

Honoraria

By Robert John Andrews

“You really need to tell them.”

“I know, dear.”

“Don’t just agree with me, you do that all the time and then ignore what I say.”

“I know, dear. I’m sorry.”

She sighed dramatically. “Don’t be sorry. Do something about it,” she said as she clunked the mug of coffee in front of him, splashing a little on the Formica table, which she immediately wiped up. She balled up the towel, then straightened it out, and flapped it. “They just run right over you. You’re just too nice. Can’t you talk to the Treasurer?”

“I have. You know I have.” He took a sip and paused. “It saves money. It does. If they have to cut paychecks ever two weeks instead of the first of the month, the accounting firm they use for payroll will charge double.” He again paused after a longer sip, holding the coffee in his mouth before swallowing. “When I came here the church was in the red by over \$49,000. At least now we are close to treading water.” He looked up at the back of her blouse as she stirred the scrambled eggs. “Things will get better. They will.”

“Promises, promises,” she said, speaking to the eggs. “Inconvenient if you ask me. Inconvenient and inconsiderate.” He waited for her to finish. “Ungrateful too. You’d think they’d ask me.”

“Yes, dear.” He smiled a wry smile, a sardonic smile, imagining them bucking up the courage to ask her.

“It’s fine the first two weeks, but you just try taking care of the household budget by the end of the month. Then it’s Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwiches in paper bags for the kids’ lunch. Maggie absolutely refuses to eat the heel of the bread. Do you realize the kids have to bring back the paper bags so we can reuse them the next day? Half the time they forget, like yesterday.”

“We just have to be more disciplined.”

“Well, we’d be more disciplined if they’d pay you the way everybody else in the world gets paid.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I just can’t believe it, Bill, that they think you’re the highest paid pastor in town.”

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Once in his study, he opened up his folder and added to his ever growing to-do list: "Talk to the Trustees." With his pen lingering over the yellow tablet, he added: "Ask the Executive Presbyter how others get paid." Next, he opened up his Bible and reread the passage he was going to preach on at the worship service for the Nursing Home early this afternoon. A warm-up for the Sunday sermon. He reviewed the text of the message and added a few notes, crossing out a few words. At the bottom of the page he wrote down two names. Visiting them after the service was his familiar routine but he wrote the names down anyway. Isabel and Ethel. Both church members were too bedfast to be wheeled into the activities room where services took place so he'd have to visit them. So sad. Both were barely aware. "Do they even remember I visit them?" he wondered. The other ladies at Bible Study talked about how vital and active they used to be. The church kitchen was spotless then, unlike now with all these new younger women. Bill remembered how another resident of the Nursing home from his church remarked before she died how the older you get the smaller the rooms get.

The activities room. A table, a lectern on wheels with the ancient microphone attached by a flexible metal arm. The out-of-tune piano. In the corner, the big screen TV. In the back of the room, cabinets and shelves. Books and VHS tapes of old westerns and DVD's of favorite musicals. The faint hint of urine and Chlorox and CVS brand perfume. The activity director and staff wheel them in and line them up side-by-side while the volunteer pianist from the neighboring Methodist church plays familiar gospel songs, which to him sound more like she is keyboarding a calliope. A few of the old ladies in the front row, reliving choir days, would start singing along, usually getting all the words of the first verses right.

Another freebie, he sighed. Every second Thursday here. Every third Wednesday at the other nursing home in town. Then the calls to fill in for offering grace at the senior center. The Borough Secretary would check on him for when he could find the time to open the Borough meetings with prayer. "Forget the salary," he brooded silently. "I should get wages." Resentment bubbled up. "You'd think that with what the nursing home charges they could at least give us a little something for doing these services."

"Sorry, God," he muttered, immediately regretting for feeling this way. He felt it unbecoming and unworthy of a pastor to be so materialistic.

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The Methodist pianist kept playing after he delivered the benediction. Collecting his papers and books, he passed by and greeted the residents who had quickly been wheeled out in the hallway to wait their turn for the elevator. They were ready for their afternoon nap. Turning into the stairwell, he headed upstairs. A staff member opened the door just as he arrived at the top of the stairs. She let him exit. They nodded to each other. A right turn down the hallway past the lounge. Two men sat and watched some talk show where two young people were yelling at each other. The men's walkers were lined up next to their chairs.

Isabel was sound asleep when he arrived. He stood at her bedside to see if she'd wake up. He counted off another minute. He left his card on her night table, mostly to let her family know he had tried to visit, waved goodbye to her roommate, and headed back past the lounge

with the two old men, both now dozing, chins slunked onto their chests, toward the west wing of the Nursing Home to visit Ethel. Waving to the ladies grouped at the nursing station, he turned left toward Ethel's room. Ethel, bed A. Blanche from Shamokin in Bed B by the window. The curtain was drawn between the two beds. Pastor Bill moved Ethel's overbed table aside so he could stand next to Ethel. There was no room for a chair. Ethel was curled up in bed, white sheets covering her tiny body. She was yellow. Her eyes stared blankly, unblinking. Her jaw had dropped, her cheeks sunken. "Oh, dear," Pastor Bill said, rubbing his forehead. He looked down at her for another ten seconds to make sure, then turned and approached the nurses station. The staff kept talking until Pastor Bill coughed. "When was the last time anyone checked on Ethel?"

While driving back to the study, he prepared what he would say when he phoned Ethel's daughter. There'd be the expected gasps and tears. There'd also be, tucked up between the tears and gasps, relief. "She should have died a year ago," Bill thought. "She was simply a husk. This is a blessing."

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The funeral at the funeral home focused on the blessing of death as well as the blessing of Ethel's simple life. Simple funeral. Old fashioned funeral. Simple people. Old fashioned people. Closed casket. Old time gospel tunes piped in, turned off when it was time for the service. Mr. Miller, the funeral director, introduce the pastor. Prayers. Bible readings. Homily. Prayers. Death, Bill preached, can be such a gift, our final hope. What a blessing it can be compared to years in a nursing home. The final cure. At the grave it was scripture sentences, the committal, Psalm 23. Mansions in heaven. Flowers placed by the family on the simple casket, soon to wilt from the June heat. Her name to be carved into the tombstone where her husband's name had been etched eight years before. Buried soon, sleeping beside each other once again. A blessing. During the drive home in the funeral coach, Mr. Miller, handed Pastor Bill his envelope, which he placed with a nod in the inside pocket of his black suit jacket. To Bill, this part always felt like being handed a tip.

At home, he handed the envelope to his wife, saying: "Well, it'll help. I'm sure it's not much, given the family. \$35 maybe. I don't know why they do this, I already get paid..."

His wife cut him off. "Yes, Bill, you say it all the time. You already get paid for doing this." She began opening the envelope. "Be grateful. It's customary. They appreciate what you do. Accept it."

Teasing out the check, she squealed. Bill turned toward her. "\$200!" she shouted, waving the check. For the next hour, she was happier than he had seen her for months. She hummed. She sang clips of pop tunes played by the radio. She even poured herself a glass of Chardonnay.

"Thank you, Ethel," Bill said. "Your death really was a blessing."

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The \$200 didn't last long, but his paycheck arrived the next week. So did the bills, including their Credit Card bill.

"I haven't the guts to open it," he said when it did arrive. It was left on his roll top desk for a week and a half before he did open it. "Well, we can try to put something towards the balance."

That afternoon, following the obligatory nursing home worship service, he stopped in to visit Isabel. Nobody had told him that she had turned for the worst. Her roommate, Viola, tried to distract herself from her proximity by cutting up coupons from the newspaper to give her daughter upon her next visit. Pastor Bill parted the curtains and sat next to Isabel who was propped and comfortable on her pillows. He doubted if she were even aware he was there. Nonetheless, this was his calling. He took out his pocket Bible and read aloud from a few of the Psalms and several passages from the Gospel According to John. Mansions. An Advocate. Life Abundant. By reading the Bible he could avoid looking at her. Abundant life, right. Isabel was pitiful, laboring to breathe, her pupils rolled back, her arthritic hands clenched. He wanted to do more for her than mere spiritual comfort. As a Protestant, he often envied the Roman Catholics and all their gadgets: Rosary beads, oil for anointing the sick and dying, a crucifix to stroke. A memory prompted him. He could do something for Isabel. An internal medicine doctor told him how before the array of medications they use today to ease pain, his doctor father -- an old fashioned, bag carrying GP -- would remove the pillows from behind the patient's head. Prone, the patient's congestion would become gentle.

Pausing to look around and listen for footsteps, he shuffled Isabel's two pillows toward the headboard, letting her head rest on the sheet. Isabel offered a faint gurgle. In his prayer before he left, he prayed for her exit to be gentle and kind. She deserved a kind and gentle death. It was a gift he could give. At the nurses station beyond the lounge, he said to the staff how glad he was at how restful she seemed.

The phone call came to the church office late afternoon. Isabel had followed Ethel. Arrangements were made. This would be a sanctuary funeral. The organist could attend and play the classic hymns, the slow mournful hymns. They worked out which members of the family would share a few memories. Public comments could be saved for the reception. The internment took place in the family plot at Odd Fellow's Cemetery. Again, on the drive back to return Pastor Bill to the church, Mr. Miller handed him the envelope.

In the kitchen, Bill asked his wife: "How much this time?" He felt the question somewhat un-Christian, but there are times practicality and necessity cannot be avoided.

"Well, I would have thought her family would have been a bit more generous, but still it's a blessing from God. \$150! Bless her."

Bill mumbled: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

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Dorothy drove Bill crazy sometimes. Surely she frustrated him. Sometimes the frustration would sink into exasperation. Sometimes the exasperation would squeeze out like a Jelly sandwich into unpastoral indignation. Sometimes the Deacons would occasionally bring her to church, but usually she felt more comfortable in her senior citizen apartment complex where

she could watch her Sunday morning programs and during the week play Bingo with her friends. Even though she could attend church, she often didn't, leaving Pastor Bill obliged to bring private communion to her. Early in his ministry he asked an Elder to accompany him on these visits. That ended soon enough due to them being busy and him finding it easier to do it himself. The only other elder who volunteered to help would talk so much it turned a thirty minute into an hour and a half.

Her apartment for low income seniors consisted of a galley kitchen, a small bedroom, a small living room made smaller by all the religious knick-knacks and trinkets the TV evangelists would send her as expressions of gratitude for her faithful donations to their ministries: various angels in various postures, framed Bible sentiments, portraits of Jesus and his flowing blonde locks, plastic crosses. "What a waste," Pastor Bill would mutter counting the cost of her needy piety. It really was indignation, not jealousy. Still, there was to Dorothy a sweetness and a vulnerability that deserved Bill's pastoral sympathies. Three heart surgeries at the nearby hospital. Valve, arteries, stints. Sometimes he'd drive her to her cardiology appointments when the senior citizen shuttle was booked. He'd hold her hand and pray at the door to the examining area. He'd wait in the lounge to drive her home. After all, she couldn't drive herself.

The attack occurred in the middle of the home communion service, right after the words of institution, interrupting him before he got the chance to say: "This is my body broken for you..." Dorothy's face tightened. Pink turned to pallor. She clutched her chest. Gulping, she managed to tell her pastor to bring her the nitroglycerine tablets next to the sink in the kitchen. Jumping up and bumping his shin against her coffee table, he rushed to fill a glass of water and find the tablets from among the dozen other bottles of pills. Finding it and pushing and twisting open the bottle, he yelled: "How many?" Dorothy tried to speak but the pain was too severe. Pastor Bill guessed, grabbing three, handing them to her in turn.

"Let me call the ambulance, Dorothy."

"No, no, I'll be fine. The angina is calming down."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, pastor. But I need to rest now, if you don't mind."

"Should I take you to your bed?"

"No, I'm comfortable here."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll be alright."

Her friend from a nearby apartment found Dorothy dead in her chair three hours later. Dorothy's funeral service, held in the nearby town where she grew up, was a moving and touching funeral. Those of her old classmates who remained were able to attend.

Bill grieved mightily for the mistake he convinced himself he had made, although he never mentioned it to anyone. The pills he gave her were for her arthritis. During the next Sunday's worship, the prayers of confession followed by the assurance of pardon he would pronounce became especially comforting. God is good. In Christ's name, you are forgiven. Thank you, Lord, I needed that. The envelope given him for Dorothy's funeral also softened the remorse. At least, she'll now disappoint all those televangelists that have been preying on her.

Pastor Bill appreciated his special ministry to the senior members of his church, especially those homebound or cared for in nursing homes. The extra income certainly relieved the stress of the family expenses. His wife hadn't seemed this relaxed and accommodating since before having children. "There really is no harm," he'd brood over in his devotions. "Their deaths have become such incredible blessings. God is good. Release from weakness, from pain. It is a special gift that I can relieve their pain, and help out my family as a result."

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It was a most difficult time for the church. Never before had there been so many deaths in such a short span of time. A time to mourn. Misplaced pillows. Mistaken medications. Twice the casters of the overbed tables crushed oxygen tubes. Old Fred forgot to lock the brakes to his wheelchair and fell, receiving an ugly gash to his scalp and breaking his hip. If only old Fred hadn't been so stubborn and had bothered to purchase one of those Medical Alert buzzers you wear around your neck. Mildred, God bless her, tripped over her family Bible left at the top of the curving stairway. A King James Version, complete with concordance, Apocrypha, and informative drawings. Mildred was getting terribly forgetful, they all agreed. Bless her soul. With her died the last descendent of one of the founding families of the church.

From the pews, the members of the church looked at their pastor and felt sorry for him. He looks so tired, so haggard, so worn out from conducting so many meaningful and beautiful funeral services. He has a gift. He has been so attentive to his pastoral duties, caring for the sick and the elderly, ministering to all the grieving family members and friends. He's always there for others.

On the second Sunday in October, the Treasurer asked for permission to stand and say a few words during the church announcements. "Pastor, today is Pastor Appreciation Sunday. We want to thank you and honor you for all you have done for this congregation, especially over the last half year. Your devotion and faithfulness has not gone unnoticed. I know that when I have to admit my Ruth next week to the nursing home, it's a comfort to know she'll be well cared for by this church." The Treasurer wiped a tear from his eye. "Please accept this envelope from your congregation as an expression of our love and gratitude. We are so proud of you."

To the applause of the congregation, Bill stepped from the pulpit. Shaking his head, his eyes downcast in humility, he received the envelope and shook the Treasurer's hand. Bill's wife, wearing a new dress, beamed.

On Halloween afternoon, Bill took the day off so he and his wife could celebrate their blessings by taking their three children out to a fancy lunch at the one of the better restaurants in the neighboring town.