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Seeking a Bivocational Calling for Pastors and Churches

Jim tells his neighbor about their church's bivocational pastor: "He preaches at our church at 9:00 on Sunday mornings, works in the church office two days a week, and does some visiting with sick members. On Sundays, he also drives eight miles up the road to another church and preaches there at 11:00. He sets up in their church office two days a week too. Then, he is the hospital chaplain one or two days a week." Jim's neighbor is speechless. He wonders when the pastor finds time for anything else.

Many churches need different kinds of leaders and models of ministry to remain workable and effective. The example of the Apostle Paul, who made tents to fund his ministry, inspired multitudes. Now the current demand for bivocational pastors (modern tentmakers) far exceeds the supply.

What Is a Bivocational Pastor?

The majority of pastors serve one congregation. The church fully funds the pastor's salary and other compensation benefits, such as health insurance, housing, and retirement. A growing percentage of pastors serve multiple parishes, meaning that several churches fully fund the pastor's salary. However, these multipoint ministry assignments are not the usual arrangement for Protestant pastors—only about 12 percent of mainline and 6 percent of conservative Protestant leaders serve more than one church.[1]

Bivocational ministry is different from serving multiple parishes. The pastor holds a dual role—he or she serves in a local church ministry position (or in multiple churches) *and* meets other significant non-church work obligations. Most often, these pastors receive salary and support from other employment—such as chaplaincy, teacher or professor at a religious school, or serving in a community services non-profit organization. More than half of bivocational ministers fit this description. However, many pastors would describe the "other" part of their vocation in unique ways—like farming, a legal professional, IT specialist, or sports coach. Most bivocational pastors reject the label of "part-time pastor" because they see their pastoral calling as full-time.

Bivocational ministry is more common among conservative Protestant pastors—about one in four work as tentmakers. Only about 6 percent of mainline Protestant pastors are bivocational and rarely are Catholic priests bivocational (1 percent). On average, bivocational ministers spend 20 hours per week in their non-church role. Pastors of small congregations devote closer to 30 hours per week to other employment, compared to about 9 hours a week for large-church bivocational pastors.

The benefits for the pastor. Many bivocational pastors find opportunities for ministry that they would not be able to pursue otherwise. These pastors find places to serve where they feel a special calling (new church development, a small or urban church, a diverse multicultural community) but where fully funded ministry is not available. Their non-church employment puts these pastors squarely out in the community—outside of any holy huddle[2]—where cross-pollination is more likely

"WE'RE HOPING TO HIRE A BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR WHO IS ALSO A PLUMBER, ELECTRICIAN, OR PASTRY CHEF."

to happen. Tentmakers are often geographically bound because of their non-church employment, boosting the likelihood of commitment to the local community.

The downside for the pastor. The myth that bivocational ministry is a second-rate ministry persists. This myth may prevent some of the most creative and entrepreneurial leaders from seeking out what seems like a riskier path. Research confirms high levels of ministry satisfaction among tentmakers, but they are too often undercompensated and provided few or no job benefits, which keeps them and their families on the financial edge. Other issues include long commutes, exhaustion, few or no days off, and limited chances for continuing education.

How Do Congregations Respond?

Only when the congregation embraces their bivocational pastor's dual roles and sees that dual calling as fundamental to their own ministry vision are they bivocational too. One definition, from "The Bivocational Congregation," states that when local churches welcome bivocational ministry they operate on two callings: "the calling of function and the calling of mission." The authors go on to describe how churches live out this calling in five distinct ways.[3]

We've always been a bivocational church. This type often occurs in small towns or rural areas where the congregation has never had a full-time pastor. Because members carry out most roles and part-time pastors come and go, they have limited pastoral expectations.

We seek to be a missional, bivocational church. This second type exhibits a greater degree of intentionality to serve their local community. They want a pastor to be an equal companion in their understanding of what it means to be the church. Their church health and viability depend on their ministry outreach.

We are a transitional bivocational church. In this model, typically one church invites another congregation to share its building (sometimes called a nested congregation). The long-term outcome of the arrangement is unplanned and uncertain. In the meantime, both congregations benefit from the dual mission of support for one another.

We are an experimental bivocational church. Two or more worshiping communities form a cluster to carry out their respective ministries. Together they call a full-time pastor, but each church experiences the leadership arrangement as a part-time clergy role for their site. Over time, they may develop collaborative Christian Education, music, or social activities.

"We want out" bivocational church. In this situation, church leaders unhappily accept a part-time pastor, but their real yearning is for a full-time pastoral leader as soon as possible. Organizationally, the congregation functions as a church with a part-time pastor, but never as a bivocational congregation with a unique mission. In the end, they draw from endowments or other funds to call a full-time pastor. Rarely does exhausting all resources in the full-time clergy pursuit lead to long-term viability.

What Does This Mean for the Congregation?

Whether a congregation has always been bivocational or is just beginning to experiment with it, there are pros and cons for all involved.

The benefits for the congregation. The most obvious one is a decreased financial burden for staff expenses. Healthy congregations direct these budget savings toward other priorities and find joy in supporting ministry outside the congregation's walls. For financially struggling churches, they see a part-time pastor as their only alternative to no pastor at all.

The downside for the congregation. Most members experience transitioning away from full-time clergy leadership to a part-time pastor as a loss, triggering a loss of identity and self-esteem. Instead of highlighting the congregation's gifts and strengths, members may only describe to potential candidates what they have lost and what is not working. Their lack of church self-esteem may keep them from attracting creative and talented pastors. Instead, they may settle for whoever is willing and available immediately.

The Bottom Line

What makes a congregation thrive today and into the future? Bivocational churches and pastors face the same temptations as other congregations—the strong pull back to old systems and habits. Yet bivocational churches and pastors possess positive qualities that give them the flexibility to experiment, adapt, and respond quickly to new opportunities. They have all that they need to respond to what God is calling them to do.

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice: 2012), 16.

2. Thom Rainer, "Eight Reasons Why Some Full-time Pastors and Staff Should Go Bivocational," http://thomrainer.com/2015/01/19/eight-reasons-fulltime-pastors-staff-go-bivocational/.

3. A. Pappas, N. Faramelli, and E. Pease, "The Bivocational Congregation: Tomorrow's Church?" *Congregations* (Alban Institute: 2009), Winter, Vol. 35, no. 1.