



# Special Report

Placing Social Science Research at the Service of the Church in the United States Since 1964



## Supporting Training for Women and Men in Religious Life in the Ten Years Following their Final Profession

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Ministry can be challenging for “new” women and men in religious life in the ten years following their final profession. By and large they have completed the formation programs of their respective religious institutes and are engaged in full-time ministry. Once in ministry, are there additional educational and pastoral training resources that they need? What supports might aid them to truly thrive in their service to God’s people?

The Catholic Theological Union, with generous funding from the Lilly Endowment, engaged the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to research the ministry-related needs of new men and women religious and lay ecclesial ministers. What types of support programs could help address their needs and aid them to thrive in their ministry? CARA investigated these questions through surveys and focus groups.

### WHO ARE THE NEW WOMEN AND MEN RELIGIOUS?

#### DEMOGRAPHICS AND BACKGROUND

Over half of the new religious are sisters (57%), one-third are priests (33%), and one in ten are brothers (10%). These new religious are a group of mature middle-aged women and men. On average, they entered their religious institute at age 30, made their final profession at age 37, and are currently 46 years old. The Midwest region of the nation is the place of residence for over one-

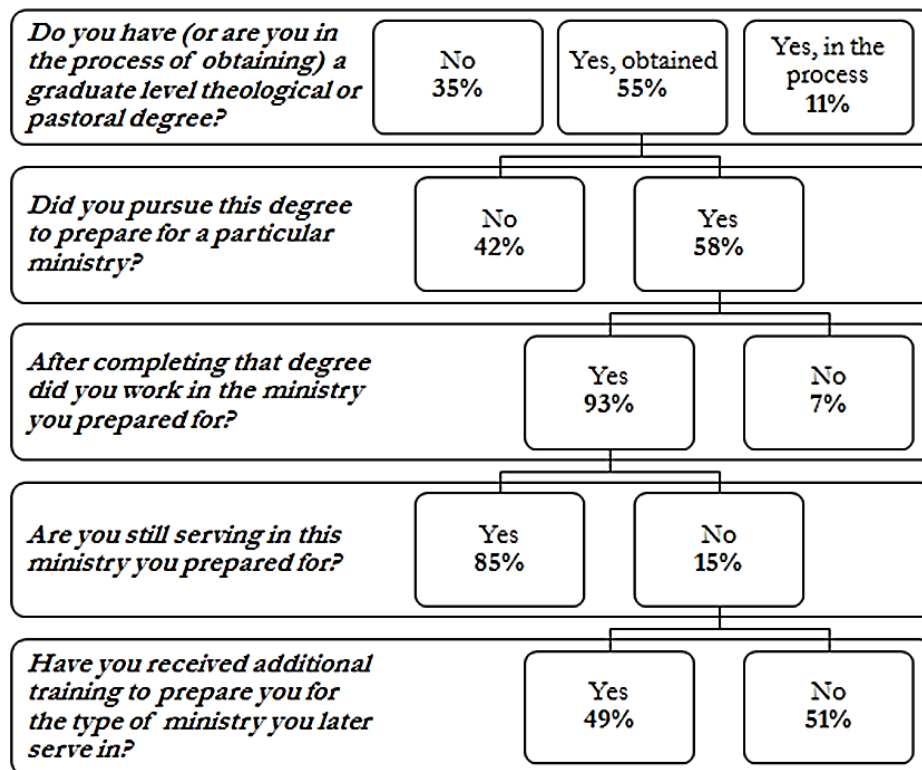
third of these new religious (36%), with one-quarter living in the South (24%), just under one-quarter in the Northeast (22%), and less than one-fifth in the West (18%). This is different from the geographic distribution of Catholics in the United States where 24% reside in the Northeast, 19% in the Midwest, 31% in the South, and 26% in the West.

Age of New Men and Women Religious	
All Valid Responses	
	Mean years:
Age at entrance into religious formation	30
Age at final vows/perpetual commitment	37
Age at ordination to priesthood*	37
Age when began serving in present ministry	41
Current age	46

\* Among those who are ordained

#### AREAS OF MINISTRY AND PREPARATION

In regard to their primary ministry the new men and women religious are fairly equally engaged in teaching (19%), parish ministry (18%), administration (17%) (not including assignments in parish ministry), and ministry internal to their religious institute (15%). About one in three (29%) are serving in other ministries. Additionally, the majority of new men and women religious (63%) reported also having a secondary ministry, often in pastoral ministry or in internal community ministry.



As a group they have multiple ministerial demands and expectations placed upon them. Most of the new religious have pursued graduate level degrees to prepare them for their eventual ministerial assignments. They are coming to ministry well prepared academically.

Two-thirds of new women and men religious (66%) already possess a graduate level theological or pastoral degree or are currently in the process of obtaining such a graduate degree. Only about one-third (35%) do not have such a graduate degree. The majority of those with a graduate degree in theology or pastoral studies (58%) pursued this degree to prepare themselves for a particular ministry and practically all (93%) went on to work in that ministry. Nearly nine in ten continue to serve in the particular ministry they prepared for, and among those who have changed ministry, half received additional training to prepare them for this ministry. Virtually all new men and women religious (96%) report being “somewhat” or “very much” prepared for their primary ministry overall. Only 1% do not feel prepared at all for the ministries they are currently serving in.

The experience of being supported in their ministry is very strong among new religious. Practically all (90%+) report support from the people with whom and to whom they minister and the members and leadership of their religious institutes. Their local religious community members, spiritual directors, lay friends and family members are also very supportive (86% to 90%). They report somewhat less support from other religious, the local bishop, and diocesan priests. Yet seven in ten report they experience support from these groups (68% to 72%).

This experience of support from so many different groups in their ministry does not mean that stress is absent from their life and ministry. Six in ten new religious identify at least one area of ministry (not related to Church teachings) as being stressful. The top three reported areas of stress are a lack of time or balance in their life, managing their work in the context of high expectations and/or low resources, and working with different groups of people.

When asked specifically about Church teachings, about a third of the new religious said they found at least one area of Church teaching to be stressful. The primary



stressors were identified as knowing and understanding Church teachings, reconciling the teachings with personally held views, and knowing how to share the teachings in different pastoral contexts. Specific topics identified by new religious were the role of women in the Church (equally identified by women and men religious), human sexuality, family life, and the Church’s functioning as an institution. Among those new religious experiencing stress with Church teaching, six in ten said it was only “a little” stress and four in ten said it was “somewhat” or “very” stressful.

Satisfaction in their current ministry is almost universal for new men and women religious as 98% feel “somewhat” or “very much” satisfied with their ministry overall. This high level of satisfaction is shown in more than nine in ten being satisfied with their sense of contribution to a larger purpose, the utilization of their gifts and skills, and a personal sense of accomplishment (92% to 97%). They report similar, yet slightly lower, sense of satisfaction in meeting the expectations of others, their level of responsibility and amount of work in their ministry, and the remuneration received (81% to 92%).

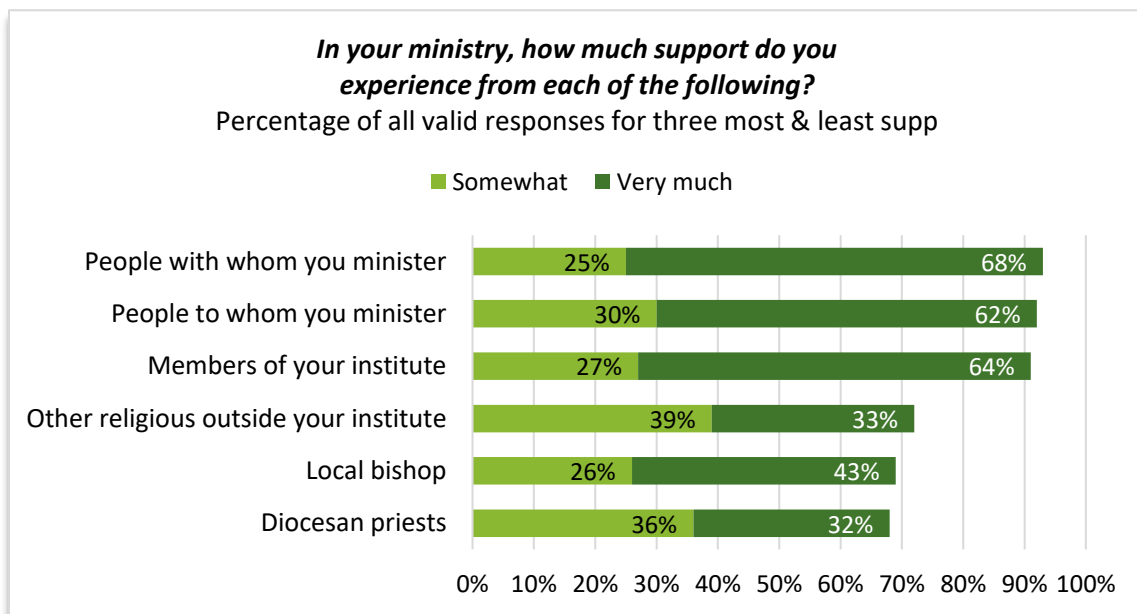
Overall, three-quarters or more new men and women religious rate their competence in a wide range of ministerial skills (communications, service skills, interpersonal, etc.) and topics (theology in general, spirituality, liturgy,

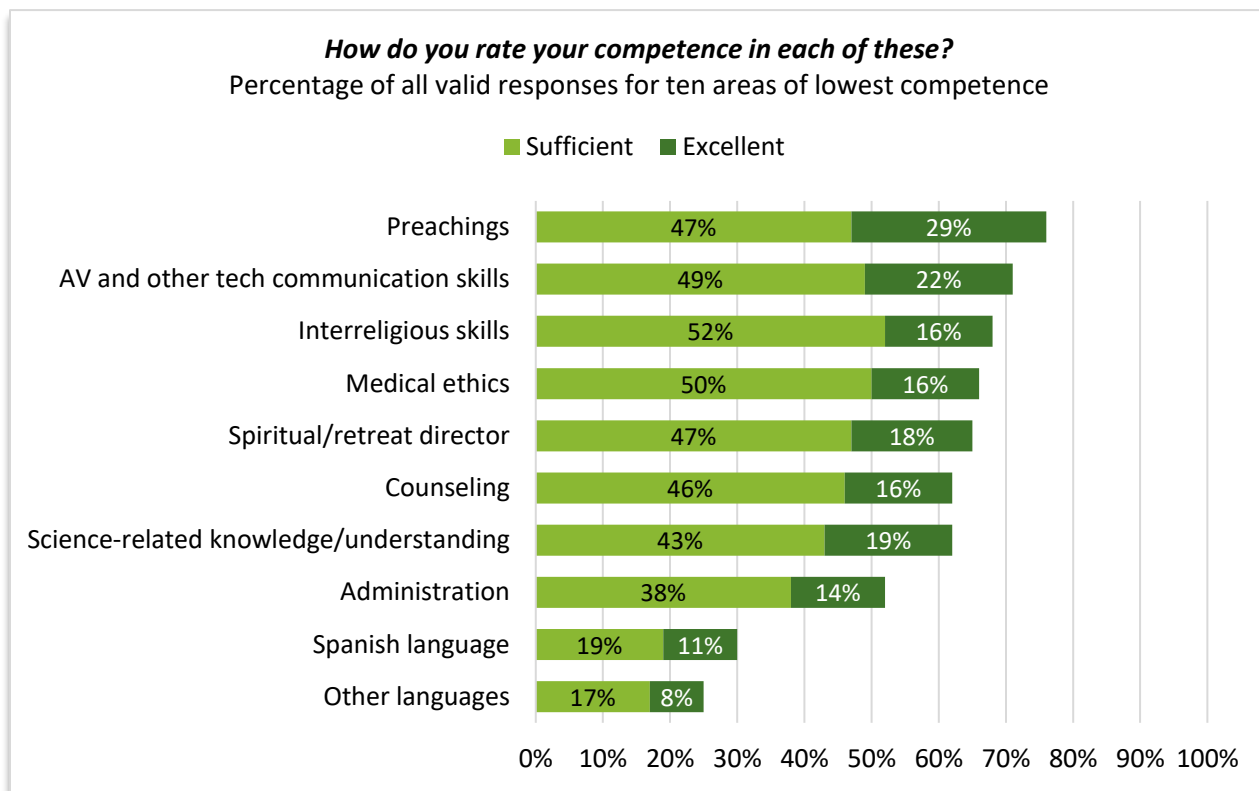
etc.) as “sufficient” or “excellent.” Around two-thirds rate their competence as at least “sufficient” in tech communication skills, interreligious skills, medical ethics, spiritual direction, counselling, and science-related knowledge. Two areas where new religious rate their competence much lower are in administration and language skills, especially in Spanish.

**TRAINING PROGRAM**

There are seven areas of training that 40% or more of the new religious consider “very” helpful: Spanish language (50%), interpersonal skills (45%), spiritual/retreat director skills (45%), administration (44%), Bible (44%), theology in general (43%), and counseling (40%). Between 20% and 37% report another 18 other pastoral skills and topics in which it would be “very” helpful to have more training. Only 16% said that more training in English language skills would be “very” helpful.

In terms of the program format (structure and delivery) for additional training and support programs, about one in five (19%) said that they would be interested if the programs were offered in Spanish, compared to four in five (85%) who were interested if they were offered in English. Two-thirds of the new religious were interested in programs offered to both women and men religious (67%) and in training that enhances the already existing formation program in their religious institute (63%).





More than half of the new religious were interested in training and support programs that included lay and religious participants (59%), that have an informal, open discussion style (57%), that offer mentoring (55%), that are online only programs (54%), that are stand alone programs (53%), and that are based on an academic curriculum (51%). Just under half were interested in training and programs using field education (49%), or provided in-person (46%), or in the classroom (43%), or a book-based self-study (32%).

**AVAILABILITY TO PARTICIPATE IN PROGRAMS**

One quarter of new men and women religious (24%) can be considered readily available to participate in a training or support program because they simultaneously meet two conditions: they do not report any challenges to participating in the program and they have time available.

The most noted obstacle for their participation is their inconsistent and changing schedule (40%) that makes their commitment to a program problematic. Recognizing the multitude of ministerial demands that new religious face in their apostolic lives, the amount of time

they have available to give to a program is limited. On average, new religious say they could commit about three hours each week to a training or support program with half saying they have two hours or less to commit.

**RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF NEW RELIGIOUS**

The analysis of the survey data collected revealed three program initiatives that might be particularly worth consideration.

**TRAINING IN SPANISH FOR NEW MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS**

One-half of the new religious report that more training in Spanish would be “very” helpful to them in their ministry. There are several reasons in favor of developing and offering a program to learn Spanish. The highest number and the highest percentage (50%) of new men and women religious indicated that they would find more training in Spanish “very” helpful, in comparison to 25 other training areas. An additional quarter would find this training “somewhat” helpful. Thus, in total 77% of new men and women religious would be interested in a training program to learn or improve their Spanish.





Only three in ten new men and women religious rate their competence at least “sufficient” in Spanish (30%). Only one training area (other languages) was rated lower out of 26 areas considered. Not all new men and women religious are equally likely to participate in a training program due to potential obstacles (such as lack of time). Significantly, those new men and women religious readily available to participate in the program are 10 percentage points more likely than those conditionally available (those who identified at least one obstacle) to report that they would find more training in Spanish language “very” helpful.

The program primarily focusing on teaching Spanish is equally likely to appeal to both men and women religious. However, new men and women religious may not be evenly distributed across different levels of Spanish language proficiency, because religious sisters are 8 percentage points less likely than religious priests and 13 percentage points less likely than religious brothers to report “excellent” competence in Spanish language.

Training in Spanish could also incorporate a secondary focus on other desired areas including interpersonal skills (conflict management and communications), Bible, and counseling. At least six in seven new men and women religious interested in learning Spanish (85%) are also at least “somewhat” interested in training focusing on interpersonal skills, Bible, and counseling.

Concerning the training format, the majority of respondents to the survey would be at least “somewhat” interested in a program with both men and women participants and with both lay and religious participants. Three in five (61%) new men and women religious who are readily available to participate in a training program, and who are “very” interested in studying Spanish, would be at least “somewhat” interested in a program with both men and women participants.

Four in five (80%) new men and women religious who are readily available to participate in a training program, and who are “very” interested in studying Spanish, would be at least “somewhat” interested in a program with both lay and religious participants.



## TRAINING IN ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS FOR NEW RELIGIOUS, IN PARTICULAR FOR PRIESTS

The training “very” helpful to the biggest group of new religious priests would primarily focus on developing administrative skills (e.g., budgeting, investing, and insurance). There are several reasons in favor of primarily focusing the program on administrative skills.

The highest percentage of new religious priests (53%) indicated that they would find more training in administrative skills “very” helpful, in comparison to 25 other focus areas. An additional quarter would find this training “somewhat” helpful. In total, 80% of new religious priests would be interested in a training program teaching administrative skills.

New religious priests were relatively less likely to report feeling at least “sufficiently” competent in regard to administrative skills (out of 26 areas of competency only foreign languages were ranked less favorably). Overall, 49% of new religious priests report feeling “inadequate” or “low” competence in regard to administrative skills.

The relatively low self-reported competence assessment in administrative skills is consistent with findings from previous studies. For example, Hoge (2006) found that only between 12 and 17 percent of religious priests ordained for five to nine years felt that their seminary prepared them “well” or “very well” for Church administration, working with multiple parishes, managing Church finances and budgeting. Other studies provide supporting evidence that many priests (and pastors, in particular) do not feel adequately prepared for their administrative duties (e.g., Conway 1992, 2002). According to Hoge (2002), only 24 percent of priests who left the priesthood felt that their theologate prepared them well for Church administration. This was the lowest (most concerning) score among 13 items reported in the study, indicating that lack of good preparation in Church administration could potentially play a more important role in priests’ resignations than any other area of theologate preparation.

New priests are relatively likely to feel stressed out about ministry areas related explicitly to money and administrative work. A caveat should be added that only a quarter of new religious priests who are “very” interested in

receiving more training in administrative skills (24%) are readily available to participate. The vast majority listed at least one potential obstacle to their participation. Therefore, training in administrative skills for new religious priests would likely benefit from accommodating various constraints in potential participants’ lives.

Notably, training in administrative skills would also benefit religious brothers and religious sisters, because both of those groups rated their competence in this area as low as religious priests did. However, brothers and sisters are less likely than priests to be attracted to such a program. This is because religious priests are 14 percentage points more likely than religious sisters to report that they would find more training in administration “very” helpful.

## TRAINING IN THEOLOGY IN GENERAL, IN PARTICULAR FOR NEW RELIGIOUS SISTERS

New religious sisters report that further training in theology in general would be “very” helpful (excluding foreign language training). The highest proportion of new religious sisters (49%) indicated that they would find more training in theology in general “very” helpful, and an additional two in five (40%) would find this training “somewhat” helpful.

Interest in receiving more training in theology in general does not seem to be related to a lack of self-reported competency in this area. The vast majority of new religious sisters (88%) report feeling at least “sufficiently” competent in theology in general. Therefore, new religious sisters may be attracted to a program of advanced study in theology that goes beyond the minimum competency required to carry out their ministry. This does not mean that such a program would only serve the purpose of personal development.

Training in theology could help reduce stresses related to their ministry work, in particular if it focused on (in order of decreasing importance): the role of women in the Church; human sexuality (including gender issues, LGBTQ, birth control and abortion); family life (including marriage, divorce and annulment); the Church’s functioning as an institution (including priesthood, religious life, hierarchy, administration, and politics); the intersection of Catholic teaching and mainstream culture



(including Catholic ethics, technology and science, the concept of sin and evil, as well as creationism); liturgy and sacraments (in particular the sacraments of Holy Communion and Reconciliation/Confession); and social teaching in other areas (related to youth, race, immigration, death penalty, and mental health).

Notably, training in theology could also attract religious priests. However, the appeal of this training to religious priests would be significantly limited. This is because religious priests are 14 percentage points less likely than religious sisters to report that they would find more training in theology in general “very” helpful. And, religious priests are 24 percentage points more likely than religious sisters to rate their competence as “excellent” in theology in general.

## MAJOR FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY OF LAY ECCLESIAL MINISTERS

The lay ecclesial ministers (LEM) survey for this project is based on a relatively small population from three dioceses, while the survey of new men and women religious has nation-wide scope. The results from the survey of LEMs are less generalizable than the responses to the survey of new men and women religious.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND BACKGROUND

Overall, three quarters of responding LEMs are female (77%) and one quarter is male (23%). The majority are lay and married (62%), while 21% are lay and single, and 8% are lay and divorced. On average, respondents were 39 years old when they began initial formation, 40 years old when they began serving as LEMs, 43 years old when they began their present ministry, 44 when they expect to complete (or completed) initial formation, and are currently 57 years old. The vast majority of LEMs identify as Caucasian/ White/Anglo (91%). Only 7% are Hispanic/Latino(a) and 1% are African American/Black/African.

## MINISTRY INFORMATION

In regard to their primary ministry, nine in ten LEMs (92%) serve in parish ministry. This includes ministry as parish catechetical leader (DRE, CRE, RCIA) (46%), pastoral associate (25%), pastoral musician, music director,

cantor or liturgy director (9%), youth ministry leader (5%), parish life coordinator (1%), and other types of parish ministry (7%). The remaining LEMs serve in administration (5%) and in other ministries (3%). The majority of LEMs (62%) reported also having a secondary ministry.

All LEMs (100%) report being “somewhat” or “very much” prepared for their current primary ministry overall, which includes 87% who report being “very” prepared. Virtually all LEMs (98%) feel “somewhat” or “very much” satisfied with their ministry overall; this includes 65% who report being “very” satisfied.

Three in five LEMs have a graduate theological or pastoral degree (62%). Additionally, 4% are in the process of obtaining such degrees. Less than one in ten LEMs report not having any formal preparation (7%). Overall, at least half of LEMs feel at least “sufficiently” competent across various ministry related areas of skills and knowledge. One notable exception is foreign languages, as only 19% of LEMs rate their competence at least “sufficient” in regard to Spanish language and 7% in regard to other languages.

Close to half (44%) of LEMs reported experiencing stress-related symptoms (such as anxiety, sleeplessness, depression, stomachache, headache, tiredness) in the month prior to taking the survey. Three in four (73%) of LEMs reported that their ministry increases their stress level “a little” or “a lot.” The top three most stressful areas of ministry can be divided into four groups.

### 1. PEOPLE

The first most common group of stressors focuses on dealing with various categories of people such as pastors, parish leadership, and/or clergy; parents, coworkers other than clergy; volunteers (or lack of volunteers); parishioners and clients; and people in general.

### 2. INSTITUTIONS

The second group involves dealing with institutions such as the diocese and other schools/parishes.



### 3. WORK

The third group of stressors relates to managing their ministry work, which includes the amount of work, inconsistent schedules, late night events, multitasking, and prioritizing tasks; carrying out specific programs, administration, and work duties; and carrying out duties in general.

### 4. INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

The fourth group pertains to long-term institutional challenges such as budget concerns and dealing with often controversial topics related to the Church.

LEMes shared various strategies that help them deal with stress in ministry. Those strategies can also be organized into four groups:

#### 1. PREVENTING STRESS

The first group of strategies focuses on preventing stress from occurring in the first place. Strategies here include strategic decision-making at work, planning a balanced lifestyle, focusing on the mission, sleeping and resting, and focusing on doing good work and developing skills.

#### 2. DEALING WITH STRESS AFTER WORK

The second group involves strategies for responding to stress, often after work. These include taking time off work, exercising, engaging in social activity, and participating in other leisure time activities.

#### 3. STRESS DURING AND AFTER WORK

The third group relates to responding to stress during or after work. Strategies in this group include praying, meditating, reflecting, putting things in perspective, eating, and listening to music.

#### 4. DEALING WITH STRESS WHILE AT WORK

The fourth group pertains to responding to stress while at work. Strategies include trying to directly address the stressful situation by resolving, collaborating, or listening; talking with confidants; avoiding a stressful situation that already occurred; and being positive or using humor.

Virtually all LEMes feel “somewhat” or “very” supported by their spouse (98%) and the people to whom they minister (97%). Nine in ten LEMes feel supported by people in their parish (94%), spiritual director (94%), friends (93%), a support group (93%), people with whom they minister (92%), and their children (89%). Four in five LEMes feel supported by clergy and religious (83%), and their extended family (83%). Half of respondents felt supported by their local bishop (49%).

### TRAINING PROGRAM

The three areas of training most likely to be considered “very” helpful to Lay Ecclesial Ministers include Spanish language (38%), Bible (36%), and interpersonal skills (34%). The three areas most likely to be considered at least “somewhat” helpful include theology in general (74%), Bible (72%), and service skills (skills to enhance the well-being and satisfaction of those served in their ministry) (72%).

In terms of program format, LEMes are most likely to express at least “some” interest in a training program available to both men and women participants (85%), and available to both lay and religious participants (82%). The few LEMes (3%) who can be considered readily available to participate in further training programs simultaneously met two conditions: they did not indicate any challenges to participating in the program and they indicated having time available to participate in the program. The amount of time available is, on average, two hours 48 minutes a week (a median of two hours). Most other LEMes indicated a challenge to participation or had limited time.

Nine in ten LEMes (88%) identified at least one potential obstacle to their participation in further training programs such as (in decreasing order of frequency): inconsistent/changing schedule (60%), lack of time (47%), lack of interest (9%), lack of support from their ministry supervisor (4%), and lack of support from their employer (1%). LEMes were not concerned with computer access or access to transportation. Additionally, 14% of LEMes indicated the existence of other obstacles that may hinder their participation in a training program.

