

Stability amidst turbulent times: the benefits of bi-vocational ministry

BY KRISTEN PLINKE BENTLEY

Over the last ten years, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kentucky (CCinKY) observed a growing number of congregations intentionally employing ministers whom they expected to hold some kind of employment outside of the congregation. During those same ten years, Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) became increasingly aware that many of its graduates were likely to be bi-vocational after graduation. Both LTS and CCinKY 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.

As part of the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers Initiative, the Conversations on Stewardship & Finances Project at LTS launched a research project in 2015 on the economic implications of bi-vocational ministry on Disciples of Christ clergy and congregations in Kentucky.

A central goal of the 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 both 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 are available. Many ministers sense a particular call to bi-vocational ministry because they wish to aid such congregations.

One such bi-vocational minister commented, "These small, mostly rural churches deserve quality of ministry and service the same as larger congregations. I can financially afford to do that."

Providing financial stability

Bi-vocational and single vocation ministers reported similar household incomes despite significant differences in the compensation they received from congregations. The majority (83%) of respondents reported an annual household income of \$50,000 or more compared to the 2015 median household income of \$45,215 in Kentucky and \$55,775 in the U.S.¹ More than half (54 %) 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-vocation ministers was between \$30,000 and \$39,999.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 and 2015 American Community Surveys. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/acs/acsbr15-02.pdf>

Bi-vocational ministers also received fewer benefits from congregations than single-vocation ministers. This indicates that, in general, bi-vocational ministers were successfully supplementing their household incomes to make them equal to that of single-vocation ministers.

Pastors and congregations interpreted the financial stability related to bi-vocational ministry in several different ways. Some pastors spoke about 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 congregation 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. 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 serves to engage in creative community-based ministry and to work toward becoming financially self-supporting.

Others saw bi-vocational ministry as the way it's always been done. 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 how he and his family were able to weather those periods of time when the congregation could not afford to pay him.

In these various contexts, "being bi-vocational" contributed to improved financial stability even though it did not solve all financial woes. Congregations "could afford" ministers, thanks to the ministers' income from employment outside the church, and ministers "could afford" to serve congregations despite congregations' limited financial resources.

Reframing the minister-congregation relationship

The compensation bi-vocational ministers received from employment outside the church impacted more than just their own financial stability and that of congregations—it cast the minister-congregation relationship in a different light. Because ministers were not dependent upon the congregation for their livelihood, they were empowered to engage with the congregation on equal footing. For

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instance, one minister who recently 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 only the job of the minister. This sense of mutual benefit was also reflected in the key role of lay leadership within congregations served by bi-vocational ministers. Congregations where strong lay leaders partnered with ministers in areas such as administration and pastoral care were more likely to be successful at bi-vocational ministry.

LTS is continuing its research concerning bi-vocational ministry and shifting away from the assumption that most

students will serve in single-vocation ministry following graduation. The research is broadening our understanding of the diversity of experiences within congregational ministry while we extend the research project to learn from those contexts where bi-vocational ministry has been widely practiced, such as in rural communities and in predominantly African American and Latin congregations.

What we've been learning has allowed LTS to be attentive to the realities of bi-vocational ministry when making decisions about strategies for advising and mentoring, curriculum design, possible directions for continuing

education for lay leaders, and how to support students who already serve as bi-vocational ministers—many of whom are enrolled part-time. The varied work schedules of such students means LTS is intentional about the way educational opportunities are scheduled within online, face-to-face, and congregational contexts, and the inclusion of asynchronous elements within the online context.

The research has informed the partnership between LTS and CCinKY and has contributed to offering a pilot peer group for Disciples bi-vocational ministers in Kentucky that has been meeting through both face-to-face and online gatherings in 2018–19.



Kristen Plinke Bentley is Project Director of Conversations on Stewardship & Finances at Lexington Theological Seminary in Lexington, Kentucky.