



Unique Challenges for Congregational Leaders **in the National Capital Area**

By Deborah L. Coe and Hale Inanoglu

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



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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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Unique Challenges for Congregational Leaders in the National Capital Area

By Hale Inanoglu and Deborah Coe

Introduction

In January of 2021, Religious Workforce Project (RWP) team member Dr. Amy Kubichek settled in to interview Iain¹, the middle-aged, white male lead pastor at Grace Lutheran. Grace is a large suburban, mostly white Mainline Protestant church located in an affluent Washington, DC suburb. The church had survived the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic fairly well, while providing much-needed services for their community. However, the congregation has slowly been losing members over the years, and as of the time of this interview, they were facing staffing cuts, despite increased giving during the pandemic shutdown in 2020. So, Amy was not very surprised when Iain shared that he found living and working in the national capital area to be very stressful:

Iain: “I have struggled with depression and anxiety in this context.... I’ve been told that most of my peers here in northern Virginia are as well. At least that’s what my doctor says.”

Amy: “So—in the context of doing ministry in this area, or the context of the pandemic?”

Iain: “This area. Yeah. [Through the] pandemic, actually.....my stress level has decreased, not increased. I have felt a thousand times better during this

¹ A pseudonym. The names of all interviewees and their churches have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.



pandemic year...but the stress here is the leadership stress, managing the critical nature of the environment [and] managing the financial stresses, which are considerable. It's those things.”

Like many clergy leaders serving congregations in the United States, Iain was well aware of the financial challenges facing a shrinking congregation located in an expensive area², especially in 2021 as the nation was emerging from a difficult pandemic. But, after our team had interviewed a number of clergy leaders, who each had their own story to tell of the extreme challenges posed by this pandemic, we were surprised to learn that *serving highly educated and upwardly and geographically mobile constituents would be considered a bigger challenge for churches in the national capital area than serving during the pandemic*. What's going on here? And what is the Religious Workforce Project?

The Lilly Endowment-funded Religious Workforce Project combines nationally gathered quantitative data with a detailed qualitative study of Christian congregations in Washington, DC and the surrounding area to explore trends in the religious workforce. The qualitative research component of the project aims to understand *how congregations are staffing for ministry* in this changing U.S. religious landscape, and *how clergy leaders prepare for and view their ministries*. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews with 41 clergy leaders, observations of worship and staff meetings, online questionnaires, and reviewing church documents and digital content. The study, which gathered data between 2019 and late 2022 (with a hiatus year in 2020), also examines the impact of the pandemic on these trends.

Although the qualitative team did not directly ask about the specific challenges of being a congregational leader in the nation's capital area, these leaders often shared during their interviews the challenges of ministry that are unique to the region. In what follows, we will highlight three unique challenges that make serving in the nation's capital area demanding for clergy leaders: (1) the hyper-critical nature of a highly educated constituency, (2) the high turnover of a very mobile constituency, and (3) proximity to Capitol Hill and its often disruptive politics. For the sake of brevity, we will

² DC is ranked as the fifth most expensive US city; Arlington, Virginia (a SW suburb located directly across the Potomac River from DC) as thirteenth, and suburb Bethesda, Maryland (which is directly to the NW of DC) is fifteenth, according to a 2023 report by Erin Gobler, featured on a Quicken Loans website. <https://www.quickenloans.com/learn/most-expensive-cities-in-the-us>.



refer to the national capital area as the DMV, referring to the Washington, DC metro area and nearby suburbs in Maryland and Virginia.

Three Challenges for Congregational Leaders

1. The Hyper-critical Nature of Highly Educated Constituents

A large proportion of DMV residents perform government and military-related work, which generally requires high levels of education. These well-educated constituents can have very high expectations, which poses a unique challenge for clergy leaders and their staff as they are pressured to adjust their ministry work to fit the local culture.

Pastor Iain, introduced earlier, is highly educated with a doctorate in leadership. Even with his background, he shares that pastoring highly educated constituents is “laborious”:

This is not a warm congregation...this congregation is “Northern Virginia cool.” It’s a very conscientious-perfectionistic environment. And so it’s not warm, and it’s very critical. And that makes it.....not a life-giving environment to do ministry.... I know that there are critical congregations everywhere, but the nature of ministry here in the Beltway³ is different. And it’s different outside of the Beltway than inside the Beltway...the wealthy, well-educated constituencies of Northern Virginia and Southern and Western Maryland, we’re just a very difficult clientele....

I think what I see here in this environment is... the education level. Three-quarters of my adults have master’s degrees. One-quarter of my adults have doctorates. And so it’s their need to argue with all the information. It’s their

³ When people refer to being inside “the Beltway,” they are referencing the area enclosed by I-495, known as the Capital Beltway, which rings the area, including Washington DC and some of its adjacent suburbs in MD and VA. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inside_the_Beltway.



need to have to understand how you arrived at any number, at any assertion. It's the constant need to argue over things; not even trying to do it in a nasty way; it's just what they do at the Department of Defense, the Pentagon. This is what they do at the White House. This is what they do on Capitol Hill. This is what they do when they are lobbying firms. This is what they do, and that comes [with them] to church. And so it makes ministry laborious. And it means that a conversation we're constantly having to have as a staff is, "Did you double-check those numbers? How are you going to deal with the criticism? What kind of pushback are we going to get over this?"

So, because we are doing our congregational meeting here at the end of the month on Zoom, we're doing a town hall on Sunday afternoon so that we can give our "super critics" an opportunity to come and "kick the tires" before we get to the congregational meeting. And hopefully, the congregational meeting will go [well]—it's all this extra work that we go through, just so we can manage the uber-critical nature of the congregation.

Iain is not the only clergy leader in our study who talked about the very critical nature of a highly educated constituency. Annabelle, the pastor of Trinity Lutheran, a medium-sized, suburban Mainline Protestant church, notices a similar uniqueness about serving a congregation in the DMV:

It's becoming harder to make the case, if you will, for the church's relevance. And the field of what else is out there—and in our community, I'm in Fairfax County, right—everything's done well. So the church better be doing it well, too. Leaflets [to attract people to the congregation] are no longer cutting it.

There is, however, a "plus side" to serving in this area, notes Annabelle:

So, I'm in Washington. I'm in a performance-based payment system. My leadership are folks who work in jobs where exceptional performance is rewarded financially. And so even in the midst of the pandemic, they issued performance bonuses for me and key leaders who they saw went above and beyond. When have you ever had a church give a performance bonus?

As Annabelle notes, it's not just the pastor who has to prove herself again and again, but it's also the church; what the church does needs to be evaluated and re-evaluated to



remain relevant. In a perfectionist and fast-evolving environment, clergy leaders need to be in tune with the language and the tools of those whom they serve.

Even home visits, something clergy leaders were once expected to do in most settings, do not work as well in this fast-paced atmosphere where professionals are defining how things are done—including ministry—through their technical knowledge and expertise. With that also comes a lower level of trust, notes Alex, the pastor of another large, suburban Mainline Protestant church:

It's hard because Northern Virginia is its own kind of animal...people don't really want me in their homes. You know what I mean? But that's a Northern Virginia thing. But if you were to think, "Oh, in the 50's, pastors just went and visited people's homes and did all that [and expected it to be well-received]," it's a very different kind of environment up here.

This makes it a little more difficult to build strong pastoral relationships with one's congregation. It can also be difficult to know how to engage a congregation filled with highly technical experts, noted Antonio, the priest at Iglesia Catolica Santa Ana, a suburban Catholic church:

[Not far from the DC metro area is] ... a major Navy aviation base. It's actually the headquarters of Naval Aviation with the test pilot school and there's a lot of research and development. There are a lot of engineers and engineering-type people around here.

So, even though [the surrounding area] traditionally was...tobacco farming and oyster fishing, I remember one of my friends, a priest that came to visit... [to give the homily] at one of my daily masses, and he assumed that a big chunk of the congregation were farmers. I don't think I have one farmer. I probably have 300 engineers. Yeah. The examples he used [in that homily] didn't really work so well!

Even the local youth reflect a culture of perfectionism and skepticism, which creates a number of unique challenges for leaders because the youth are also anxious and stressed out. Brad, youth pastor at First Presbyterian, a medium-sized, Mainline Protestant, suburban church, explains that when he tries to teach theological concepts to the youth, the stressful and politicized culture can sometimes get in the way:



... When I think about ... the anxieties of this culture around us compared to a Spokane, a downtown Philadelphia or a suburb outside of DC ... no one says no to anything, [resulting in] overscheduled kids, [and a] really high pressure to perform. ... So in my ministry ... We try to be a low-pressure place. I try to emphasize, “You are enough. If you are able to come as you can, that’s great.” And one of my hopes [is] that I can eventually [teach them that] this level of busyness is not going to sustain you long-term as you become a college student, a young adult, [and] an adult.

But the youth that I work with are generally Biblically illiterate ... And so, I am working with getting kids to talk about God and their personal faith when it can... very quickly move to either moralistic or a social or a political thing. So if we talk about ... taking the log out of your own eye, that can very quickly devolve into discussions around identity politics or patriarchy ... because ... it’s in the air. It’s definitely in the air around here. But if you talk about prayer or faith or trust or hope, those get a little bit more—those times get a little more rickety or [they] tend to respond with “crickets” [i.e.—silence].

As we have shown, serving congregations in the DMV presents unique challenges due to the hyper-critical and perfectionistic nature of its highly educated residents. Clergy leaders struggle with a demanding environment where members’ high educational attainment and performance expectations make ministry “laborious.” The constant need for detailed justification makes serving in this context difficult, as does maintaining the church’s relevance in a culture where exceptional performance is expected, and traditional methods of engagement are not enough.

The youth cannot evade the regional culture either; they are stressed and overscheduled from the constant pressure to perform, while being keenly aware of the country’s polarizing politics. These factors make it difficult to lead their spiritual formation.

2. The High Turnover of a Very Mobile Constituency

Because of the high proportion of area residents who work for the government and military, serving congregations in the DMV poses an additional challenge: the high turnover of a mobile constituency. In their interviews, clergy leaders frequently spoke of issues related to the transient nature of their congregations.



For example, Alex is the pastor of Open Hearts UMC, a large, suburban Mainline Protestant church located in Virginia. Alex noted that the constant movement of military families creates instability for the congregation:

I mean the interesting part of being in a transient, very military-based—so I have nine families moving this summer. And normally, hopefully you get the revolving door of that, there are going to be five or six military families who are going to move in. But ... people don't live here in retirement. They retire somewhere else.

These families often do not retire in the area, leading to a perpetual cycle of incoming and outgoing members. This transient nature makes it difficult to build a stable, engaged congregation and strains church resources, as there is a frequent need to recruit and train new volunteers.

Similarly, Father Antonio of Iglesia Catolica Santa Ana, a medium-sized suburban Catholic parish, emphasized the difficulty of engaging with a constituency that includes many veterans and individuals on short-term assignments. The transient nature of these members means that their involvement is often limited, affecting the continuity and effectiveness of ministry efforts:

So, there's a lot of technical expertise and training ... [and] a lot of veterans... and some of them are cycling through their one, two or three-year [tours]. It's a little difficult getting engagement from those. I know they are not going to be here for very long, which is a little different from a lot of the other parishes ... So, we do get the turnover.

Theo, the pastor of New Life Community Church, a growing, medium-sized, multi-denominational suburban church, pointed out that the high mobility of individuals, combined with their busy schedules—juggling family visits and extracurricular activities—further complicates efforts to maintain active participation. Many congregation members are frequently traveling or engaged in numerous activities, leading to sporadic attendance and reduced involvement in church life:

I think the competition for people's time and attention is very different now because of the media and the accessibility of transport, right? ... I noticed this especially in DC, because a lot of people aren't from here, and so they are



always traveling for family. And on top [of that], they are busy with soccer and baseball ... It feels like even more core elders and former elders, if they are here twice a month, that's a good thing.

Overall, the high turnover and mobility of congregants in the DMV—primarily due to the prevalence of military and government-related jobs—pose challenges for congregational leaders. The constant influx and departure of military and government personnel, along with busy lifestyles and frequent travel, lead to difficulties in maintaining stable, engaged congregations. This transient environment has negative implications for retaining old members, recruitment and training of new members to serve as volunteers, and the continuity of church ministries.

3. Proximity to Capitol Hill and Disruptive Politics

The last unique challenge facing churches in the DMV is probably the one challenge our readers would have most anticipated: whether churches like it or not, they are embedded in contentious politics due to their location. We found proximity to Capitol Hill and disruptive politics to be traumatizing for some church leaders and their congregations, and for others, less of a challenge, but they would nonetheless identify serving in this region as challenging.

A striking example is Holy Cross Lutheran Church, a medium-sized, urban Mainline Protestant congregation. During the pandemic and the concurrent racial unrest after the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota, the church faced daily protests and political unrest, and the situation worsened during the January 6, 2021, Capitol Hill insurrection when the church was targeted by white supremacists because of its support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Holy Cross Lutheran pastor Elizabeth described how the church's visibility and political stance made it a target for violence, including an attack on their Black Lives Matter banner. Elizabeth shared some of her experience with us during the interview:

I think it was very different when there was an uprising going on in Washington, DC and every day there were protestors ... so in 2020, there was a lot of focus on that. And that was trying in that the convening of I would say ongoing suffering because of the pandemic, political turmoil, in part because of who was the president, unprecedented levels of protesting that shifted from supporting Black Lives Matter to white supremacists attacking...



Particularly, even on this weekend, in the [Washington] Post, there was a piece on that—it was in December when the Proud Boys⁴ came and stole the banner [from our church property]. Well, they also came to Holy Cross Lutheran Church. And so we were attacked because we were a white church with Black Lives Matter support.

So part of the role that I had during that time, and it wasn't well-received by some of the young adults who were pretty sure they were equipped to deal with anything, which is not true because the level of evil flying around was above our formation...

... I'm going to go ahead and say where I observed evil working on the outside, but also working to get into the congregation to cause fracture and confusion. And so part of what I had to do was hold the space and I also had to assert myself as the senior pastor for safety for the entire institution. And some of the things that—some of the young adults thought we could do right away, we could do right away. But we'd like to have the congregation support for that. And that made me very unpopular.

Elizabeth had to navigate these crises while maintaining the safety and unity of the congregation, despite resistance from some younger members who wanted to do something tangible but were unprepared to deal with such extreme cases. The church's location near Capitol Hill meant it was exposed to both external threats and internal conflicts, highlighting the difficulties of leading a congregation in such a politically charged environment.

Another way that the politicized environment affects congregations in the DMV is that the increased political polarization seeps into congregational life in ways that we typically do not see in other locations. From what we have observed throughout our careers, we think it is safe to say that Mainline Protestant denominations are hesitant to label themselves as “progressive” or “conservative,” preferring instead to say that they are inclusive, which leaves room for different interpretations of scripture and “a place at the table” for everyone who desires to follow Jesus.

⁴ “The Proud Boys is an exclusively male North American far-right, neo-fascist militant organization that promotes and engages in political violence. The group's leaders have been convicted of violently opposing the United States government, including the constitutionally prescribed transfer of presidential power.” Source: Wikipedia.



However, we observed in the DMV a tendency for congregations to clearly lean theologically and socio-politically in one direction or the other. The challenge for clergy leaders in this context is helping their congregations navigate the polarization in a healthy way, which is hard to do when virtually everyone in the congregation leans either left or right politically.

For example, St. John's United Church is a growing, medium-sized, mostly white suburban Mainline Protestant church that leans left. Their pastor, Bryan, who is openly gay, describes this congregation as:

.... very serious about their engagement with society and mission and ... of course, we're right outside of D.C., so it would be derelict for any of our congregations not to be concerned about politics ... And then ... probably the biggest selling point is we would almost put up with the other churches and straw men and say, "We're not those people, we're not going to judge you based on what you wear, we're not going to judge you because of your children. It's a very open-minded welcoming [congregation]"—and in this congregation, genuinely so.

Yeah, I mean, the cutting edge of that is, are we *really* welcoming to *everybody*? I mean, are you going to welcome the guy that marched on the 6th into this fellowship? And it's like, "Well, probably not," which is a challenge, but very welcoming to anyone who agrees with us. [laughter]

Near the other end of the political spectrum we have Mount Hope Church, a small, conservative, white, rural Mainline Protestant church that was in the process of disaffiliating with their denomination at the time of our study. They have slowly been losing members and employee morale has been low, notes Pastor Jeff, who like Pastor Bryan, is also middle-aged, white, and highly educated. Jeff shared during his interview something that had surprised him when he had first arrived to be the lead pastor at Mount Hope:

...we have a security team that I've never had at another church. There are literally three men that have concealed carry weapons. And they've even got little head pieces. They look like they are greeting you at the door. But somebody is watching all of the cameras and saying, "Somebody we don't know is coming to door number one." And it was all in place before I got here.



And it's actually pretty odd because the doors are locked. I mean, the door you walked in. There is another door where we have our handicapped people come in because it's closer, and they don't have to go upstairs. That's locked. And if there is not a security person there, they just have to wait until somebody comes and open the door because they are so worried about security even though we are not in downtown Baltimore. I don't get it. So there's lots of things that would stop people from feeling, I think, super welcome when they come through the door. And it's something they need to work on.

It seems that fear of the “other” has gripped this small congregation, which is located out in the middle of a field, far from the bustle and traffic of the city. Their fear has increased so much that they have elevated their security measures, and as far as we could tell, it was not in response to having had any kind of incident at the church. Managing this fear comes at a great price: it is hard to be welcoming when one fears the stranger.

Serving congregations in the Washington, DC metro area is challenging for congregational leaders. The national capital region, marked by its high level of education, transience, and intense political activity, creates a complex context for congregational leadership. Congregational leaders must navigate all of these challenges to effectively manage and support their congregations.

Putting It All Together

Although we did not set out at the beginning of this project to learn about challenges for congregations that are particular to their location in the nation's capital and surrounding area, our study provided a unique opportunity for us to identify some of these challenges by examining the data we had already collected. We identified three challenges that may be unique to this region of the country, which make serving in the nation's capital area particularly demanding for religious leaders: (1) the hyper-critical nature of a highly educated constituency, (2) the high turnover of a very mobile constituency, and (3) proximity to Capitol Hill and its often disruptive political activities.

Are these challenges really unique to the DMV?

We point out that these challenges *may be unique* to this region, as we have not tested to see if this holds true in other regions. Certainly, there are other places where



the constituencies are highly educated and have very high expectations. And, there are other places where military bases are located, leading to a higher-than-average turnover in a large proportion of the local population, as military workers frequently get moved between different bases. However, *this combination of challenges found here* is likely to be unique (at least, in the United States), as there is only one national capital with its unique national political and military-centric network.

What might this mean? Implications for the preparation for ministry of congregational leaders

So, what does this mean for clergy leaders and the organizations that help prepare them for ministry? Below, we consider some plausible implications for preparation for ministry in this challenging context and for other contexts that may pose similar challenges.

(1) the hyper-critical nature of a highly educated constituency

Being an effective clergy leader in the DMV or any other highly educated, perfectionistic, and critical environment can be difficult. Clergy leaders must navigate these pressures by:

1. developing *emotional intelligence skills* to handle constant scrutiny from overly perfectionistic constituencies
2. ensuring that they (or someone on their staff) are able to engage effectively with *technologies used by contemporary society* to meet expectations of a technically proficient congregation
3. expanding their *communication and critical thinking skills* to engage effectively with congregants who are informed and likely to question traditional beliefs and practices
4. building their *administrative and management skills* to meet expectations of congregations that they act as not only spiritual leaders, but also as CEOs and effective managers in their roles as clergy leaders

To help candidates and congregational leaders develop these skills, seminaries and other organizations involved in candidates' preparation for congregational ministry and continuing education could be incorporating into their curricula:



- training and practice in constructive dialogue and conflict resolution
- experiential training in technologies used by congregations
- small-group supportive communities, where congregational leaders can share their experiences in safe, supportive environments

Additionally, by fostering an environment that values intellectual engagement, these organizations can prepare leaders to respond thoughtfully to inquiries and criticisms, ultimately strengthening the relationship between clergy leaders and their congregations.

(2) the high turnover of a very mobile constituency

In light of the high turnover rates associated with a highly mobile and transient population, religious leaders must be equipped with the skills necessary to rapidly foster community and connection. Preparation and continuing education programs could place more emphasis on evangelism and member engagement, which are both necessary for congregational continuity, but particularly so in areas of high population turnover. Some suggestions include:

- Congregational adult education resources that include an emphasis on *evangelism as a natural extension of discipleship* (something that is typically not emphasized in Catholic and Mainline Protestant congregations)
- Leader resources for *building relationships with newcomers and integrating them* quickly into congregational life
- Resources for helping congregations *build strong communities* that include collaboration with people living in the surrounding neighborhood

(3) proximity to Capitol Hill and its often-disruptive politics

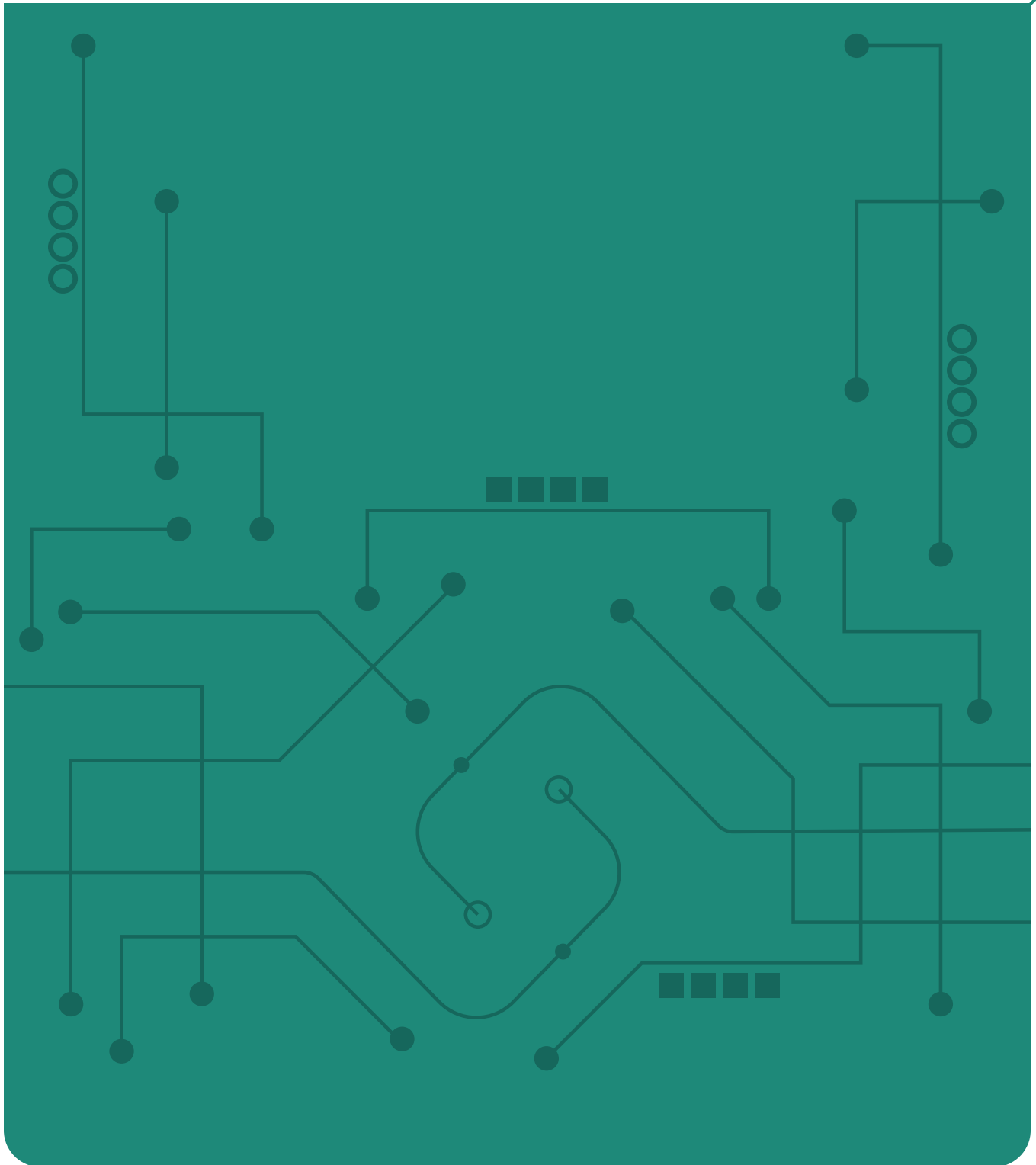
For congregations in the DMV, proximity to Capitol Hill adds another layer of complexity, requiring clergy leaders to be adept in public theology and social advocacy. This implies that organizations involved in the preparation of candidates for ministry and continuing education for clergy leaders should offer training focused on the intersection of faith and public life, enabling leaders to navigate politically charged discussions with sensitivity and insight. Courses that cover advocacy strategies, social



justice issues, and the ethical implications of political engagement are crucial. By equipping clergy leaders with the *knowledge and skills to address societal challenges*, seminaries and church governing bodies can prepare them to be effective advocates for their communities while fostering unity amidst diverse opinions.

In such an environment, the ability to offer *counseling* (or know when and where to refer individuals when appropriate) and *pastoral care* also seems critical, and yet in our research, we learned that many clergy leaders felt ill-equipped for this role when called upon to provide pastoral care or counseling referrals.

In conclusion, the challenges posed by a hyper-critical, highly educated constituency, a very mobile and transient population, and a politically charged environment have profound implications for the preparation of religious leaders. To prepare leaders for serving in this region and other areas with similar contexts, organizations that train these leaders must adapt their curricula and training to prioritize: emotional intelligence, technology skills, advanced communication and critical thinking skills, administration and management skills, evangelism and hospitality, member engagement, pastoral care and counseling, community-building strategies, public theology, and public advocacy training. By addressing these needs, seminaries and judicatory bodies can cultivate leaders who are not only capable of navigating their unique contexts but also fostering resilient, inclusive, and engaged congregations that thrive in challenging environments.



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