WEAVING THREADS OF **CO-VOCATIONAL** MINISTRY

Full Research Report

Dr. Rebeca Heringer and Ellen Duffield

Co-Vocational Canada

BRIERCREST SEMINARY

WEAVING THREADS OF **CO-VOCATIONAL** MINISTRY

Full Research Report

Rebeca Heringer (PhD) & Ellen Duffield (DMin, in process)

Co-Vocational Canada

BRIERCREST SEMINARY

COVOCATIONAL MINISTRY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the summer of 2025, 20 participants from across Canada– 12 denominational leaders and 8 Co-Vocational (CoVo) pastors– engaged in in-depth conversations about co-vocational ministry. In total, 17 denominations were represented.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the characteristics of thriving CoVo congregations in Canada for the development of a framework that could support and promote the holistic well-being of congregations that are conducting or want to implement CoVo ministries.

Co-vocational congregations are not just churches with a pastor who is paid part time. They are "a different breed of congregation" (MacDonald, 2020, p.7) necessitating a different congregational vision and approach to ministry and leadership. The findings of this study highlight the need for addressing persistent stigma and resistance, congregational reframing, and re-envisioned pathways to credentialing and ordination. They also surface the critical role of denominational leaders and others in helping to shape the narrative and provide specific supports.

In this report, six overarching and intertwined themes are examined, illustrated by participants' quotes. We seek to provide insights from previous studies and opportunities for further reflection.

1. REASONS
A flourishing CoVo congregation is contingent upon a strong theology of missional engagement which guides not only the pastor but also the congregation itself.

2. CONCEPTUALIZATION
If CoVo ministry is perceived simply as a necessary evil, it becomes a hindrance to achieving its full potential. Fighting against this stigma may entail celebrating and normalizing co-vocational ministry both at the local church and in the denominational context.

3. SUPPORTING CONGREGATIONAL REFRAMING
A mismatch of congregational expectations and a 'priesthood of all believers' theology reinforces the need for new frameworks and opportunities for congregations to re-envision themselves.

4. DENOMINATIONAL RESPONSIVITY
It is crucial that denominations seek to listen directly to the CoVo pastors about how their leaders may be responsive to their needs.

5. PASTOR'S COMPENSATION, SATISFACTION, AND WELLBEING
CoVo pastors express high levels of satisfaction and wellbeing but stress the importance of adequate time off, compensation, and support.

6. RE-ENVISIONING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION, ORDINATION, AND CREDENTIALING
Our findings surrounding credentialing and ordination emphasize the need to adapt ministry education to address these transitions—particularly in the lives of CoVo leaders.

CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Methods 5

Findings 6

1. Reasons for CoVo 6
2. Conceptualization for CoVo 6
3. Supporting Congregational Re-framing 7
4. Denominational Responsivity 8
5. Pastor's Compensation, Satisfaction, and Well-being 11
6. Re-Envisioning Theological Education, Credentialing, and Ordination 14

Discussion 16

Conclusion 22

Appendix A 23

References 25

About the Authors 27

Co-Vocational Canada

INTRODUCTION

Despite not being a new phenomenon, co-vocationality has been gaining increasingly more attention across denominations and academic circles in North America and Europe. Traditionally it has been more predominant among other parts of the world and non-white/immigrant communities in North America. More recently there has been a consistent increase in this ministry model among Canadian Christian churches.

Across the literature, several other terms are used to refer to a pastor who works both inside and outside the church. Some of these terms include bi-vocational, co-vocational, multi-vocational, dual-vocation, shared-time ministry, and tent-making. Although there might be differences in how the terms are used by different authors, and even how such terms are defined in specific contexts, in this report we will use the term "co-vocational" (CoVo) as an umbrella term to reflect the lived experience of a pastor who is appointed to serve in a local church while also working in outside employment.

Opportunities

The reasons for adopting CoVo are not limited to a congregation/denomination financial constraint, although this is often the initial or main cause (MacDonald, 2020). As Stephens (2021a) observes, "it should be clear that bivocational ministry is more than a money-saving strategy for dwindling congregations" (p. 7). CoVo can help both small and larger congregations to thrive, such as by providing missiological flexibility/missional focus. Speaking both from experience and from interviews with twenty-five bi-vocational pastors, Hamilton (2022), in his book ***The Future is Bivocational***, suggests that bi-vocational churches can be more missionally effective than those with full-time pastors as they tend to be more embedded in the community. Furthermore, CoVo can also be a means for reducing ministry costs. Research suggests that CoVo churches can be more resilient and sustainable in ways that go far beyond finances. Hamilton stresses that "incarnational, neighbourhood churches" offer "prophetic alternatives to [the] corporate, competitive, [consumer] mindset" (p. 22) that has developed as a result of Christendom and the move towards secularity. CoVo can offer pastors a greater point of contact with the community and stimulate the congregation to be more active in serving the church as a priesthood of all believers or a "whole Body" approach to ministry.

These missional advances are by no means a given. As Canadian research (Bartlett, 2022) indicates the tendency of CoVo churches is to turn inwards; expecting their pastor to focus on worship services and congregational visitation. By contrast vital churches take on their own congregational care so CoVo pastors can focus on equipping ministry leaders and community engagement. As we keep stressing:

> Congregations must be intentionally coached to address deeply rooted expectations and adopt a new vision of congregational thriving, and intentional engagement with the broader community.

Additionally, being a CoVo pastor allows greater financial independence to the minister, which in turn can empower pastors to engage with the congregation on equal footing, as well as the opportunity to use different gifts, passions, and skills to serve God in multiple and varied ways. In a similar vein, CoVo may give pastors "a greater sense of personal freedom and [feeling] less prone to building their entire identity around 'being a pastor'" (Siebert, 2022, p. 95). Given the numerous reasons that lead churches to adopt this model, many also believe this approach to ministry is expected to increase in the years to come.

Challenges

Nevertheless, the challenges with CoVo are also well known. Some are dissatisfied with their salaries, but perhaps the most common obstacle currently faced by CoVo pastors relates to the difficulties with time management and scheduling. This can become increasingly more difficult when having to respond and attend to different bosses, demands, and workplaces. Such difficulties frequently lead pastors to forego rest or have adequate home, family, and personal time thus putting them at greater risk of burnout.

The complexities of CoVo pastor's schedules and the collaborative approach to ministry that co-vocationality requires suggest the need for additional administrative support, stronger group processes and communication pathways, and more grace and flexibility on the part of congregations.

Several CoVo pastors from our previous study also report how challenging it is to manage the expectations of the congregation. Although the pastor is paid part-time, oftentimes congregations expects them to be as available as a uni-vocational pastor. Another very recurrent challenge is the stigma and the "feeling lesser than" that surrounds CoVo ministry (Bentley, 2021, 2022; Bickers, 2007; Lundquist, 2019; MacDonald, 2020; Stephens, 2021b). Despite evidence to the contrary, the stigma persists that CoVo models suggest less important or less successful congregations, or that congregations with CoVo clergy cannot be healthy.

These findings confirm the need for new frameworks that help congregations reframe their view of ministry, help boards set realistic expectations and help CoVo pastors lean into thriving ministry through well designed job descriptions and adherence to regular practices of sabbath keeping and family and personal well-being.

Unexpected Benefits of Co-Vocational Models

Data from a Hartford Institute for Religion Research (HIRR) report seems to suggest that "only 62% of full-time clergy describe their overall health and wellness as good or great" whereas the rate among CoVo reaches 80% (MacDonald, 2024). It may also be argued that "the rewards of being bivocational far outweigh the difficulties of this form of ministry" (Bickers, 2007, p. 64). Watson and colleagues (2020) also observe how the passion with which CoVo pastors describe their mission seems to be directly related to an often-higher level of satisfaction and lower level of burnout than uni-vocational pastors. In terms of finances, Bentley (2021) found that CoVo contributes to the financial stability of congregations and pastors themselves. Even in light of the potential challenges, CoVo ministries "can be immensely rewarding" ... especially as they "permit a variety of configurations of meaningful employment and lifestyle" (Cox, 2018, p. 107). And as MacDonald (2020) emphasizes, "congregations can experience more vitality, not less, after switching to part-time clergy" (p. 2).

Study Purpose

Amid the well-known potential benefits and challenges noted in the literature, discussions about CoVo continue to increase in North America in the last decade as many co-vocational pastors strive to promote a healthy and sustainable ministry. However, one of the key findings from a symposium conducted in February 2025 by Co-Vocational Canada, was an urgent need for a framework which could provide the necessary structure to CoVo congregations (while still remaining flexible to respond to specific needs, strengths, mission, etc.).

The purpose of this study was to better understand the characteristics of thriving CoVo congregations in Canada for the development of a framework that could support and promote the holistic well-being of congregations that are conducting or want to implement CoVo ministries.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the characteristics of thriving CoVo congregations in Canada for the development of a framework that could support and promote the holistic well-being of congregations that are conducting or want to implement CoVo ministries.

METHODS

This research project was funded by the Lilly Foundation and received approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB) of Briercrest College and Seminary (Application ID: 05-2025-02). Through a purposeful, snowball sampling approach, we sent out invitations to more than 50 denominational leaders and pastors across Canada. Those who received the invitation were also encouraged to forward it to others in their network who might be interested in participating. Participants read and signed a consent form which outlined the purpose of the project and what their involvement would entail.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire (see Appendix A) was designed based on Briercrest's definition of thriving CoVo pastors, congregations, and denominations, as outlined below:

1. **Thriving co-vocational ministers experience and can articulate how their two or more occupations are essential to their unique vocation.** They are able to discern changes in their calling and feel satisfaction in their work. They understand what aspects of ministry are difficult for them personally and have cultivated strategies to find rest and renewal while balancing their work and personal lives. When facing new challenges, thriving co-vocational ministers know how to access the supports that best help them navigate these challenges in resilient ways.

2. **Thriving congregations affirm the biblical call on every disciple of Jesus to serve in the priesthood of all believers.** By empowering the entire body of the church to act, onus is distributed among the congregation as all members discern and follow their individual and unique calling. Thriving congregations understand and intentionally set reasonable expectations for paid and volunteer staff, joyfully respecting boundaries that nurture wellness. They raise up leaders who value diverse vocational callings as not only compatible with but valuable for the life of ministry. Thriving congregations see life change in the individuals who make up their church community and contribute toward building flourishing neighborhoods and cities.

3. **Co-Vocationally friendly denominations understand the unique needs of their co-vocational ministers and congregations.** They are attentive to these needs and enable their members to build (or transition to) thriving co-vocational congregations.

A total of 20 participants were recruited from across Canada: 12 denominational leaders and 8 CoVo pastors – a total of 17 denominations represented. Each interview lasted for about 45 minutes. The audio files were digitally transcribed, and an inductive thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was conducted for each of the transcripts. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview and make any edits they deemed necessary. In order to protect participants' confidentiality, any identifiers (such as their names or denominations) have been removed from the transcripts and replaced with words that could retain the meaning of the sentence (e.g., "name of church").

In this section, we provide a more detailed overview of some of the six most prominent and intertwined themes discussed in the interviews.

FINDINGS

1. Reasons for CoVo

In alignment with the literature, one primary reason participants give for working co-vocationally is financial necessity— to make it possible and sustainable for the church and/or for themselves. As one leader stated, "this is an economic necessity as opposed to necessarily a choice" (Leader 2). It was observed that this often becomes a necessity due to the decreasing size of congregations and consequently "congregations are not able to provide a full-time pastoral salary" (Leader 9). Or as a pastor stated, "I love being a pastor, but I also like being able to have food on the table" (Pastor 2).

Another primary reason is a sense of mission and the ability to foster relationships outside of church. As a leader observed, "many actually continue on in that way and realize that that's something that's either very helpful for their ministry or they like to still have that connection in a community context" (Leader 7).

Other reasons include pastors who already have other interests that they do not want to give up:

> someone that is in potentially starting into pastoral work at a later stage in life, may have some fairly strong financial investments or businesses or things that they're doing already and say, "well, yeah, I know I'm feeling called, but I'm not going to go full-time. I'm going to step into this role in a part-time role because I have my other interests." (Leader 12)

Or as another pastor stated: "I had the job first before they came up with the offer to replace the pastor and I think my field, I'm in the IT field so I'm kind of passionate about it" (Pastor 4). It was observed that for some it happens intentionally while for others it "just happens," as this pastor put it: "co-vocational or bi-vocational ministry was not something I had planned. It happened by accident or God's divine plan, which I did not see coming" (Pastor 1).

2. Conceptualization of CoVo

How pastors and denominational leaders conceptualize co-vocationality was another important question this study sought to address, given that such understanding could be pivotal to how co-vocational ministries are enacted. Some denominations, particularly those in Quebec, have embraced CoVo from the beginning as legitimate and the norm. As one participant stated: "We've always embraced it right from the start. So, it's been always a valid way to do ministry. In fact, we would see it as entirely legitimate" (Leader 4).

However, there is still a stigma associated with it in some denominations. As one leader stated, "Despite the fact that co-vocationalism is a beautiful expression of vocation, I do think that there's a bias against it, like as a less than [approach]" (Leader 6). A pastor also expressed a similar opinion: "I think that there is still a bias, in some regard, against co-vocational ministry" (Pastor 3). Co-vocationality has "probably historically been viewed as a sort of a necessary evil, in decades past" (Leader 5), among some denominations, as if pastors were not committed enough to the church. As this pastor states:

> A few times I've been talking to some full-time pastors and I almost feel, I almost get the impression that I'm not committed enough to church ministry because I haven't walked away from my secular job and you know, that is a feeling I have felt more than once, that I'm not committed enough to the church because I'm not in full-time ministry. (Pastor 1)

One church, for example, seems not to like when the CoVo pastor attends weddings, funerals etc. in lieu of the full-time pastor, as if the CoVo pastor was not good enough:

> It's a 600-member church in Ottawa, and [there's] a full-time pastor and [there's] a part-time co-vocational pastor. And whenever there's a birthday or a retirement party or a wedding or a funeral, they all want to have the senior pastor coming. They don't want to have the assistant pastor coming. They think that he's not really the pastor. (Leader 10)

However, this seems to be changing and increasingly co-vocationality is seen more positively across denominations: "I think there is a growing edge of just acknowledgement that this is not a less than scenario or solution" (Leader 6). There is a growing acknowledgment of the gift and opportunity of CoVo, as well as a "mutual understanding of what it means" (Pastor 6) among the congregation.

3. Supporting Congregational Reframing

Missional Impact

Nearly all participants emphasized that they expect the church to play a major role in the neighborhood and city, and that the role of the CoVo church is no different from the non-CoVo congregation – to be light and salt and show the love of Christ:

> I would hope regardless of a co-vocational role or a full-time role, the perspective that we would have is that a local church is, of course, for the gathering and fellowship of believers, but to make an impact on the community and to be on mission, to build relationships with those who don't know Jesus. (Leader 8)

It was observed that having a CoVo pastor does not necessarily make the church more missional, as this leader stated:

> I was under the premise that because the pastor was co-vocational, as a result, the church would be more missional, but that's not the case. That's not the case. It depends really, it really depends about the social imaginary that inhabits the local church. (Leader 10)

This aligns with other findings that in the US that suggested that only 4% of participants reported that having a bivocational pastor makes the congregation more active in the church (Earlham).

This mismatch of congregational expectations and behaviour with a 'priesthood of all believers' theology reinforces the need for new frameworks and for opportunities for congregations to reimagine themselves as missional communities.

Certainly, CoVo pastors can serve as a connection to the neighborhood:

> one of the things we really hope is that a pastor that is actually working in the marketplace somewhere is going to be a natural bridge for that church and the community. (Leader 5)

Multiple co-vocational pastors observed how they have been intentional about establishing meaningful connections between their congregations and the community where it is located – oftentimes, in churches who had not been very missional prior to their coming:

> both churches were very, I would call, inward-looking when I went to them, right? Since I've been to them both are reaching out into the community every opportunity they can. (Pastor 1)

Leadership Training and Pastor as Equipper

Most leaders stated that training of new leaders is a high priority in their denomination and essential in a CoVo church. CoVo pastors have been intentional about delegating responsibilities to lay people in the congregation (e.g., occasional preaching, leading worship, praying). This aligns with the biblical perspective of a priesthood of all believers. As a pastor said, "I let them know that as a pastor I'm not here to lead everything and do everything. You know, I am here to equip and empower" (Pastor 6)

Realistic Expectations

In established CoVo congregations, the church sees the pastor as part of them and are supportive of the pastor's co-vocationality. As a leader expressed, "churches need to think of the pastor differently when they are co-vocational... it's gotta be teamwork" (Leader 1). Across the interviews, some pastors expressed that their congregation understood their other vocation as an extension of ministry and appreciate them working co-vocationally. As a pastor observed, "they are very sensitive to me working two jobs. They're always very concerned that I'm doing too much. And they do actively take things off my plate when it's possible. So, they're very aware of that" (Pastor 1).

However, some congregations have unrealistic expectations of CoVo pastors, expecting them to work full time when they are not being paid for full-time work. As one leader pointed out: "Sometimes the expectation from those churches and those members about the bandwidth that should be or could be required from the pastor is not reasonable" (Leader 10).

4. Denominational Responsivity

One of the most prominent points raised by participants was the importance of relational connection between denominations and CoVo pastors. It was observed that denominational communication with CoVo pastors is key but often a challenge (e.g., due to the size of the country, time zones, finances, etc.):

> communication is always the challenge. I always hear that is that's a need. I mean, denominational leaders are working too hard. They also are spread, you know, very spread, very thin supervising so many churches across large geographical areas. So, they really can only get to know a church so much. (Leader 1)

> What's missing is ability to connect. What's missing is the challenges that somebody has to make that connection. So, for example, a co-vocational pastor that wants to come to a regional connection may still have to travel two or three or four hours to get to a connection gathering of some sort and a regional get-together. And so, if they are co-vocational, they may not have the financial resource or the time resource to be able to join up with that. So that's not working yet. (Leader 3)

> We struggle, I think, when we do have events to bring pastors together. It's always hard to know when we can schedule them. Especially if it's physical gatherings because for the pastors who are not serving co-vocationally, weekends are not an advantageous time to bring them together. (Leader 9)

Pastors value response time and some denominations could improve in this area. Some practices that seem to be working include weekly check-ins, online groups, prompt email responses, being accessible, and having regional ministers to help connect with pastors more personally:

> we try to provide a weekly check-in point for them again and that's been really well received. So, some of them can't participate every week because of their schedules, but we have an online group that's about two hours and they just share best practices, they pray together. It's an online opportunity for them just to get some support for each and we let those get to a certain size, and then we divided into two and we have a staff person that oversees that. So that's been really helpful. (Leader 4)

Scheduling meetings/events is often a challenge, and many denominations are trying to adapt to the reality of CoVo pastors (e.g., meeting on Zoom instead).

> We're really wrestling with, like, how are we even doing scheduling of events and where we have specifically within the church planning context, like a lot of times our trainings have revolved around, like weekdays or events have revolved, our retreats have revolved on our own weekdays. Just asking very intentional questions about like, well, what does that look like for someone who's co-vocational? And coming up with some creative solutions to make sure that they're getting a level of care, support, encouragement through those experiences. (Leader 6)

5. Pastor's Compensation, Satisfaction, and Well-being

Compensation

Most participants indicated that a salary grid was used to determine CoVo pastors' salaries. However, leaders recognize the importance of being appropriate in terms of compensation and benefits, especially taking into consideration the context in which the church is located, the cost of living in the region, etc.:

> we do try to encourage churches to be realistic about what it costs for pastors to live. (Leader 5)

> so, we use the living wage as a baseline. Because we don't want anybody, not just minimum wage, but the living wage for every area because every community has a different capacity for housing and work and what resources and taxes and all those kinds of things. (Leader 7)

Some leaders also emphasized the importance of being generous with salary and benefits for CoVo pastors, whenever possible:

> We do provide a recommended pastoral salary grid. And so, what I will say to a church, I say, why don't you use that as a measure, and then make it pro-rated plus. … think to give recognition to the fact that it never is restricted to exactly the defined hours that therefore it should be pro rated plus… if they can, I always say try to err a bit on the side of generosity. (Leader 9)

> I think overall pastors aren't always paid as well and so we have to think through, so are there also other ways to bless pastors with other things? Whether that's housing or benefits for their family medically or whatever it might be. (Leader 11)

It was also widely observed how important it is for denominations to be open to learning ways to be responsive to CoVo pastors, seeking to make meaningful connections with them, and learning from their perspectives and experiences:

> at a leadership level from our network, we continually need to be learning about co-vocational ministry … So how do we listen to them well? How do we hear their needs? How do ask them what they want? How does their family respond? Not just about how is their family, how are their wives or spouses or husbands? How do they see this whole co-vocational thing? I think for us, we're quite relational as a network, which is our strength, but then how do we actually help people coach them and come alongside them with what they need on a personal level? (Leader 11)

Well-being and Satisfaction

All pastors expressed enjoying being a CoVo pastor and feeling called it: "I can't see myself not doing it. [Being] a pastor, sharing my faith, ministry, it is who I am. It is not an occupation, it's a calling" (Pastor 1). Nonetheless, a couple of them also wish they were full-time pastors only, especially those who are getting older and desiring to retire but not being able to do so:

> Rated from 1 to 10, I would say 10. I'm enjoying... By saying that, of course, as human as we are, I wish I were a full-time pastor, but this is what the Lord has gifted me and I'm so thankful. (Pastor 2)

> My heart wants me to be a full-time pastor. I'm in my mid-40s right now, I look around, I'm very much the old guy as a paramedic. The myth of retirement for me as a paramedic is quite far off. I thank God that I am co-vocational, and although I don't wish to remain co-vocational for the rest of my life, I think this is a very important season in my spiritual walk. (Pastor 3)

These findings align with previous Canadian research (Watson and Santos, 2022) in which researchers were "surprised not to see any significant differences in levels of satisfaction, stress or indices of burnout" between CoVo and uni-vocational (UV) participants. (p. 28) Additionally, they found "no compelling support for the argument that the sources of satisfaction or stress differ" between the two groups —even when differentiated by gender or years of ministry. (p. 28-29) Importantly, when participants who would choose to remain CoVo were compared with those who would prefer to be UV "statistically average higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization" were found among the latter group. (p. 32)

Pastors also expressed feeling very welcomed by the congregation:

> all the church members, well, first of all, they welcome me with open arms. And so far, I don't think, or I don't hear no complaints so far. (Pastor 4)

Boundaries

When it comes to boundaries, all pastors expressed that their congregation is very respectful of their working hours. Most pastors have clearly indicated what day(s) and time(s) they can be reached and some of them also expressed being flexible and/or being available for a phone call in case of emergencies:

> they are very respectful of my hours... But if it's an emergency, I told them, do not hesitate to reach out to me. (Pastor 1)

> one of the things that we've had to be intentional about is helping the members of our congregation to know that I may not be available on the 9 to 5 basis, but we will make time for anybody that needs our time. (Pastor 8)

Denominational leaders and CoVo pastors emphasized that pastors need to be intentional about taking time off (weekly sabbath and periodically for extended periods of time) and be able to plan financially for that.

> I think definitely it has to start with the pastor having a really clear goal in mind. (Leader 1)

> I think we... rightly or wrongly, probably, arguably wrongly have to require the maturity of the pastor to manage that to the best of their ability. (Leader 9)

Some denominational leaders express that ultimately, they trust the pastor's maturity to be able to handle time well. Denominations can encourage and provide guidelines, but it is up to local churches to respect pastors' time off:

> this is where our local church autonomy gets us a bit, you know, we can try to

One denominational leader observed that there is the potential that co-vocational pastors are taken advantage of, which requires denominations to be very intentional about pastoral care.

> suggest that churches are reasonable in terms of giving time off and so on, but that's not always heeded. (Leader 5)

> We trust the local churches to actually respect the Sabbath for the pastor, but I would say that this is a point that we probably need to address... The local church is sovereign... we don't have any points of legislation that enforce those. (Leader 10)

While most CoVo pastors emphasized the importance of taking time off ("I think you have to be intentional about having a day that you are not responsible for anything", Pastor 8), some expressed not doing so – although they said the work doesn't feel like a burden and they enjoy what they are doing: "I work 70 hours a week, but it doesn't feel like a burden to me" (Pastor 1).

Many pastors emphasized that they make sure to dedicate time to their family and some also observed being able to incorporate physical activities during the week (e.g., running, rollerblading, playing hockey). As a pastor stated, "you're not as effective if you don't rest, you know, that's a spiritual-physical law" (Pastor 5).

Role of Congregations and Denominations in Pastoral Well-being

Some pastors observed that the work of a CoVo pastor can be very intense and more than what is written on the paper. Some denominational leaders also expressed being aware that CoVo pastors often work more than they are being paid for and more than they have time for. One denominational leader observed that there is the potential that co-vocational pastors are taken advantage of, which requires denominations to be very intentional about pastoral care. Therefore, some denominations have been very intentional about seeking to promote pastors' well-being and seek to keep local churches accountable by exercising constant dialog with them.

> as the fellowship and the organization, we're investing a lot of time right now into our vision and one of the pillars of our vision is to cultivate personal and relational well-being. (Leader 3)

In order to do that, some denominations seek to have annual reports and regular check-ins (e.g., through regional ministers) with pastors as a way to help and encourage them to take time off:

> We also get quarterly reports that are sent in, letting us know how things are going, any questions, any needs. So, there's a constant dialog throughout, even though they are doing their own and in their own context. (Leader 7)

> Are they working seven days a week? Well, that's certainly not what's expected and actually not sustainable. So, we would follow up as regional ministers to try and do that. ... Our setup is that we have past or network groups that meet whether monthly, bimonthly and then we have annual reports that are also required for our credential holders. But individually one on one regional ministers would also be able to connect and, you know, do check-ins. (Leader 8)

A couple of pastors also expressed feeling lonely in their role, and would appreciate a greater support system from their denomination:

> What would be helpful for my denomination to support me in my role? I would like to have a support group, a recognized support group, an email or a chat group... just so we can talk about things, you know, stress. (Pastor 1)

> It's easy for some of those co-vocational folks to feel left out because they can't attend everything. (Leader 5)

6. Re-Envisioning Theological Education, Credentialing, and Ordination

Some denominations are not making any differentiations in the process of credentialing and ordination in light of co-vocationality. Others have been questioning ways in which they can be more responsive to the reality of CoVo pastors:

> They haven't trained for it, like they don't have an MDiv and then moved into full-time ministry and that kind of stuff, so that isn't their path... So how do we build in mechanisms of training that are sensitive to the dynamic, but, also, make the grade? (Leader 2)

Having an academic credential (e.g., a bachelor's degree in theology or pastoral ministry) is highly recommended by most denominations – the majority strongly prefer a Master of Divinity or similar, in order to be ordained.

> a local pastor will be able to assess the level of education, theological education you can acquire and then adapt that requirement to the level education. Now if they want to be ordained in the denomination - so it's not a requirement to operate as a local pastor, but if they seek ordination, then they need to have a bachelor or a master's degree in theology. (Leader 10)

> You don't actually need to have an educational criteria to enter into our credentialing program. But we would recommend at least some Bible school and would prefer a bachelor's of some level at least. (Leader 12)

However, many denominations are trying to be responsive and flexible to the fact that for many CoVo pastors this is their second career and they do not have specific theological training. So, oftentimes, the requirement is simply having at least one year of formal religious education (which could be done online):

> we'd like people to have a Bible college or a seminary degree, but we still only, you have to have like an equivalent of one year Bible college and we will credential you for ministry. We prefer if you were in a teaching role in a full-time position you had more training than that but with so many online options there's so many great ways to get training now so we offer some of that and offer it online but we generally refer people to partners that we have that do online training. (Leader 4)

In a few cases, the theological degree is not required for ordination; experience and gifts are considered instead – although denominations might still expect that the CoVo pastor undertake some online theological training in subsequent years.

> So now we're needing to say, okay, so how do we work with folks who are receiving the call usually they live later in life. They have maybe professional training, but they don't have theological background. So, what do we do in that space that's respectful of people who are holding multiple paths? (Leader 2)

> So, we try to accommodate people. So, we'll credential them if they want to be a pastor as long as they'll commit to doing, you know being perpetually in a course for the next three years. (Leader 4)

A couple of denominational leaders observed that there is not much attention given to specifically training of CoVo pastors in their denomination, but some denominations are supportive in terms of providing training for a CoVo pastor to obtain the necessary credential they need:

> So, it's not that we're closing the doors to those who don't have a formal education, but we're wanting to develop those who maybe haven't had that experience and give them some training and support. (Leader 8)

The need for responsivity towards CoVo pastors in terms of credentialing and ordination was also recognised by a couple of pastors who struggled in the process:

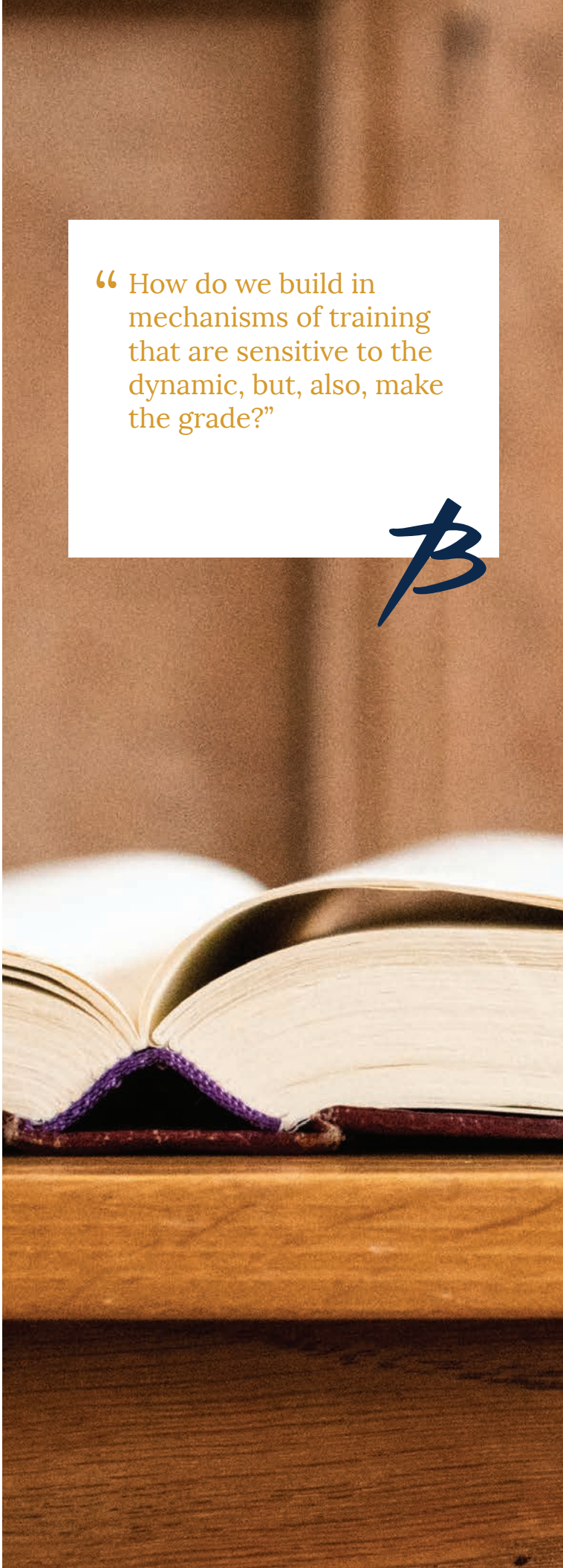
> there was no shortcut even though I was a recognized lay pastor. I had to go do the whole thing as per a person that went full-time into seminary, although I was in seminary part-time for 12 years, right, but there was no shortcut for me. No recognition of my lay pastor training or experience, which I... I still struggle with that, right? (Pastor 1)

> I don't believe that there are any accommodations made for co-vocational pastors as it relates to credentialing and ordination. As a co-vocational pastor, I am required to obtain the same credentials as my colleagues who are sole pastors. And the ordination track remains identical. (Pastor 3)

For others the process seems to have happened more graciously:

> they are willing to work with, provide training, the process until you will get your credential. They're very supportive. (Pastor 2)

> [they] absolutely take into account people's positions and situations and provide grace and flexibility around the process. (Pastor 6)



“How do we build in mechanisms of training that are sensitive to the dynamic, but, also, make the grade?”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the characteristics of thriving CoVo congregations in Canada for the development of a framework that could support and promote the holistic well-being of congregations that are conducting or want to implement CoVo ministries. The denominations and pastors who participated in the study were not necessarily recruited based on our criteria of flourishing, but it was our hope that we could learn from their experiences and what they believe to be working or not in the pursuit of a flourishing CoVo church. The six overarching themes discussed above shed light on a myriad of aspects to be taken into consideration by denominations, congregations, and pastors alike when pursuing healthy and sustainable co-vocational ministries.

The first aspect to be put under scrutiny is the reason why one decides to work as a co-vocational pastor. The idea that this decision is solely based on a financial necessity was debunked by pastors and denominational leaders interviewed in this study. A very strong reason that leads pastors to work co-vocationally is out of a sense of mission. Sadly, this study and others demonstrate that a theology of missional engagement does not automatically translate into practice. However, we concur with Edington (2018) who states that "in the optimal realization of this model the entire congregation adopts a bivocational understanding of the ministry it is called to do in the world" (p. 11). As the author states, "this is not just an accidental byproduct of the sort of person a congregation hires; it is an intentional outcome of a purposeful process" (p. 11).

Therefore, and based on the data collected in this study, we believe that

a flourishing CoVo congregation is contingent upon a strong theology of missional engagement which guides not only the pastor but also the congregation itself.

It is of utmost importance, therefore, that pastors, churches, and denominations alike seek to help congregants adopt this biblical understanding and be actively engaged in the community they are located.

Bartlett (2022) insightfully comments that many church communities "crash into" CoVo, compounded by clergy with limited experience. Exceptions share commonalities:

congregations who "courageously grasp a new vision of faithfulness" (p. 52), have addressed "deeply rooted norms" (p. 17), and who have been coached to create a plan and a congregational commitment to the new reality that includes new job descriptions for all.

Another important question is "how" is co-vocational ministry conceptualized by pastors, congregations, and denominations? As Bickers (2007) states, "the call to bivocational ministry is no less valid than the call to a fully funded ministry" (p. xi). If co-vocational ministry is perceived simply as a necessary evil (including by the pastor him/herself), it becomes a hindrance to achieving its full potential. Yet,

Fighting against this stigma may entail celebrating and normalizing co-vocational ministry both at the local church and in the denominational context.

like this project, previous studies have identified a persistent but slowly shifting stigma regarding co-vocational ministry. As Bickers (2007) observes, "a bivocational church must avoid the risk of thinking of itself as an inferior church that cannot afford a fully funded minister" (p. 58). Fighting against this stigma may entail celebrating and normalizing co-vocational ministry both at the local church and in the denominational context – perhaps even by adjusting the terminology used, such as referring to them as fully-funded or co-vocational pastor rather than full-time or part-time pastor (Bickers, 2007). Pastors who acknowledge the privileges afforded by such an approach to ministry are more likely to thrive (MacDonald, 2020).

This points to the importance of a co-vocational call and the "unique fit" between the pastor (including their personality and gifts), their family, the congregation, and additional employment (Watson et al., 2020).

Third, our findings speak to the importance of supporting congregational reframing, especially as it relates to pursuing the biblical call of a priesthood of all believers. Thriving CoVo congregations must be more "group centered" than "pastor centered" (Edington, 2018), and it is arguably essential that laypeople step up and take over ministerial roles (MacDonald, 2020). As Edington (2018) observed,

"the successful implementation of a bivocational model of ministry is a work of the entire faith community, and not just the ordained member (or members) of that community" (p. 26).

Bickers (2007) also observe that having laypersons assume ministry responsibilities is key in the pursuit of a thriving CoVo congregation.

Practices that seem to be working across denominations include delegating functions to lay people at church (e.g., praying, preaching, leading ministries) as well as investing in training for those who are identified as potential leaders in the congregation.

Fourth, denomination responsivity is an area that requires great attention, especially as it relates to changing the narrative about co-vocationality, scheduling meetings/conferences/retreats, and on-going communication with CoVo pastors. Bicker (2007) observed that "many bivocational ministers are unaware of the denominational resources available for them" (p. 33).

This study's findings point to the major importance of finding creative ways to connect with CoVo pastors and establish meaningful and on-going relationships with them.

Meeting online and outside of business hours, for example, may be a way to allow CoVo pastors to connect more often. However, the most important thing is to seek to listen directly to the CoVo pastors from each denomination how their leaders may be responsive to their needs.

Fifth, participants emphasized the importance of being as generous as possible with CoVo pastors when it comes to their salary and benefits. Bickers (2007), observes that a co-vocational pastor often does not have the same medical benefits as fully funded pastors. As such, the author notes several potential benefits that could also be helpful to the CoVo pastor, such as a book allowance, continuing education allowance, mileage allowance, and funds for hospitality (p. 55).

Practices that seem to be working across denominations include delegating functions to lay people at church (e.g., praying, preaching, leading ministries) as well as investing in training for those who are identified as potential leaders in the congregation.

Bickers (2007) also observed that "time management is the number one problem among bivocational ministers" (p. 48). Although most pastors in this study expressed being able to take time off to exercise or spend time with the family, many also stated working way much more than what they are being paid for. While some say that the work does not feel as a burden to them, it is arguably inevitable that such intense workload without adequate rest will lead to burnout. Therefore, both the congregation and the denomination must respect the pastors' work hours and it can be very helpful for denominational leaders to check-in with CoVo pastors with some regularity to make sure they are taking time off weekly as well as periodically, reminding them that, ultimately, "you are the only person who can ensure that you remain healthy spiritually, emotionally, and physically" (Bickers, 2007, p. 81).

Finally, our findings surrounding credentialing and ordination also support earlier Canadian research suggesting the need to adapt ministry education to address these transitions is particularly clear in the lives of co-vocational leaders be they church planters, new Canadian clergy responding to diaspora needs, or leaders in long established congregations.

As Bickers (2007) observes, it is of utmost importance for denominations to address the educational requirements for ordination: "it may be that an educational standard for ordination is an outdated requirement better suited for ministry in an earlier time and not for the postmodern period in which we now minister" (p. 31).

Denominations may have to either invest in and provide the education they require pastors to have (with adequate time for completion), support certificate and other accessible training pathways, or look for other criteria such as one's gifts and experience.

All this points to the importance of intentional, prayerful, and targeted approaches to supporting congregations in transition. And it raises several important questions:

What theological perspectives support co-vocational congregational models of ministry?

In your context what narratives or practices undermine or support this approach to ministry?

What is needed to enable congregations to re-envision themselves as a 'priesthood of all believers' led by Ephesians 4:11 'equippers,' rather than places of 'one-directional' ministry?

If embracing co-vocationality means rethinking how ecclesiology is understood how might we facilitate this?

How might we become equipped to help congregations to prayerfully and purposefully discern their pathway, courageously grasp a new vision of faithfulness, and create a faith-filled yet feasible plan?

In what ways might robust theological reflection, deep dialogue and prayerful discernment inform denominational practices of supporting co-vocational pastors and congregations?

In this era of shrinking pools of congregational leaders how might we better offer discernment pathways for people in pews who might be sensing the call of God to step into leadership?

How is your denomination's approach to theological and ministry preparedness changing in light of the rising number of co-vocational pastors and congregations in Canada? What narratives support or undermine these changes?

How might we think differently about educational pathways for both CoVo pastors and CoVo congregations?

THEME	MOVING FROM...	TO...	BEST PRACTICES	REFLECTION QUESTIONS
Reasons	Finances	Mission	Communal discernment pathways	How might CoVo ministry models enable us to faithfully serve our community?
Conceptualization	Stigma	Celebration	Normalize through storytelling	In our context, what narratives or practices undermine or support this approach to ministry?
Supporting Congregational Reframing	Paid leaders "do the work of congregational and community ministry."	Priesthood of all believers	Training pastors to be "equippers" and facilitative leaders rather than "doers."	How might we become equipped to help congregations to discern and courageously grasp a new vision of faithfulness, and create a faith-filled yet feasible plan?
Denominational Responsivity	Difficult to access meetings and resources. Feeling unsupported and misunderstood.	"CoVo friendly" gatherings and support.	Scheduling creativity and frequent communication.	How is robust theological reflection, deep dialogue and prayer informing how we support CoVo pastors and congregations?
Pastor's Satisfaction & Well-being	Part-time salary for full-time work.	Realistic expectations and compensation.	Job descriptions for CoVo pastors and CoVo congregations. Opportunities for CoVo pastors to identify their vocational call and work within their areas of giftedness.	How do we balance cruciform leadership with ministry thriving?
Re-envisioning theological education, credentialling, and ordination	Formal theological education for pastors before serving in church.	"CoVo friendly" theological and leadership training for people serving or sensing a call to serve.	Accessible training opportunities for pastors, lay leaders, and congregations.	How might we think differently about educational pathways for both CoVo pastors and CoVo congregations?

Co-Vocational Canada

CONCLUSION

The invaluable perspectives and experiences shared by participants suggest both ongoing stigma and an emerging celebration of the ancient practice of co-vocationality. The findings of this study highlight the need for addressing persistent stigma and resistance, congregational reframing, and re-envisioned pathways to credentialing and ordination. They also surface the critical role of denominational leaders and others in helping to shape the narrative, being ready and available to listen to the needs of co-vocational pastors and being responsive to them.

APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Pastors

Part 1 – Personal Questions

1. Can you please tell me a bit about yourself, how long you have been in your current role, and how long you have experienced co-vocationality in your congregation?
   a. What led you to work co-vocationally?

2. How do you see the relationship between your two or more occupations?

3. How satisfied are you with your work?

4. What measures, if any, were taken to ensure that you would have a fair salary?

5. What aspects of ministry are personally difficult for you?

6. What strategies have you cultivated to find rest and renewal while balancing your work and personal life?

7. When facing new challenges, which supports do you access that best help you navigate these challenges?

Part 2 – Congregation Questions

8. In what ways, if any, does your congregation affirm the biblical call on every disciple of Jesus to serve in the priesthood of all believers?
   a. In what ways, if any, have you been training other leaders at church?
   b. To what extent is there lay involvement at the church?

9. How do you perceive your congregation's understanding of Co-Vocationality?
   a. What measures, if any, were taken to make sure the congregation is aware of what Co-Vocationality is, its benefits, the role of the congregation, etc.?

10. To what extent have reasonable expectations been set for paid and volunteer staff in your congregation?

11. Have those boundaries been respected?
    a. If yes, what strategies have been put in place to ensure those are respected?
    b. If no, where do you think the issue lays?

12. Thinking specifically about your personal and family time, do you consider you have adequate and regular time off work? What strategies, if any, have been put in place by you or the congregation to ensure that you get such time off?

13. How does your congregation envision their role with its neighbourhood and the city?

Part 3 – Denominational Questions

14. To what extent do you believe your denomination understands the unique needs of their co-vocational ministers and congregations? How is that evidenced?

15. How attentive to these needs do you consider your denomination to be in the pursuit of thriving co-vocational congregations?

16. In terms of credentialing and ordination, how responsive to your needs as a CoVo pastor has your denomination been?

17. What is working/missing from the support you expect from your denomination when considering your role as a CoVo pastor?

Is there anything else you would like to add when considering the pursuit of thriving CoVo congregations?

Denominational Leaders

1. Can you please tell me a bit about yourself, how long you have been in your current role, and how long you have experienced co-vocationality in your denomination?

2. How many congregations are there in your denomination?

3. To the best of your knowledge, how many congregations in your denomination have co-vocational pastors?
   a. What are the main reasons for pursuing co-vocational ministry you see among your congregations?

4. What do you think should be the relationship between a CoVo pastor's two or more occupations?

5. What measures, if any, were taken to ensure that CoVo pastors in your denomination have a fair salary?

6. What supports/strategies, if any, are put in place to ensure the CoVo pastor has adequate and regular time off?

7. To what extent are co-vocational ministers treated differently than "full-time" clergy?

8. How do you perceive your denomination's understanding/conceptualization of Co-Vocationality?
   a. What measures, if any, are taken to make sure the leaders in the denomination are aware of what Co-Vocationality is, its benefits, the role of the congregation, etc.?
   b. To what extent do you believe your denomination understands the unique needs of their co-vocational ministers and congregations?
   c. How attentive to these needs do you consider your denomination to be in the pursuit of thriving co-vocational congregations?

9. To what extent do you see training of new leaders being a priority in your congregations?

10. What role do you expect your CoVo congregations to play in their neighbourhoods and cities?

11. What does your denomination accept/recognize as theological education?
    a. To what extent are you re-evaluating, in light of co-vocationality, the process of credentialing and ordination?

12. From a denomination point of view, what is working/missing from the support you give to your CoVo pastors/congregations?

Is there anything else you would like to add when considering the pursuit of thriving CoVo congregations?

REFERENCES

Bentley, K. (2021). *Perspectives of Bi-Vocational Ministry: Emerging Themes in Bi-vocational Ministry Research.* Lexington Theological Seminary.

Bentley, K. (2022). Pitching Our Tent with Bivocational Ministry. In D. Stephens (Ed.) *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry* (pp. 111-131). Atla Open Press. https://doi.org/10.31046/atlaopenpress.82

Bickers, D. (2007). *The Work of The Bivocational Minister.* Judson Press.

Cox, C. (2018). The Rewards of Bivocational Ministry. *Restoration Quarterly*, 60(2), 99-107.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Earlham School of Religion Bivocational Ministry Data Research. (2017). https://esr.earlham.edu/ research/ecffm/bivocationaldata

Edington, M. (2018). *Bivocational: Returning to the roots of ministry.* Church Publishing.

Hamilton, A. (2022). *The Future is Bivocational: Shaping Christian Leaders for a Post-Christian World.* Ark House Press.

Lundquist, D. J. (2019). *Bi-Vocational Ministry: What Works from the Perspective of Bi-Vocational Ministers and Their Congregants.* Lancaster Theological Seminary.

MacDonald, G. J. (2020). *Part-Time is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-Time Clergy.* Westminster John Knox Press.

MacDonald, G. J. (2024, March 20). Full-time ministry drains too many clergy and church budgets. Part-time pastors can help. *Presbyterian Outlook.* https://religionnews.com/2024/03/14/full-time-ministry-drains-too-many-clergy-and-church-budgets-part-time-pastors-can-help/

Siebert, J. (2022). Tending to the tentmaker. In J. Watson & N. Santos (Eds.). *Tentmakers: Multivocational Ministry in Western Society* (pp. 94-103). Wipf and Stock Publishers.

Stephens, D. W. (2021). Bivocational Ministry as the Congregation's Curriculum. *Religions*, 12(1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010056

Watson, J., Malcolm, W., Chapman M.D., Fisher E. A., Draper, M., Santos, N.F., Siebert, J. & Bratton A. (2020). Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project, Research Report. CMMP.

Watson, J. and Santos, N. Eds. (2022) *Tentmakers: Multivocational Ministry in Western Society.* Wipf and Stock Publishers.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rebeca Heringer (PhD)

Rebeca is a researcher at Co-Vocational Canada. She holds a Ph.D. and M.Ed. in Education from the University of Manitoba, and a BA in Social Communications from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Born and raised in Brazil, Rebeca has worked with children and youth in poverty, children and youth with disabilities, and refugees and immigrants in Canada, Brazil, Hungary, and Kenya.

Some of her other research interests include culturally responsive teaching; (forced) migrations and subsequent exclusions, oppressions, and inequities in education; anti-racism and inclusive education; children and youth well-being; philosophical foundations of education; research ethics and anti-oppressive research methodologies.

Ellen Duffield (DMin, in process)

Ellen is the Coordinator of the Paul E. Magnus Centre for Leadership Studies, Program Coordinator for the Master of Arts in Leadership, Theology, and Systems, and Co-Vocational Canada Project Director.

Before coming to Briercrest Seminary, she had the privilege of directing The Leadership Studio in Ontario, teaching hundreds of seasoned and emerging leaders each year. Prior to that she spent 20 years of working in camp and co-vocational Church leadership, co-founded an international leadership ministry for women, and engaged in numerous consulting, coaching and group facilitation partnerships.

Co-Vocational Canada

briercrestseminary.ca/co-vocational-canada

BRIERCREST SEMINARY

510 College Dr, Caronport, SK S0H 0S0
(306) 756-3200

briercrestseminary.ca