

Student Debt Survey 2016

Executive Summary

An online survey was conducted July 8–September 30, 2016, to answer the two-part question: How affordable is The United Church of Canada’s training for ministry personnel? What is the financial burden on students?

Demographics:

393 people responded. Respondents’ ages were spread between under 30 to over 70, with most respondents being between 50 and 59. Sixty-six percent were female. Respondents were from twelve of the thirteen Conferences (there were no responses from the All Native Circle). The status of the respondents varied: those considering ministry (4%), those in the process who had not begun their education (2%), those in the process who had begun their education (19%), active ministers (67%), and retired ministers (8%). The three ministry streams were represented: designated lay ministry (7%), diaconal ministry (9%), and ordained ministry (84%).

Findings:

Training for ministry in The United Church of Canada, in any of the three main streams of ministry, is expensive for all those undertaking it. It is a challenging process for anyone, at any stage of life. Although some people have a great understanding of where to access funding, how to manage their finances, and what lifestyle changes they will have to undertake to live as a minister, many do not. People may not know where to access funding support or how to do good financial planning, and they may be unrealistic about the lifestyle changes they will have to undertake once they are in ministry. Although there is a good understanding of what a minister’s salary is right from the start, some people seem unable to adjust to this salary once they are earning it.

People have a variety of experiences of the training process based on their personal support systems, savings, and ability to work throughout the process. People generally did not expect financial support from the church and found some of the programs/expectations unrealistic. Tuition and travel were consistently named as the largest expenses, although the cost of living and the need for cars on internships were also named.

People from all of the stages and streams would have benefited from financial advice throughout the process. Most would benefit from a better understanding of where funding support is available and how to apply for it. A few people, at every stage of the process, have incurred excessive debt that they never expect to pay off. Consideration must be given to the impact of carrying huge debt, or any debt, on people’s well-being and ability to minister effectively.

Gaps in research:

There were no survey responses from students or ministers in the All Native Circle Conference. Further research is being conducted to better understand the financial challenges that students in the All Native Circle experience in their training for ministry.

Student Debt Survey 2016: Report

Question:

How affordable is The United Church of Canada's training for ministry personnel? What is the financial burden on students?

Premise:

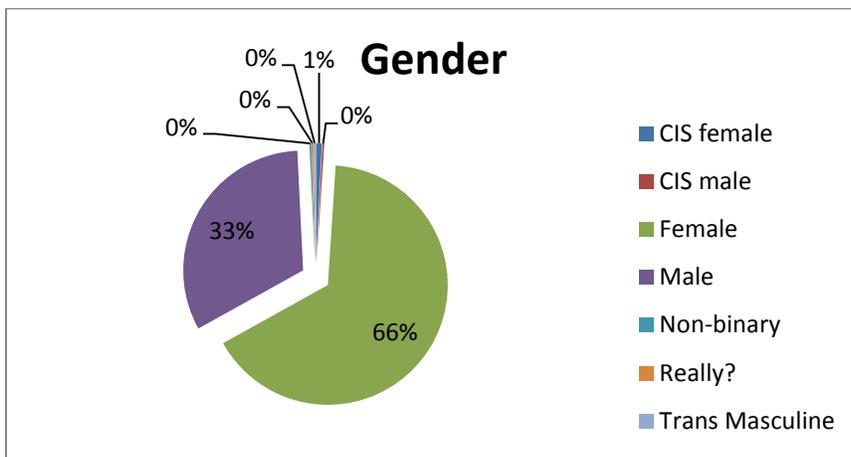
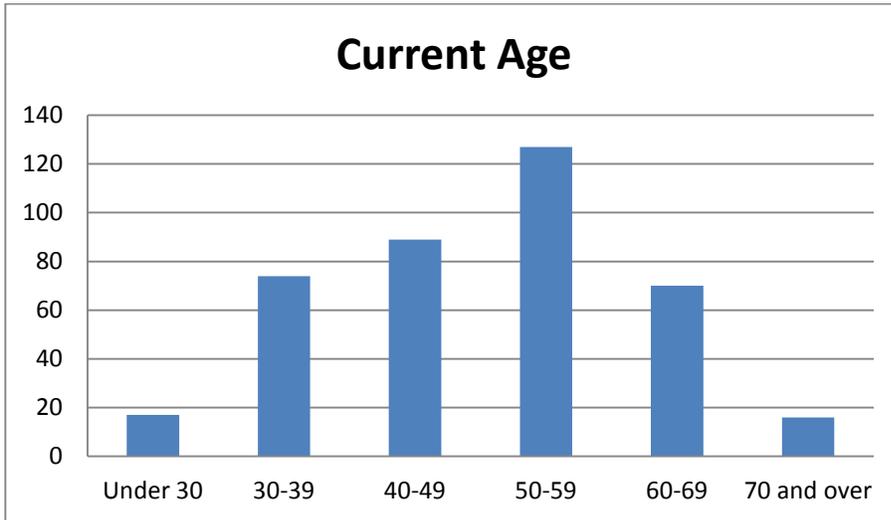
The Student Debt Research Survey was conducted at the request of the United Church's Permanent Committee Ministry and Employment Policies and Services. Appreciating that the journey to entering paid accountable ministry has financial implications, this survey was an attempt to gather a realistic picture of the costs incurred by those who have pursued, are pursuing, or are considering pursuing ministry in The United Church of Canada.

This survey was conducted through SurveyMonkey; the Web link was shared through Conference personnel ministers of each Conference, who were asked to share it with the ministers and students in their Conferences, specifically those who had entered paid accountable ministry within the previous 10 years. The Web link was also shared through social media, including Facebook, the Church Leadership Network, and Twitter.

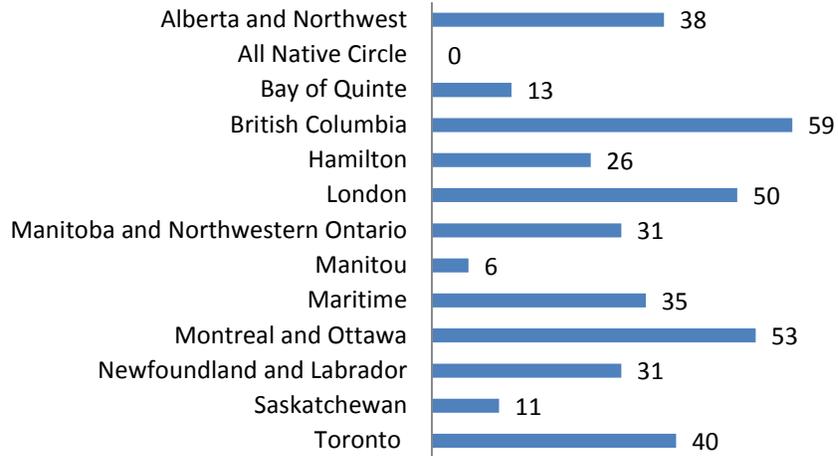
Ministers were asked to only complete the survey once, even if they received the link from multiple sources. The Web link was public from July 8, 2016, until September 7, 2016. Because we received limited responses from almost half of the Conferences, the survey was rereleased for the month of September 2016.

Who Responded to the Survey:

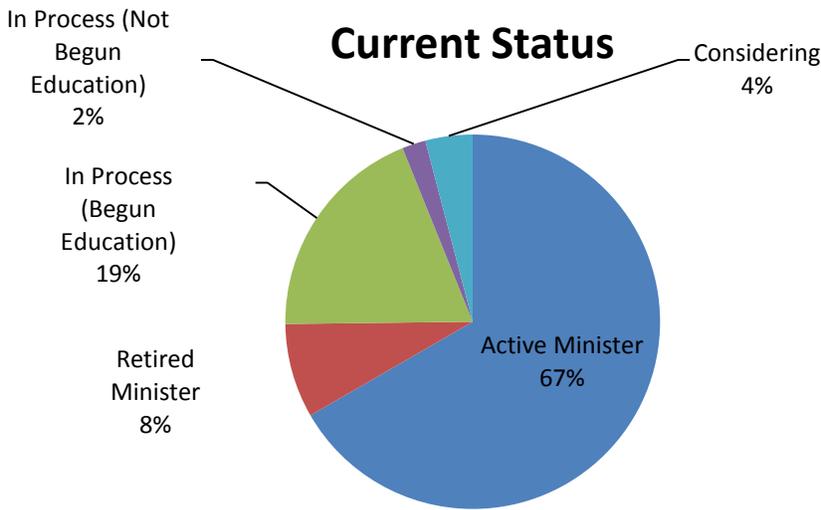
Total Responses: 393

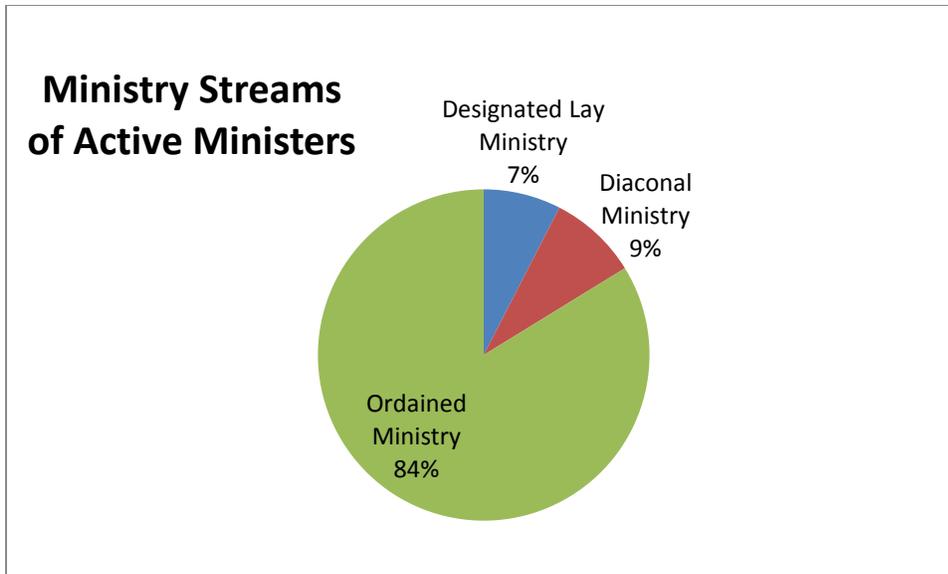


Current Conference



Current Status





Findings:

Those considering becoming a minister:

- Awareness that there are financial considerations to entering the process
- Good knowledge of the schools and programs available
- Do *not* know funding options
 - No common knowledge of financial support available
- Decent grasp of minister's starting salary

Those who have begun the process to becoming a minister but have not begun their education yet:

- Good understanding of the expenses involved in process
- Good knowledge of the schools and programs available
- Some knowledge of where funding might come from
- Realistic about needing to work during process
- Most expected to work within the church during their training
- Good understanding of minister's starting salary

Those who have begun the process to becoming a minister and have begun their education:

- A few people had a very good understanding of various funding sources
- Tuition and travel were named as the highest expenses
 - Surprising because so many of the schools offer grants/bursaries to keep tuition costs down
 - About half hadn't received any financial support from their school
- *Many* people did not expect financial support and/or did not know where to find it, not great knowledge of funding support for process
- Good understanding of minister's starting salary

Student Debt Survey 2016

- About half did not expect to have to borrow any money
- Borrowing against or removing money from RRSPs not uncommon
 - Reasonable knowledge of the government's Lifelong Learning Plan which makes this possible
- Loans incurred will mostly pay for living expenses and tuition (travel much lower, even though listed as a primary expense earlier)
- People seem realistic about when they'll be able to pay loans off
 - Some people seem unaware of when/how loans will be paid off
 - Some people seem despondent that they will be paying them back forever
 - A few people seemed to wish they had a better understanding and more support
- Many people were working as Student Supply – this change to the process seems to be working well for people
- Most people work during the process, either within the church or at a place of employment outside the church
- Some serious concerns about a few students financial positions – are the support committees aware? Do they know they can access financial planning support through EAP and financial support at various sources?

Active Designated Lay Ministers:

- Generally, DLMs have less debt than other active ministers
 - Most people reported working throughout their training process
 - None under 30 years old, 13/18 were over 50 years old
 - Majority had more savings
 - Majority of people with children, had older children
- Financial planning still needed
 - Evidence in responses that there wasn't a firm grasp of the annual minimum increase of living or how to balance a household budget
- Most people worked during their training

Active Diaconal Ministers:

- Generally higher debt and loans needed to complete training
- Eastern Star is a *huge* help
 - Still need to increase awareness as some received nothing from them
- Tuition and travel named as the most expensive part of the training despite the bursaries offered by Centre for Christian Studies and elsewhere
- 19/21 under 50 years of age
- Field Placements
 - Seemed that some field placements were paid

Student Debt Survey 2016

- Despite previous survey that most diaconal ministers didn't think payment was necessary during field placement, some found this an expensive part of the program
- Good awareness of bursaries
- ALL worked, full or part time during their training
- 1/3 took 4 years to complete the training, 2/3 took 5-15 years
- Concern that sometimes piecing together funding from multiple sources of small amounts is a job onto itself
- Some help from family and friends to help pay for expenses

Active Ordained Ministers:

- Generally good knowledge about funding options available
- Realistic plans to pay off loans in reasonable timeframes
 - A few people despondent about never paying loans off
 - Some had come into unexpected money that cleared or greatly decreased loans, mostly through inheritance
- Cost of living was more expensive for people than tuition
- Lots of help from family and friends to help pay for expenses
 - Were people younger and therefore received more support and had fewer previous expenses/responsibilities?
- More people kept jobs outside the church during their training
 - Most people worked part-time throughout the whole process
 - Some found it difficult to find part-time work that worked with the church/student schedule
- Most people did not expect financial support from the church at any level
- Pine Hill and Eastern Star were huge funding sources for many, although some clearly didn't know they existed, inconsistent across the country
- Time away from family was named as an expense/sacrifice by a few
- Some struggled with finding work for the 4 months over the summer
 - Some who had gone through training when there were still summer student placements said that helped keep them afloat during the year, and also meant that the program was a year shorter – for some, the summer student placement cost them money
- Some unreasonable expectations that people buy cars while on internship with no financial help
- Financial counseling would have been very helpful for many, and understanding of the benefits packages they were entitled to
 - Some people benefited greatly from financial advice they receive when entering the process – financial planning crucial in avoiding debt

General debt (everyone who took the survey was asked a few questions about their general debt, apart from ministry training):

- Many people have reasonable amount of debt while some have taken on huge amounts of debt with no prospect of ever paying it off
 - Some of this debt has been unavoidable, unforeseen circumstances
 - Some of this debt has been because of poor financial planning and unrealistic expectations of lifestyle
- Several people named poor money management as the cause for their debt
- Mortgage/housing, life, and the cost of education (not just ministry training) were the highest expenses that are causing people to take on debt

Observations:

- All students go through challenges, especially when switching careers and going back to school – ministry salaries are not high, especially in relation to the cost of training
- Nobody mentioned funds raised through weddings and funerals
 - Do students know they can do funerals? Are there opportunities for them?
 - Approximately how much income do ministers make from weddings and funerals? Can these supplement a salary? This is probably location dependent.

Suggestions:

- Increase knowledge and understanding of financial implications of process:
 - Make it common knowledge in the Church that funding is available
 - Highlight the Foundations recently funding of theological students
 - Highlight bursary available for ministers' children to attend university
- Increase knowledge of funding options/supports:
 - Create a page on The United Church of Canada website linking people to all funding options
 - In the Discernment Process, ensure that all students have access to funding options and support (congregations, students, Candidacy Pathway process)
 - Ensure people in process have met with a financial planner through the EFAP and received information about group insurance plan
 - Create an article in *Connex* highlighting that financial planners are available through EFAP
- Increase awareness of the services that EFAP offers: financial planning, as well as counselling
- Encourage Candidates to take advantage of all the benefits offered by the United Church, including group insurance and pension
- Advertise Millennial scholarship from the government
- Could the Pine Hill model be expanded for all United Church schools or students?

Student Debt Survey 2016

- Would ministers/people be willing to contribute to an endowment fund for people training for ministry?
- Thank Pine Hill and Eastern Star for their incredible support of ministry Candidates over the years – just completed survey and had been incredibly evident of their support!
- It would be of great benefit to the church if the tuition of any student in any stream of ministry was covered
- Ensure the Candidacy Pathway process helps people realize this is a vocation that may impact lifestyle in many ways