

Adventures in innovative ministry: 8 competencies and support structures that bi-vocational ministers need

BY CARRIE GRAHAM

Bi-vocational ministry can play out in a variety of ways. Some choose to do graphic design or hold a retail job with a flexible schedule. Some hold traditional day jobs in business. In my case, bi-vocational ministry has involved two complementary part-time endeavors, with the learnings in each environment helping me serve in the other. What I did not realize is how formational this particular job combination would become. God has taken my bi-vocational ministry and created a Venn diagram of abundant overlap. The result? I have gained an unexpectedly integrated sense of what future ministers need in terms of vocational preparation through theological education.

Job A: The Church Lab

A few years ago, I started a community called [The Church Lab](#), a creative ministry that explores how spiritual growth happens in diverse and nontraditional settings. We believe that in the current American religious landscape, spiritual formation involves four pillars of investment: interreligious dialogue, mission, worship, and discipleship. Thus far we've focused on interreligious dialogue. As part of our mission and vision, The Church Lab is increasingly resourcing leaders who seek training to develop as innovators or facilitators for their own services.



The Church Lab consist of small groups that gather bi-weekly in a living room to discuss spiritual life.

The Church Lab was born from a call to pastoral work alongside a call to facilitate dialogue, both conceived during my time at Fuller Theological Seminary. I went on to co-found the [Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue Journal](#) with three classmates and the help of Dr. Richard Mouw and other mentors/scholars. I suspected the two worlds of dialogue and pastoral work were more appropriately an integrated venture in my service to God and God's people but, without a blueprint, I spent five years pursuing them as separate ministries before The Church Lab was born. Now I exercise pastoral care with dialoguers whose new, diverse friendships are both sharpening and challenging their faith commitments.

Built into our very name is the expectation of experimenting, failing, learning, trying again. We know that operating new expressions of theologically well-anchored community can be isolating and risky, yet it is a paramount endeavor for new and veteran ministries alike. As church and seminary attendance decreases, the path to spiritual maturity shifts in approach and

scope. But how? We are in the lab, so to speak, happily tinkering away at this question.

Of course, pragmatic minds may wonder how to fund such experimental operations. It is not achieved without difficulty or ongoing need. Required is a funding model that matches the mission, and this necessity has kept my personal journey with money spiritually grounded.

Job B: Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers (ECFFM)

For the last few years, I had the joy of coordinating and then directing the Ministers Facing Money program at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, part of the ATS ECFFM project. Piecing together the curriculum was a labor of love, and my energy and enthusiasm grew in direct correlation to every life I witnessed changed.

The experiment with our program was to achieve debt reduction by getting to the root of what causes long-term financial health. I was empowered to build a holistic experience that would take a small community of students on a multi-layered journey regarding money, often a cohort of 10 who worked together for a year. In the first semester, they focused purely on their personal financial habits, facing their vulnerabilities and relationships with money and understanding where they originated. Emotional awareness and narrative played a central role in this semester, all while gaining practical tools for healthy personal financial habits as well as theological consideration and prayerful, spiritual grounding around money. In the second semester, students took this foundational work and considered how it can bear witness effectively in a congregational setting, whether in preaching, pastoral care, or spiritual leadership in a tense committee meeting.

This community delivered leaders who, with ownership of their own experience, began to shift the campus culture to a more financially conscientious environment, bit by bit. They began to take this work into their field education and their worshipping communities. The motto we often used called us to behaviors that reflect who is at the helm: "The hope of Christ dictates our money. Money does not dictate our hope."

In the process, last fall alone, I met one-on-one with 44 students. Students often brought to seminary an awareness of the shifting religious and vocational landscape, along with questions about modern callings and how to prepare financially for a bi-vocational lifestyle. Increasingly, I found myself drawing from my own lessons learned as an entrepreneurial, bi-vocational minister.

Needs in theological education: *integrated observations*

Between (a) learning the bi-vocational lifestyle, (b) exploring ministry in a nontraditional plant setting, and (c) creating programming to holistically prepare ministers for healthy financial leadership, my distinct vantage point revealed areas of overlap as well as eight competencies and support structures that theological education needs to provide to aspiring ministers:

1 *A spiritually grounded, theologically thoughtful, emotionally intelligent relationship to money*

Ministers are in need of being vocationally resourceful with financial challenges, both their own and those of the communities they will lead, including debt and budget management.

2 *An ability to match funding approaches to the mission*

As creative approaches to sustainable funding become vital to thriving ministry, some missional activity may best be backed by crowdfunding or individual donors, others by denominational support. Endowments will be appropriate for some but not others.

3 *An understanding of who to call on for practical tools, such as a CPA or lawyer, to understand the "business" of ministry*

These experts might be consulted for planting or non-profit formation purposes, or even to understand the parameters of ethical "business" or sustainable financial practices in an established church setting.



Highlights of a week in the life of a bi-vocational pastor

Day 1:

One-on-one budget consultation with seminary student

Day 2:

Post-election group dialogue to promote healing between conservative and liberal people of faith

Day 3:

Student retreat exercise—Church Budget Committee simulation

Day 4:

Semiannual meeting with Multi-Faith Matters grant team to foster collaboration and share positive stories

Day 5:

Meeting with two dialogue partners for prayer, leadership development, and fundraising planning

Day 6:

Phone call with fundraising coach regarding donor base updates and year-end appeals

Day 7:

Group meeting with students about spiritual and financial viability of bi-vocational and creative ministries

4 *An understanding of meaning and strategies around bi-vocational ministry and call*

Students need practical and spiritually pertinent information around bi-vocational service. Will it be by necessity or choice that a minister might take a part-time call with a congregation and work in a business office the other half of the week, or even in a complementary part-time ministry? How might these two environments inform a minister about the culture around us and expose spiritual needs that need to be met? How can we prepare students to notice and discern how to meet such needs, whether via partnerships or new spaces for spiritual formation?

5 *A support network for experimentation, with room on the learning curve for failure*

Within established structures where budgets are based on attendance or donations, seminarians will do well to learn how to make space for their own learning curves. To meet shifting needs calls for experimentation and even failure, as we learn what is effective for the needs of emerging populations. Students need a network of support as well as financially astute habits to aid them in setting themselves up for success.

6 *An ability to discern appropriate partnerships, unmet needs, and how to address them*

Who are the populations our students are drawn to serve, and what are their spiritual and practical needs? Which nonprofits or church families are already serving them, if any, and how can a student join forces with or learn lessons from them? How might one envision how to effectively minister with such a population? Students need space during seminary to ask these questions and practice among the demographics with which they feel compelled to serve.

7 *A faithfulness to historic institutions and denominations while honoring new structures for spiritual growth*

In a decreasingly church-centered context, ministers are bridge builders between our historic institutions

of Christian faith and new structures and organizations. Students need attention to both the theory and the practice of bridge building between our neighborhoods and our institutions.

8 *Strong boundaries, a support network, and a prioritized self-care regimen*

Burnout prevention for those on the front lines of ministry has always been a challenge, and aspiring ministers must learn to (a) incorporate a healthy sense of failure and learning curve toward both faithful and new ministries, (b) build bridges between our anchored institutions and an adult population with shifting attitudes toward religion, and (c) develop reflective support networks and rejuvenating Sabbath practices.

It would be easy to be an armchair leader, naming needs and wishing luck to the striving theological institutions doing the hard work of preparing ministers with limited resources. Perhaps some institutions do not feel equipped to discern and make changes in-house but might instead be looking for partnerships, external programming, or reflections on how to best support students in a contextually appropriate manner. By allowing these observations to be a starting point, however, we can discern how best to pursue our common mission: equipping students to serve God and God's people.



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