

Lay Staff Ministry in the United Methodist Church

By Ann A. Michel

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Highlights from the Study

The growth of lay staff in congregations across denominations is a significant trend shaping the way churches engage in ministry and the way people experience church on the front lines of local ministry. In order to understand this development more fully, Dr. Ann A. Michel, associate director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership, set out to answer two questions within her denominational context: “How many lay staff work in United Methodist congregations?” and “What do they do?” Although more research is needed to understand this trend fully, this research revealed important aspects of the changing profile of church staffing.

Many lay staff serve the church. It is likely that there are at least 40,000 part-time and full-time lay personnel in United Methodist churches.

The numbers are growing. Denomination-wide, the percentage of total church expenditures spent on non-clergy compensation has grown consistently over the past two decades. In 2009, the denominational average was 19.6 percent. In every category of congregation size studied, and in the denomination as a whole, that percentage grew consistently since 1989 when records were first kept and the percentage was 14.6 percent.

They serve in churches across a wide size range. While it is true that very large churches tend to have large staffs, the lay employees of churches with attendance over 1,000 account for only about 12 percent of lay employees denomination-wide. These very large churches actually have fewer lay staff (and fewer clergy) per worshiper than other size categories studied. About half of lay staff work in churches with attendance of 350 or more and half in smaller churches.

Most lay staff work in program areas. While church administrative and support services account for 35 to 39 percent of lay staff in the churches studied, a larger group of lay staff serve in program ministries. Five specific categories of ministry generally account for the highest percentage of lay workers – children’s ministry, office administration, music, facilities, and youth. In churches with more than 500 attendance, children’s ministry and office administration top the list, each accounting for just under 20 percent of total staff. In smaller churches, music personnel are usually the largest category.

Lay staff are predominantly part-time except in very large churches. One notable difference in churches with attendance over 1,000 is the percentage of lay staff working full-time. Based on survey responses, 74 percent of staff are full-time in the largest churches compared to 45 to 50 percent in other churches with attendance above 350 but less than 1,000. Women are much more likely than men to work part-time, particularly in larger churches.

Lay staff are predominantly female. Women make up about 70 percent of lay staff.

Lay staff tend to come from the congregation they serve. About 60 percent of lay staff were members of the congregation they served before being hired.

Most lay staff do not have formal theological education.

Salaries for lay staff are notably higher in larger churches. The salaries of most full-time lay staff surveyed in 2010 fell in the range of \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year. The pay scale is notably higher in churches with average attendance above 1,000 where 31 percent made more than \$50,000.

Lay Staff Ministry in United Methodist Churches

By Ann A. Michel

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Tens of thousands of lay staff workers provide Christian nurture to our children, counsel our youth, lead the ministries that engage others in Christian formation, education, and outreach, offer worship, and order the life of the church in a myriad of vital ways. Over the past several decades, the work of lay staff has become increasingly important to many congregations. Yet these co-laborers in the vineyard often go unnoticed by agencies and institutions beyond the local church. This report seeks to document the nature and scope of their ministry.

Methodology

This inquiry employed a number of different quantitative and qualitative research methods to assess the extent and character of lay staff ministry in United Methodist churches in the United States. The first phase of research involved detailed study of the staff listings on congregational websites in a representative sample of churches in several different size tiers based on attendance. The second phase involved online surveys administered to all lay staff members identified through the web research. Senior pastors were also surveyed on how staffing levels or patterns have changed in their church. Finally, this research examined non-clergy compensation statistics collected by the denomination since 1989 as an aggregate measure of the growth in lay staff and in connection with other data to illuminate lay staffing trends.

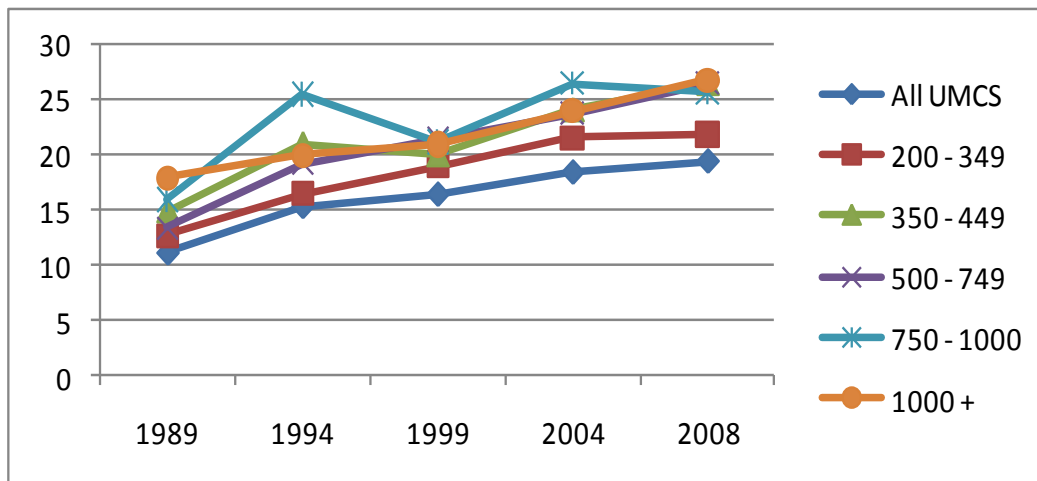
Documenting the Growth of Church Staff

Over the past three to four decades, the model of church staffing has changed significantly -- moving away from the traditional emphasis on full-time ordained ministers and toward a larger number of lay staff members, many of whom are part-time. Ninety-one percent of clergy respondents to the survey said their lay staff had increased compared to twenty years ago, and 83 percent said it had increased in the past ten years. Fifty-four percent anticipated that their lay staff would continue to grow in the future.

One statistical measure of the overall trend is the amount spent by congregations on non-clergy or "other" compensation. In the 2009 conference year, non-clergy compensation accounted for 19.6 percent of the total expenditures of United Methodist Churches in the United States, up from 14.6 percent in 1989, the first year in which these statistics were collected. And that percentage has grown consistently over the past two decades for the denomination as a whole and within each of the size tiers studied.

In the sample of churches examined in this study, non-clergy compensation as a percentage of total church expenditures ranged from 21.9 percent in churches with worship attendance of 200 to 349, to 26.8 percent in churches with 1000 or more in attendance. Generally, the percentage is higher the larger the church size. But the trend line is similar regardless of size.

The Growth in Non-clergy Compensation as a Percentage of Total Church Expenditures



The growth of lay staff ministry can be viewed within the context of broader shifts in the cultural, theological, and ecclesiological landscape, including the democratization of culture, globalization, anti-institutionalism, the changing role of women in the church and the workplace, and the megachurch movement.

Other factors fueling the trend include:

- A changing culture of volunteerism.** The growth in lay staffing has coincided with the era in which many American women moved into the workforce, making them less available for volunteer duty and more interested in the possibility of part-time or full-time employment. Additionally, the time demands and pressures of contemporary lifestyles have curtailed the availability of both women and men for church responsibilities. Also, in many areas of ministry people have come to expect a level of professionalism that goes beyond what volunteers might typically offer.
- The shift from generalists to specialists.** Increasingly, congregations find that ordained generalists do not have the inclination or the necessary skill sets to focus in specific areas such as children's and youth ministry, music, administration and finance, and an expanding range of other programmatic ministries. This is particularly the case for ministries with children and youth. But the growing demand for specialized programmatic ministry in other areas of church life has similarly fueled the demand for lay staff.
- Growth.** Congregational growth was the factor related to the expansion of lay staffs most commonly cited by pastors responding to the clergy survey. At least half of respondents named overall church growth as the main reason for larger staffs. Others referenced the growth of specific programs or ministries.
- Compensation.** For many congregations, there is a simple dollars-and-cents logic to the shift toward more lay staffing. For the "price" of one clergy person with a conference-mandated minimum salary, benefits package, and housing allowance, a congregation often can hire several part-time lay staff. The cost factor was named by a large proportion of the clergy survey respondents as an explanation for the increase in their lay staffing and as a factor that comes into play in deciding whether to staff a particular ministry with an ordained or a lay person.
- Control in hiring.** Another factor leading many churches to opt for lay staff over ordained staff is the ability to exercise more control in selecting the right person for the job and the ability to control that individual's tenure as an employee.

How Many Lay Persons Serve in Church Staff Roles in United Methodist Churches?

It is likely that there are at least 40,000 part-time and full-time lay personnel in United Methodist churches. About half work in churches with average attendance of 350 or more, and half in smaller churches. This estimate was achieved using staff totals derived by analyzing the staff listings on church websites together with statistics on non-clergy compensation in churches of different sizes. Based on these calculations, it is reasonable to estimate that there are about 20,400 lay employees, including both part-time and full-time personnel, in the 1436 United Methodist churches with average worship attendance of 350 or more.

| Estimated Total Number of Lay Staff by Size Tier | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Size Tier | Number of churches in size tier | Percent of churches in study sample | Total lay staff in study sample | Extrapolated total for size tier | Total Non-clergy Compensation in size tier (2008) |
| 1000 + | 180 | 90% | 4709 | 5232 | \$193,576,093 |
| 750–999 | 143 | 10% | 265 | 2650 | \$81,422,106 |
| 500–749 | 424 | 10% | 536 | 5360 | \$154,641,822 |
| 350–449 | 689 | 10% | 715 | 7150 | \$162,569,747 |
| 200–349 | 2103 | 5% | NA | NA | \$256,983,718 |

What about the number of staff in smaller churches? Much is made of the fact that less than five percent of churches with average attendance over 350 account for almost half of non-clergy staff expenditures. But the other side of that coin is that churches with average worship attendance of less than 350 account for 52 percent of the non-clergy compensation within the denomination. If those dollars translate into staff hires at the same rate as in larger churches, it would be fair to *gestimate* that there are another 22,100 lay staff employees in churches with attendance below 350. In all likelihood, it translates into a larger number of staff hires since smaller churches are more likely to have part-time and very-part-time employees.

The Areas of Ministry in Which Lay Persons Work

The staff listings on church websites reveal that lay persons serve in a very wide array of roles. Across the size tiers studied, the same five specific areas of ministry accounted for the highest percentage of laity working in each tier – children’s ministry, office administration, music, facilities, and youth. Generally, office administration and children’s ministry topped the list, each ranging from about 17 to 19 percent of lay staff in every size category studied. However, in churches with average attendance of 350 to 499, music accounted for the highest percentage of their lay staff at 20 percent. Moving down the size tiers, one sees that these five specific areas together account for a comparatively larger percentage of the overall lay staff.

When the specific job categories are grouped into broader categories, other patterns become clear. In all the size tiers studied, administration, operations, and other support functions together account for 35 to 39 percent of lay staff, while children and youth together account for about 25 percent of lay staff. In churches with attendance over 1000, about a quarter of lay staff work in other programmatic ministries, and 15 percent in music and worship. In churches with attendance of 500 or less, those percentages are reversed.

| Percentage of Churches Studied in each Size Tier with Lay Staff in these Specific Categories of Ministry | | | | |
|---|-------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 1000+ | 750–999 | 500–749 | 350–499 |
| Administrative | 95% | 100% | 98% | 96% |
| Children | 97% | 100% | 95% | 86% |
| Music | 84% | 100% | 88% | 96% |
| Youth | 87% | 93% | 84% | 72% |

At least 95 percent of churches in all size tiers studied had laity as administrative office staff, and at least 95 percent of churches with 500 or more in worship had laity working in children’s ministry. The percentages with lay staff in music and youth ministry were more variable, but were still quite high across the board.

The churches examined in this research had extensive and varied programmatic ministries staffed by lay persons. Depending on the ministry footprint of the particular church, these might include such things as counseling services and recovery programs, campus ministry, communications, recreational programs, congregational care and health ministries, mission initiatives, ministries of outreach, membership and evangelism, and all types of adult education and fellowship.

- Eighty-three percent of churches studied with 350 to 499 worshipers had a lay staff person in at least one area of programmatic ministry other than music, worship, children, and youth. Fifty percent had two or more, and 13 percent had three or more.
- Eighty-seven percent of churches studied in the 500 to 749 size tier had at least one program staffer in addition to those working with children, youth, music, and worship. Forty-seven percent had two or more, and 30 percent had three or more.
- Ninety-three percent of churches studied in the 750 to 999 size range had at least one lay staff member in an area of programmatic ministry other than children, youth, music, or worship. Eighty percent had two or more, and 67 percent had three or more.
- Ninety-seven percent of churches studied with average worship attendance of 1000 or more had lay staff in programmatic ministries other than music, worship, children, and youth. Seventy-seven percent had three or more, 56 percent had five or more, and 25 percent had nine or more. The average in these churches is seven.

Lay Staff in Relation to Other Variables

The Ratio of Lay Staff to Clergy. Not surprisingly, when one looks at the size tiers in aggregate, the ratio of the total number of lay staff to the total number of clergy persons increases as worship attendance increases. In churches with attendance between 350 and 500, there are on average 4.3 lay staff per clergy person. In churches with attendance between 500 and 1000, the average is 4.5 lay staff per clergy person. And in churches with average attendance of more than 1,000, the ratio is 5.6 to 1. But the staff/clergy ratio for the individual churches within each tier does not increase in a linear manner, in part because the number of clergy serving these congregations varies greatly. As one examines the churches in a tier as a whole, however, the pattern becomes more evident.

Ratio of Lay Staff to Average Worship Attendance. One of the most surprising findings of this research is that the ratio of lay staff to worship attendance actually decreases as churches get larger. Churches with average attendance of 1000 or more have an average of one lay staff person for every 55 worshipers, while churches in the 500 to 999 attendance range have one for every 49 worshipers. Churches with average attendance of 350 to 499 have one for every 40 worshipers. More of the lay personnel in the largest churches are full-time, and the amount of non-clergy compensation per worshiper is larger in the largest churches. Nevertheless, this finding calls into question the common perception that largest churches “have more staff” than any other churches.

The Characteristics of Lay Staff

Age. The age of lay staff survey respondents appears to follow a similar pattern across the size tiers studied. Those under the age of thirty were from six to nine percent of staff. People in their thirties comprised between ten and 19 percent of lay staff. Those in their forties ranged from 25 to 31 percent. Those in their fifties represent between 23 and 33 percent of lay staff. And those sixty and older were 25 to 30 percent of the survey respondents in all categories.

Gender. The web profile research indicates that about 70 percent of church staffers are female. A somewhat higher percentage of survey respondents were female, attributable perhaps to a higher survey response rate from women. Among those responding to the survey who worked part-time, the percentage of females was higher. In churches with average worship attendance over 1000, 90 percent of the part-time lay work force is female. The percentage of part-timers who are women is between 72 and 82 percent in other size categories studied. The web profiles indicate that only 65 percent of staff are female in churches with average attendance of 2,000 or more, where jobs are more likely to be full-time and the pay scale tends to be higher. In churches with attendance over 1000, only 10 percent of male survey respondents reported being part-time, compared to 40 to 45 percent of the men in all other size categories studied.

When websites were profiled, gender distribution was not recorded by specific job category, but general trends are easily observable. Children’s ministry is staffed almost exclusively by women. Men are most typically found in youth ministry positions, music and worship, positions related to facilities, maintenance, and operations, IT and other technical support roles, and some types of administrative work. Women comprise the preponderance of staff in various aspects of programmatic ministry and office support.

Church Membership. About 60 percent of lay staff report that they were members of the congregation they serve before being hired. Seventy to 85 percent report that they currently are members of the congregation, suggesting that it is not uncommon for lay hires to join the church once they are on the job. The largest churches have the highest percent of employees who are members (84.2%). Of those who do not belong to the church where they work, about 50 to 60 percent belong to a different church.

Prior Occupations. Across the size tiers studied, 55 to 60 percent of lay staff were previously employed in non-church work. The percentage of those who had previously worked for a different church varied from 17 to 29 percent depending on the size tier, with the highest percentage in churches of 350 to 499 where music staff account for more of the overall staffing. Roughly 15 to 25 percent, depending on the size tier, were homemakers entering or reentering the job market. Around five percent had worked in church-related or parachurch organizations.

Part-time/Full-time. Because the information derived from church web listings did not distinguish between part-time and full-time staff, survey responses were the only direct source of data on this dimension of the lay workforce. Full-time lay staff were 74 percent of survey respondents in churches with average attendance of over 1000, 45 percent

in churches of 750 to 999, 51 percent in churches of 500 to 749, and 46 percent in churches of 350 to 449. The difference in the percentage of full-time staff is one of the most notable differences between the largest churches and the others studied.

An analysis of non-clergy compensation also suggests that the percentage of part-timers increases in small churches. Based on the total estimated number of staff in each tier, the average compensation level per employee is \$36,998 in churches with average attendance over 1000, \$30,725 in churches of 750 to 999, \$28,851 in churches of 500 to 749, and \$22,737 in churches with average attendance of 350 to 499.

Salaries. The salaries of most full-time lay staff are between \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year. In all size categories studied, more than 40 percent of full-time lay staff had salaries of less than \$40,000 a year. The percentage of full-time salaries under \$40,000 was significantly higher in churches with average attendance of below 750 (65% in the 500 to 749 range, and 60% in the 350 to 499 range). The percent of salaries above \$50,000 was greatest in churches with average attendance of a 1000 or more (31.2 %). In other size categories studied, only 9 to 16 percent of full-time lay salaries were over \$50,000 per year.

Of those with full-time jobs, the percent with church-provided health insurance was 80.3 percent in the largest churches, 72.2 percent in churches with average attendance of 750 to 999, 39.1 percent in churches with attendance of 500 to 749, and 50 percent in churches of 350 to 499. Among the survey respondents overall, which included part-timers, the percentage with insurance through their church job was substantially lower.

Conclusion

This research suggests that lay staff ministry is more extensive and diverse than commonly assumed. With the expansion of lay staff roles comes the need to assure that laity serving on the front lines of congregational ministry have the faith, knowledge, and skill needed for fruitful service. It is important that local congregations, the denomination, and lay ministry practitioners themselves attend to their needs for training, spiritual formation, accountability, and support, while at the same time affirming the calling of lay servants within an inclusive framework of ministry.

About the Author

Dr. Ann A. Michel is associate director of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership and recently completed her Doctor of Ministry degree in church leadership from Wesley Theological Seminary. Her blog on lay staff issues can be found at www.in-ministry-together.com. Joe Arnold, research director for the Lewis Center, assisted in the preparation of this report by providing statistical data.

About the Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Established by Wesley Theological Seminary in 2003, the Lewis Center for Church Leadership helps the United Methodist Church address its current challenges. The Center is building a vision for church leadership grounded in faith, informed by knowledge, and exercised in effective action. It seeks a holistic understanding of Christian leadership that brings together theology and management, scholarship and practice, research and application.

Committed to the broad goal of helping the church reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people, the Center focuses on improving leadership effectiveness and providing actionable strategic insights to promote fruitful ministry. The Center seeks to be a trusted resource for congregations and denominations seeking to serve, thrive, and grow. The Center staff, along with other consultants who assist with special projects, also draws on the expertise of the entire Wesley faculty and a wide array of gifted practitioners.

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