



## “Are part-time pastors only partly pastors?”

### *Combating second-class self-esteem*

Mennonite part-time and bivocational pastors are not alone in low self-esteem or low sense of authentication and validity. It’s hard to put one’s finger on, but there tends to be a sense in American culture that full-time means “professional” and part-time means “less than...” or not as committed to one’s career or calling. Yet the worker-priest model is an ancient, respectable and widely used in our world, finds H. Karl Reko in a 1987 D.Min. dissertation.<sup>1</sup> One wonders if it is just the Americans that have a problem with bivocational ministry, and if it has difficulty fitting into the American dream?

Anthony Pappas, for his Alban Institute publication, discovered a negative attitude bivocational clergy have toward themselves.<sup>2</sup> He finds four myths about bivocational pastoring that must be exposed, much as the boy did to the emperor’s “new clothes”:

**Myth #1 “If only I’d gone to seminary, I’d be a better pastor.”** Seminary does a lot of good things, but should not be elevated to the New Jerusalem. It’s okay to feel inadequate given the awesome nature of the pastoral task.

**Myth #2 “If only I were more committed, I would be a full-time pastor.”** Full-time pastors seldom experience the same stresses as secularly employed parishioners; they can be the “holy one” for the congregation absolving members from responsibility, and can hesitate to be prophetic as it might cost them their jobs.

**Myth #3 “If only I were a good pastor, our church would grow.”** A half-truth at best, factors that contribute to growth include the situation, the congregation, and Christianity’s lessening reinforcement in our culture.

**Myth #4 “If only I had more time to give to pastoring, more would get done.”** Maybe, but more time sometimes means less ministry is done by the rest of the congregation.

The 2001 U.S. Congregational Life survey<sup>3</sup> found that empowering the laity to ministry made for strong churches and small congregations, those with fewer than 100

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<sup>1</sup> H. Karl Reko, “Determinative Factors in Worker-Priest Ministries” (D.Min. diss., Chicago: Christ Seminary-Seminex, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pappas, ed., *Inside the Small Church* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute), 2002.

<sup>3</sup>The U.S. Congregational Life Survey, Louisville, Kentucky: U.S. Congregations and Research Services, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). [www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)

in worship, tend to do better than bigger congregations at identifying and nurturing leaders. Smaller congregations may be places where people feel they're known; where they feel they're a real part of what's going on and can play a significant role in determining where the congregation will go. This is a strong argument against growing large churches and necessitates pastors willing to serve small ones part-time.

Another finding from this national survey: conservative Protestant churches and congregations in historically black denominations score higher than average on empowering leaders. Mainline Protestant churches and Catholic congregations tend not to do as well. As Mennonite Church USA moves toward missional identity, and our growing congregations are largely racial ethnic groups, one can project that the need for bivocational pastors might be our highest need, and pastors who need full-time pastorates may become a liability.

In a study of Mennonite bivocational pastors <sup>4</sup>, Mennonite perspectives matched those in other denominations. Lowell Barnes concludes, in a 1990 survey of Evangelical Free bivocational pastors, that there needs to be more value placed on the work of their bivocational pastors by the Christian community. He surveyed both district superintendents (DS) and the pastors themselves. The findings with the DS survey ranged from reports of limited or negative experiences with bivocational ministers to requests for these pastors to be utilized as missionary pastors. In his closing paragraphs, he makes these recommendations that serve Mennonite Church USA well: 1) bivocational ministry needs to be presented as an attractive option by the training institutions; 2) there should be a well defined support system within local districts; 3) on the denominational level there needs to be recognition for dual role pastors (feature articles, district and national gatherings, sponsor tent-maker speakers at colleges/seminaries); 4) the bivocational pastor needs access to the denominational health insurance and retirement plans; 5) districts should monitor congregations that "slip" from being able to afford a full-time pastor to using a dual role pastor and ask hard questions about sustainability and closing. <sup>5</sup>

Case studies sometimes make the most compelling case, and there are examples of congregations building vitality in rural congregations that may spark ideas transportable to many settings. Tri-county Ministry in North Dakota is a model of a cooperating ministry with seven ELCA congregations and one Presbyterian (USA). A 165 member anchor church that could have sustained a full-time pastor with some part-time staff, instead envisioned a stronger area ministry with the benefit of more full-time staff and entered cooperative negotiations with surrounding small congregations. More such success stories are available, including strategy manuals for such ministries.<sup>6</sup> For rural congregations considering a bivocational pastor, I highly recommend a book/video set on discovering hope and vitalization for the future.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Barnes.

<sup>6</sup> Gilson A.C. Waldenkenig and William O. Avery. *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategies* (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 1999).

Edward A. Kail with Julia Kuhn Wallace, *Partnersteps: Developing Cooperative Ministries Today* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>, David Goldenne-Poling and L. Shannon Jung, *Discovering Hope*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).