

**Appreciation or Obligation?**  
**Dr. Carl Addison**  
**Earthen Vessels Ministry, Inc.**

*Carl Addison directs Earthen Vessels Ministry, a ministry devoted to pastors, their families, and the congregations they serve. He also directs SHAPE and the Financial Freedom Fund for Indiana Ministries.*

So, what crosses your mind when you hear the phrase, “Pastors’ Appreciation Month?” While it really is a noble idea, it is striking that it stirs up so many mixed emotions in congregations and clergy alike. There is seldom a church that doesn’t want to express appreciation to their pastor, and it would be difficult to find a pastor who didn’t want to be appreciated. Yet, the unsettledness remains.

I took the opportunity to communicate with a number of pastors about Pastors’ Appreciation, and there were several issues that surfaced. In fact, I was surprised by how often the same issues came up. Some of those issues are things that churches ought to hear, and some are things pastors ought to hear. It is my hope that both pastors and congregations could have a better understanding of Pastors’ Appreciation Month so that the experience could be the positive and loving thing it was intended to be.

First, to congregations, let’s explore a few issues. **It probably won’t surprise you that most pastors would rather be appreciated year round because it was already a part of the culture of the church, rather than to have one day set aside for that purpose.** Otherwise, it feels less like appreciation and more like an obligation the church is fulfilling. Let’s face it – Pastors’ Appreciation Month in a congregation where little mutual appreciation exists seems forced and even out of place. Appreciation that matters is authentic!

**Did you know that many pastors find Pastors’ Appreciation Month one that is filled with anxiety and awkwardness?** Most often, materials about Pastors’ Appreciation are mailed directly to them. Most feel it is inappropriate to pass those materials on. Consequently, many miss out totally. Be sure, then, that your congregation is alert to the fact that each year, Pastors’ Appreciation Month is observed in October, and designate someone to be watchful for those clearly marked promotional materials. Intercept them before your pastor even sees them.

Another of those things pastors would like congregations to know is **that a poorly planned observance, or one that is just thrown together, seems more like an afterthought than appreciation.** One pastor put it, “plan, plan, plan.” Even in times when relationships might be strained remember, the purpose is to honor not only the pastor and family but you are lifting up the principle of honoring the position or office of the pastor.

**Make your appreciation specific.** For example, instead of saying, "I appreciate you," tell your pastor why. Let them know that a particular message helped you, or that their presence during a difficult time made a difference. Make your expressions of appreciation personal.

**Make your appreciation practical.** Pastors' salaries often are unable to keep up with rising costs as giving to the church reflects our current economic struggles. Gift cards to restaurants or grocery stores, home improvements (pastors' spouses especially love these), or even movie theater tickets provide things that just don't always fit into the pastors' family budget. And, don't forget the babysitting. Many pastors are called to serve far away from family and close friends, and need the church to become their family. Very significantly, **pastors often say they would like their congregations to realize how important Pastors' Appreciation is to their families.** Why not make it about the whole family? It was incredibly meaningful to our children when they received their own cards, often with a personal gift inside.

There are also some things pastors need to consider when it comes to Pastor's Appreciation Month. **The very first of those is that pastors have to learn how to appreciate their congregations, and their efforts at Pastors' Appreciation.** It is way too often that pastors compare what other churches did for their pastors, and come away frustrated, hurt, and even angry about the whole process. But churches think differently, their leadership have different backgrounds, and they have varying resources. Pastors, let's quit our comparisons and be thankful for the people God has called us to serve.

For some churches, written personal expressions of gratitude are a far better and more personal way to say thank you than a monetary gift or a weekend away. Other churches think differently, and their expressions are going to reflect that difference. And, let's be honest, the relationship we have with the church will without a doubt speak into this process.

**Pastors, be practical in your expectations.** You know all too well what your church can afford, so understand that as Pastors' Appreciation Sunday approaches. We sometimes are disappointed because our expectations are not practical or realistic.

To pastors, I would add this. **Every October you have the built-in opportunity to teach your family that the church is a very good place with a lot of very good people in it.** They are people who really do care about you and your family. Don't miss this chance to allow your family to experience the love of good but imperfect people. Even if the whole idea makes you uncomfortable, your family needs to know that all of you are appreciated.

To pastors and congregations, let's remove the anxiety and awkwardness from what ought to be a day of celebration and love. **Churches, do your best** to appropriately express your appreciation to your pastor. **Pastors, do your best** to appreciate the congregation and their efforts. After all, appreciation modeled can become appreciation expressed!