

Perspectives of Bi-Vocational Ministry: Emerging Themes in Bi-vocational Ministry Research at Lexington Theological Seminary*

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Many Disciples of Christ congregations in Kentucky are led by ministers who hold employment outside the congregations they serve. These bi-vocational ministers have been a presence in Kentucky for some time, especially in congregations in rural communities and in predominantly African-American congregations. Over the past ten years, the Christian Church in Kentucky (CCK) observed a growing number of congregations intentionally employing ministers whom they expected to hold employment outside of the congregation. During that same time, Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) became increasingly aware that a number of their graduates were

*Portions of this article have previously appeared in issues of The Disciples' Advocate (published by Disciples Home Missions) and in an article published on ATS Colloquy Online at

<https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/stability-amidst-turbulent-times-the-benefits-of-bi-vocational-ministry.pdf>

likely to be bi-vocational ministers given the accessibility of its online program. LTS is not alone in recognizing that bi-vocational ministry is on the horizon for numerous graduates. According to the Graduating Student Questionnaire of the Association of Theological Schools, 30 percent of graduates from theological schools in the U.S. and Canada in 2017 reported they expect to hold another paid position in addition to ministerial work after graduation, with percentages higher among African-American (57 percent) and Latinx (41 percent) graduates.¹ According to the National Congregations Study III, 34 percent of solo or senior pastors in the United States are bi-vocational.² The significant presence of those who serve bi-vocationally within the ministerial population is being noticed nationally and across denominations.

In 2015, LTS launched a research project on the economic implications of bi-vocational ministry on Disciples of Christ clergy and congregations in Kentucky. The research was part of the *Conversations on Stewardship & Finances* Project at LTS, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. as part of the *Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers* (ECFFM) Initiative. LTS partnered with the CCK in the research project. Both LTS and CCK wanted to know more about the experience of those engaged in this kind of ministry in order to better prepare them academically and to support them more effectively. This article shares some of the themes identified in the research project.

One of the first steps taken in the project was assembling a research advisory team to guide its development. A team formed in 2014 that included LTS staff and faculty as well as Disciples ministers who were familiar with bi-vocational ministry. The group began planning for the research by reflecting and writing on their

own perceptions and/or experiences with bi-vocational ministry and the group held conversations about those reflections. Later, after plans for the research were developed, informal conversations were held with bi-vocational ministers who provided helpful feedback. These initial reflections and conversations were time well spent. They sharpened the advisory team's awareness of ways that many people think and speak about ministry and about bi-vocational ministry in particular. Bi-vocational ministers shared how they valued their work in congregations yet had the nagging feeling that others, those outside of bi-vocational ministry, did not find the same value in their work. They perceived that others considered their ministry "less than" other forms of ministry. These conversations led the advisory team to a fuller realization of the incomplete portrait of ministry that focuses primarily on ministers as seminary-educated and ordained, then employed, with full benefits, by congregations which are their sole employers. Although swaths of the ministerial landscape were left out of that portrait, it has functioned as the normative way of thinking and speaking within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) [CC (DoC)] and other mainline protestant denominations in North America for some time.

In a workshop session at the 2014 Regional Assembly of the CCK a number of bi-vocational ministers provided feedback about plans for the project. In a discussion during the workshop they voiced something echoed by other bi-vocational ministers throughout the project; they said, "Please, whatever you do, don't call us 'part-time ministers.'" They explained that "part-time" was not the best way to describe a model of ministry which often included responding to hospital calls in the night, attending meetings and engaging in pastoral counseling

during the week, as well as preparing for weekly worship and preaching alongside other duties. They made the case that even though bi-vocational ministers have employment outside the congregation and are not paid what others would call a full-time salary by congregations, they are fully engaged in ministry in ways not communicated by the term, “part-time.”

Keeping this in mind, the advisory team began to think of ‘bi-vocational’ and ‘single-vocational’ (rather than ‘part-time’ and ‘full-time’) as ways to describe ministry within the research project. In addition, the research advisory team crafted a working definition of bi-vocational ministry³ that was broad enough to include ministers who are ordained, commissioned, or licensed and whose other employment might be considered part-time or full-time.⁴ The definition reads: “Bi-vocational ministers are individuals who are licensed, commissioned, or ordained ministers serving in a congregation who also receive income through employment outside the congregation.” This definition was shared widely before launching the research project. Bi-vocational ministers found this a sufficient definition.

Similarities and Differences for Bi-Vocational and Single-Vocational Ministers

One interest of the research project was to discover how the compensation of bi-vocational ministers compared to that of single-vocational ministers. To accomplish this, we fielded a survey of 110 Disciples ministers in Kentucky, including 44 bi-vocational ministers, serving Disciples congregations. It was followed later by interviews with bi-vocational solo pastors and lay leaders within Disciples congregations in Kentucky.⁵

The survey provided insight regarding the ministers’ education, ordination status, compensation and

income, the positions and types of congregations in which they serve, the congregations' stewardship practices, and their economic challenges. The interviews shed light on the experience of solo pastors and lay leaders with their congregations in particular as well as with bi-vocational ministry in general. Results from the survey indicated some significant similarities and differences between bi-vocational and single-vocational ministers in Kentucky, including:

- Bi-vocational and single-vocational ministers did not differ significantly in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, or marital status; however, they did differ by age: 80 percent of bi-vocational ministers were over the age of 50 compared to 48 percent of single-vocational ministers;
- In general, ministers were well-educated (85 percent have postgraduate degrees); however, bi-vocational ministers were less likely than single-vocational ministers to have a postgraduate degree: whereas 97 percent of single-vocational ministers had either a Masters or Doctorate degree, only 67 percent of bi-vocational ministers did;
- Bi-vocational ministers (58 percent) were less likely to be ordained than single-vocational ministers (94 percent);
- Bi-vocational ministers (73 percent) were more likely to be solo pastors than single-vocational ministers (44 percent);
- Bi-vocational ministers were more likely to serve congregations in rural areas (43 percent), and in congregations with an average weekly worship attendance of 50 or fewer (63 percent), whereas single-vocational ministers were more commonly serving congregations in small towns (52 percent),

and in those with an average weekly worship attendance of more than 50 people (88 percent);

- Bi-vocational ministers often had a different experience with congregational budgeting than did single-vocational ministers, partially due to congregational size.⁶
- There was no significant difference in household income between bi-vocational and single-vocational ministers. However, there was a significant difference in church compensation and salary between bi-vocational and single-vocational ministers;
- The household income of the majority of ministers included employment income from spouses (61 percent of bi-vocational ministers and 56 percent of single-vocational ministers);
- The majority of ministers expressed concern about retirement income (66 percent), funds for emergencies (65 percent), and resources for healthcare expenses (65 percent); and
- Bi-vocational ministers were more likely than single-vocational ministers to be concerned about monthly bills and living expenses (47 percent of bi-vocational ministers and 35 percent of single-vocational ministers).

Despite some significant differences, bi-vocational and single-vocational ministers expressed equal satisfaction with ministry (88 percent responded they were satisfied with their ministry setting). In addition, the majority (82 percent) of bi-vocational ministers were satisfied with bi-vocational ministry in particular. The top three reasons given for serving in bi-vocational ministry were “family demands or needs” (40 percent), “financial decision” (40 percent), and “called to bi-vocational ministry” (37

percent). Following the survey, interviews conducted with bi-vocational solo pastors and lay leaders in congregations explored some of the specific needs, interests, and experiences of bi-vocational ministry.

Financial Stability and Compensation

A central goal of the research project was to discover how bi-vocational ministry relates to the financial stability of ministers and congregations. We found that ‘being bi-vocational’ contributes to financial stability for ministers and congregations. The compensation bi-vocational ministers earned from employment outside the church supplemented what congregations paid and enabled them to serve congregations where fewer financial resources were available.

As mentioned earlier, survey responses indicated the household income of bi-vocational and single-vocational ministers was similar despite significant differences in the compensation they received from congregations. The majority (83 percent) of respondents reported an annual household income of \$50,000 or more compared to the median household income in 2015 of \$45,215 in Kentucky and \$55,775 in the U.S.⁷ More than half (54 percent) reported household incomes of \$75,000 or more. However, the median salary that congregations paid bi-vocational ministers was between \$10,000 and \$19,999, and the median salary that congregations paid single-vocational ministers was between \$30,000 and \$39,999. Likewise, bi-vocational ministers received fewer benefits from congregations than did single-vocational ministers. This indicates that, in general, bi-vocational ministers were successfully supplementing their household income to make it equal to that of single-vocational ministers.

Pastors and congregations interpreted the financial stability related to bi-vocational ministry in several different ways. Some pastors spoke of congregational decline. One bi-vocational solo pastor served a congregation in a community where most of the young families have moved away. He was worried about the congregation's future, as he knew the congregation struggled to pay its bills. He was satisfied with what the congregations paid him, but he wondered who would take his place when he leaves. The lay leaders of the congregation where he served lamented the increasing costs of "keeping the doors open and the lights on" in their aging church building and wished they could pay their pastor more. Some ministers saw the promise of bi-vocational ministry as a way to 'jump start' something new and missional. A bi-vocational solo pastor spoke enthusiastically of her experience leading a new church start. The income and benefits of her full-time employment outside the church allowed the new congregation she served to engage in creative community-based ministry and to work toward financial sustainability. A bi-vocational solo pastor who served in a low income setting for more than 20 years believed that the income and benefits provided through his employment outside the church enabled him to continue serving the same congregation for many years, even amidst serious economic downturns that impacted the surrounding community. He recounted periods of time when the congregation could not afford to pay him. In these various contexts, 'being bi-vocational' contributed to improved financial stability for the congregation even though it did not solve all their financial woes.

Conversations about compensation also revealed differing viewpoints in congregations. When asked if they were compensated fairly, the pastors indicated they were

compensated fairly by the congregation, although there were times when some had had to wait for their pay. Some even admitted they felt over paid and indicated they would work for much less or without being paid at all. Benefits were not of much concern to most bi-vocational ministers interviewed since they already were provided through their other employment or through that of spouses.⁸ This finding reflects that what these ministers receive from congregations is not their primary source of income. Their comments also reflected the reality that many bi-vocational ministers, like other ministers, serve congregations for reasons that do not correspond with financial and/or professional interests. The willingness of some to work for little, or nothing at all, may also reflect an ambivalence about money and the payment for ministry that is present within the church at large.

When lay leaders were asked if they thought the congregation paid the pastor fairly, they expressed a variety of opinions about compensation. Some said, “Yes, but...” and used caveats like “under the circumstances” and “based on our budget constraints” to indicate congregations’ financial circumstances kept them from doing more. Others said bluntly that their pastor was underpaid and they wished they could pay more. Most expressed gratitude for the willingness of bi-vocational ministers, theirs in particular, to work for less pay. One lay person said, “I think they [bi-vocational ministers] recognize a need; they are more a part of the people rather than just serving a position and getting paid for it.” However, some lay leaders raised the issue of how much congregations should pay ministers, whether bi-vocational or not. One lay person stated, “I like the minister to be part of the group, the community, to give to the community. The idea that some are fully compensated... hmmm... well, we have people in the

church who are on the lower end of the economic ladder, if you will.” A commissioned minister in a different congregation had first-hand experience with the perspective that *any* payment devalues the work of ministers. He said, “There’s one person I know of who thinks that a minister should work for nothing - a chicken and a pig - that’s it. They think if you got the call, then that’s what you’re supposed to do... and you’re not supposed to be paid.” He went on to defend the practice of paying ministers, specifically mentioning those who earn the M.Div. degree (even though he had not earned the M.Div. himself). He said:

Look at all the time and effort that most ministers have put into their education. Do they not deserve to have a return on their education? Do you want a good minister? Do you want one who’s well-educated? Do you want them to know what they’re talking about? If you do, you’re going to need to pay them. And if you don’t pay, you’re going to get what you pay for. If someone gets a M.Div. and they don’t have another job, they should be paid a minimum of a teacher’s salary.

All these perspectives voiced in the interviews reveal that compensation for ministers is a complicated topic. This complexity and difference of opinion are not reserved for congregations with bi-vocational ministers alone, as Daniel Aleshire, the former executive director of The Association of Theological Schools, noted:

Questions about compensation of ministers are always questions about how much. And, invariably, one person’s definition of too little is another person’s definition of too

much. When does salary become so high that it makes the authentic life of service suspect? When is it so low that it makes an authentic life of service impossible?⁹

However, despite differences of opinion regarding compensation and fairness of pay, all believed that the ability and willingness of bi-vocational ministers to work for lower compensation was key to financial sustainability for their congregations.

Call and Response

Common themes emerged in the interviews regarding how people are called into bi-vocational ministry. When asked how they came to be bi-vocational, pastors indicated: (a) calls to ministry usually come after they are already employed elsewhere; (b) calls to ministry are often in response to a specific congregation's need; and (c) being bi-vocational gives a unique orientation to the minister-congregation relationship.

Pastors explained they were called to a specific congregation while they had stable employment in that geographic area. In some instances, especially if they had earned M.Div. degrees and were ordained, they went through the regional search and call process. In other cases, a regional minister was looking for potential candidates for a particular congregation or leaders from a congregation reached out directly to them as individuals. In the latter case, they were contacted because they were known in the community through their employment and through active lay participation in a local congregation.¹⁰

Several ministers said they were surprised when they were first asked to consider serving a congregation as minister since they had not previously engaged in any theological education or training for pastoral leadership.

One of them had never considered single-vocational ministry, but he had been a lay leader in area congregations for years. He eventually considered bi-vocational ministry because he cared about the church and because others were persistent. As he put it, “people would not leave me alone.” Another minister expressed surprise at what was, literally, a call from the congregation where he later became pastor. He explained, “I got a call one day from this church. They were looking for a minister. I immediately asked them why they had called me... I had no training.”

For these pastors, coming to realize they are being called to bi-vocational ministry involved a process of identifying the qualities needed to serve in such a way, despite a lack of preparation for ministry. Since they had not been to seminary and were surprised when someone contacted them, they were called to careful consideration. Here, one described his discernment process:

Eventually I decided [to respond affirmatively] because I had always tried to determine how I was supposed to be serving. So I kept asking God, “Is this what you want me to do?” Finally I realized I was asking the wrong question. I’ve always asked about serving and now I see this is how God wants me to serve. It was like all of a sudden, “Here is your chance, now go do it.”

I accepted their call.

Another pastor explained how the financial limitations of congregations played a key role in discerning his call to ministry. He was serving as a volunteer lay leader in a large, suburban congregation when others suggested he consider becoming a minister. He was skeptical; he was working full-time in a corporation at the management level

and said he “didn’t know any ministers who were not seminary trained with at least an M.Div.” However, his pastor persuaded him to enroll in a weeklong course hosted one summer by CCK. At that event, he met ministers serving congregations which could only afford to pay them if they had additional employment. That’s when it dawned on him there was a “real need” for men and women in the ministry, including those who had not attended seminary. He began his own discernment process at that point and it eventually led to him being the bi-vocational pastor of a small urban church facing significant economic challenges. Like other ministers who were surprised by initial calls to ministry, it took some time for him to see himself in the role. Yet, once these ministers were installed as pastors of their congregations, they became committed to the work and cared deeply for the people.

Several other ministers recounted that they were called into bi-vocational ministry after they had first graduated from seminary and had been ordained. Some had anticipated bi-vocational ministry during seminary but for others it was a change of plans. For those who were considering bi-vocational ministry during seminary, one said the attraction was its “flexibility;” he believed congregations had more flexible expectations of bi-vocational ministers than of those ministers whose employment was “100 percent in congregations.” The other, a woman who entered seminary in her 30s with several years of work experience, had first thought she would be a Christian counselor after seminary and then discovered her gifts for preaching and serving congregations. Once graduated, she found it worked well to bring together the work experience she had gained from her earlier career with the work of serving congregations.

Most who went to seminary before becoming bi-vocational ministers did not expect to do so when they were in seminary. Some of them served congregations as single-vocational ministers after graduating from seminary and became bi-vocational later. For instance, one minister explained he never planned on bi-vocational ministry and turned to it because he could not support himself financially on the income he received from congregations he served. He was disappointed that for years his primary income needed to come from his hourly employment at a nonprofit organization while he also served as a rural church pastor. Another minister said he shifted to become a bi-vocational solo pastor at a small congregation several years after seminary. It was a move that made sense to him over a span of time; he came to a point where he saw “what would be best for his life after trying the full-time route” and he did not regret the shift to bi-vocational ministry. Another who made a similar move did so after dropping out of congregational ministry entirely for a while; he was “burned out.” He found full-time employment in private business and later returned to ministry as a solo pastor in a congregation which had a tradition of bi-vocational ministry. These ministers knew about bi-vocational ministry when they were in seminary, they simply had not expected they would serve that way. One reflected on his thinking during seminary:

We knew that with a seminary degree we were pricing ourselves out of the range of the little student churches that we had grown to love... I had said, ‘would it not be great to take these skills and this training and put it to work in a church that could not afford it, by having a second job?’

Although these ministers often came to bi-vocational ministry through indirect routes, they agreed it allowed them to engage in work they've been called to do in addition to meeting the financial needs that congregations face.

Once they began serving, these ministers discovered that having income from another source of employment was more than simply a financial benefit to the congregation. They noted that because ministers were not dependent upon the congregation for their livelihood, they were empowered to engage with the congregation on equal footing. For instance, one of the ministers who began serving for the first time as a bi-vocational solo pastor reflected that – intentionally or not – bi-vocational ministry “created a different dynamic... a different orientation to the church and the whole financial aspect; ... they don't look at you with the attitude of ‘well, we hired you to do that.’” Both ministers and lay leaders indicated that because the congregation was not the minister's sole employer, bi-vocational ministry resisted the temptation for congregations to think of ministry as the ‘job’ of the minister. Because of the tendency toward increased lay leadership, the compensation that bi-vocational ministers receive from employment outside the congregation does more than impact the financial stability of ministers and congregations, it also casts the minister-congregation relationship in a different light.

Patterns of Leadership Formation

Because many bi-vocational ministers respond to a specific congregations' needs after they are already fully employed elsewhere in the community, some begin serving a congregation without completing theological education or training for pastoral ministry. Several who were commis-

sioned after becoming pastors spoke of the process of engaging in coursework while also serving a congregation. They said the education helped them develop skills for ministry, provided opportunities to meet with other ministers, and helped them develop their sense of identity as a pastor. Some alluded to the educational process as increasing their confidence and helping the congregation see them more fully as a pastor. Since they are already serving in congregations as pastors, they brought their experience into the coursework even as it helped them reflect on what they were doing, how they were doing it, and how they might do it better.

One of the solo pastors who served a rural congregation spoke at length about his experience of beginning coursework not long after he was installed. He had lived in the area most of his adult life and had worked nearby in secondary and post-secondary education; he had previously met some of the ministers who had served the congregation before he became the pastor. These ministers had been seminary-educated and as an educator himself, he knew well the value of education. Once he was installed he learned about continuing education opportunities that would fulfill requirements for commissioning. It took him several years to complete the required education. He scheduled courses around his other commitments and took seasonal classes as well as some online courses. He said that while the work was done to meet requirements for commissioning, he also wanted to develop his skills and expand his knowledge in order to be a better minister. He said, "one of the things the search committee stressed [during the search process] ... was that they were looking for a spiritual leader. That has stuck with me. I try to provide that as best as I can... I hope that I can fulfill their needs as a spiritual leader." After being commissioned, he

continued to take continuing education courses in the summer and made space in his schedule to attend district minister meetings regularly. Reflecting on the educational experience in the commissioning program, he said that those enrolled in the classes would learn as much, or more, from each other as from the instructors. Often he learned how others would respond in a certain situation and they, in turn, would learn from the way he did. He said that his “learning days are not over.” While he did not follow the pattern of attending seminary and being ordained or commissioned before serving a congregation, he demonstrated a commitment to life-long learning that helped help him grow in his faith and develop his gifts and skills for ministry. He surmised that being educated earlier in his life, “in the traditional way,” might have been helpful, but that he knew the skills and insight he brought from his years as a lay leader into his role as a minister were valuable.

A congregation in western Kentucky served by two bi-vocational ministers reflects a pattern described above. The lead pastor of the congregation had served there for most of the previous twenty years. When he began at the congregation he had been working for a number of years at a corporation in a nearby town. Once he became the congregation’s pastor, the income from his employment, as well as from his spouse’s employment, provided the bulk of his financial support. He did not attend seminary before coming to the congregation; instead, over a period of time he pursued education which lead to the CCK commissioning him as a minister. Over the years, he and other leaders in the congregation sought to identify the gifts for ministry in people who were part of the congregation and to nurture them to become pastoral leaders. A few years ago they saw these gifts for ministry in a young man who was

part of the congregation and employed in the community as a full-time fifth-grade teacher in the community. He had been baptized in the congregation as a child and then returned to the community after college. The pastor began mentoring him as a lay leader and then as youth minister and assistant minister. At the time of the interviews this young man was pursuing educational opportunities and working toward becoming a commissioned minister through the CCK.

The pattern of leadership formation where individuals pursue education and training for ministry after they are already serving as ministers is familiar in bi-vocational ministry. It is influenced by the economic challenges faced by congregations—they seek pastoral leadership without the financial resources to support someone who had already attended seminary and would need to relocate to their community to serve their congregation. This pattern of pursuing education for ministry while serving as a minister highlights the ways congregations recognize gifts for ministry among people in different ways and at various life stages. While many enroll in theological education full-time to prepare for ministry (and may or may not return to the same community when they graduate), others remain in the community and serve while also being formed as pastoral leaders. Within both these contrasting patterns the congregation plays an important role in identifying and forming leaders for ministry as do both theological schools and regional bodies which help individuals develop skills for theological interpretation and pastoral leadership, establish relationships with ministry colleagues, and form their own sense of identity as a minister.

Other Valuable Benefits

Congregations identified several benefits to bi-vocational ministry beyond its financial advantages. Pastors believed their 'other job' helped strengthen their ministry by helping them broaden their range of skills, expand their network of relationships, and improve their understanding of the lives of people in congregations. Some saw skills from their employment 'outside' the congregation helpful 'inside' the congregation. For instance, one was a solo pastor for many years while also running a family-owned business and he developed strong financial management skills and a knowledge of investments. He believed his business acumen and financial skills were real strengths he brought into congregational ministry. He commented, "many ministers go to their first church and they look at a financial statement and they don't know what in the world is going on. They don't know what to do... I've seen quite a few instances where ministers have gotten themselves in trouble financially." Pastors interpreted these transferable skills differently depending on their employment. One who also worked in local government used her knowledge of community resources to help church members as well as others in the surrounding community. Those who also were teachers saw their relationships of support with students and families in the community interconnected to their ministry in the church. Several commented that working in a secular setting helped them relate to the 'everyday' world and better understand the experiences of other people, some of whom were in the pews.

Some ministers also saw benefits of 'being bi-vocational' for their own personal ministry. For instance, one of the bi-vocational pastors also was a self-employed potter. He found that sitting at the wheel and making

pottery brought a creative dimension that helped him enjoy ministry more and be more productive. He appreciated how the creative process often led to time for contemplation and theological reflection that found expression in his preaching. Some of the ministers also alluded to the benefit of having more than one work environment, explaining that working in more than one place sometimes allowed them to set aside problems temporarily (from both places of employment), consider them from a distance, and put them in a new perspective.

Lay leaders also saw benefits in having a minister who was also employed outside the church, especially when they lived and worked close to the congregation's location. Some lay leaders saw how their ministers gave congregations more visibility in the community through their relationships and personal encounters with community members at their other place of work. Others noted how this helped the congregation see their community more fully. One lay leader appreciated the way being "out in the public, not just in our congregation" allowed the pastor to perceive the needs of others in the community and bring that awareness into the congregation, giving them a "broader view" of their own community.

Challenges with Time

While interviews indicated that 'being bi-vocational' increases financial stability for congregations and ministers as well as other valuable benefits, it also comes with something else – time constraints for the ministers. Most pastors reported that time and scheduling were challenges.¹¹ It was more challenging for some than for others, depending upon the flexibility of their work schedules, their seniority (or lack of it), how much time was spent commuting, as well as the nature of expectations

others had of them in their congregations, other places of work, and households.

Three of the ministers had served in bi-vocational ministry for more than twenty years and each of them reported times when they had to take breaks from congregational ministry. For each of them, having other bi-vocational co-pastors or assistant ministers for periods of time helped them make it through difficult times and allowed them to continue to serve the congregations. Another pastor, who also had a 40 hour-a-week job outside the church, described how for him, scheduling was less of a challenge than was exhaustion. He said, "The biggest thing is that I find myself, over a long haul, being mentally exhausted at times, and the mental exhaustion can lead to spiritual exhaustion ... It all hinges on how tired I am, how long I continue to go without real rest." He was relieved that he had some 'comp time' coming and he would get some extra sleep the next week, but more than anything else he lamented that he didn't have time to be with his spouse in any significant way. Others also reported that their various responsibilities meant time with family members suffered.

Several pastors drove 30 minutes or more to reach the church from their home and some also had to commute to their other place of employment. For many of them, commuting brought additional issues to the scheduling challenges they faced. One pastor had a commute of 75 minutes to her church. This meant she always had to include travel time in her weekly calendar. Her commute included a stretch on the interstate and sometimes traffic problems interfered as well. On the other hand, two pastors with commutes of about 30 minutes to the church did not find time or scheduling to be serious problems. What seemed to be the difference for them was that they both had

flexibility with their employment outside the church and they served congregations with strong lay leadership and well-articulated (and mutually agreed upon) expectations of the pastor. One of the pastors was at the church building on specific days of the week and then was available to them by phone while he worked primarily at his other job the rest of the week. He praised how lay leaders took care of the rest of the work of the church. The second minister emphasized that when he was first interviewed by church leaders, he had been upfront about the limitations of his schedule and told them, "...this is the best you can get from me." He also believed that the commute, as time-consuming as it was, helped him maintain boundaries between church work and the rest of his life. He said, "I am a person who does not like to take work home. Home is home, work is work. That commute does give me time to process... If there is an issue at the church, I process mentally on the commute. So when I get home I am not tied up in knots about something that is going on at church." Again, this pastor expressed confidence in the way lay leaders carried much of the day to day ministry. Other than occasional times when funerals were scheduled at times when he was already working, he found balancing a schedule with two workplaces manageable.

Others with less flexible employment outside the church worked hard to manage their schedules and their energy. One minister admitted, "You get to a point where you are overbooked." Some knew of bi-vocational ministry colleagues who had experienced significant difficulties in this area, especially when needing to officiate at funerals. For these pastors, their best practices included thinking ahead about potential conflicts and communicating clearly with lay leaders, as well as those in their other place of employment, so that plans were in place for those times

when responsibilities at work and at church conflicted. Some described ways they structured their schedules and made adjustments in order to get the work done. One minister, who also was a high school teacher, discussed handling pastoral care issues that emerged during the school day, "If there was an emergency, I was there right after class. If a crisis, I asked the principal to get somebody to cover for me." Another minister, who also worked full-time in private business, described how he used vacation days to handle funerals and then gave up days he usually worked at the church to get other work accomplished. A few of them mentioned that technology provided tools that allowed them to work more effectively. One of them said, "Technology probably made it possible for me to be bi-vocational... The fact that my other job is remote means I can do it anywhere as long as I have the internet or a phone... I will do some work here at the church building when it is just unavoidable." One described the challenges he faced through the years and said often the tight schedule has been a challenge, but it also helped him become more efficient, saying, "I think being bi-vocational has taught me how to schedule and be a better steward of my time. I've always been pretty big on time management, but it's been brought to a more prominent position." These ministers described how some weeks could require a real balancing act, depending upon work flow.

Another significant consequence of the complicated schedule of bi-vocational ministers related to opportunities to gather with other ministers. Many ministers noted they seldom gathered with ministry colleagues at district or regional gatherings, or at the General Assembly of the CC (DoC). The schedule of such gatherings presented a challenge in themselves; they often are held during times when these bi-vocational ministers had obligations related to their

other employment. In such cases, their attendance would have required them to take time off from work, perhaps without pay, or to use vacation time. The cost of attendance at the General Assembly also may have been a factor; it is challenging for smaller congregations, including those with bi-vocational ministers, to fund the travel and lodging expenses often required by attendance of ministers or lay leaders.

However, some expressed a different concern related to the challenge of time; some lay leaders and ministers said they believed that bi-vocational ministry meant “some ministry was not getting done.” Some, especially in those congregations experiencing a declining and aging membership, believed the congregation might be stronger with a minister who could devote more time to ministry, such as pastoral visitation and evangelism. Some lay leaders said they knew of congregation members who were concerned that the minister did not ‘visit enough.’ However, others disagreed and thought visitation was an area where congregation members could do more. In one interview, when discussing how some in their congregation wish their minister would do more visitation, one lay leader said, “I don’t think the thing about visitation is a shortcoming on [the minister’s] part, as much as it is a shortcoming on the congregation’s part for not helping more with that ... I feel that if there is anybody that thinks there is not enough visitation being done, they need to step up and do it.” Some pastors also thought more time at the church might make a difference. One said, “I imagine our finances and our attendance would be better if I were here all day, knocking on doors.” Another said, “To be honest with you, I wish they could have someone who would really be here more. It’s probably been a little inconvenient for them, because I’m not available all the time.... since

I'm not here every day, all day... conversations may have been missed.”

Lay leaders were aware that congregations with bi-vocational ministers are challenged to be flexible and willing to adjust their preferences in order to respond to the demands of the minister's time constraints. This was shown in varying ways. One congregation adjusted its Sunday morning worship schedule in order to accommodate their pastor's work schedule. Another congregation re-structured its schedule of regular committee meetings so that they only met on Sundays or Wednesday evenings to make it was less difficult for the pastor to attend. These kinds of adjustments not only alleviated the pressure on pastors' schedules, they also demonstrated a sense that partnership in ministry strengthens bi-vocational ministry. However, some congregations are better than others at doing this, and even in the best of them, much of the real adjustments are left to ministers themselves.

Highlighting the Role of Lay People

The most commonly mentioned impact of bi-vocational ministry on congregations was that of increased lay participation. Pastors and lay leaders noted that having a bi-vocational minister nearly went hand in hand with increased participation by lay people. The time constraints imposed by bi-vocational ministers' employment outside the congregation create openings for lay people to take on ministry roles. Although some congregations had greater lay participation than others, all pointed to increased lay participation as an important and positive impact of bi-vocational ministry.

Pastors who had entered bi-vocational ministry after serving as single-vocational ministers with larger congregations expressed a level of surprise and delight with

the collaborative spirit they discovered when entering bi-vocational ministry. One 'first time' bi-vocational pastor stated, "It is the most self-sufficient congregation I have ever experienced!" Another said this aspect of bi-vocational ministry contrasted with his previous experience where he had been expected, as the single-vocational pastor, to be responsible for coordinating a great deal of the congregation's ministry. About his bi-vocational context, he said:

The thing I have noticed is that if someone dies, or someone is in trouble, or if someone is in need, I find out about it only at the point that I am needed. That is, to do the funeral, or whatever. If something goes on in the church... if it snows a lot and the parking lot needs shoveling, I will get a phone call to tell me that it has been handled. They really have a 'priesthood of all believers.' It is their church ... I am not looked to... to be an administrator. I am there to teach them, give them good Bible studies Wednesday night and on Sunday morning I am the adult Sunday school teacher... and, of course, I preach.

The congregation he served was notable in that it was not struggling to pay its bills and it had well-defined expectations of the minister. Lay leaders saw the role of the pastor as 'equipping them' to engage in their ministry as lay leaders of the congregation. A conversation in the hallway at another congregation revealed how lay leaders and the minister there regularly shared in the pastoral visitation week in week out. These lay leaders spoke of how much sense it made for them to share in the pastoral visitation responsibilities since they were in the community every day while their minister was working elsewhere.

Pastors who were licensed or commissioned ministers saw continuity between the role of pastor and the role of lay leaders. One mentioned his own experience as a lay leader when he talked about lay leadership in the congregation, "I do encourage lay leadership a lot," he said, "I try to get them involved. We have some wonderful lay people who are very capable... Coming from a lay leadership background myself, I certainly try to encourage and promote it in the church." Another commissioned pastor said, "...it's drastically increased the lay leadership... I think it gives them more a sense of... their connection to the church, their ownership of the church." He discussed the challenges some lay leaders faced regarding work, such as evangelism, which they thought it was the work of a pastor. He said, "changing that mind set was slow," but he also observed that it was changing. He attributed some change to leaders realizing that people "weren't just going to walk in the door" and recognizing that several lay people could do more work than one minister, especially one with limited time. All agreed increased participation of lay people was key to strong bi-vocational ministry in congregations. Congregations where strong lay leaders partner with ministers in areas such as administration and pastoral care are exemplars of successful bi-vocational ministry.

One minister emphasized how critical the role of lay people can be for bi-vocational ministry. Having served as a bi-vocational minister for more than two decades, he had experienced problems in his own context and also witnessed colleagues struggle with unrealistic expectations congregations sometimes placed upon them. He said that while some congregations may have had lay leaders who share the yoke of ministry, many others have demonstrated much weaker lay leadership while also expecting their bi-vocational ministers to carry a heavy load. His perspective

was also shared by a woman who had been in bi-vocational ministry for a number of years. She explained:

For me, bi-vocational ministry meant serving in a church that could not afford to pay a minister a full-time compensation package, which could include one, some, or all of the benefits of: a living wage or salary, insurance, utilities, pension, education allowance, travel, etc. I always had another means of employment that made it possible for me to serve a small church. Although I received a part-time package, the churches I served expected me to be a full-time minister. Too often the church leadership was weak or did not live up to their expectations as church leaders. The churches also wanted me to either live in the community where the church was located, or as close as possible.

Others also alluded to the need for members of their congregation to participate more fully in ministry and to appreciate the difficulty that ministers face trying to meet expectations at both the church and the other workplace. Bi-vocational ministry often requires support and a re-alignment of expectations among members of congregations—ministers are not meant to carry the load on their own. Such increased participation also helps lay people emerge as leaders and deepen their own sense of ministry as a vocation shared by the congregation rather than being a professional responsibility of a pastor.

*Permeable Boundaries of
Congregation and Community*

Woven through the interviews with pastors and lay leaders alike was a strong sense of congregations' connection to the surrounding community. Like other congregations, those with bi-vocational ministers affirm the central importance of connections to their community. However, there may be something about congregations where ministers are employed outside the church that deepens these connections. Clearly, those called into bi-vocational ministry when they were already living and working in the community came into their positions as pastors with pre-established connections to the community. In addition, the increased role that lay leaders can play in congregations with bi-vocational ministers may contribute. As mentioned earlier, bi-vocational ministry is most successful when lay leaders take on significant roles and responsibility for ministry. A cadre of involved lay leaders may accentuate how the lives of those who gather to worship together on Sundays extend into the community. It is possible that empowered lay leadership within congregations also strengthens congregations' connections with the community.

Congregations with ministers who reside, work, and pastor in the same community observe their pastor passing through boundaries of church and community on a regular basis. In one congregation in western Kentucky the solo pastor served for more than 30 years while also being employed full-time as a public-school teacher. He grew up in the general area and as a child he belonged to a small Disciples congregation in a community just down the road from where he later served as pastor. In his teen years, he began to help lead worship on Sundays, sometimes preaching, leading prayers, and serving communion. When

in college, he continued serving as a lay leader in a local congregation. During that time, one of the regional ministers began to discuss with him the possibility of becoming a licensed lay minister. After graduating from college, he began teaching full-time in the area and then, eventually, he became a licensed minister.

When leaders of the congregation were looking for a new pastor all those years ago, they knew they needed someone who would be able to supplement the income they provided and he fit the bill. He became their pastor while continuing to teach full-time. Through the years, his relationships with students and families within the community were interwoven with his roles as both pastor and teacher. When asked about this, he stated that he considers his ministry and vocation to extend beyond the walls of the church building into the community.

During the years he served as pastor, the congregation cultivated a fruitful relationship within the community. In work led primarily by lay people, the congregation's ministry included significant outreach and neighborhood development. In addition, they established signature programs that fit with their rural community. Many men and women in both the church and the community were hunters, and in the 1990s the congregation began hosting a breakfast and "blessing of the hunt" on the Thursday before the beginning of modern gun deer season each year. It's an event where the minister prays for both safety and bounty during the hunting season. A few months later each year, the church hosts a "Wild Game Dinner" where members of the community gather together and bring some of the bounty to share. Most of the work of community-building was led by lay people and the pastor did not orchestrate the work. However, his life-long relationships with others in the area and his understanding of the community played

crucial roles in the deep roots of the congregation's ministry.

Lay leaders and pastors spoke of ways their congregations and members were involved in local service projects and supported civic activities. Regardless of a congregation's level of involvement in the community, they recognized the importance of caring for those in the community outside their congregation. One lay leader said, "We really need to be reaching out. First of all because it is the gospel, second of all, if we do not reach out, we are going to fade away." They emphasized the importance of going out into the community rather than expecting the community to come to them. However, some also faced challenges in this area. Some congregations lamented the declining numbers and the aging of their church membership. Those in rural areas saw the surrounding communities were facing similar problems. Rural areas in Kentucky, especially counties in the western and eastern part of the commonwealth, see the population declining¹² and aging, with lagging birth rates and younger people migrating to other places for better employment opportunities.¹³ These challenges can tempt congregations to turn inward and worry primarily about their own survival.

Congregations indicated the importance of aiding their community in various ways, including giving funds for causes and projects, assisting people in need, and participating in ecumenical activities. All the congregations were reaching out to their communities in ways beyond their size. In rural areas and smaller communities, those interviewed highlighted their tightly-knit communities and how church members took part in the community as leaders in civic organizations, served as volunteer fire fighters, and participated in community service groups. For instance, one of the bi-vocational ministers was an elected

official in a community close to where he pastored. A few also spoke of their congregation's presence in the community as a "light" to the wider community through witnessing to social justice and fairness to all people. For congregations in urban and suburban contexts, connections to the surrounding community looked different from that of rural and smaller communities, but the interconnections were still there, with ministers reporting the priority of reaching out to specific groups or situations they identified.

Conclusion

Pastors and lay leaders interviewed as part of the LTS research project believe in the value of bi-vocational ministry. In contrast to seeing it as "less than" other forms of ministry, they believe it has unique benefits. Their experience reveals both benefits and drawbacks in having ministers who hold other employment, yet they see it as the model of ministry that is financially sustainable for them. The ministers serve bi-vocationally because they are financially able to and because they know the needs of the congregations they serve. For some of them this has come with experience. One of the "first time" bi-vocational pastors reflected on the way he once viewed bi-vocational ministry. He said, "Regretfully, I can remember a time... thinking, 'well it is bi-vocational' or 'she is bi-vocational, and she could not hack it as a 'real' minister.' It is kind of humbling... to be on the other side of it and thinking, 'Now, wait a minute, it is real ministry and these folks are working hard.' I wish I had known, back in the day when I was such an arrogant kid. When I actually walked into this church, I wish I had known how important they were going to become to me..." His sentiments reflected the feelings of others in the interviews which revealed a portrait of bi-

vocational ministers who are deeply connected to the congregation and the congregation to their community.

The interviews with congregations revealed that successful bi-vocational ministry relies on more than a minister with a second job that helps pay the bills. It also involves collaboration within congregations and the formation of a sense of ministry that is shared.

Despite challenges they face, bi-vocational pastors are fully engaged in ministry within the congregations they serve. They offer a different portrait of a minister, for they clearly are not a full-service professional. The financial advantages their additional employment provides for congregations has an impact on the minister-congregation relationship which pushes against the false image of the pastor/professional “who can do it all.” Although some congregations do it better than others, most are working toward a ministry that is a shared endeavor. Such shared ministry involves not only the one who is called ‘the minister,’ but also those who lead and serve in other ways.

Several themes emerged from the interviews that were part of the LTS research project. Conversations with bi-vocational ministers and lay leaders revealed in their congregations:

- Bi-vocational ministry contributes to the financial stability for the pastor and congregations;
- Calls to bi-vocational ministry are often in response to a congregation’s needs and financial limitations;
- Individuals frequently become bi-vocational ministers after they already are employed;
- Bi-vocational ministers often pursue theological education and training for pastoral leadership after they are already serving congregations;
- Because bi-vocational ministers are not dependent on congregations for their livelihood, it provides a

unique orientation to the minister-congregation relationship; and

- Shared ministry (where lay leadership partners with ministers) is key to successful bi-vocational ministry.

Lay leaders expressed appreciation for their pastors. They believed they gained pastors with ‘real world’ job experience, with a broader range of skills, and greater access to the community. They appreciated their minister who would come and serve them after also working hard at another job, often for 40 hours or more a week. They also appreciated that having a bi-vocational minister contributed to an increased participation of lay people. The drawbacks, of course, were that ministers had less time – to devote to the congregations, to their family members, as well as to the replenishing of their own energy – and it was time that was missed. For the ministry to be successful, congregation members need to appreciate as fully as possible the difficulty that ministers face trying to meet expectations at both the church and the other workplace.

Bi-vocational ministry can be interpreted in various ways. Some see it as a growing trend, almost a ‘sign of the times,’ due to increasing economic challenges that ministers and congregations are facing. Others, particularly those in certain geographic contexts or racial/ethnic communities have a long experience with bi-vocational ministry and say it’s the ‘way we’ve always done it.’ Others, especially those in newer congregations, see its missional potential and point to its more sustainable use of congregational resources and natural connections to the wider community. They describe it as being on the “cutting edge” of ministry.

Endnotes

¹ Jo Ann Deasy, "Shifting Vocational Identity in Theological Education: Insights from the ATS Student Questionnaires," *Theological Education* 52, no. 1 (2018): 66, accessed August 31, 2019, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/theological-education/2018-TE-/2018-TE-52-1/63-78%20Deasy.pdf>. Responses to the GSQ in years 2013-14 through 2016-17 by students affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) showed that among Disciples who graduated in 2013-14 through 2016-17 from theological schools across the U.S. and Canada, 37 percent expected to serve in bi-vocational ministry, with 58 percent of African-American graduates and 60 percent of Latinx graduates anticipating bi-vocational ministry after graduation.

²Mark Chaves and Alison Eagle, "Religious Congregations in 21st Century America," 2015, *National Congregations Study III*, 16, accessed August 31, 2019, http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf.

³C. Jeff Woods, "Alternative Pastoral Models," *Alban at Duke University*, January 9, 2013, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://alban.org/archive/alternative-pastoral-models/>. The understanding of bi-vocational ministry in our research project incorporates Woods' bi-vocational model and bi-ministry model.

⁴ At the time the research project began most ministers in the CCK were commissioned or ordained. Previously CCK had licensed ministers to serve congregations without educational expectations. In 2009 the term "commissioned minister" came into use in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with the adoption of the Theological Foundations and Policies and Criteria for the Order of Ministry. CCK grandfathered standing to licensed ministers until they retired. Currently CCK commissions ministers to serve within the Kentucky region and they engage in education through continuing education or certificate programs. Ordained ministers pursue education through academic programs leading to the M.Div. degree or through certificate programs if they are in the apprentice track to ordination. Ordained ministers may participate in the Search and Call process throughout the CC(DoC). Ministers in all three categories currently serve in Kentucky in good standing.

⁵In 2015-2018 thirteen pastors and twenty lay leaders in Disciples of Christ congregations in Kentucky were interviewed about

their experiences with their congregations and about bi-vocational ministry in general.

⁶Survey results indicated congregations with bi-vocational ministers tend to have more informal practices regarding financial matters and stewardship. However, the difference is explained by congregational size; bi-vocational ministers are more likely to serve small congregations, and small congregations are more likely to have informal practices (i.e. practices regarding written annual budgets, designated processes for developing a budget, estimating income and expenses, reporting financial matters to the congregation, and encouraging giving in the congregation). The topic of practices regarding financial matters and stewardship is not addressed in this article.

⁷Kirby Posey, "Household Income: 2015," American Survey Briefs, September 2016, U.S. Census Bureau, 3, accessed August 31, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/acs/acsbr15-02.pdf>.

⁸While benefits were not much concern for most ministers interviewed in the project, it is important to note that the survey results indicated this may not be true for all bi-vocational ministers. Benefits are of concern for some, just not most of those who were interviewed.

⁹Daniel Aleshire, "Financing the Call to Serve: Some Reflections on Ministry, Money, and Theological Education" (delivered at the meeting of the *Economic Challenges for Future Ministers Project*, Pittsburgh, PA, April 2014), 2, accessed August 15, 2019, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/current-initiatives/economic-challenges-facing-future-ministers/presentations-reflections/aleshire-financing-the-call-to-serve.pdf>

¹⁰None of the ministers interviewed for the project relocated in order to respond to their calls to bi-vocational ministry. They all resided in the general area of the congregations' locations and several commuted. However, some bi-vocational ministers do relocate when called to a congregation and this requires them to find new employment or to have 'portable' employment that allows them to relocate with less difficulty.

¹¹While most of the bi-vocational pastors interviewed reported that time and scheduling were challenges for them, it is important to note that the survey results indicated this may also be a concern among single-vocational ministers. Responding to the survey

question, “What would strengthen your ministry as a pastor?” the option of “more time for self, rest” was chosen by 43 percent of single-vocational ministers compared to 21 percent of bi-vocational ministers.

¹²Dustin Pugel, “Rural Kentucky Population Continues Decline While Urban and Suburban Areas Grow,” *Kentucky Center for Economic Policy*, May 23, 2016, accessed May 8, 2019, <https://kypolicy.org/rural-kentucky-population-continues-decline-urban-suburban-areas-grow/>

¹³Marcus Green, “More than half of Kentucky’s counties losing population, Census data shows,” *WDRB*, Louisville, KY, July 5, 2015, accessed May 8, 2019, https://www.wdrb.com/news/more-than-half-of-kentucky-s-counties-losing-population-census/article_27a1708f-40a7-544c-b438-24ce0fcc5337.html