

THE 2023 Youth Pastor Compensation Report



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We've been at this for six years now, and the Youth Pastor Compensation Survey has had well over 6,000 respondents. The survey is brought to you by Chemistry Staffing in association with The Youth Cartel and ChurchSalary.com. Dan Navarra is the lead researcher and author of this report and serves Chemistry Staffing as a Church Coach, where he helps churches find healthy long-term fits for key roles. Dan also has over fifteen years of youth ministry experience. Special thanks are well deserved for general editing done, as always, by Mark Oestreicher of The Youth Cartel; and for certain input and analysis from Aaron Hill of Christianity Today's ChurchSalary.com arm. The heart of this team remains the empowerment of youth workers to understand their compensation best and be equipped to have conversations about their careers and compensation with their churches, ultimately leading to long-term health for the youth workers and the ministries they lead. We care about youth workers!

2022 was a BIG year for many churches as many had a year mostly free from COVID-19 restrictions. Many saw this year as the season of emerging into the "new normal" that resembled pre-pandemic youth ministry with camps, unmasked youth group gatherings, lock-ins, and mission trips all making a comeback nationwide. In contrast, many other ministries struggled with a "new normal," including lower attendance and budget cuts. Let's take a look at some BIG pieces of data for this year's compensation report.



DAN NAVARRA
LEAD RESEARCHER & AUTHOR
THE YOUTH PASTOR COMPENSATION REPORT



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THE BIG NUMBER

This year, we had 803 respondents, with 686 self-classifying as full-time. For our purposes, full-time is defined as being regularly scheduled for 30 hours or more per week, and our report will mostly address this employee classification. Also, please note that we use the term “youth pastor” throughout as synonymous with any other term meaning an employed youth worker. This language is not meant to indicate anything other than referring to a person who is paid to lead a youth ministry.

The national average salary for a full-time youth pastor in 2022 was \$51,234.

The chart at the end of this section illustrates the trend in our field over the past six years we’ve collected data. We’ve seen an overall increase in the average full-time salary of 12.5% over the past six years. We think it's helpful to point out that larger number in the overall landscape of time because we hear from youth pastors who have gone “many years” without seeing a pay increase. If you’re not receiving a 2-3% increase in salary every year, you’re effectively seeing a pay decrease compared to your peers. And even that 2-3% annual increase won’t keep up with historic inflation numbers wreaking havoc on personal finances everywhere, but more on that later.

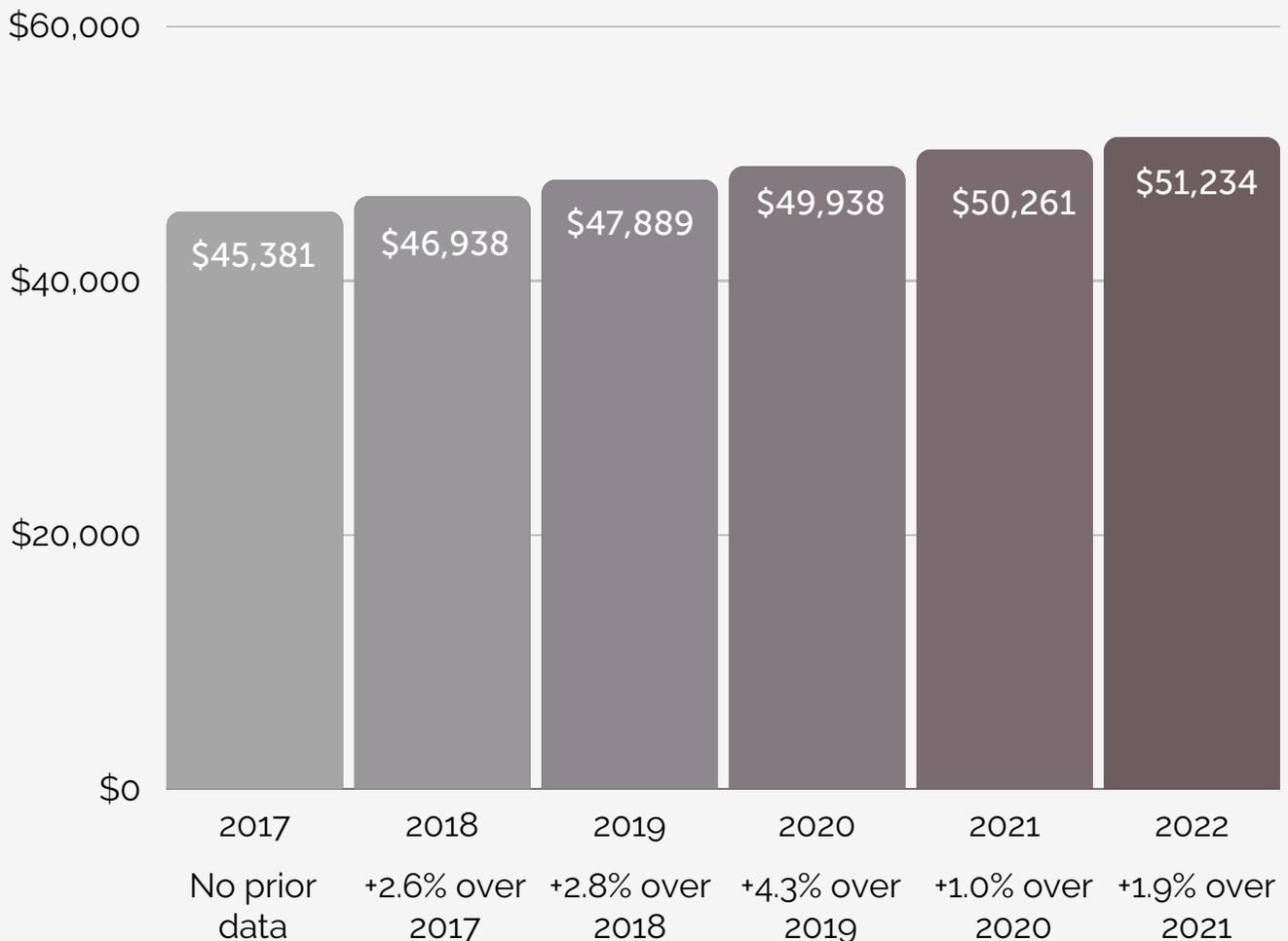
More than half (53%) of youth pastors did NOT receive an annual review from their supervisor where they had an opportunity to talk about their compensation in the past year. Every year we point to this as a huge factor impacting compensation. Those who had an annual review in the past year earned an average of 7.5% more than those who did not. Among those respondents who reported receiving no change in compensation in 2022, the total number of those who did not have a review outnumbers those who did by more than a 2:1 ratio. The number of self-declared “pure merit” raises received is also nearly doubled for those who have reviews compared to those who do not. Among those who had a review, there was significantly more “cost of living” raises and more “increased workload” raises earned.



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What does this all point to?

If you're NOT talking about compensation with your supervisor every year, odds are you earn less and are 60% less likely to receive a raise than your peers who are. We know not everyone gets to control if they have an annual review, but asking your supervisor or your board for a review is the first step to fixing that. It's never been more true: the squeaky wheel has a better chance of getting oil. Just be sure to squeak with humility.





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THE TWO BIG FACTORS

Attendance and budget have proven over the years to be the two biggest determining factors of a youth pastor's salary. This rang true again this year. You can have less experience or education than another youth pastor. Still, if you work at a bigger church with a bigger budget, you will earn more despite your relatively lower qualifications. The 93 churches in this survey that reported having a weekly attendance of over 1,000 pay their youth pastors an average of \$60,060/year. The other 591 churches with 1,000 people or less in attendance pay their youth pastors an average of \$49.867/year, or 17% less. But even within the metrics for churches under 1,000 in size, there is a big gap between the

“larger” churches and the “smaller” ones. Churches that average between 500-1,000 people each weekend paid an average of \$54,200, while churches with attendance under 500 paid an average of \$48,747—a 10% gap. Notably, 490 of the 684 churches (or 71%) have less than 500 in weekly attendance. Because of that large sample size, we want to provide a line-by-line breakdown of churches under 500 in weekly attendance who currently support a full-time youth pastor.

Church Attendance	Avg Annual Salary	Number of Churches
50 or less	\$37,259	10
51 - 100	\$41,661	52
101 - 150	\$45,413	91
151 - 200	\$48,477	96
201 - 250	\$46,459	51
251 - 300	\$50,924	69
301 - 400	\$55,831	75
401 - 500	\$54,029	46
TOTALS	\$48,747	490



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Church Budget	Avg Annual Salary	Number of Churches
1 - 1.5M	\$53,535	81
1.5 - 2M	\$56,048	44
2 - 2.5M	\$57,517	28
2.5 - 3M	\$63,357	14
3 - 3.5M	\$61,500	19
3.5 - 4M	\$65,870	13
4 - 4.5M	\$54,889	8
4.5 - 5M	\$66,785	7
5 - 7M	\$62,266	15
7 - 10M	\$68,700	8
10 - 15M	\$67,071	6
15M+	\$69,233	3
AVERAGE/TOTAL	\$48,747	490

While it's not a hard and fast rule, there is a pattern of larger churches paying their youth pastors more.

The budget works similarly. Churches with a budget of \$1,000,000 or more pay an average of \$58,233. Churches with a budget of less than a million pay \$48,161—good for an eye-popping 17% difference. 246 of the 564 (43%) participants said their church had a budget of over one million dollars.

There were 122 who reported being unsure of their church's budget. Let's break this down further.



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If we look at this another way, churches with a budget of 1-3M paid an average of \$55,688 (with a large 167 church sample size). Churches with 3-5M jump up to \$62,370 (+11%). Churches over 5M see a minor increase from there to \$65,438 (+4.6%). With a budget under a million, the pattern is still very true.

Church Budget	Avg Annual Salary	Number of Churches
51 - 100k	\$36,750	4
101 - 250k	\$39,228	41
251 - 500k	\$46,328	114
501 - 750k	\$50,806	79
751 - 1M	\$53,307	80
AVERAGE/TOTAL	\$48,161	318

If you're frustrated with your compensation, it could be for a variety of reasons. Still, the quickest analytics tool you have at your disposal is "Do I know my church's attendance and budget numbers?" If you do, simply ask yourself if you're surprised you're paid what you are, based on where your numbers fall in the compensation landscape. Being informed is step number one. Because no matter how educated or experienced you are, the biggest hurdles to higher compensation are church size and the corresponding dollars more people coming can give.



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Youth pastors often think youth group size or growth is an indicator of their compensation value, but this simply isn't nearly as reliable of a metric for determining fair compensation. In truth, plenty of highly paid youth pastors are running relatively small youth groups when considering the landscape of their church size. They are being paid well compared to smaller-church youth pastors with big youth groups relative to the size of the church. The takeaway is: a bigger youth group doesn't always mean bigger pay, but a bigger church and budget almost always mean bigger pay.

Also, remember, 122 full-time youth pastors were unsure of their church's budget numbers. These 122 rated their satisfaction with their compensation at 3.6 out of 5, which was almost precisely average among all full-time youth pastors. The lowest satisfaction numbers came from those with a \$1-2M budget, at 3.42/5. Those at a church with less than a million dollar budget rate at 3.45/5. By contrast, those at a church with over a 3M budget rated their compensation satisfaction at 3.91/5.

THE OTHER TWO BIG FACTORS

Education and experience are the "other" two big factors that can affect compensation. A shocking 92.5% of full-time youth pastors who took this year's survey reported having at least completed a 4-year college degree. This was up more than 5% from a year ago. 40% of youth pastors have completed a master's degree or higher. Remember, the average annual salary for a youth pastor this year was \$51,234. If you have a master's or higher level of education, your average salary was \$55,360. If you did not, your average was \$48,571— for a gap of 12.2%, nearly identical to last year's 12.8% difference and continuing a narrowing trend from the 14-16% numbers we saw several years ago.



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If you're at a smaller church (budget less than a million with weekend attendance less than 1,000), your best bet for a significant raise is to get a master's degree. Smaller churches still pay more for more education.

Shout out to Pastor Grant B. from Texas, who has had 41 years of total ministry experience, and Pastor Doug R. from California for having 40 years employed at his current church. Experience matters and you two gentlemen checked in with the highest numbers. Only 17 out of 686 full-time youth pastors have been at their present church for more than 20 years. That's the top 2.5% for those keeping score at home.

This year 33 first-year youth pastors (full-time) and 221 (32%) youth pastors with five years or less of experience completed the survey. The following chart reveals how tenure affects compensation.

Total Experience	Avg Annual Salary	% of Survey
1 - 5 Years	\$44,600	32%
6 - 10 Years	\$49,246	29%
11 - 15 Years	\$55,069	17%
16+ Years	\$60,528	22%

Looking at the data overall, the numbers jump up to the tune of 5-10% between year 11 and year 12. Youth pastors who stick it out longer than ten years are rare, and there is clearly a wage premium attached to this inflection point of experience.

The average youth pastor (according to the national average of compensation) has worked at 2.4 churches and has ten years of paid ministry experience.



THE BIG INFLATION EFFECT

Inflation seemed to be the word of the year for 2022. So we decided to see how it was impacting youth pastors. The vast majority of youth pastors (88%) reported that food and fuel costs have significantly impacted them and their families in the past year. Around one-third of youth pastors reported the costs of housing, insurance, and recreational or elective activities affected them and their families significantly. About half of youth pastors reported rising utility costs having an effect. In fact, only a handful of youth pastors (2.8%) reported that inflation hadn't impacted them or their families.

We asked you to let us know what changes you were making to combat inflation. The overwhelming majority of youth pastors talked about reducing food costs by eating out less, making coffee at home, and switching to cheaper, less convenient stores for purchasing food. A significant segment of youth pastors mentioned scrambling to find new income streams, like increased work hours for a spouse, working a new side hustle, or emphasizing credit cards that offer cash-back incentives. Many youth pastors have addressed inflation by finding alternative living accommodations, whether that means lowering commuting costs or downsizing to reduce spending.

The big takeaway is that most youth pastors are cutting spending in one way or another to combat inflation. If youth pastor salaries were being increased to better keep pace with the economy in which we live, there would be less pressure to cut spending. Normally, personal finance budgets slide up as wages slid up. Yet, while youth pastor salaries rose nearly 2% this past year and 1% the year before, the annual inflation rate for the United States was 7.1% for the 12 months that ended November 2022 (chosen because it is when the survey window ended) after rising 7.7% in the 12 months before that. This is according to U.S. Labor Department data published on December 13, 2022.



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To summarize, youth pastors have seen an average of about a 3% salary increase in the past two years, while the national inflation number is nearly 15%. The result is a symbolic tightening of the belt with many youth pastors (and any family that depends on them) in a tough spot.

Church leaders and supervisors reading this report should take notice of the disparity in these statistics and realize their youth pastor could be getting financially choked out of their current position or out of ministry altogether. Indeed, much has been written on The Great Resignation and the alarming number of pastors leaving the ministry. Undeniably, a complex compensation landscape is a core component of the decision to leave a ministry role or “promote” out of youth ministry.

THE BIG GENDER WAGE GAP

Every year, we are committed to highlighting data regarding how men and women are comparatively compensated while performing the same role of a full-time youth pastor. In 2022, 466 male youth pastors reported earning an average of \$54,441, while 218 female youth pastors reported earning an average salary of \$44,504. That amounts to an 18.2% wage gap—the highest we’ve ever reported. It should be noted that two full-time youth pastors preferred not to state their gender and averaged \$37,000 in salary.

There were 196 youth pastors (28.6%) who reported receiving no raise in compensation last year. Out of that group, over a third (37.2%) were female. Proportionately speaking, 32% of the youth pastors who took this year's survey were female. In terms of performance reviews, women barely edged out men (54% to 52%). That's good news, right? Not really. Even though fewer men (per capita) received performance reviews in 2022, more men received raises. A massive disparity in outcomes still exists between male and female youth pastors.



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Aaron Hill from ChurchSalary.com did a deep dive on this and discovered there's more under the surface. For the 218 female youth pastors, the average church size was 624 people, and the average church budget was \$1,020,320. But among male youth pastors, these crucial church stats were larger: average church size was 687, and the average budget was \$1,444,182. This may not seem like a large difference,, but there is a 4.1% increase in pay between youth pastors who work at churches with a general fund budget of \$1M-1.5M range to a \$1.5M-2M church (\$53,389 versus \$55,581).

In other words, part of the gender wage gap is clearly the average church size and budget. On average, full-time male youth pastors work in churches with 10% more attendees and 41.4% larger budgets. Since we know that attendance and budget play the biggest role in determining salary, this is clearly stretching the gender gap. If the types of churches that will hire full-time female youth pastors are, on average, smaller with less money, women will inevitably get paid smaller salaries.

Last year, 39% of men received a COLA raise versus only 33% of women. In terms of the cause of their raise, 12.4% of women received a raise due to increased workload or responsibilities versus only 10% of men. When it comes to pure merit, 12% of men received raises compared to only 8.7% of women.

This gender gap extends even to tenure. For first-year youth pastors, the average salary for the 13 female youth pastors hired in 2022 was \$36,299, versus an average of \$38,894 for the 20 male youth pastors. That is a 6.6% gap right out of the starting gate! After two years of total service, male youth pastors earn an average of \$52,590 (slightly above the national average). Meanwhile, their female counterparts earn an average of only \$43,057. In other words, that 6.6% gap turns into an 18.1% gap within only two years.



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What does all this mean? 163 men got hired by a church in the past two years at an 18.1% higher average annual salary than the 88 women hired during the same period. An average woman who has completed their Master's degree earned an average of \$47,052, while a man with only a four-year college degree earned an average of \$51,550 (\$58,186 if they have their Master's).

An always sensitive topic, but crucial for female youth pastors, is maternity benefits. Only 28.4% of youth pastors reported receiving paid maternity or paternity leave that didn't require the use of sick time or vacation time.

THE BIG CONCLUSION

This is an emergency. For years we've been trying to sound the alarm on pastoral compensation. It is a major barrier that prevents youth pastors from remaining in ministry long enough to see freshmen graduate high school. Youth pastors have done everything they can to raise their street cred by having over a 92% college completion rate. Yet this career is still difficult for most churches to fund appropriately, let alone create a margin for a less stressful financial picture. With inflation numbers raising costs at historical rates, churches need to make hard choices to support their key team members adequately. If not, they will lose these crucial employees, burn them out, or both.

At Chemistry Staffing, we are often asked what the job landscape looks like in the church world. We've been saying it's a "candidate's market for a few years." This is especially true in the youth pastor world. If you are truly being under-compensated in your current role, there are churches out there—probably not too far from where you are serving—that are willing to pay more for people who can do the job well and who have the right mix of tenure, education, and real-life results of doing good ministry. We tell churches all the time that if they have a staff member who is doing a good job, pay them enough to keep them.



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Why? Because it's hard for churches to find great team members right now in the open market, and churches who let their beloved staff walk away to another opportunity because of dollars are usually shocked to see how much it costs to hire a replacement. In the business world, companies give raises to retain their top employees all the time because they know competing companies will scoop them up if they don't. Replacing an existing employee with a new one is costly both in terms of time and money. While it's not that cutthroat for most churches, the principle is, unfortunately, true: the easiest way to get a raise is to leave for the church down the street. And it will stay that way in our industry until churches pay healthier wages and provide better employee benefits.

Youth ministry is a calling, and it is still a legitimate career path. As is the tradition of this report, I'd like to leave you with a blessing for the year ahead as you pursue your calling; but I'm going to do this by borrowing from a combination of two songs that have spoken to me regarding my own calling in ministry recently. You'll recognize lines and themes below from Good Grace (Hillsong) and Jireh (Maverick City Music x Elevation Worship).

Youth Pastor,

Don't let your heart be troubled. Hold your head up high. Don't fear any evil. Fix your eyes on this one truth: God is madly in love with you. Take courage, hold on, be strong, and remember where our help comes from. It comes from Jehovah Jireh (God will provide). He's forever enough, always enough, more than enough. May you not forget this truth, and always remember you are already loved and already chosen. Amen.



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