



# What Clergy Leaders Wish They Had Been Trained to Do And Why it Matters

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Religious Workforce Project  
Lewis Center for Church Leadership  
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**Religious  
Workforce  
Project**





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## About the Religious Workforce Project

Building on previous research, the Religious Workforce Project is an effort to understand the nation's religious workforce in a comprehensive way. The Project includes a national meta-analysis and a qualitative study in the Washington, DC, metro area. Funding for the project is generously provided by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project seeks to answer the following questions: Given today's changing religious landscape, how are leaders of U.S. congregations adapting? How do these changes shape the staffing, financial models, priorities, and the work of U.S. congregations? And what is the state of the religious workforce today?

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## Introduction

While the quantitative component of the Religious Workforce Project (RWP) identifies religious workforce trends in broad strokes across the U.S. religious landscape, our qualitative work offers a “deep dive” into Christian congregations found in the Washington, DC, metro area and the surrounding region to better understand emerging trends within the religious workforce. The purpose of the RWP’s qualitative research component is twofold: (1) to better understand how congregations employ and deploy persons to fulfill their missions, and (2) to learn how pastoral leaders in congregational settings understand the nature of their ministry today.

To answer those research questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews of 41 congregational leaders in a variety of Christian traditions and contexts. We also participated in worship services and staff meetings, asked them to fill out an online questionnaire (that focused primarily on budgeting and staffing), and pored over documents that churches provided, websites, and Facebook pages. The timing of this qualitative data collection, which began in 2019 (pre-pandemic shut-down conditions) and concluded in late 2022 (post-pandemic shut-down), was serendipitous in that it offered a unique opportunity to include pandemic effects in our analyses. For more information on how we conducted the research, refer to the Appendix.

One set of questions in our interviews asked about their present role as a congregational leader, which primed them to think about what they do, what they prioritize, and what they ideally need to perform their leadership role well. Then we asked them, “Are there some responsibilities or expectations in your role as a pastor that you were never trained for?” Their responses to that last question will be the primary focus of this report: we outline five key skill sets that clergy leaders in our qualitative study said they needed to have in their roles as congregational leaders but did not develop during their formalized preparation for ministry. Future reports and blog posts will share what we have learned on other related topics.

We asked 41 clergy leaders, “Are there some responsibilities or expectations in your role as a pastor that you were never trained for?”



# What clergy leaders were not trained to do.

## Five key skill sets

One of the questions we asked clergy leaders during our semi- structured interviews was, “Are there some responsibilities or expectations in your role as a pastor that you were never trained for?” Regardless of the traditions to which they belonged, most of the clergy leaders we interviewed talked about five key areas: administration and management (mentioned in 20 of the interviews), technology skills (9), soft skills for leadership (7), counseling and pastoral care (6), and facilities management (4). Note that throughout this report, the names of all churches and clergy leaders are pseudonyms.

### Administration and Management

Church administration is about the day-to-day tasks that help a church to run efficiently. It includes (but is not limited to) making sure the office is staffed and has the necessary equipment and supplies (which could be delegated to an administrative assistant as well), the supervision and training of staff and scheduling of staff and volunteers, making sure that the books are being done properly on a day-to-day basis, managing church communications, seeing that routine maintenance tasks are done, and negotiating with outside parties. Church management is about setting vision and goals, setting strategies for achieving those goals, setting budgets that align with the church’s mission and goals, and managing the control of expenditures—the high-level, big-picture things that are more like being the CEO of a company than an office manager.

About half (20) of the clergy leaders in our study mentioned tasks related to administration and management



When our interviewees talked about having felt ill-prepared for some of these kinds of responsibilities, their comments were sometimes as general as “how to manage church” or “administrative stuff” or as specific as doing taxes, budgeting, scheduling activities, or interpreting a contract.

Some of the clergy leaders in our study were fortunate enough to have been second-career pastors, who developed administrative and management skills in other vocational settings prior to leading a congregation.

For example, Marcus is a Black African immigrant who came to the United States as a young child. He is well-educated, first as a lawyer, then as a divinity school graduate. At the time of his interview in late 2020, he was bi-vocational, working full-time as an attorney while serving part-time as the pastor of Pilgrim Baptist Church, a medium-sized urban church in a Historically Black Protestant denomination. Marcus shared that while he did not receive administrative training in seminary, his secular career as a lawyer had prepared him well for many of these tasks in a church setting:

I'm part of a fraternity where I was...exposed to Robert's Rule of Order, I was exposed to budgeting, how to run committees, how to set programs. All the things that you would do at a church I had learned through this organization and some my other dealings have been on boards and things like that. And just being part of this congregation, understanding the church, I began to learn how the church operates...They don't teach you in seminary... how to run a business meeting... (and) budgeting.

Darryl is a white pastor who was of retirement age when he was interviewed for this project in early 2021. At that time, he was the part-time interim pastor at St. Lawrence, a small suburban Mainline Protestant congregation. His career had been in non-profit ministry, and after retirement, he became a part-time interim pastor and had served four congregations in this role. Since then, he has left St. Lawrence to serve as an interim pastor at another church, and a new part-time clergy leader has been installed there. She serves two congregations. Darryl drew heavily on his previous non-profit management experience for his role as an interim pastor:



There are things that I know about, not because I went to seminary, but because of my experience in nonprofit work. Like...one of the parishioners...wanted to set up a tutoring program in the schools. So, my experience in the nonprofit world, working with public education facilities, I was able to identify who to go to and how to get that rolling. A lot of things to do with budgets and contracts. We had to hire a lawyer to get us out of a bad contract with [a former tenant]. I was comfortable in how to pursue that and to follow through on it. So, there are some things that I learned in the nonprofit world that I hadn't been exposed to in seminary.

Not all clergy leaders in the study had been so fortunate to have learned administration and management through other careers, however. Instead, clergy leaders often received on-the-job training once they became congregational leaders. Some found the financial aspects particularly troublesome, and budgeting was an issue for eight of them. There did not seem to be a pattern in the data; this was an issue across clergy leaders' genders, race or ethnicity, religious traditions, church sizes, and settings.

Inadequate training in financial management was a big issue for Father Miguel, a young Latino priest who went to seminary right after high school. He leads Iglesia Catolica Santísimo Sacramento, a large, suburban Roman Catholic Hispanic-majority congregation. At the time of his interview in 2022, he was celebrating four masses each weekend with an average worship attendance of 800, and they were growing. Despite the large church size, they were struggling financially, and Father Miguel felt a lot of pressure to do fundraising with no paid staff to help him. He noted that in seminary:

...you never get trained in finance. I don't know if now it has changed, but I never took a course on parish finance, budget, hiring, firing...you just learn as you go.

Jeff, a white, middle-aged full-time pastor, leads Mount Hope Church, a small rural congregation that has been losing members. He had a previous career in finance yet felt inadequately prepared to handle the financial aspects of church leadership. Even though he is not sure that pastors need to be hands-on with the finances, he believes that seminaries should be preparing candidates for it because they will ultimately be affected if the congregation's financials are not worked out:



Even financials, I mean, they don't really get into how do you deal with all the financial stuff that ends up being on the plate of the pastor because let's face it, if they don't make money, you're going to have to be appointed someplace else because they're going to go down in size, and they won't be able to afford you. Ultimately, no matter what, even if you want to be hands-off, it affects you.

That kind of frustration is echoed by Lamont and Nikki, a married African American couple who co-pastor two small, urban Mainline Protestant churches. They feel this pressure to do fundraising though they were not taught to do it in seminary, and their role is only very part-time, which gives them about enough time to do sermons and a little work within their community, Nikki points out. Yet, she says:

They expect you to do grant writing—they expect you to find resources or funds, which comes with another set of responsibilities. That's not my strength. I'm not a grant writer. I'm a grassroots organizer.

## Technology Skills

Nine clergy leaders in our study expressed feeling inadequately trained in technology skills. This would include skills needed to present sermons in a variety of formats and make them available online, and to plan and conduct worship in modern contexts (such as hybrid and online), including multimedia production.

We know that before the pandemic many churches had already been regularly using technologies such as websites, projecting slides and videos on screens during worship, and live-streaming worship services.<sup>1</sup> Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic forced most churches to close their doors in early 2020 and take their worship and other programmatic activity online, this gave those clergy leaders an advantage, as they were well prepared for this shift.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Continuing Impact of Technology on Congregations." A Joint Report from Faith Communities Today and the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations National Research Project (FACT/EPIC). <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/the-continuing-impact-of-technology-on-congregations-hybrid-worship-online-giving-and-implications-for-the-future/>.





However, this became a problem for those clergy leaders who had not been engaging regularly with these technologies before the pandemic. Some of them did not have anyone on staff to set up hybrid worship, so they had to figure it out themselves. Many had no experience of giving their sermons in an empty room, in front of a camera, either live-streamed or recorded (or both), and then editing a recording and putting it up on a website. And they found that learning these new technologies, while trying to keep their churches running during a fearful time with an unknown future, to be exhausting.

Troy is a middle-aged white full-time pastor, who leads Cornerstone Church, a small suburban, nondenominational Evangelical church. They had sold their building before the pandemic and at the time we observed worship and interviewed Troy in 2021, they were meeting in a local elementary school. Every weekend, they would set up and then take down all the furnishings for worship. They had been steadily losing members, and worried about raising enough revenue to keep their staff. To make things worse, because of the school's policies, they were unable to live-stream worship, making it difficult to get through the pandemic shut-down.

The ministry environment that we are moving into, none of us has been prepared for or trained for. So, none of us went to seminary and got the skill sets necessary for doing the kind of ministry this moment is calling for. We don't know how to be on television. We don't know how to be on digital devices. We don't know how to speak to a screen. We're still trying to fit ourselves into a pre-COVID box and just add some digital elements on top of it, rather than realizing that the environment calls for a whole different way of inhabiting the space."

~ Iain, pastor at Grace Lutheran



Troy seemed worn out by all the effort he was putting in to keep the church going, and lamented that the pandemic had not helped:

COVID changed everybody's job. I mean, you had to become a recording artist. Or you had to pick up editing. So, I use some of that (and it has) impacted me. Not as much as my staff.

Pastor Jeff at Mount Hope, whom we introduced earlier, found learning new technology to get through the pandemic to be exhausting as well:

I always had it on my list that I wanted to learn how to use Apple Movie Maker...to create videos. And I never found the time. But guess what? There was time in COVID. And it needed to happen. And so, to produce—I mean, I was preaching and producing, doing all the work for everything on Sunday to get out to everybody because you couldn't be with anybody else. So, it would take 60 hours a week to put worship together.

In addition to the fatigue that came with learning new skills during the already stressful pandemic, some clergy leaders experienced new kinds of pressure. For example, Annabelle is a white, middle-aged pastor of a growing, medium-sized suburban Mainline Protestant church, Trinity Lutheran. She shared in her 2021 interview that one of the new pressures she is feeling post-COVID is related to hybrid worship. She had to learn new technologies to get through the pandemic, and hybrid worship has been a positive shift. However, there are also drawbacks:

"...I think both the pressure that I feel and the pressure that comes from the accessibility that people now have of me, that that's really significant...Throw in a pandemic, throw in the fact that now we are headed into a hybrid way of being church...If I had a bad sermon on a Sunday morning, three hundred people heard it. Now, if I have a bad sermon, it's on the internet for all to see. Right? So, it's just a different set of pressures."



Elizabeth, a middle-aged white woman, is solo pastor at Holy Cross, a medium-sized urban Mainline Protestant church. Though she is fortunate to have young, tech-savvy part-time and volunteer staff who are doing a great job at managing this new way of being a church, she feels a sense of pressure to pick up more technology skills herself:

...starting on Monday, [I'm doing] a certificate program with Lexington Seminary on technology. I have got to upskill myself. Although I have a young adult [on staff] who's been here for the summer who assures me I'm not as deficient as I think I am; I'm like...Ugh...it's going to be hybrid church forever. So, I better be more equipped in terms of being able to be confident about it.

Monica is a middle-aged Latina pastor at Iglesia Episcopal San Cristobal, a small, Latino ministry embedded within a larger suburban Mainline Protestant church. When we talked with her in 2022, she shared another unexpected pitfall of taking church online:

Yeah...we're not trained for dealing with internet trolls...so there's just hateful people out there that do things. And you can ignore them, but then not everybody does. And then, somebody else might see it and raise it up and then you've got to deal with it. And it's very pastoral, it's very pastoral, but it's hard to discern what you ignore and what you don't ignore.

The growing need for technological training is not limited to clergy leaders trying to figure out how to “do hybrid church.” As we see increased immigration among clergy leaders, we must recognize that they may not be coming from societies that have been able to take our everyday technologies for granted. For example, Pastor Manuel was ordained as a Catholic priest in a Latin American country but switched to The Episcopal Church when he emigrated to the United States. He leads San Juan Episcopal, a large, suburban Hispanic-majority congregation (they do three services each week in Spanish and one in English), and shared how he struggled with learning to use a computer when he first arrived here:

That's technology. You know when I got to this country, I had to learn to use a computer. I had never used it before...until the year 2000...[it] was the first time I use[d] a computer, because I have always had a typewriter to write. So, my first limitation is technology.



## Soft Skills for Leadership

Seven of the clergy leaders in our study felt inadequately prepared in soft skills—skills that are not specific to any kind of career, also known as “transferable skills,” “people skills,” or “interpersonal skills.” These include the ability to: communicate clearly and effectively, work well with others, collaborate, adapt as needed, manage one’s time effectively, be a team player, be creative, think critically, and have a good work ethic.

There are also soft skills that seem particularly appropriate for leadership roles, including the ability to:

- inspire others to achieve shared goals and objectives
- set a clear vision and communicate it effectively
- create a culture of accountability and excellence
- coach or mentor others
- solve problems
- manage conflict well
- delegate tasks
- have high emotional intelligence (including self-awareness and ability to do professional self-care)

The clergy leaders in our study who mentioned soft skills focused on those needed for leadership roles, such as developing emotional intelligence and self-awareness, or entrepreneurship. Sometimes they talked about needing training in leadership in a general sense. For example, Janet, a middle-aged Asian woman, had been a systems analyst and then found her calling to ministry while she served on a team in a large Evangelical Protestant church. She later started a small, nondenominational ethnic-specific church, The Chapel Ministry, when she saw a need for it.

Janet would have appreciated more entrepreneurial skills when starting this new church, and she also felt that she lacked in leadership training in general:

I need more training (in) leadership, I mean, learning, management...seems like nowadays being a pastor, you have to know all those things also.



Keith is a white Evangelical Protestant pastor approaching retirement age, who pastors at Willowdale, a large, suburban non-denominational church. He talked about not feeling adequately trained in administration and management, including “day-to-day practical things of setting up tables and answering conflict, how to run a finance committee meeting...and how to budget for a nonprofit ministry.” But he also lacked leadership training. Despite being in a great role in which he successfully grew a church, it was hard, and he did not feel adequately supported in learning how to do it:

There was no...leadership training. No one ever trained me on how to go from being a solo pastor to a pastor leading a staff and what that looks like to make room for a staff.

Others talked about more specific ways they could have been better prepared for congregational leadership. Theo is a 40ish Asian pastor of New Life Community Church, a medium-sized urban Mainline Protestant church. He had entered ministry as a vocation after working for a few years as an engineer. He struggled with getting out of that problem-solving mindset and genuinely seeing people as needing to be listened to, rather than attempting to solve their problems. He also struggled with how to present himself publicly as a religious leader and deal with self-awareness:

Yeah, basically, emotional relational skill setting. Obviously, that's a lot huger coming [into pastoral leadership] as an engineer. Just give me a problem. Let me sit down and crank it out. Yeah. And...learning to view that...people aren't problems to solve...and [also there's] how to do a press conference...So how to position yourself before the public...that's actually probably useful...and also knowing yourself, but that's just a constant journey.

Although Theo's previous career did little to prepare him for a ministry role, other second-career clergy leaders found that their experiences outside the church prepared them for leadership in ways that they did not get in seminary.

Marcus, introduced earlier, not only found his experience as a lawyer to be helpful when it came to church administration and management, it also helped him develop leadership skills; something he also says he did not get from his seminary education:



And so, while seminary did not provide that training, the other things, the other components of like being a leader, setting goals, managing a team and managing team dynamics, being able to identify your gaps and filling those gaps, your passion, the vision, all those things sort of came...from other organizations that I was a part of that I had a chance to experience.

## Counseling and Pastoral Care

Six clergy leaders mentioned this skill set as an area in which they wished they received training (or more training), despite that it is one of the key roles that clergy leaders are expected to perform. We noticed that it was a common issue across the religious traditions:

Father Matthew is a young white Catholic priest who studied psychology before attending seminary. He leads two small rural Catholic parishes, and wishes he had been sufficiently trained in counseling:

Sometimes people, when they have a certain trouble or certain matter that they want to discuss, you want to be able to feel confident when you're a priest with counseling or with directing people because you're just new and you don't have any sort of background or experience.

Jerry is an older African American pastor at Canaan Baptist, a medium-sized urban Historically Black Protestant church. His previous career had been in the healthcare system as an administrator, and he felt that he was only given the basics in counseling:

I feel that I still need to become adept at counseling, drug counseling on a certain level. There's a broad-brush campaign across all levels of counseling. But there are some areas that I'm just lacking in...And marriage counseling is something, again, this is new to me as well.



Annabelle, a Mainline Protestant pastor whom we introduced earlier, also feels that she needed seminary training in this area. She shared that this training would have been more valuable to her than some of the classes she took in seminary:

Right now, in the work that I'm doing in mental health, I would have been far better [off] with a couple semesters in basic psychology, mental health, [and] crisis management. The Bible's nice. I like Bible. I mean, I became a pastor, right? I get excited about that. But that's not where people's [needs] are.

Maria was the associate pastor for a small Latino congregation embedded within a large suburban Mainline Protestant church. Since her interview for this project in 2022, she has left this church. She had been raised Catholic in a South American country and felt called to come to the United States to work with Latinos here. She came here on a scholarship at a Mainline Protestant seminary. Maria felt that she could have received more training in pastoral care and found a training opportunity to learn bereavement coaching that cost \$5000 and took nine months. Her congregation pitched in to pay for it. In her interview, her passion for this ministry was clear:

My passion is to help people die in peace. But I also realized that, yes, in part, God gave me a gift to be able to do it. But I was out of balance with how to comfort the bereaved. And I knew that I was not on the same level. How could I help those who were suffering?

Jerry, an African American pastor whose story we told in part earlier, also wished he had received more training in counseling and pastoral care. He feels that he is not adequately trained for offering counseling and pastoral care, but the need for it has been great:

I...think people are overwhelmed, and the view is, how are we going to do this? And they are putting a lot of the burden on the pastor, I think, to figure this out. I think that the ministry is a lot of what I have been doing, in the last years... of the grief ministry, of grief counseling and funerals and that sort of thing. And those who remain in the church have made huge investments, and they want to be—they want to have a good time, [a] nice home-going service, and they want to see the church survive. But I think their focus is more immediate than long term...That's my sense. And then there is a segment of the church that is quite concerned of the direction that we are going in and a view that we can still thrive as a smaller church.



## Facilities Management

Not having adequate training in facilities management was brought up directly by four clergy leaders in our study. Facilities management is often tied to administration and management and can include knowing what kind of staffing (whether volunteer or paid) is needed so that the clergy leader does not have to be directly involved with, for example, cleaning, landscaping maintenance, roof leaks, heating, air conditioning, or plumbing issues.

Annabelle (introduced earlier) not only wished she could have had more training in technology, counseling, and pastoral care; she also found facilities management to be a real issue when she took this role as senior pastor at Trinity Lutheran:

I joked that I felt called to be a pastor before I knew what pastors did all day. And while you spent the morning with the cancer committee, I spent the morning with a plumber discussing the finer points of urinals...he...handed me a flashlight and said, 'Look down this urinal and then describe to me in graphic detail.' No.

And while Annabelle's story may seem funny to us, it's a common story. Monica, whom we introduced earlier, shared this quip:

Well, I think—this is less me and more my rector, but she gets pulled into really mundane things, like how the toilet paper dispensers are working. You know? [laughter].

Keith, also introduced earlier, is nearing retirement and grateful that he no longer has to think about the physical work that pastors are often asked to do for their churches.

In his case, we believe he went above and beyond the call to serve when he was a younger pastor:

So...in my first church I dug a septic system for the church. I mean, there's everyday things in pastoral ministry that no one trains you for. We got a lot of theological training. I got great exegetical, theological training. But in terms of the day-to-day practical things of setting up tables and answering conflict, nobody was dealing with that really well. So yeah, lots of things I didn't get trained for.





But all bathroom humor aside, taking care of an older church building can be serious business as well, as we learned from Father Matthew, whom we introduced earlier, when we shared that he wished he had received more training in counseling and pastoral care. He also shared his frustration at having to maintain a building and be in charge of...well...everything. And these high expectations of him come with very little help from staff:

One of the biggest frustrations I think of a small staff and of a pastor who's running a church and a mission is the facilities. And so right away, you are given the keys to the kingdom and you're in charge of everything. You have to know to make decisions and get contracts reviewed and you have a lot of phone calls with contractors and businesses to get them to come and look at stuff and all that. So right away, one of the frustrating things is that you are understaffed when it comes to facilities and maintenance. So, you're kind of hands-on. You can be hands-on so that the facility goes according to the code, or you can let it go. But you don't really have an option because you need it to be clean and you need it to be maintained. So that's kind of frustrating.

Elizabeth, whom we introduced earlier, didn't speak directly to the issue of being expected to handle the building maintenance, as much as the social pressure to make it a priority in her role as a church pastor. Holy Cross is located in a historic neighborhood in DC. The church has a rich history of social justice ministry in the neighborhood, and she feels a lot of pressure to preserve and maintain the building because of its historic significance. She came to this church not understanding that being the pastor of a church in that kind of setting would come with expectations from not only the church and its members, but also from the community:

I think stuff around, when you have a historic building...I think that there has to be preparation for what that means; it's one of your biggest assets.



Sometimes we got a sense that a clergy leader has been frustrated for a long time by the ministry preparation that they did not receive, such as when one pastor's responses to the question turned into a lengthy rant that encompassed most of these categories. This quote is from Annabelle again, who has done a remarkable job of growing this church, despite all the things she didn't learn during her formalized preparation for ministry:

So, I took two semesters on the early church and memorized all of the heresies of the early church. No one has ever walked into my office with a crisis on Donatism. No one has ever come worried about the light of Christ in them and if they were a Gnostic. I feel pretty strongly that a vast majority of my seminary education was great if I wanted to be a theologian, and useless if I wanted to be a parish pastor.

I received nothing in administration.... how to read a profit and loss sheet, how to budget, how to oversee budget, how to track trends. There was very little, if anything on stewardship...how to ask people for money, how to connect money with discipleship. Jesus talks about money more than anything else in the gospels, and we spend no time in seminary about the stumbling block and blessing that money is.

There's nothing on staff supervision, on HR, on hiring, on firing, on the messiness of church members who are also on your staff or intentionally hiring staff who are not church members, but then you are doing good ministries, so they want to become church members. If we are doing church right, people who come to be part of our community want to join it. And so, what does that mean?

There's nothing on strategic planning. How do you cast a vision? Beyond my definition of being a senior pastor is, in a lot of ways, that I am called to cast a vision beyond where the congregation can see themselves. And there's nothing on that.

There's nothing on copy machine leases, HVAC repairs, urinals, building management. I mean, I would rather have been better off with two semesters of basic HVAC repair than those heresies because then I would actually be useful on Sunday morning when the heater goes out and I'm standing there in my alb<sup>2</sup> hitting the thing like, "Will it turn on?"

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<sup>2</sup> a white, belted ankle-length garment worn by some clergy.



After reviewing and analyzing interviews with forty-one clergy leaders, we kept track of the myriad tasks they carry out in a typical week in their roles as congregational leaders. When we tallied up the list, we were shocked to learn how many different tasks they do (and are expected to do). We thought it would be helpful to provide this list of tasks to show how much clergy leaders are expected to do.

**Table 1. Tasks that clergy leaders carry out**

Administration and Church Management (including Finances, Strategic Planning)	Baptism or Dedication	Blessing or Last Rites	Denominational and Ecumenical roles (participating in meetings, committees, etc.)	Communications
Community Outreach	Contacting Visitors/New Members	Continuing Education	Developing Leaders	Fundraising
Funerals (Planning and Leading)	Hearing Confessions	Leading a Class and/or Small Group	Leading Worship	Learning and Performing Music in Worship
Maintaining Facilities	Ministry Meetings	Pastoral Care and Counseling	Personal Prayer and Praying for Others	Planning Worship
Prayer Services and/or Vigils	Studying and Sermon Prep	Supervising Staff and/or Volunteers	Teaching Congregations (Discipleship, Stewardship, How to Behave, etc.)	Visiting and/or Teaching in Parochial Schools or Children's Programs, Preschool, etc.
Visiting Members and Neighbors at Home, in Hospitals, Nursing Homes, etc.	Wedding Preparation for Couples	Weddings	Writing Reports, Blog Posts, Podcasts, etc.	Youth Ministry



# Putting it all together.

Some studies<sup>3</sup> have shown that clergy leaders have felt they lacked adequate training in administrative skills, and our findings agree with that. In fact, administrative and management skills were the most frequently mentioned category when we asked the clergy leaders in our study about any areas of responsibility for which they felt inadequately prepared when they entered congregational ministry.

Other studies<sup>4</sup> have shown that clergy leaders tend to receive little training in identifying signs of mental illness and in counseling so they can refer parishioners to mental health professionals or feel comfortable providing pastoral care. We were expecting to find that in our interviews, but it came up in only six of our interviews (15%).

However, the studies that discussed this training need may have asked questions that primed interviewees or survey participants to talk about mental health specifically, which could account for their emphasis on this one skill set over others, whereas the question we asked of our interviewees allowed for a wide range of response topics.

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<sup>3</sup> Judith C. P. Lin and Deborah Gin, "What Do Alums Wish They Had Learned in Seminary?" The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Colloquy Online, October 2020.

Deborah H.C. Gin, "Mapping the Workforce: What Competencies Do ATS Alums Need?" The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Colloquy Online, September 2018.

<sup>4</sup> "Pastors Get Scant Seminary Training on How to Help Mentally Ill, Baylor Study Finds." Mental Health Weekly Digest, 22 Sept. 2014, p. 212.

Jashalund Royston and Susan Barnett, "PC(USA) Ministers Are Not Reticent to Talk About Mental Health." Special Report to Presbyterian News Service, September 27, 2021.



One key skill set that clergy leaders in our study talked about needing (but not usually having) was related to technology. When we reviewed the literature, we noted that while the impact of the pandemic on pastors' well-being was well-covered,<sup>5</sup> it was hard to find any mention of the impact this pandemic had on clergy leaders' sense of inadequacy in terms of their technological skills, which was a dominant theme in our interviews.

However, most of the extant research on skills for which clergy leaders would like to have had more training was conducted prior to the pandemic, and we are sure that the pandemic-related research currently underway will cover this gap. This was a serendipitous benefit of conducting the research when we did, as most of our interviews were conducted during and after the pandemic shutdown, allowing us an early opportunity for discovery in this area.

## Some key insights.

*(1) The pandemic shutdown of 2020 led to a sudden shift that required clergy leaders to have technological skill sets that they did not need to have before.*

A recent report by Lin and Gin,<sup>6</sup> based on a 2017 survey of graduates of ATS-affiliated seminaries, listed the top ten things pastors wished they had learned in seminary: administration, leadership, finance, theology, pastoral care and counseling, and ministry. Those were followed by themes of intrapersonal competency, social justice, conflict resolution, intercultural competency, and education and teaching. Our study had similar findings; administrative and management were the top skill sets that clergy leaders reported that they lacked.

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<sup>5</sup> Eileen Campbell-Reid, "#Pandemic Pastoring: What it Was Like, How it Changed Us, Where We Go from Here." September 2022. <https://eileencampbellreed.org/pandemicpastoring-report-download-2022/>.

"I'm Exhausted All the Time': Exploring the Factors Contributing to Growing Clergy Discontentment." A Joint Report from Faith Communities Today and the Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations National Research Project (FACT/EPIC). <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/research/national-survey-research/im-exhausted-all-the-time-exploring-the-factors-contributing-to-growing-clergy-discontentment/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lin, Judith C. P. and Deborah Gin. 2020.



However, several of the leaders we interviewed talked about learning to use new technologies as the top thing they wished they had learned in their preparation for ministry. This makes sense, as we conducted our interviews over a period that began before and continued through and after the pandemic. Our findings reflect the changes that churches are making because of the pandemic.

We observed that the pandemic significantly changed religious practice—the way churches do worship and ministry, possibly permanently;<sup>7</sup> according to a report published in February 2024 by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research. In a fall 2023 national survey of congregations, 80% reported that they plan to continue offering hybrid worship for at least the next several years.

As churches pivot to new ministry models that require marketing and technological skill sets, this shift comes with staffing implications for future-focused churches. In our interviews and observations, we noted that most churches have put together worship technology teams, and among larger congregations, those are usually paid staff positions. In smaller congregations that cannot afford additional staff and/or cannot find volunteers to help plan and lead hybrid worship, this has added to the workload of the clergy leaders.

As noted in the previous section of this report, some clergy leaders are also finding themselves ill-equipped for these shifts in designing and leading worship. These shifts included changing the way they think of, plan for, and carry out worship and other ministries, learning new technologies for delivering sermons, podcasts, blog posts, and even using QR codes and texts during worship.

I believe that we are in a wilderness moment just as the people of Israel were in a wilderness moment long ago ...that there is a strong pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that is leading us, but that we are going to a place that we do not yet know what it will look like ... life coming out of the pandemic, into an intentionally hybrid church, into a church that you no longer have to live here to be a part of ... into a church that has taken the pandemic extremely seriously when your kid's soccer team has not. I think we are standing in the wilderness. And God has big things that are coming. But we can't yet see them.

~ Annabelle, lead pastor of  
Trinity Lutheran Church

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<sup>7</sup> "...Continuing Impact of Technology on Congregations..." FACT/EPIC.



Clergy leaders have also had to find new and creative ways to stay connected with their congregations, adjusting how they use their building facilities, and finding new ways to connect with their surrounding communities.

In some cases, clergy leaders had already been building and using these technological skills before the pandemic, and some talked of being lucky enough to have had those experiences or having someone in their congregation or already on their staff who could take on hybrid worship and other innovations that needed to happen quickly.

Others in our study identified this as a growing-edge area, expressing gratitude that they have just survived it. Although a few clergy leaders (mostly in Catholic parishes) said they would not be continuing to conduct hybrid masses, a majority of the clergy leaders we interviewed will, and they believe that this is the church of the future.

*(2) Long-term membership loss has led to the loss of staff and volunteers, too, which in turn has forced congregational leaders to pick up responsibilities that would have previously been delegated to someone else.*

If the pandemic's impact on clergy leaders and the way churches staff for ministry were the only stories we told, we would be glossing over the implications of long-term decline across the church in Western societies that led us to this moment. This decline has had detrimental effects on churches and their leaders.

When we asked congregational leaders if there were any responsibilities in their present role which they weren't prepared to do, we learned that even long before the pandemic, they had been struggling with having to do more tasks that had been previously covered by staff and volunteers when the churches were larger and had the financial resources to pay that staff.

I've taken on more and more to get us through [the pandemic]-- I mean, I think of it as just getting us through this time, but I know that at the end of this time, getting other people to jump in, and know what needs to be done, and to take on some of those roles, and many of our parishioners are getting older-- I mean, there's only more things that are going to end up on my plate, not less.

~ Darryl, priest at St. Lawrence Episcopal Church



The church and all its models are still based on a society that no longer exists;<sup>8</sup> one in which most people joined churches and other social organizations and were committed to them, with many serving as committee members, officers, and so on. Consequently, in that era churches also typically had enough volunteer workers who collectively had the skills required to pull off running a non-profit organization, such as building maintenance, accounting and budgeting, running business meetings, and offering human resources and legal advice. Though clergy leaders have always had some responsibilities beyond delivering a sermon and providing pastoral care, today, many of those tasks mentioned above fall on the clergy leaders.

*(3) There is also a perception among clergy leaders that formalized preparation for ministry is less adequate than it could or should be.*

As the U.S. religious landscape continues along the trajectory that began decades before the pandemic,<sup>9</sup> we are also learning from these clergy leader interviews that the traditional system of denominations working with affiliated seminaries to ensure that clergy leaders are well-equipped for congregational leadership has not been working adequately. Clergy often feel ill-equipped for tasks that they have been expected to do all along, such as church administration and management. And, we might add, most of the clergy leaders who talked about lacking training in these areas were not young, recent seminary graduates, which suggests that this is not a new phenomenon.

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<sup>8</sup> Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. 2000. Simon & Schuster.

<sup>9</sup> "Modeling the Future of Religion in America." Pew Research Center, 2022.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/>.





*(4) We must remember that preparation for ministry is not all about seminary training.*

I never was officially trained. I know what seminaries teach because I just kind of-- I'm an avid learner. And so, a lot of people go to seminaries, and they borrow my book. So, I feel like, in that regard, my equipping hasn't been based on training I've received from people. It's just been the Lord leading me in the directions I needed to study the things I needed. And if I find myself deficient in something, then I study.

~ Pastor Daniel at Crossroads Christian Church, a small, rural non-denominational congregation

There has been a trend for a while of older students entering seminary leading to congregational leadership. This may be a good thing because they enter into this vocation with maturity and wisdom, as well as skills needed for ministry that are not taught in seminary but picked up in other secular occupations or as volunteers in congregational settings.

When we asked clergy leaders what they needed to know how to do, but were not trained to do before they became congregational leaders, it did not particularly imply what they were not trained to do *through their seminary education* but was asked as a more general question about what skills they thought they lacked and would be useful as clergy leaders in congregations.

This is important because we do not want to limit our thinking to seminary education as the only process of preparation for ministry. We need to consider all the relevant experiences in preparing for ministry as a vocation, which includes hands-on training as well as any education that they receive.



And the order in which that training happens varies widely. Most clergy leaders in our study received some form of seminary training<sup>10</sup>. Of the 41 clergy leaders we interviewed for this project only one pastor in a rural Evangelical church did not receive formal seminary training before he became a pastor. Other clergy leaders, mainly in the Historically Black Protestant tradition, sought a form of seminary training during their engagement with ministry at some point (either in some other role in a church or after being called to be the church's pastor or associate pastor). Some of the clergy leaders in our study (in Evangelical, Mainline and Historically Black Protestant traditions, but none of the Catholics in our sample<sup>11</sup>) attended seminary after their first careers in a secular setting.

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<sup>10</sup> This might be because of response bias in our sampling procedure. Because this project was conducted at a seminary, and trained clergy leaders are more likely to trust researchers from a seminary, we could have over-representation of seminary-trained clergy leaders in our sample.

<sup>11</sup> One of the Catholic priests in our study attended seminary, left to pursue a government job, then went back to seminary and then became ordained.




# What Might This Mean?

What's happening that clergy leaders have not felt adequately prepared for congregational ministry, even before the pandemic? At this point, we can only share what we have learned. Attempts to explain why would be speculation.

We know that lately, denominations and seminaries have been asking what kinds of preparation clergy leaders need to better serve churches so they can remain relevant (or maybe the better language to use here is "become relevant again"). It's our hope that this report will provide incentive for those conversations to continue and perhaps lead to some creative new ways to prepare ministry leaders that are more aligned with the church we see in the future.

To prepare for the long term, seminaries must be engaging in some conversations that go beyond tweaking the curriculum, to include reimagining what the church of the future will look like, and what kinds of leadership training will be needed to support that. For the immediate short-term, perhaps five years or so, seminaries should be considering what kinds of training and preparation the shrinking number of MDiv-seeking students need to be well-prepared for leadership in this moment. It is our hope that our qualitative findings from this project can help to inform that short-term pivot, while also sounding the alarm for seminaries and denominations to engage in the important long-term reimagining work that must be done to help the church become relevant in our society once again.

And what are the implications for denominational leaders, who set the goals and vision for the broader church's future? They determine the "rules" for starting new initiatives, for ordination, for who can and cannot perform sacraments. So, the path that seminaries take is intimately tied to what the denominations with which they are affiliated decide will be their pathway into the future. 



# Appendix.

## Qualitative Research Methods

### *Sampling and recruitment*

Although this is a study about the people who comprise the religious workforce, because *congregations* employ the religious workforce, they are used as a primary unit of analysis in terms of sampling and recruiting. For the sake of convenience and budget, the geographic location for the qualitative portion of the RWP study was limited to the Washington DC metro area and surrounding counties. Although the results cannot be generalized to the rest of the country, insights from a carefully planned sample can still be of real value in thinking about how church staffing and the nature of congregational ministry have changed and continue to evolve. We can learn much more about these topics by asking open-ended questions in interviews than could be gleaned from survey data.

We deliberately sampled churches from a variety of Christian traditions, in urban, suburban, and rural settings, and of different sizes, which would allow us to make some comparisons by each of these sets of congregational characteristics. Our sampling goal was to end up with 45 congregations as described in Table 2.

Table 2. Originally proposed sample				
Religious Tradition	Small (< 50)	Medium (51-300)	Large (301 +)	Total
Evangelical Protestant (14%)	3	3	3	9
Mainline Protestant (15%)	3	3	3	9
Historically Black Protestant (12%)	3	3	3	9
Catholic (19%)	3	3	3	9
Other Christian	3	3	3	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>45</b>



Our goal was to include three churches from each of five different Christian traditions in each size category. *Small* was defined as having fewer than 50 in average weekly worship attendance; *medium* was 51-300; and *large* was more than 300. These three size designations come from <http://www.usachurches.org/church-sizes.htm> but they are frequently used in the academic literature on churches.

These five categories of Christian churches come from the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Survey (<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>), a national survey of more than 35,000 Americans about their religious affiliations, beliefs and practices, and social and political views. Percentages refer to the percentage of adults belonging to each tradition in the Washington DC metro area according to the same Pew study.

The "Other Christian" category was intended to capture congregations that might be underrepresented in the other categories, such as independent churches and racial and ethnic minority congregations. We decided to fill the category with Latino or Hispanic congregations, in Catholic and Protestant traditions as we were able.

We began the sampling process using a stratified random sampling method. First, we drew a random sample within the DC metro area and surrounding region of U.S. Census block groups (geographical areas that are smaller than Census tracts, meant to approximate a neighborhood). Five block groups were drawn from the city, five from DC suburbs, and five from the nearest rural area. Google maps were then used to map all churches that we could find within each of these block groups. Then, from the resulting lists of churches, we began randomly drawing samples of congregations in threes from each list (urban, suburban, and rural), noting to which traditions they belonged as well as our estimates of their sizes (which we confirmed later after contacting them), to fill all the cells in the proposed sample shown in Table 2. We then contacted the churches as described below.



At first, we reached out to churches via phone calls and follow-up emails. During the pandemic shutdown in the spring and summer of 2020, we turned to emails and Facebook messaging, and that continued after congregations began returning to their buildings, as they didn't always have office staff in place to answer phones. Sometimes we were unable to get through using any of those methods, and sometimes a researcher just showing up on Sunday morning and introducing themselves was what it took to gain a church's participation.

When we exhausted the randomly selected lists, we turned to snowball sampling (asking those congregational leaders with whom we had developed a good rapport to provide us with names and contact information for leaders in neighboring churches) to fill out our sample. Although we were able to find 45 congregations, some were ultimately dropped from the project for various reasons.

**Table 3. Final sample**

Religious Tradition	Small (< 50)	Medium (51-300)	Large (301 +)	Total
Evangelical Protestant (14%)	3	2	1	6
Mainline Protestant (15%)	5	8	3	16
Historically Black Protestant (12%)	3	3	1	7
Catholic (19%)	0	1	2	3
Latino	3	1	4	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>40</b>

In total, we were able to recruit leaders to be interviewed from 40 congregations, with a desirable mix of congregations by size (small, medium, and large), Christian tradition (Historically Black Protestant, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Latino), and in urban, suburban, and rural contexts. We made sure that a large proportion of the sample included leaders from congregations in which for most congregants the first language was Spanish, in both Catholic and Protestant settings.

Table 3 shows the breakdown by size and tradition of the final sample. The sample breakdown by geographic location is not shown in the table; 22 were suburban, 12 urban, and 6 rural.



## *Data collection*

We sought to interview the “lead” clergy person in larger congregations that have multiple staff, and the “solo” clergy person in smaller churches. In one congregation, we interviewed both an interim clergy leader and a lay leader. In another, we interviewed a clergy couple who together co-pastored two small congregations; and in a third congregation, we interviewed the lead pastor, as well as his wife and a ministry staff member. This resulted in interviews with 44 individuals, though only 41 of them were clergy leaders, and only the 41 clergy leaders’ interview responses were used in this report.

We explored how these congregations staff for ministry through interviews of their clergy leaders, reviewing their publicly available materials such as websites, Facebook pages, and church records, through direct observations of worship and meetings, and through an online questionnaire that asked about their budgets and how they staff for ministry.

## *Analyses*

Although our primary data source for this paper was interviews, we also gathered additional qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sources: documents provided by the participating churches, a questionnaire that we asked them to fill out with information about staffing and budgets, a worship observation and an organizational meeting observation at each church, and viewing their website (if they had one) and their Facebook page (if they had one).

Interviews and these other documents were loaded into Dedoose qualitative analysis software and “coded” into categories (and subcategories and then subcategories of those), until we felt that the depth of coding provided enough information to answer each research question.

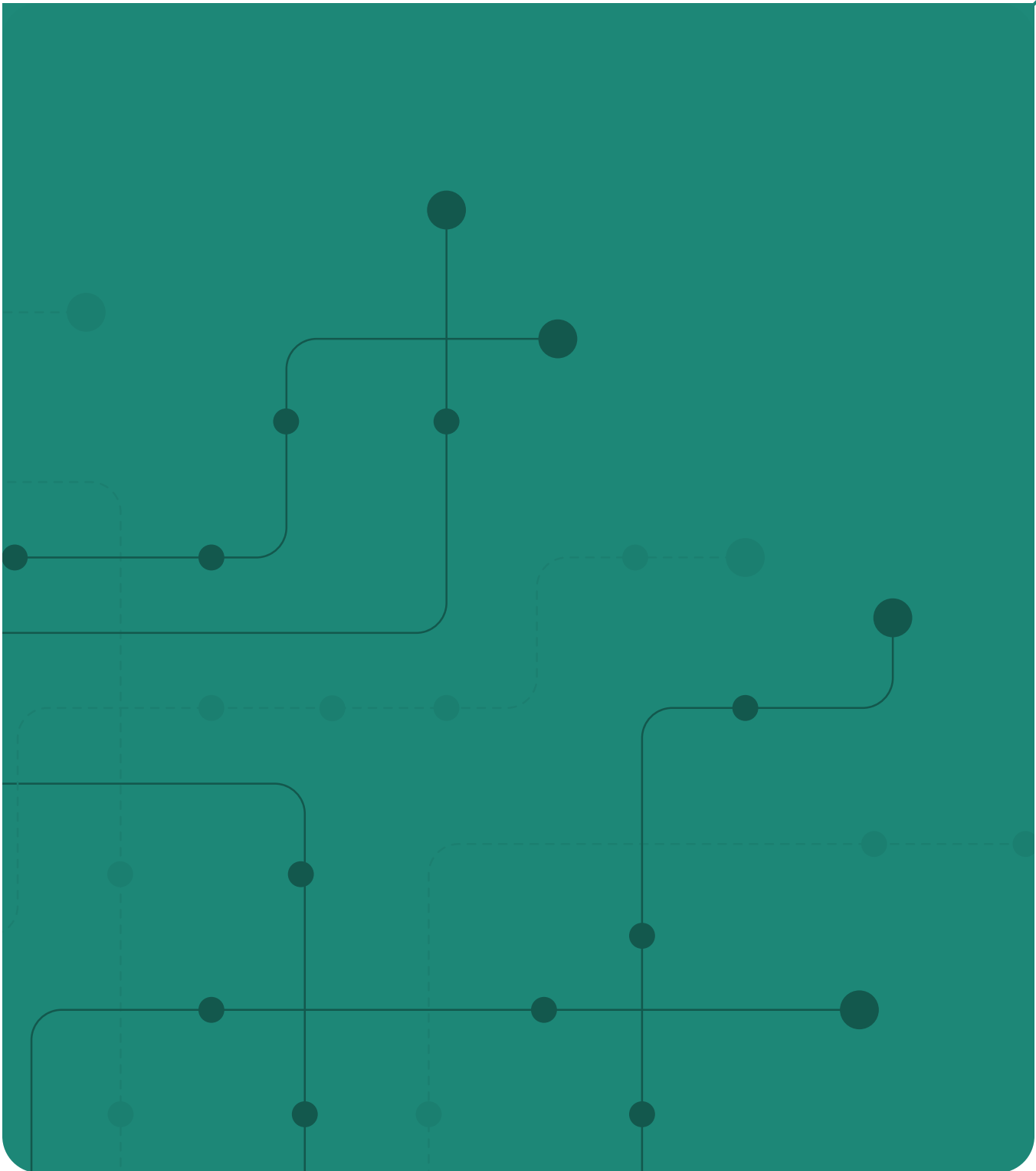


We also used all these data sources to create a spreadsheet that gave a profile of each congregation (including its location, size, affiliation, whether it had been declining, stable, or growing in both membership size and average worship attendance, staff and budget information, and information about their website and/or social media accounts).

This spreadsheet also included information about each clergy leader we interviewed, including our estimates of their age, gender, race, and ethnicity. In addition, the spreadsheet also included some findings for key research questions, such as their path to ministry, what they see as their greatest challenge in the next few years, and their staffing “wish lists.” We also used the spreadsheet to track staff movement (when people left and/or were replaced during the period of our study).

The Dedoose codebook and this spreadsheet were used to build this report.





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