments to Compensation: The “**Additional Compensation Added by Mutual Agreement**” section uses a point system to account for years of related non-pastoral experience, additional degrees, and the number of staff supervised. The rostered ministry completes this section of the workbook. The values entered are added (up to a max of 10 points) and that number is multiplied by \$500. While this additional compensation is not a part of the minimum compensation requirement, it provides a helpful guidance for mutual conversation and agreement.

A congregation providing a parsonage for its rostered minister is encouraged to establish an “**Equity Allowance**” of at least \$1,000 per year. These funds are set aside to help the rostered minister accumulate equity for the purchase of a home when that is needed or desired. Please see Appendix B for further information about equity allowances. A congregation providing a parsonage for its rostered minister is strongly encouraged to pay the actual expenses for the maintenance and the utilities for the parsonage. If the congregation prefers to not pay the utilities, a realistic utility adjustment should be made to the rostered minister’s salary. See Compensation Workbook (Excel) for details:

<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

Retirement: Regarding pensions, we recommend 12% of “Defined Compensation” as calculated on the Portico worksheet. If the congregation is currently contributing at a lower rate, we strongly encourage a movement to 12% as soon as possible at a rate of at least 0.5% each year until the full 12% level is achieved. **Please be sure to read all materials sent from Portico to determine the correct amount to include on this line.** (See Appendix I) Visit www.porticobenefits.org for the 2022 Pensions Calculator.

Health Care: For health care, the total percentage of “defined compensation” (as defined by Portico) will vary according to the selected package. The Synod Council recommends selecting either the Gold+ or Silver+ package in consultation with the rostered minister. Should the rostered minister, in consultation with the congregation, elect to seek coverage from another insurance provider, the congregation will pay the premium directly or reimburse the rostered minister for the cost of the premium. The actual figures for 2026 will be mailed by Portico. **Please use the Portico materials to determine the correct amount to include on this line.** Visit their website at www.porticobenefits.org for their 2026 Health Care Costs Calculator.

Vacation: We recommend four weeks of vacation, including four Sundays, so that the rostered minister has ample time away to maintain personal and family health.

Sick Leave. We recommend two weeks of sick leave per year with full salary, housing, and benefits should be provided for the rostered minister.

Short-term Disability Leave. Short-term Disability Leave of up to two months with full salary, housing, and benefits should be provided for the rostered minister, if needed. The Portico Disability Plan provides for the potential of 2/3 of defined compensation to be paid beginning in the third month. Portico will assist each rostered ministers in applying for long-term disability benefits provided by the Lincoln Financial Group. Each application for disability must be made prior to the end of employment.

Continuing Education: ELCA guidelines suggest two weeks (including two Sundays) of continuing education for those in full-time calls.

Download the Compensation Workbook (Excel) at:
<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

NOTES ON REIMBURSABLE EXPENSES

Professional expenses can be reimbursed in a number of ways. The most desirable is a fully **accountable reimbursement plan** under which the rostered minister submits expenses to the Treasurer and is reimbursed. Under this arrangement the rostered minister need not include the reimbursement as income nor be concerned that the expenses might not be deductible. See [Appendix F](#) and [Appendix G](#) for details and examples.

A. Automobile Expenses. If an automobile is not purchased or leased by the church for the pastor's use, reimbursement should be made at the prevailing IRS allowable rate.

B. Professional Expenses.

- **Continuing Education.** To facilitate the updating of skills, and thereby the strengthening of ministry, the congregation should provide at least two weeks each year, including two Sundays, (in addition to vacation time) **and** \$800 annually, both of which may accrue up to three years.
- **Books & Periodicals.** We encourage \$300 annually to keep abreast of developments in the many facets of ministry.
- **Synod Events.**
 - Attendance at the **Synod Assembly** is required. Therefore, all expenses (travel, lodging, and registration) should be paid. Please note, for **individuals under call by the Synod Council**, please contact the Office of the Bishop for details on assistance available to attend Synod Assembly.
 - **First Call Theological Education** is required. Documents outlining this program are available through the Office of the Bishop.
 - We strongly encourage attendance at the **Gathering of the Ministerium**. This gathering is a time away with the bishop and other rostered ministers for worship, spiritual sharing, conversation, and to learn from gifted presenters.
- **Other.** See [Appendix F](#) & [Appendix G](#) for examples.

Appendix A: 2026 Pastor Cash Compensation Guidelines with Housing Allowance

The suggestion for 2026 is that congregations consider a 3% to 7% cost of living increase over the 2025 beginning salary recommendation. (Note: In previous years, the recommendations have included the full cost of living increase recommended for Social Security.) Step increases in the cash compensation tables (base salary, housing, and full Self-Employment Tax compensation), based on total years of ministry experience or time under call for Rostered Ministers, continue to be set at 1.75% per year.

The guidelines offer suggestions for a 3%, 5%, or 7% cost of living increase for 2026 and numbers from 2025 as a reference.

Years of Experience	For Comparison			
	2026 3% CC	2026 5% CC	2026 7% CC	2025 3% CC
Year 1	61,822	63,022	64,223	60,021
Year 2	62,904	64,125	65,347	61,072
Year 3	64,004	65,247	66,490	62,140
Year 4	65,125	66,390	67,655	63,229
Year 5	66,264	67,550	68,837	64,334
Year 6	67,423	68,733	70,042	65,460
Year 7	68,603	69,935	71,267	66,605
Year 8	69,804	71,159	72,515	67,771
Year 9	71,026	72,405	73,784	68,957
Year 10	72,269	73,672	75,075	70,164
Year 11	73,533	74,961	76,389	71,391
Year 12	75,115	76,573	78,032	72,927
Year 13	76,129	77,607	79,086	73,912
Year 14	77,463	78,967	80,471	75,206
Year 15	78,819	80,349	81,879	76,523
Year 16	80,197	81,754	83,311	77,861
Year 17	81,599	83,184	84,768	79,222
Year 18	82,950	84,560	86,171	80,534
Year 19	84,481	86,121	87,761	82,020
Year 20	85,959	87,629	89,298	83,456
Year 21	87,463	89,161	90,859	84,915
Year 22	88,995	90,723	92,451	86,403
Year 23	90,559	92,318	94,076	87,922
Year 24	92,138	93,927	95,716	89,454
Year 25 +	93,750	95,570	97,390	91,019

Download the Compensation Workbook (Excel) at:

<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

Appendix A1: 2026 Pastor Cash Compensation Guidelines with Parsonage

The suggestion for 2026 is that congregations consider a 3% to 7% cost of living increase over the 2025 beginning salary recommendation. (Note: In previous years, the recommendations have included the full cost of living increase recommended for Social Security.) Step increases in the cash compensation tables (base salary, housing, and full Self-Employment Tax compensation), based on total years of ministry experience or time under call for Rostered Ministers, continue to be set at 1.75% per year.

The guidelines offer suggestions for a 3%, 5%, or 7% cost of living increase for 2026 and numbers from 2025 as a reference.

Years of Experience	2026 3% CC	2026 5% CC	2026 7% CC	For Comparison 2025 3% CC
Year 1	49,022	49,974	50,926	47,594
Year 2	49,512	50,474	51,435	48,070
Year 3	50,752	51,738	52,723	49,274
Year 4	51,640	52,643	53,646	50,136
Year 5	52,543	53,563	54,584	51,013
Year 6	53,464	54,502	55,540	51,907
Year 7	54,399	55,455	56,511	52,814
Year 8	55,350	56,425	57,500	53,738
Year 9	56,319	57,413	58,506	54,679
Year 10	57,303	58,416	59,529	55,634
Year 11	57,499	58,615	59,732	55,824
Year 12	59,328	60,480	61,632	57,600
Year 13	60,366	61,538	62,711	58,608
Year 14	61,422	62,615	63,807	59,633
Year 15	62,499	63,712	64,926	60,678
Year 16	63,591	64,826	66,061	61,739
Year 17	64,704	65,961	67,217	62,820
Year 18	65,837	67,116	68,394	63,920
Year 19	66,989	68,290	69,591	65,038
Year 20	68,161	69,484	70,808	66,175
Year 21	69,354	70,701	72,048	67,334
Year 22	70,568	71,938	73,308	68,513
Year 23	71,803	73,197	74,591	69,711
Year 24	73,059	74,477	75,896	70,931
Year 25 +	74,337	75,781	77,224	72,172

Download the Compensation Workbook (Excel) at:

<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

Appendix A2: 2026 Rostered Minister Minimum Salary Guidelines for Deacons

The suggestion for 2026 is that congregations consider a 3% to 7% cost of living increase over the 2025 beginning salary recommendation. (Note: In previous years, the recommendations have included the full cost of living increase recommended for Social Security.) Step increases in the cash compensation tables based on total years of ministry experience or time under call* for Rostered Ministers, continue to be set at 1.75% per year.

*Prior to the creation of the Word and Service roster, members of the deaconess community, associates in ministry, and others serving in roles now on the Word and Service roster were not eligible to be called, so when figuring compensation, please include all ministry experience.

Years of Experience	2026 3% CC	2026 5% CC	2026 7% CC	For Comparison 2025 3% CC
Year 1	49,902	50,871	51,839	48,448
Year 2	50,775	51,761	52,747	49,296
Year 3	51,664	52,667	53,670	50,159
Year 4	52,568	53,588	54,609	51,037
Year 5	53,490	54,528	55,567	51,932
Year 6	54,424	55,481	56,538	52,839
Year 7	55,376	56,451	57,526	53,763
Year 8	56,347	57,441	58,535	54,705
Year 9	57,332	58,445	59,559	55,662
Year 10	58,336	59,468	60,601	56,637
Year 11	59,356	60,509	61,661	57,627
Year 12	60,395	61,568	62,740	58,636
Year 13	61,452	62,645	63,838	59,662
Year 14	62,527	63,741	64,956	60,706
Year 15	63,621	64,856	66,092	61,768
Year 16	64,734	65,991	67,248	62,849
Year 17	65,867	67,146	68,425	63,949
Year 18	67,019	68,321	69,622	65,067
Year 19	68,194	69,518	70,842	66,207
Year 20	69,386	70,733	72,081	67,365
Year 21	70,689	72,061	73,434	68,630
Year 22	71,836	73,231	74,625	69,743
Year 23	73,093	74,512	75,931	70,964
Year 24	74,372	75,816	77,261	72,206
Year 25 +	75,674	77,143	78,613	73,470

Download the Compensation Workbook (Excel) at:

<https://www.vasynod.org/resources/compensation-guidelines/>

Appendix B: Equity Allowance

An equity allowance is strongly encouraged if the rostered minister lives in a parsonage. This may help to provide housing later in a pastor's ministry, in retirement, at death or disability or when a parsonage is no longer available. The Virginia Synod encourages congregations to establish an equity allowance of at least \$2,400 per year. This allowance can be paid directly to the rostered minister each year, in which case it is included in the defined compensation figures. Alternatively, the congregation can pay into a depository (agreeable to the rostered minister and the congregation(s)). These funds are designated for the provision of housing and remain in the depository until a parsonage is no longer available or until the rostered retires, is disabled, dies, or resigns. At this time payment is made to the rostered minister, their beneficiaries, or the funds are transferred to another congregation for the rostered minister. These funds are taxable to the rostered when they are withdrawn for use. Other tax planning strategies such as Rabbi Trusts or Crumney Trusts, could also be explored with your rostered minister's personal tax advisor.

Appendix C: Pulpit Supply

We recommend the following compensation for pulpit supply for rostered ministers or synod authorized lay preachers:

One Service	\$200.00 - \$300.00
Each Additional Service during One Visit	\$75.00

Plus the IRS rate for the ROUND TRIP mileage

Note: The range of the pulpit supply recommendation has also been broadened. This is in recognition of the reality that the local context and the cost of living vary widely across the Virginia Synod. We encourage congregation councils to factor in the complexity of their context when determining where they fall within this recommended range. In addition, for some congregations the pulpit supply recommendations also serve as one of the guidelines used to determine honorarium gifts for funerals and weddings. We believe that the 2026 recommendation is an accurate reflection of the actual time and effort expended in pulpit supply.

Appendix D: Sabbatical/Extended Study Leave

It is important for rostered ministers as well as congregations and agencies to realize the value of continuing education through workshops, seminary courses, and personal study. ELCA congregations have long been encouraged to provide time and financial assistance to enable rostered ministers to maintain and improve their skills. From time-to-time, however, rostered ministers may desire an extended period of time for study, personal growth, and reflection without the responsibilities of regular service — thus a sabbatical leave. These guidelines are provided to assist rostered ministers and congregations, synods, and agencies in preparing for sabbatical leaves.

1. Sabbatical leaves are intended for in-depth study of one or two topics directly related to the pastor's call and should include time for personal and familial reflection.
2. The initial development will utilize the annual continuing education arrangements between the pastor and congregation, synod or agency.
3. The bishop will need to be consulted early in the process to assure adequate interim ministry during the sabbatical leave.

4. Sabbatical leaves are normally for a period of 12 to 26 weeks.
5. Those who may present proposals are pastors who have a minimum of seven years in the ministry and who have served in their current call for five or more years. The proposal shall include:
 - a. A rationale for the sabbatical, including personal goals, and potential value for the Church, congregation or agency.
 - b. A detailed outline of the intended course of study and use of time.
 - c. An outline of financial implications for the sabbatical, including pastoral coverage during the absence.
6. Proposals for sabbatical leaves shall be presented to the governing body of the congregation or agency not less than six months prior to the leave.
7. Careful consideration shall be given to all aspects of the proposal and implications for the congregation or agency and the pastor.
8. Congregations or agencies may give sabbatical leaves as merit benefits.
9. Normally the financial considerations for the sabbatical shall be negotiated by the rostered minister and the congregation/agency. It is suggested, however, that the total compensation (base salary, housing and Self-employment Tax, pension/health, and vacation) be maintained at the current level, with the rostered minister assuming responsibility for all other personal and family expenses.
10. Sabbatical grants are available from the Lilly Endowment at:
www.lillyendowment.org/religion and the Louisville Institute at www.louisville-institute.org/Grants/programs/sgpldetail.aspx.
11. When a sabbatical leave is granted, a rostered minister shall normally agree to serve that congregation or agency for a minimum of one year following its completion.
12. Within six weeks of the completion of the sabbatical leave, the rostered minister shall present to the congregation/agency and the bishop a detailed reflection on the experiences of the leave.
13. Congregations and/or rostered ministers who want assistance in developing sabbatical plans should contact the Office of the Bishop.

Appendix E: Counseling for Rostered Ministers and Their Families

Video Conferencing Counseling is now available through Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Our EAP provider is now offering EAP video counseling to all rostered ministers. These licensed counselors are specially trained in offering video counseling. Remember, you and your family members may qualify for up to six in-person EAP counseling sessions per issue per year, at no cost for you.

The Virginia Synod and ELCA support mental and emotional health care. If you need additional care beyond what is available through EAP or through your health care provider and funding is a roadblock, please contact the Office of the Bishop to inquire about potential grants.

Appendix F: Reimbursement Policy - Example

REIMBURSEMENT POLICY

In accordance with Treasury Regulations 1.162-17 and 1.274-5(e)_____ (name)_____

Lutheran Church hereby establishes reimbursement accounts and a reimbursement policy for the rostered ministers(s) and staff members with the following terms and conditions:

1. A reimbursement account will be established with each rostered ministers and staff member consisting of an amount designated by the congregation for the reimbursement of ministry expenses and any additional amount which the rostered minister or staff member wishes to add as a salary reduction.**

2. The church will reimburse only ministry-related expenses incurred by a rostered minister or staff member. Such expenses will include:

- Business use of automobile, up to the current IRS standard mileage rate. It is understood that one daily round trip's commuting miles between the rostered minister's or staff member's home and the church will not be reimbursed.
- Business travel away from home; transportation, lodging, and meals.
- Convention and conference registration expenses.
- Educational expenses
- Books, journals, magazines, computer software, cell phone access, internet access costs, and organizational supplies if related to ministry or employment.
- Purchase and maintenance of clerical garments.
- Children's sermon resources.
- Entertainment/hospitality expenses, if business/ministry connection is met.

3. The rostered minister or staff member will account for each allowable expense in writing monthly. Documentation will include the amount, time and place, business/ministry purpose and relationship of each expense. A receipt will accompany the documentation.

4. The rostered minister or staff member will return advances or reimbursements that exceed actual business/ministry expenses.

5. Under this accountable arrangement, the church will not report amounts reimbursed as taxable income on the pastor's or staff member's Form W-2. Neither will the Rostered Minister nor staff member report reimbursed amounts as income on Form 1040 for personal income tax purposes.

** Under a salary reduction plan, if the designated amount by which the salary is reduced is not used, that amount must be forfeited. It is strongly suggested that before adopting any plan your legal/tax advisor be consulted to be certain that your plan complies with the most recent regulations

Appendix G: Reimbursement Authorization Form – Example

Reimbursement Authorization Form

Date_____

No.

LUTHERAN CHURCH

Payment Authorization Form

Budget Account No.

Requested By:_____ Title_____

Approved By:_____ Title_____

ITEMS	COST
Auto - Mileage (_____miles)	\$
Parking Fees/Tolls	\$
Books/Publications/Software	\$
Continuing Education Costs	\$
Maintenance of Clergy Garments	\$
Professional Gifts/Cards/Postage	\$
Meals/Entertainment – Church Business	\$
Meals/Entertainment of Out-of-Town Speakers	\$
Children Sermons	\$
Cellphone	\$
Hospitality/Social Ministry/Assistance	\$
Other:	\$
TOTAL	\$

Date Bill Paid_____ Check No._____ Amount_____

Appendix H: Rostered Ministers' Housing Allowance Designation - Example

Insert for Minutes of Congregation Council Meeting:

The Congregation Council of _____ Lutheran Church meeting on (date), after considering the Statement of Pastor _____, setting forth the amounts estimated to be designated as Housing Allowance beginning (date), (based upon a home valued at \$_____, with a fair rental value of the home, furnished, plus the cost of all utilities @ \$_____per month) upon motion duly made and seconded, adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, that the Rev. _____ receive payment in the amount of \$_____ designated as Parsonage Housing Allowance effective (date), as follows:

Housing-Mortgage PIT \$

Utilities and Fuel

Maintenanc

e Insurance

Furnishings

Total 2026 Housing Allowance: \$

and \$_____ shall be designated as Base Salary,

and \$_____ shall be designated as Social Security Allowance.

Notification by Secretary of the Congregation Council:

The Secretary of the Congregation Council should officially inform the Pastor of the action taken and the amounts of the designated allowances, in writing, as follows:

Notification of Parsonage Housing Allowance

Date:

Dear Pastor _____:

This is to advise you that at a meeting of the Congregation Council of _____ Lutheran Church held on _____ (date), your Parsonage Housing Allowance beginning (date) was officially designated and fixed in the amount of \$_____.

Accordingly, \$_____ of the total payments to you beginning (date) will constitute Parsonage Housing Allowance, \$_____ will constitute base salary, and \$_____ will constitute Social Security Allowance, for a total Compensation Package of \$_____.

Under Section 107 of the Internal Revenue Code, an ordained minister of the gospel is allowed to exclude from gross income the Parsonage Housing Allowance paid as part of compensation to the extent used to rent or provide a home (meals and maid service excluded). You should keep accurate records of your expenditures to rent or provide a home in order to substantiate any amounts excluded from gross income in filing your federal income tax return.

Sincerely,

_____, Council Secretary

Appendix I: Defined Compensation for Portico Benefits Service

For 2026 Pension calculations and Medical calculations, visit the Portico Benefits Service website at www.porticobenefits.org to access their calculation programs.

Q. What is defined compensation?

A. Defined compensation is the basis that Portico Benefits Service uses to determine the amount which a congregation or sponsoring organization pays toward pension and health benefits for a pastor.

Defined compensation is calculated as follows:

- (A) cash salary - annual base salary (before reductions for tax sheltered annuities or reimbursement accounts); *plus*
- (B) clergy Social Security tax allowance; *and*
- (C) if housing/parsonage is provided, 30 percent of (A) + (B), plus furnishings and utility allowances paid directly to the member, *or* if housing is not provided, the actual cash housing allowance paid to the member.

Defined compensation also includes

- housing equity contributions, if the sponsoring congregation or organization pays them directly to the member (include in base salary);
- additional tax-sheltered annuity contributions, made by way of a voluntary salary reduction agreement reached between the member and the sponsoring congregation or organization, including tax-sheltered contributions made to other financial institutions (include in base salary);
- furnishings and utilities allowance, if the sponsoring congregation or organization pays it directly to the member.

Defined compensation **does not** include

- housing equity contributions made on the member's behalf to the Optional Pension Plan or to another financial institution;
- furnishings and utilities allowance, if the sponsoring congregation pays these expenses directly;
- additional pension contributions (above the Regular Pension Plan requirement) paid by the sponsoring congregation or organization on the member's behalf, in addition to the member's salary;
- automobile allowance/reimbursement;
- book allowance/reimbursement;
- continuing education allowance/reimbursement.

See Portico Benefits Service materials for worksheets which are usually received by congregations in August or visit their website at www.porticobenefits.org for the latest information.

Appendix J: Suggested Office Holidays

At the request of congregations, the Compensation Guidelines now include a potential list of holidays that may be observed by office closure and not included as vacation days for rostered ministers or church employees. For holidays that fall on a Sunday, consider observing the Friday before the holiday or the Monday following the holiday. *(Please note, the Virginia Synod Office of the Bishop also observes all Federal Holidays not included in the list below.)*

New Year's Day (if not on a Sunday)

Birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Easter Monday

Memorial Day

Juneteenth

Independence Day

Labor Day

Indigenous People's Day

Thanksgiving

Day after Thanksgiving

Christmas Day (if not on a Sunday)

Day after Christmas Day (if not on a Sunday)