CHAPTER 4

Black and Bivocational

JESSICA YOUNG BROWN

Research on the ministerial profession for the past twenty years indicates an increasing reliance on bivocational ministers in parish ministry. Congregational finances are a significant contributing factor. In the United States, fewer people are identifying with organized religion, and this translates to fewer members at churches and fewer monetary resources to make those churches run. This shift has resulted in much-deserved attention to a variety of topics related to bivocational ministry, including how seminaries can train clergy for bivocational ministry, the financial implications of this shift, and ways to support clergy in mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness.

Bivocational ministry is clearly a specialized way of doing ministry. The example of Paul as a bivocational minister balancing his tentmaking with his church planting has become a foundational framework for theological discussions of bivocational ministry (Dorr

1988, 1). Dorr's discussion of the financial and cultural realities that necessitated this balancing act mirrors some of the same realities we see today. Simply put, some people are in bivocational ministry because they must be for financial reasons. Still, this does not mean they are not called to and cannot thrive in a multifaceted ministry context. Ferris (2001, 82) acknowledged that bivocational ministry necessitates an ability to be professional and effective in multiple domains—often simultaneously. To call it a juggling act is an understatement. These ministers must be able to prioritize time, organize their tasks, and be efficient in their professional lives.

Deasy (2018), Stephens (chapter 1 in this volume), and others have stressed the need for seminaries to educate clergy about the realities of bivocational ministry. Stephens made the argument that it is the project of the whole congregation to envision and imagine the ways bivocational ministry can be practiced. Bickers (2007, 14) acknowledged that there is a call to bivocational ministry and a choice that can be made about embarking on this kind of vocation. Thus, there is a need not only for traditional seminary education but also continuing education, which can be a challenge due to the busy schedules of bivocational ministers. The truth is that much of the formal education ministers receive imagines a life committed to parish ministry as the sole vocation. This is an incomplete vision for multiple reasons. As mentioned, a large segment of ministers who are bivocational will need to balance ministry demands with other paid employment. Second, as a part of the same dynamics that yield increasing numbers of bivocational ministers, we must acknowledge that parish ministry is not the only place ministers engage their call. Ministers serve in nonprofit organizations, policy positions, and education, while still holding other paid professional responsibilities. Thus, the true educational mandate is one that allows for a more expansive view of what ministry is, one that fully incorporates work inside and outside the church.

Sometimes lost in the larger discussion of bivocational ministry is the impact of culture, particularly race. A 2017 survey by the Association of Theological Schools revealed that about 30% of graduating seminarians anticipated bivocational ministry (Deasy 2018). However, when these numbers were broken down by race, people of color were much more likely to anticipate this track: almost 60% of Black seminarians and over 40% of Hispanic/Latinx seminarians were preparing for bivocational ministry. There is a clear trend that people of color are more likely to be involved in bivocational ministry

(Young Brown 2017). In many Black church communities, there may even be an expectation of bivocational ministry (Crawford 2012). From the inception of the Black church in the United States, pastoral leaders have engaged in other professions simultaneously, including education, politics, and other forms of civil service. In addition, Black pastors are more likely to serve in part-time pastoral positions, less likely to serve in fully funded ministry positions, and more likely to identify as bivocational than their White and Latinx counterparts (Crawford 2012, 20). This dynamic is likely even more pronounced for licensed and ordained ministers who do not serve in a primary pastoral role, such as unpaid associate ministers. In a Black church context, the inclusion of unpaid ministerial staff is critical because unpaid associate ministers, in conjunction with bivocational and partially funded pastoral leaders, are heavily involved in the everyday functioning of the church and are active and visible ministerial leaders. It is safe to say that bivocational ministers probably make up the majority of the vocation.

While a large segment of Black ministers is bivocational, there is a dearth of research about the experiences of these clergy. Perry and Schleifer (2019, 2) acknowledged that, while bivocational ministry has become more of a trend in the past twenty years for the church at large, Black pastors have been engaged in this ministerial dynamic for longer (see also Crawford 2012, 24). This reality begs the question: why are we not looking to Black bivocational ministers to inform our understanding about what it means to thrive in this context? In any professional context, the people who have been engaging in a practice longer and more extensively naturally become the experts. Thus, this chapter looks to Black bivocational clergy as exemplars for navigating bivocational ministry. The goal of this qualitative exploration is to explore the practices and strategies these clergy use to thrive.

Methodology

Through email listservs and social media invitations, Black ministers who self-identified as bivocational were invited to participate in a brief survey about their experiences as bivocational or multivocational ministers. In addition to free response items, participants were asked survey questions on a five-point Likert scale to assess their experiences in bivocational ministry, where a score of one

would indicate they have not had that experience, and a score of five would indicate they have had that experience very often (figure 1).

Figure 1: Likert scale response.

After completing the survey, participants were invited to participate in a 30–40-minute individual interview to share their experiences in more detail. Survey data was collected from March 2021 to August 2021, with interviews held in June and July 2021.

Of twenty-eight survey participants, sixteen indicated interest in completing the interview, and seven interviews were successfully scheduled. It should be noted that the difference between those who expressed interest in the interview and those who were able to complete the interview is likely telling of a common dynamic in bivocational ministry—full schedules and very little free time.

Survey Results

The 28 survey participants were 64% male and 36% female. Almost half (46%) were married, 28% percent identified as single, 14% indicated being in long-term romantic relationships, and 10% were divorced.

Clergy who responded to the survey had been in ministry an average of 14.6 years, with an average of 11 of those years serving bivocationally. In addition, almost 68% reported that their ministry work was unpaid. Yet 61% of this sample reported having an official position in a parish context.

Participants were asked a variety of questions, which sought to explore experiences in bivocational ministry that might be seen as positive or helpful. Over 80% of respondents stated they are able to use their "secular" skills in their ministry work often or very often. Slightly over 78% stated that they are able to explore gifts and passions that they would not have been able to with just one job. Eighty-two percent of participants endorsed that they are often able to find opportunities to see God in different ways (see figure 2).

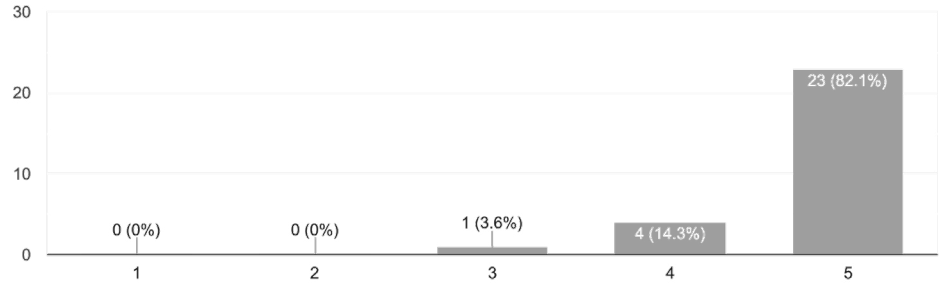

Figure 2: Finding opportunities to see God in different ways.

When asked about finances, results were more mixed. One of the purported benefits of bivocational ministry is increased financial security. However, in this sample, about 35% provided neutral or negative responses, while the other 65% stated they have more financial security due to bivocational ministry.

Unsurprisingly, results were mixed when asked about spending time with family and making time for self-care (figures 3 and 4). While some ministers felt they are able to respond to these demands appropriately, others did not see opportunities for self-care or family in their lives. The most common response to a question about the ability to have work/life balance was neutral (figure 5). Likewise, most participants (60%) provided neutral or negative responses when asked about their ability to engage in leisure activities (figure 6). This is consistent with the literature on the challenges associated with ministry in general and bivocational ministry in particular (for example, Ferguson et al. 2014; Wells et al. 2012). These results suggest that, while some clergy are finding a flow between personal life, ministry responsibilities, and caring for themselves well, this balance is not happening for all.

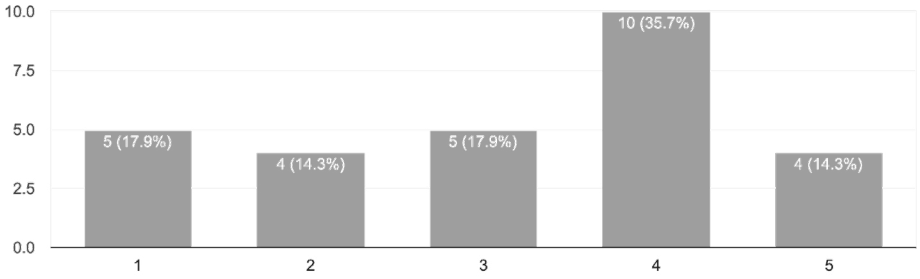

Figure 3: Spending time with family.

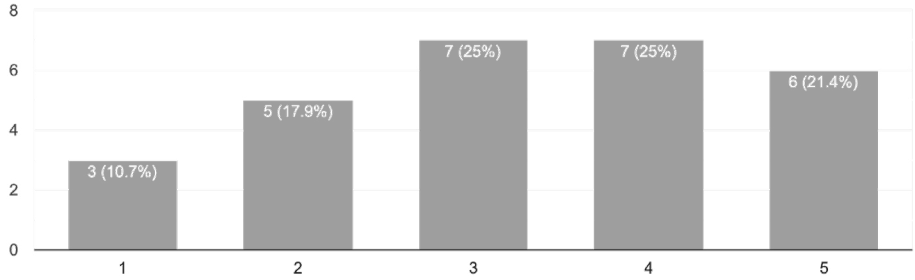

Figure 4: Making time for self-care.

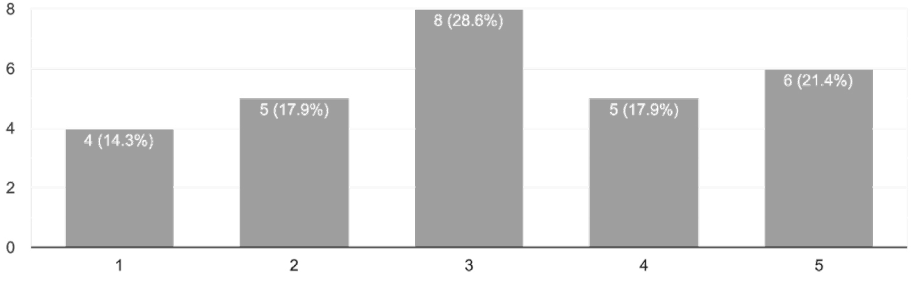

Figure 5: Work-life balance.

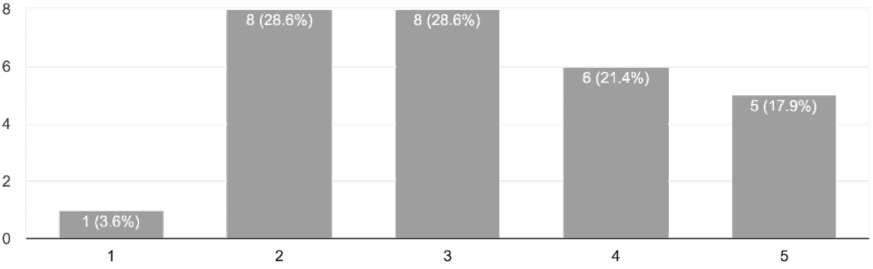

Figure 6: Time for leisure activities.

The last set of survey questions asked about how participants navigate their professional responsibilities. Responses were mostly in the affirmative when participants were asked about whether they had opportunity to be creative professionally, with 79% stating that they can do so often or very often. Most participants (70%) stated that they are able to meet the needs of their parishioners or community members often or very often. In addition, most (60%) answered that they feel professionally fulfilled often or very often. However, it should be noted that about one-third of respondents provided a neu-

tral or negative response to this prompt. Likewise, while most (64%) reported having appropriate boundaries often or very often, the rest responded in the negative or neutral. A final question asked about ministers' ability to learn and develop new skills, which most (75%) indicated they could do often or very often.

Survey respondents were given an opportunity to provide open-ended responses to what they see as the opportunities and challenges of bivocational ministry. Two main themes arose from this question: money and flexibility. Respondents noted both the necessity and gift of having additional income outside the church. Others noted that this provides a flexibility to take risks in ministry and affords the opportunity to minister to a wide variety of people and exercise a larger set of skills. When asked about challenges in bivocational ministry, the overwhelming response was related to difficulty with time management. Many shared the sentiment of not having enough time, constantly juggling multiple demands, and shared concerns about how this could lead to burnout or difficulties in some other domain of life. Some ministers also expressed frustration that their work is not valued at the same level as fully compensated pastors, in terms of influence and in terms of finance, due to their bivocational status.

Overall, the survey results confirm what previous research suggests about both the gifts and challenges of bivocational ministry (Scroggins and Wright 2013; Smith 2014). Of particular note in this population of Black ministers is the volume of unpaid ministers who are actively involved in ministry work on a regular basis. Often, the study of bivocational ministry focuses on clergy with two paid positions, one of which is in ministry. However, in the Black church context and in small or rural ministries, it may be more common to have unpaid leaders in official roles. It is important to hear and respond to the experiences of these leaders as they are running churches alongside pastors who may be bivocational as well. Though this sample is small, pastors, assistant pastors, Christian educators, youth ministers, executive or administrative pastors, and chaplains were all represented. Regardless of pay level or number of contracted hours, congregations likely expect ministers in these roles to operate in ways that mimic a full-time minister. This sentiment was confirmed by the reflections provided in interviews. These expectations present a serious challenge when attempting to also make time for self and family.

Also of note in the survey responses are the ways bivocational ministers seem to find the good in their bivocational status. The overwhelming majority of this population identified transferable skills that can be used across contexts, the ability to use different gifts or passions, and the ability to see God in multiple and varied ways. There are clearly opportunities in bivocational ministry that will be supported and enhanced by shifting church and denominational systems to recognize and respond to the particularities of bivocational ministry.

Interview Results

Seven clergy were interviewed about their bivocational experiences. There were three men and four women. Of this group, two were senior pastors, three were in paid part-time ministerial positions, and two were in unpaid part-time ministerial positions. The interviews focused on understanding the practices and strategies that help clergy to sustain bivocational ministry, the challenges they face in executing their vocation, and their hopes for how churches and denominations would support bivocational clergy.

A primary theme expressed by these clergy was a continuity of their sense of vocation and calling both in the context of their ministry work and in their other professional activities. For some, this was exemplified in the form of transferable skills that they use in various contexts. For others, it was the sense that being called in a "secular" context provides an opportunity to minister to people who might be uninterested in or disconnected from the church. Every participant rejected a stark distinction between their call as a minister and their other professional work. One interviewee stated, "I don't have a secular vocation," when describing her non-church work. "I get to see God at work everywhere." Each minister could identify a common thread that connects the work they do across environments. One participant said he feels his main paid position equips him to do ministry more effectively because he has a sense of how organizations run and is able to put processes in place. Another pastor stated it this way: "In every part of my life, I'm pastoring . . . It's all building relationships with people." Yet another interviewee described her vocation as "multifaceted, multi-layered, complex, [and] intersectional."

Related to the concept of an all-encompassing vocational thread, four interviewees acknowledged that one of the things they enjoy about being bivocational is the ability to connect with people and do ministry outside of the traditional church context and with people who may not be connected with God or the church. Of those four interviewees, three specifically mentioned that this sense of doing ministry is not necessarily connected to whether people know they are ministers or even if they identify as Christian. They noted enjoying opportunities to listen, respond, and attend to the needs of others, seeing it as "God-work" regardless of whether it is labeled that way. There was a sense that bivocational ministry broadens the scope of possible ministry.

Respondents shared that spiritual disciplines are crucial to their functioning in ministry. Several participants noted that in addition to more formal spiritual disciplines and time set aside for devotional activities, they commit to a constant prayer life centered on praying throughout the day that helps them to navigate the choices they make and opportunities to do ministry in and out of church. Two ministers distinguished study and devotion for their own personal spiritual enrichment from preparation for sermons or bible study. Others talked about maintaining a sense of deep connection to their personal call—their sense of why God called them as individuals (see Chapman and Watson, chapter 6 in this volume).

Five participants shared that one of the ways they manage competing demands is to have firm boundaries. Several talked about setting up boundaries around their time so that certain tasks and times are protected—for example, having certain days for family or personal time or dedicating certain evenings to sermon preparation. Additionally, participants talked about communicating these boundaries to parishioners. One participant shared his frustrations that parishioners seem to have expectations of him that do not take into account that he has a full-time job outside his ministry work. Another stated that she finds herself reminding her pastor that she works, and this might mean that her pace in how she moves through ministry "elevations" might be different. One pastor said it simply: "I refuse to be burnt out . . . you have to have a balance." This pastor also noted that delegating is an important practice in her ministry work. Four participants also shared that committing to mental health therapy has been crucial for them in maintaining a sense of balance. Two of these four also noted that sharing with others about their mental

health journey has been helpful in setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

All female interviewees identified bivocational ministry as a way to do ministry in resistance to the patriarchal frameworks in the Black church that present barriers to being in full-time ministry, being compensated ethically, or being seen as a viable church leader. Though the bivocational role does not present an escape, they noted that they are able to access opportunities to exercise their gifts when those doors are not open in the church. As one participant noted: "I never dealt with sexism until I got baptized. The sin of the Black church is sexism." For these women, the challenges they face as bivocational ministers are connected to and exacerbated by the struggle of being a woman in a patriarchal system. This oppressive framework impacted their understanding of how they are compensated (or not), people's perceptions of their ability and fitness to lead, and their sense of place in their congregations. One interviewee noted her influence in the community is not mirrored in the church, due to the challenges of Black patriarchy in the church. She also noted that while the expectation for men in ministry is to be in a pastoral role, the expectation for women is to be in a teaching or auxiliary role. The dual challenge of being a woman and bivocational also elongates and presents barriers to moving through denominational credentialing processes. Two women talked about how their educational process and consequently their dates of ordination were delayed; there was a sense that this delay then led others in the community to question their abilities and status as a minister. Another noted that she does not get the same respect as male ministers in her church, despite being credentialed in two different denominations and having more education than her male counterparts. The female pastor noted a desire for female mentorship in addition to the positive relationships she had with male pastors, noting the particular experiences of women in ministry.

In addition to the dynamic of patriarchy in the Black church, all seven participants noted the way the particularities of Black church culture complicate a bivocational identity. Crawford's (2012, 21) review of the Black church as an institution highlights the way Black clergy have historically been pillars of the Black community, intrinsically connected to the nuclear family and engaged in community life. This salient cultural reality does not discriminate based on full-time or bivocational status, and congregational expectations do not calibrate with the amount of compensation. Several participants not-

ed that they feel the pressure of expectations to live into this all-encompassing historical and cultural role. One pastor put it this way: "Pastoring a church is a 24-hour job . . . being available, taking calls in the middle of the night, visiting nursing homes." The necessity of the changes needed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to heighten these expectations. One participant shared that trying to live into this cultural norm was costly for him: "Before I took a vacation in June 2021, I had preached 63 straight Sundays, because I didn't want to take time off during COVID. . . . I was ready to stop pastoring." Another interviewee stated a desire to push back against a "transactional" view of bivocational ministers that conceptualizes their worth and status in ministry to what they are paid, declaring "I am not your prostitute!"

Of course, money is a primary theme for these ministers. Two interviewees talked about a sense of financial freedom that comes with being bivocational. They acknowledged that because Black churches are typically less equipped to provide ethical salaries and comprehensive benefits, having another job allowed them to have a sense of financial security and not be concerned about their livelihood while doing ministry. One participant noted: "The blessing is, there was an opportunity to serve. I wasn't going to make money, because my money comes from elsewhere. I'm not basing my livelihood on it, and I'm ok with that. It changes the stress level." Two even noted that after being suddenly let go from ministry jobs, their other professions helped them to stay afloat financially. For others, there was a sense of frustration that their ministry work could not provide a living and that their other work, even when they enjoy it, is simply a necessity. Several expressed desires that they would be compensated more fairly for the work they do in ministry.

Time is another common theme for bivocational clergy. As one of the pastors in the group noted, "It never seems that there are enough hours in a day." Several noted that time presents a serious challenge and that their faith and sense of commitment to their call keeps them motivated and committed. Almost all of the interviewees talked about being engaged in community activities in addition to their ministry work and their other job responsibilities. Their passion and desire to serve fueled them even in the midst of limited time and personal resources. This theme seemed to be intrinsically connected to the common vocational thread that connects various activities. Time management seems to be viewed through this lens of an overall call that guides life activities. One interviewee stated, "It's all one big

ball. I'm not inclined to compartmentalize those identities unless I'm forced to."

Two interviewees—one who is a senior pastor and another who is in an unpaid ministry position—shared that they have a desire to engage in various continuing education opportunities but feel there is neither enough time to do these things nor sufficient opportunities for people who are working full-time. The pastor acknowledged that if it had not been for the COVID-19 pandemic and conferences shifting to virtual platforms where session recordings can be viewed later, he would have had to take leave from his full-time job to get any continuing education in ministry.

Interviewees had various suggestions for how Black churches and denominations can support and equip bivocational clergy. One participant stressed the need for Black churches to convene conversations and disseminate research about bivocational ministry. According to him, we should "let people know that it's possible and realistic. We have that thought that 'if I'm not full-time, I'm not successful' . . . but that's not realistic. . . . I think how we present ministry for our culture needs to change. . . . It just means you're skillful at more than one thing. I don't think people look at it like that."

A significant challenge highlighted in this sample is that because bivocational clergy often do not have full-time status, they are not afforded some of the benefits afforded to full-time clergy, such as paid leave, insurance and retirement benefits, or sabbatical time. Both senior pastors noted the need to have sacred spaces for pastors to talk with each other and receive support. Others noted specific needs, such as having practical ways to take time off without being financially burdened and a fund to support educational endeavors. As one minister in an unpaid position shared, "I can go to my sorority and get a scholarship . . . I should be able to get support from my denomination."

Conclusions

The Black ministers in this study reported some of the same gifts and challenges as non-Black bivocational ministers, affirming that much of the research on bivocational ministry is applicable to Black populations. They also described some cultural experiences particular to the Black church that intersect with the realities of being bivoca-

tional. Historically, most Black churches have not been equipped to provide a full-time salary. Bivocational ministry has, in some ways, been the norm, even when it was not labeled that way. Black pastors have developed practices to make it work and are often doing well. However, this does not save them from the stresses and challenges of bivocational ministry. Due to their vast lived experience, these clergy have also provided some key insights into the experience of being Black and bivocational.

As a start, the Black church must reckon with the expectations that are placed on ministers in general and bivocational ministers in particular—expectations that are reflective of a historical and cultural reality that may be outdated in some ways. This reckoning speaks directly to Stephens's encouragement that the congregation envision and co-create intentional bivocational ministry (chapter 1 in this volume). This re-envisioning does not mean a loss of the role of minister as vital to the community. It does, however, require a scaling back of the functional expectations placed on ministers to hold sacred space, allowing for their human limitations and sense of wellness. It also requires that bivocational clergy be seen as information-sharers and ambassadors who provide a diverse set of skills to the church and serve a vital role in the functioning of the church—rather than being seen as less-than. Embedded in the hierarchical models embodied by some Black churches are oppressive systems such as patriarchy, homophobia, and elitism. Because they do not hold full-time ministry status, bivocational ministers are especially vulnerable to these barriers. Unsurprisingly, the women in this study seemed to readily identify the way these oppressive systems have impacted their lives and their ministries. If bivocational ministry is the new norm, as many have argued, the Black church must find a way to make this arrangement more just and equitable by working to dismantle these oppressive systems in the context of ministry life. A just and equitable system of bivocational ministry demands more consistent compensation, financial and functional support for educational engagement, and clear pathways for advancement and credentialing. A bivocational status should not present a barrier to active engagement in ministry life.

In this research sample, clergy clearly felt a sense of passion about their call. Despite the challenges, they reported excitement about ministry, a deep sense of connection to their parishioners and community members, and a wonder at their engagement with God in their life and work. This passion is a gift that undoubtedly keeps

them going and provides a sense of motivation. This passion can also act as a double-edged sword as it might make it difficult to pull back or say no and might put ministers at greater risk for overwork and burnout. This intrapsychic dynamic, combined with a Black church culture that prioritizes accessibility and availability of its pastoral leadership, is a recipe for an overworked and overextended minister. As we seek to shift church culture to more reasonable expectations, we also open up space for bivocational ministers to honor and communicate their own limits without sacrificing their sense of call.

The most salient sustaining factor for these clergy is a clear sense of ministerial identity active in all their professional activities, regardless of whether this was in the context of the church or not. This identity seems to be the driving force that helped these clergy to transfer skills from one domain to another, to remain connected to their understanding of God in their lives, and to prioritize tasks on a daily basis. This identity was fueled and sustained by a commitment to spiritual disciplines and practices that helped clergy to maintain a sense of connection with the divine. For these Black clergy, this sense of connection helps them navigate this commitment to family and self as it sets the standard for prioritizing competing tasks and setting appropriate boundaries. Several interviewees talked about this connectivity as also being encompassed in their understanding of call: they viewed themselves as being called to church work and their other professional responsibilities—not one or the other. Integration is crucial to a healthy sense of flow.

Survey results suggested wide variability in the extent to which ministers are able to enjoy leisure time, make time for family, and dedicate energy for balance and self-care. The feedback from interviewees suggests that a clear and coherent set of boundaries is a key practice for meeting these goals. Boundaries include internal commitments to certain priorities and external communication with others about how those priorities will impact interpersonal engagement. In the context of the powerful Black church culture mentioned earlier, this communication process is crucial and must be taught as a sustaining practice.

This research yielded fruitful insights into the experiences of Black bivocational clergy, and there is still much more work to do. Because time availability is a challenge, this sample was small. Larger groups of Black bivocational clergy need to be accessed to create a fuller picture of the diversity of experiences within the Black community. Observing the distinctions between men and women,

between seminary-trained and those less formally trained, and between diverse ministerial positions is likely to provide a more nuanced understanding of how churches and denominations can help these clergy thrive. It is clear from this small sample that women may need additional resources and sources of support compared to men. It is also clear that the pathways for thriving might be different for pastoral leaders than those who hold associate positions. What is clear is that any solutions and resources for Black bivocational clergy must take into account the nuances of the Black church experience.

Works Cited

Bickers, Dennis W. 2007. *The Work of the Bivocational Minister*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson.

Crawford, Erika D. 2012. "Serving Them is Killing Me: Using Technology as a Vehicle for Self-Care for Bi-Vocational Pastors in the Black Church" DMin diss., Fordham University. *https://proquest.com/docview/1316905977*.

Deasy, Jo Ann. 2018. "Shifting Vocational Identity in Theological Education: Insights from the ATS Student Questionnaires." *Theological Education* 52, no. 1: 63–78. *https://ats.edu/files/galleries/2018-theological-education-v52-n1.pdf*.

Dorr, Luther M. 1988. *The Bivocational Pastor*. Nashville: Broadman.

Ferguson, Todd W., Brita Andercheck, Joshua C. Tom, Brandon C. Martinez, and Samuel Stroope. 2014. "Occupational Conditions, Self-Care, and Obesity among Clergy in the United States." *Social Science Research* 49: 249–63. *https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.08.014*.

Ferris, Robert W. 2001. "Of Tents and Taxonomies." *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 1: 79–82.

Perry, Samuel L., and Cyrus Schleifer. 2019. "Are Bivocational Clergy Becoming the New Normal? An Analysis of the Current Population Survey, 1996–2017." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 2: 513–25. *https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12593*.

Scroggins, Jimmy, and Steven Wright. 2013. “The Math Doesn’t Work: Why the Future of Church Planting is Bi-Vocational.” *9 Marks*, January 3. *https://www.9marks.org/article/journalmath-doesnt-work-why-future-church-planting-bi-vocational/*.

Smith, Gregory Harris. 2014. “Effective Strategies for Bi-vocational Ministry.” DMin diss., Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. *https://proquest.com/docview/1525999370/4BEC2D3FD-6F348A2PQ/1*.

Wells, Carl R., Janice Probst, Robert McKeown, Stephanie Mitchem, and Han Whiejong. 2012. “The Relationship Between Work-Related Stress and Boundary-Related Stress Within the Clerical Profession.” *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 1: 215–30. *https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-011-9501-9*.

Young Brown, Jessica. 2017. “Don’t Be Afraid of a Future with More Bivocational Ministers.” *Duke Leadership Education*. November 12. *https://thrivinginministry.org/dont-be-afraid-of-a-future-with-more-bivocational-ministers*.