



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

The United Methodist Church

Practical Church Leadership Program PROGRAM IMPACT STUDY (2018-2023)

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Abstract

This report is offered to illustrate the impact of an educational program designed specifically to build confidence and administrative acumen among clergy serving small to large churches across the U.S., discuss factors that attributed to its success, and offer recommendations to stakeholders and others concerned with pastoral preparedness.

Four major findings are reported.

- Applied learning in administration and management led to more resilient and capable leaders and is a benefit to local churches.
- Relational and supportive learning led to more satisfaction and success among scholars.
- Timing of this type of education, while in the field, is important.
- Participation would have been prohibitive if not for scholarships, which has implications for those supporting continuing education efforts for clergy.

Introduction

The American church has undergone significant changes in the last few decades, and the way in which leaders are prepared to lead churches in this new landscape is shifting as well: 65% of Americans identify as Christian, down from 77% a decade earlier (Pew Research, 2019) and weekly church attendance has declined by more than 20% since 1999 (Jones, 2021). Many of those who attend go to larger churches with 350 or more members. But most churches in the U.S. have 100 or fewer members. These shifts have changed how churches are being managed and by whom. Often, smaller churches are led by a solo, full-time, or part-time clergy person with limited staff and volunteer support (Hartford Institute, 2024).

The ways in which clergy are expected to lead the church have also shifted in the last few decades. Retired clergy said that forty years ago, the job of clergy was primarily pastoral care and preaching with support staff and lay leaders carrying other church responsibilities (Janssen, 2024). But today, clergy leading congregations of all sizes are often expected to pastor and preach while also leading administrative responsibilities and managing the

business affairs of the church. Many clergy report feeling role-related stress due to the discrepancy between why they answered their ministry call – preaching and pastoral care – and what a large portion of their work entails: administration and management, (Clark, Walker, Spur, & Squires, 2023). Despite this shift in role responsibilities and priorities, there are still few robust graduate or continuing education programs that intentionally prepare clergy in church administration and little research that speaks to the need or impact of such education on clergy who lead churches today.

Background

In 2018, the Dakotas and Minnesota Conferences of the United Methodist Church and their respective foundations partnered with Dakota Wesleyan University (DWU) to create what is now called the Practical Church Leadership (PCL) Program. Since its inception, the program was built differently than traditional models of seminary or continuing education; it is designed intentionally to fill gaps in building administrative and leadership skills that can be applied in real-time.

PCL is a year-long, 21-graduate-credit-hour, certificate program created for working ministry professionals to strengthen their confidence and capability in a variety of leadership skills, including financial development and management, governance, talent management, project management, strategy, change and conflict management, and communications. The program uses a cohort learning approach and is delivered in a hybrid model that blends online learning with three weekend retreat-style sessions. Other distinct features include individual coaching and a year-long capstone project. Eighteen of the 21 credits can, if the participant chooses, be applied toward a 36-credit-hour MBA at Dakota Wesleyan University.

There were 15 pastors from Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota in the pilot cohort. Since then, the program has graduated nearly 200, offering two cohorts each year, and includes pastors and other ministry leaders from ten states and two denominations. The majority of scholars are part of the United Methodist tradition. 80% serve congregations with less than 350 in average weekly

attendance and the majority of participants have been in church ministry for more than five years. The PCL program distinguishes church size by average weekly attendance using the following metrics:

Family Church: Fewer than 50

Pastoral Church: 50-75

Program Church: 75-200

Large Church: 200-350

Corporate Church: 350-500

Mega Church: 500+

This report is designed to demonstrate the program's impact and discuss implications for stakeholders involved with, or in support of, PCL and other contemporary educational opportunities for ministry professionals.

Study

In order to assess the impact the program has made on participants, DWU and the Dakotas and Minnesota Conferences of the UMC worked with an external evaluator to complete an eight-month study comprised of PCL scholars from the past six years, and a sample of laity representing ministries affected by the scholar's participation in the program.

The overall goals of the evaluation were to provide insights into the following questions:

1. How does education that focuses on administration impact a pastor's ability to lead?
2. Does pastoral leadership in the PCL program impact the viability of local congregations?
3. What is the longitudinal impact of participation in the program?

Methods

The following methods were used for this research:

1. Document review from 129 participants – including pre- and post-program surveys, program and course outcomes, applied project outcomes, and course surveys.

2. Surveys of various PCL stakeholders: past students (n=60) who are primarily UMC elders and licensed local pastors, with some ELCA pastors, as well as other stakeholders (n=40) who are judicatory officials, lay leaders, etc.

A variety of quantitative and qualitative questions were asked in the student survey to assess the program's impact on skill development, application of learning, and lasting impact of skills attained and/or refined. In the survey to laity, questions focused on comparing leadership development among program graduates with those who had not participated, impact of the program on participants' leadership ability, and perceived skills needed to lead church in the coming years.

3. Interviews – Interviews were conducted with ten randomly selected former program participants. These interviews averaged 30 minutes, and focused on questions such as:

- *How would you describe the shifting needs of the churches served by PCL?*
- *What do pastors and lay leaders need in order to thrive?*
- *How would the church(es) be different if more pastors and lay leaders received the sort of training that PCL offers?*
- *What sort of suggestions would you make for improving the PCL experience, if any?*
- *Has going through PCL impacted your leadership style?*
- *Is there a connection between the skills taught by PCL and adaptive leadership in times of change?*
- *At what stage in pastoral training are the skills taught by PCL most helpful?*
- *In the balance between content and format of PCL (e.g. cohorts, etc.), what were the most impactful parts for you?*
- *How would you make the case for ongoing support of PCL to bishops, district superintendents, and so on?*

Study Participants

The participant survey was sent to 129 past students of the program, with 60 respondents. Among those, 78% were elders, 10% licensed local pastors, 2% deacons, and 10% conference staff, campus ministers, or former pastors. Respondents represented a robust mix of scholars who recently completed the program and those who finished four or more years ago. Thus, researchers were able to capture both the short-term and longitudinal impact of the program upon both the attitudes and the behaviors of graduates. The stakeholder (laity and judicatory officials) survey was sent to 78 individuals, with 40 responding. Ten, randomly selected, past-program participants took part in the qualitative interviews.

The 2023-2024 cohort in class



Findings and Implications

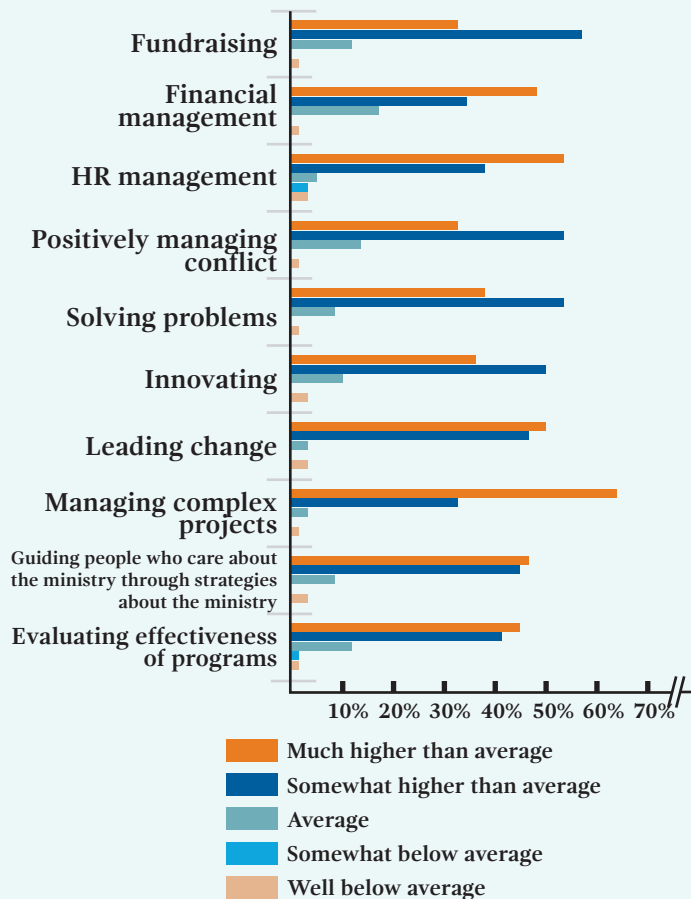
Finding One

Participation in PCL led to significant **gains in administrative skills** for scholars as well as **benefits for the ministries** they served.

Benefits for Scholars

The following chart offers a snapshot of survey responses aimed at assessing the extent to which PCL graduates discerned an increase in their skills in key administrative areas. As indicated in this chart, the majority of PCL participants **perceived a much higher, or somewhat higher, increase in administrative skills after participation in the program.**

Participant Survey Question: Rate your agreement with the following assertions: The PCL program at Dakota Wesleyan University has increased your skills in the following areas of church life/ministry:



This survey finding aligns with pre- and post-program data, collected annually from 2018-2023, that assessed changes in participants' confidence and skill. As indicated in the chart below, there were significant differences, ($p=.05$), across all confidence areas assessed.



The program also evaluated course learning outcomes in its seven-week classes. Outcomes examined included: the ability to develop effective fundraising strategies; analyze and report on financial data; create strategies for board, staff, and volunteer engagement; engage skills in project, change, and conflict management; and assess the effectiveness of organizational programs and processes. Each year, student assignments were assessed using rubrics and course learning outcomes were evaluated by the professor using a mastery score with 1 being “does not meet expectations,” 3 being “meets expectations,” and 5 being “exceeds expectations.” Over the six-year program, more than 90% of students met or exceeded outcomes, as demonstrated by this example from 2021-2022.

Average Outcome Score

88.14% Exceeds expectations

8.47% Meets expectations

3.39% Does not meet expectations

“I have been in ministry full time since 2007 and the PCL program taught me so much that I had never learned. It also helped put into words the things I had learned the hard way! PCL transformed my ministry into a ministry that is up to date and able to keep up with the changing landscape of ministry in the 21st century.”

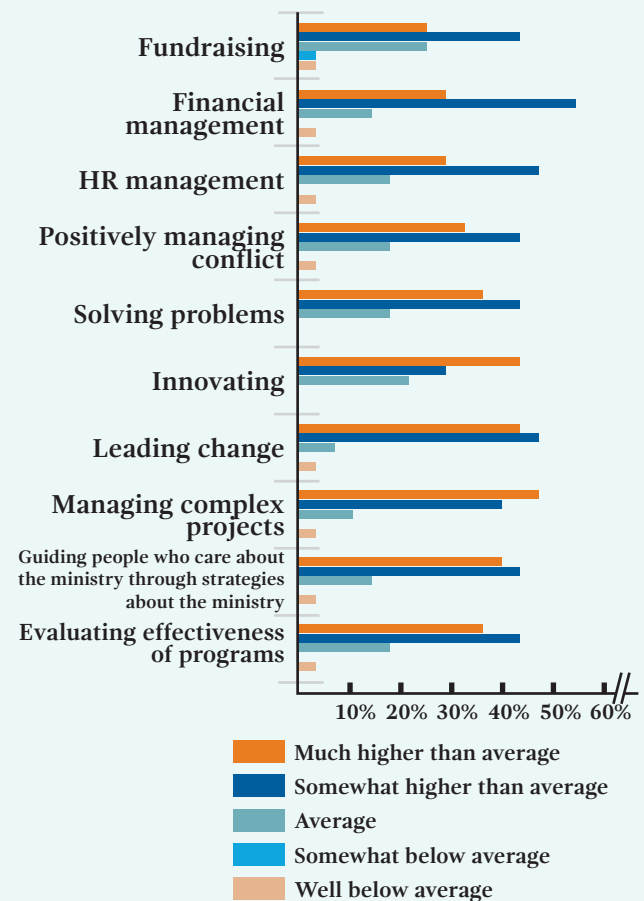
-BT, Mid-Size Church, Pennsylvania

Benefits for Congregations

Congregational stakeholders represent lay leaders, judicatory representatives, and congregations impacted by their clergy person’s involvement in PCL.

The following chart offers a snapshot of survey responses aimed at assessing the leadership and administrative skills targeted in the PCL program by stakeholders. As indicated in this chart, the majority of stakeholders **noticed an increase in the pastor’s administrative skills.**

Stakeholder question: Based on your observations about participants who completed the PCL program, please rate their skill in the following areas as compared to ministry leaders who have not participated in this (or similar) programs:



“I believe our pastors who complete the PCL program have an increased level of confidence in the work they are doing strategically in their ministries. I also believe that the opportunity has developed cohorts for our pastors to create a support system that would not have presented itself without the program.”

- Program Sponsor

“To date, we raised \$104,722. This exceeds expectations and our goal. More importantly, this project served as a point for the church to rally together—celebrating wins across campus and beginning to function more as one church. This has been an absolutely fantastic program. I have highly recommended it to others and will continue to do so.”

-Zack, Large Church, Michigan

Congregations have benefited from their leaders' applied learning through the PCL program. The most significant benefit came through scholars' applied projects. These projects were designed with input from members of the congregation/ministry and varied in length and scope from six months to one year. The purpose of the project was to improve student acumen in project management and to engage stakeholders in a project that led to benefits for the congregation. All scholars reported measurable benefits to their ministry in some way, as indicated by final project reports. The researchers completed a review of projects, assessing 180 projects. Below is a snapshot of the type and scope of projects, highlighting selected outcomes achieved. Some projects encompassed more than one area.

Governance: 44

Financial Development or Management: 40

Human Resource Management: 51

Strategic Planning: 88

Communications: 45

Program Development: 38

Other: 21

“Your investment in this initiative has empowered us to take meaningful steps towards addressing the rural housing crisis in our small community and create a lasting impact on our community. The insights gained from (PCL) have been instrumental in navigating the complexities of this project, from securing financing to engaging stakeholders effectively.”

-Chris, Program-Size Church, Missouri

“All of this led to...an 18% rise in giving and ministry! By walking us through this education and seeing how critical the different parts of the lesson were to our ministry, the entire church ended up healing and growing from this program.”

-Laraine, Program-Size Church, Missouri

Outcomes of these projects varied based on the type, size, and scope of the project. A random sample of projects and their associated outcomes are highlighted below.

Description	Type	Outcomes
Help church re-engage after COVID fatigue and develop a plan to engage in renewing programs while also creating new opportunities.	Strategic Planning and Development	• Growth through a return of 12 small groups. • Creation of a new gathering for young families. • A successful 200th anniversary celebration. • Continued financial strength. • An increase of in-person worship attendance by over 25%.
Develop and execute programming plans for growth as a new church in the annual conference.	Program Development	• After-school program participation increased by 50%. • Sunday morning kids' ministry increased by 50%. • The return rate for first-time visitors hit 56%.
Bring more joy and stability to church's financial work, focusing on annual finance campaign with analysis of giving and trust fund.	Financial Development and Management	• Compiled accurate data of giving history over the last 10 years, which helps budgeting process and may save \$25,000 in the coming year. • Developed record of 40 years of gifts to the trust fund. • Developed a well-articulated story about the impact of the trust fund. • Created a plan to grow the trust fund.
Develop a missional budget for the congregation, which involved combining church mission and budget.	Financial Development	• Giving increased by 5%-10% per week. • Committee meetings now have an informed purpose. • 2-3 new leaders empowered to serve as finance champions. • 3 new projects were implemented with increase in resources.
Shift leadership and governance structure from committee-based to single-board governance. Engage volunteers in ministry. Develop a unified strategy with the simplified board for the next year.	Governance and Human Resource Development, Strategy	• Committee meeting time was reduced by 50% • More diverse (in terms of age, gender, and ministry background). • Increase in individual engagement in ministries across campus. • Strategic plan for next year designed with a collaborative effort by a unified, single board. • Increase in overall enthusiasm for governance and ministry.

“We were unsure how successful we would be, given the trends of the church had been declining for a couple of years. We have been overjoyed with the results thus far, as we have seen an increase in giving in the church between 32% and 59% each quarter. We’ve also established a cash reserve policy and now have cash on hand. ”

-Ben, Program-Size Church, Missouri

Given that all projects were undertaken as part of a year-long project management course within the PCL program, it's notable that over 96% of students met or exceeded outcomes for project management and saw significant gains ($p=.05$) pre-and-post-program, in their ability to design and lead projects, as well as articulate and measure project outcomes.

“Learning about project management revolutionized how I tackle large-scale projects in my church – from getting key stakeholders on board (and interviewing them ahead of time to set project objectives), to establishing what is out of scope for the project, and then following up with team accountability sessions. It has really helped my leadership.”

- PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

The review of pre-and-post-program surveys from PCL participants, course outcomes, and outcomes of participants' applied learning reveal gains in administrative skills and benefit to congregations. The documents and datasets also demonstrate a high degree of reported satisfaction (and low attrition) with the program along with measurable results from applied learning.

Implication from Finding One

Administrative skill building fosters capability, confidence, and resiliency for clergy, which impacts the ministries they serve.

Both the surveys and the interviews demonstrated the ongoing validity of a core conviction within PCL's theory of change: that greater facility with, and confidence in, leadership and administrative skills in areas including strategic planning, fundraising, and staff management has a discernible impact upon pastoral leaders' ability to be calm, adaptive, and effective in their leadership, including during times of tumult and change. The institutions they serve benefit as a result.

“My greatest area of growth was/is financial management. I did not take any business courses at any level of my education and taking PCL and focusing on financial management allowed me to the opportunity to better understand the financial processes of churches and help my leaders be more effective in their area of serving. I helped my church reduce their deficit by \$40,000, helped simplify their budget, and discovered new ways of engaging people in the financial backing of ministry.”

- PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

While pastoral leadership involves rapid changes and transitions even during “normal” times, the past several years of ministry in the UMC, especially, has involved significant and rapid transitions. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, accelerated decline in church membership within mainline Protestantism, debates regarding sexuality, and disaffiliation of churches from the denomination have been deeply disruptive within the life of the UMC. Thus, pastors have had to deliver adaptive, resilient, and calm leadership to foster stability within the ministries they led and to remain healthy themselves.

While several variables may be attributed to a church's ability to be resilient and thrive, study participants, overall, reported that participation in the PCL program contributed to strengthening their resilience. They also reported a high degree of satisfaction and were able to recall specific examples of how applying the skills they learned from PCL contributed to their confidence and success as a leader.

“The church wishes to convey how pleased they are that I have been enrolled in PCL. It has facilitated growth in the church, communication has improved, and we are in a better place than we were a year ago, despite all that has happened.”

- PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

Finding Two

The design of the program was a key contributor to **significant engagement** and **overall student benefit**.

The PCL program is delivered using a cohort learning model. The program uses a hybrid model but adds weekly or biweekly virtual and synchronous sessions and three weekend workshops to foster engagement and relational connection. It is clear that a core feature of PCL is its high degree of interpersonal engagement with coaches, cohort members, instructors, and other staff and stakeholders. The evaluation found that these interpersonal, relational aspects were key to the satisfaction and success reported by participants and a main differentiator when compared to similar, online, graduate programs.

“ I cannot say how much this program has shaped my confidence as a leader and provided me with the practical tools I have struggled to learn on my own.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

“ I would never have completed this on my own. The coach and the peers made it all possible.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

“ Having real-time coaching support meant that I was far more bold in my project than I would have been otherwise, and the results were much better.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

Implication from Finding Two

Cohort, collaboration, and relational learning attributed to participant satisfaction.

This finding has implications for scaling and sustainability. It would be difficult to reproduce the graduates' success with this content without the cohort and relational model that was so key to their positive experiences. The people and the relationships are not only as important as the content, but they help make the content come alive. This suggests that, even if the program were to explore creating condensed modules or other scaled interventions as part of its broader sustainability strategies, the core of the program may need to retain this degree of person-to-person/cohort/coaching-based relationality to retain the effectiveness described in this report.



Scholars from Missouri in the 2022-2023 cohort

Finding Three

The **content, learning application, and timing** of the education offered through the PCL program is important.

All interview participants had been out of formal seminary training for at least three years before participating in PCL and over 67% had been in ministry for more than 10 years. 10% of respondents had been trained as licensed local pastors and had not attended seminary. There was no significant differences related to the impact on learning between scholars who were elders and received formal seminary training, and those who were licensed local pastors and had not attended seminary. During interviews, participants highlighted the relevance of learning content, led by subject-matter experts in business and administration, and application of said content, as notably different than other forms of education they had received.

All participants affirmed that the applied-learning content had more relevance given that, as pastors with experience in the field, they now knew things about the importance of administrative skills that they might not have fully grasped in seminary. Still, some insisted that at least a modest introduction to these skills in earlier stages of development would have been helpful. Most agreed that the intentional and robust learning, provided by the year-long program, was more beneficial toward application of knowledge than other short-course or workshop-style continuing education.

“The landscape is changing, but the local church’s agility and willingness to adapt to the changes is a challenge. Churches want to believe they want change—however, nostalgia of what church used to be keeps them paralyzed in accepting the changes of today.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

“ Sometimes I struggle to see the relevance of some of the church’s continuing education events. If they were more like PCL, or could incorporate PCL, that would really help make them worthwhile.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

“ This project has caused us to look deeper into our needs, wants, and dreams for our church rather than taking a cookie-cutter approach to staffing. As a result, we are positioning ourselves for continued and future growth instead of remaining reactionary and falling behind. ”

-Teresa, Program Size Church, South Dakota

“ When I entered seminary, the professors were adamant that the business world and theology could not intertwine. I think they spent too much time in their ivory towers. This program helped me go back to my roots and apply leadership methods that have helped the church grow both spiritually and numerically. It has helped develop an administrative council that does not focus on regurgitating reports but rather focuses on identifying needs and how ministries can be developed to address those needs. ”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

Implication from Finding Three

There is a need for more continuing education that emphasizes contemporary administrative skill building when and where pastors need it most.

This finding suggests two things:

1. The PCL program, and other robust continuing education programs that build administrative acumen, occupy a particularly important niche in the ongoing formation and training of practicing pastoral leaders, regardless of whether they were trained through seminary or a local pastor training program.
2. Engagement of needed administrative skills is both more feasible and more welcome once pastors are “out in the field.” The fact that the year-long projects pursued by cohort members are “real-time” engagements with challenges and opportunities facing their current ministry settings helps with that relevance. The focused nature of the program also sets it apart from other avenues of pastoral education, such as Doctor of Ministry programs, which by necessity are less focused on specific management and financial skill acquisition.

“I believe this is an important compliment to the education pastors receive and if I could make changes to educational requirements, I would include some of these classes.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

“I have been in ministry for over 24 years. PCL sharpened some skills I already had and it introduced new skills to me that I had not heard about anywhere else that helped me understand the need to change and be relevant in the world today.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

Another implication for this finding is that there may be opportunities for PCL stakeholders to explore strategic partnerships with other institutions involved in the initial and continuing formation of pastoral leaders within or outside the UMC. The expertise and practitioner experience that a business school (in this case, DWU's nonprofit administration program) offers is a valuable complement to other pastoral education that is led, predominately, by theological experts.

The 2018-2019 cohort in class



Finding Four

Scholarships for participation in continuing education are important.

Tuition assistance, derived from sources such as grants through the Lilly Endowment, contributions given by UMC annual conferences, key donors, UMC area foundations, and ELCA synod scholarship funds were key to offset costs for PCL participants. Moreover, given the economic challenges faced by many pastors, most participants who acknowledged the value of the program also indicated that it would have been difficult or impossible to participate without the tuition assistance.

“We continue to deal with the fallout from the 1-2 punch of the pandemic and the disaffiliation of churches from the UMC in our conference. Added to the ongoing trend of fewer and fewer people joining and attending church, we are facing a tremendous sea of change and uncertainty. The greatest challenge I see is helping our clergy—our ‘front-line’ people—stay motivated and committed to serving and adapting in this ever-changing time.”

-Program Sponsor, Anonymous Survey Response

Implication from Finding Four

Institutions may need to reconsider fundraising and scholarship strategies.

This finding raises an important question for donors and funders about the timing and type of education that merits scholarship attention. Given that career-long learning is important to the resilience of leaders and the vitality of churches, more financial resources to support this type of learning and development is essential.



A graduate receives her certificate in 2024

“I think the foundation scholarship really removed all my stress to think how I can finance this. They were so helpful to me, and I have already encouraged others to take this program.”

-Po'ese, Program-Size Church, Missouri

“Without the scholarship, I would not have been able to attend this program. Their support of me was the catalyst I needed to transform my ministry and the church.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

“Having the foundation’s support was critical for the church and me. By their investing in me, that investment has now affected hundreds of people and the future of our church.”

-PCL Graduate, Anonymous Survey Response

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the findings and offered for further consideration and reflection for PCL stakeholders and others who may be interested in similar educational programming for ministry professionals.

- 1. Continue to develop storytelling around the connections between practical leadership skills and resilient, adaptive leadership in times of turmoil.** The broader question of how to form leaders that are prepared to guide the church amidst various upheavals and transitions is a perennial question for judicatories and seminaries, etc. PCL program stakeholders should continue to find ways to creatively tell (and platform) the stories of participants who can attest to the positive impact of PCL upon their leadership.
- 2. Advance opportunities for scholarship and funding to facilitate participation in the program.** Many participants indicated that the tuition assistance was necessary for their participation in the program. This presents an opportunity for stakeholders, and those who benefit from these programs, to explore various fundraising models to support participants financially. This support could, for instance, be integrated into parish continuing education budgets, or perhaps built into pastoral compensation packages through the efforts of the Board of Ministry. Examining possibilities for scholarship endowments and legacy gifts, whether at the university or through a supporting foundation, also merits exploration. In any case, identifying funding streams for sustaining the program will be a key priority moving forward.
- 3. Consider developing access to program resources for laity within the UMC.** Some respondents in the interviews suggested that, while pastors naturally benefit from the sort of training offered by PCL, some lay leaders in congregations might also benefit from engaging in at least parts of the program. One interview participant reported, “People assume that laity have all the financial wisdom and it is pastors that need help. The opposite has been true in my experience; I would thrive with better equipped laity on this front.” Such explorations, should they prove workable, might have the dual advantage of increasing the financial/administrative management skills of these lay leaders while also facilitating stronger communication around administrative matters between pastors and laity.
- 4. Consider strategic partnerships with other educational institutions in order to deliver needed interventions at multiple stages.** There is something core about the structure of the program’s high-touch, highly relational approach that would be difficult to replicate under other circumstances. That said, it might be that some degree of module creation or intervention at the level of seminary training, or required ongoing education (e.g. Leadership Academies) could open a wider section of the church to the type of training that PCL/DWU provides. This might be worth exploring with both seminaries and those in judicatories responsible for continuing education.



Conclusion

The PCL program represents a significant and successful intervention in the life of clergy participants. Moreover, the timing of the program in the last six years has, in many respects, been providential. The rapid shifts and sometimes painful turmoil in congregational and pastoral life in the last few years have, if nothing else, provided a gritty “testing ground” for the effectiveness of the PCL program. As emphasized in this report, the core strategy of PCL—empowering pastors to be more effective in administrative matters so they can achieve excellence in leadership—has resulted in leaders who are able to exhibit calm, resilient, and adaptive leadership in the face of various transitions. To quote one congregation member, **“The PCL program has been a ‘Godsend’ to our churches and their leaders. It has given our clergy incredible tools to help guide and move their churches forward in areas that would not have been addressed if the PCL opportunity would not have been available.”**



Graduates of the 2022-2023 cohort

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