

Biblical and Theological Support for Bivocational Ministry

Paul and the disciples were fisherman as well as ministers. Jesus was a carpenter. Like Lydia in Thyatira, the head of a household was a leader both in the church and in their guild. **These were the first bivocational ministers.** Ronald Hock¹ indicates Paul intentionally kept his leather-working trade to “work with his hands and be dependent on no one” (1 Thessalonians 4:10b-12). He debated Christ with the religious leaders in the synagogue but also in the marketplace with whoever happened to be there (Acts 17:17). His tent-making (a more honorable name than leather-working) supported his admonition that Christians (as well as ministers) should not be oddities but be part of recognized society toward the goal of saving some of them (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy wrote to the Thessalonians, recounting their labor and toil- “we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God”(1 Thessalonians 2:1). But 1 Corinthians 9 is the theological heart of Paul’s ministry, as Hock claims, then Paul certainly does not discourage salaries and benefits for pastors- he makes a strong argument in vv 3-14 for the right to eat some of the fruit of the vineyard one has tended, and quotes Mosaic law forbidding the muzzling of the ox who is tramping out the grain- even the ox has the right to eat. But Paul sets himself apart from the rights of a living wage, so as to fit in with the people to whom he is witnessing. All work is done for the sake of the gospel to share in its blessing.

Scripture teaches that leadership gifts are given by God for the benefit of all and not for one’s own career development. Ephesians 4 lists the gifts God gave, but then describes the end toward which those gifts point: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry”. By our baptismal covenant, we are all given a ministry to live out as part of our loving relationship with Christ. But this often cannot be done without equipping and encouraging. Mennonites intend to call pastors with the mandate to equip others.² The ministry of all, priesthood of all believers, is a tenet of Mennonite theology as well. As lay members grow in ministry, people discover their own gifts for ministry or leadership. Pastors who can help develop new ministries and leaders are sorely needed. All pastors need to be convinced of their calling to equip, rather than dazzle the saints with their own seminary brilliance. Bivocational and part-time pastors have a natural incentive to equip others to lead: their own limited time.

We need a renewed commitment to the Old Testament Abrahamic covenant: we sectarian Mennonites are part of a larger picture that we have received from our ancestors just as all Christians have. Our particular interpretation of the gospel is not for the good of Mennonites or preserving our own heritage or ensuring us against further persecution. Our calling is to orient our faith and churches so that, through us, all nations might be blessed. Abrahamic covenant promises fit into and were furthered by Jesus’ own ministry. Mary sees Abrahamic grounding in

¹ Hock, Ronald F., *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

² Everett J. Thomas, ed., *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1996).

her call to give birth to Jesus (Luke 1:54-55). Jesus' understanding of his own ministry, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to captives (Luke 4:18-19) is certainly an extension of "all nations" that God promised would be blessed. As we understand our own ministries as extensions of Christ's ministry, how can we strive to do any less than serve all people? Certainly this theological perspective calls pastors to consider the challenging route of bi-vocational ministry so that under-served congregations, "all nations" might benefit from pastoral leadership, not just large congregations with salary and benefits for full-time pastors.

God calls us, and we go where we are sent. "Here I am, send me" (Isaiah 6:8). But in Mennonite theology, an inner call is validated by an outer call from the Christian community. The example most dear to us is Eli's confirmation of Samuel's call. As our denomination intentionally hones our "shoulder-tapping" skills, we must also discern with candidates if part-time or bivocational settings are part of God's call on their lives. Mennonites respond to need; we must clarify what kind of pastors Mennonite Church USA really needs.

Mennonite ministerial history and tradition. From the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement during the Reformation, shared leadership was foundational. Our current polity document³, that was written to contribute to the unity of an integrating Mennonite denomination in North America, still serves to outline ministerial theology and practice for the denomination today. But it does not offer much about the validity of bivocational ministry. In fact, the paragraph in which the definition is located is entitled "professional ministry and lay ministry" and could be interpreted as understanding bivocational ministry as less than professional. It defines *professional* ministry as ministers who are 1) trained to do the work 2) paid so they have time to do the work and 3) accountable to a group for the quality of the work. The *Polity* quotes from the *Ordinal*, a document with General Conference roots, which was calling for establishment of a seminary for training pastors as early as 1675. The *Polity* then mentions "another form" of ministry which often emerges in smaller congregations *unable to support a full-time pastor*, bivocational ministry. It hints at the assumption that the bivocational minister would not be seminary trained and would be seen as a stop-gap measure. This official document does a bit better with the definition of bivocational ministry in the glossary: "The term suggests that an ordained person has two vocations, one in ministry and one in some other field of work. A minister is always a minister, even if he/she spends some time on another job."⁴ The document describes *professional* ministry first (full-time, trained, ordained), *bivocational* ministry second (ordained, part-time, *perhaps even* seminary-trained) and then *lay* ministry (a form of unordained ministry) that emerges out of the congregation through the affirmation of gifts, usually does not have seminary training, often requires another vocation, and thus is a position with a part-time commitment. Despite the admonition that "a minister is always a minister" in the glossary, by this ordering and wording in the body of the document places a "secondary" emphasis on bivocational ministry, or equates it too closely with lay ministry. This may contribute to bivocational pastors feeling a weakened sense of being fully committed pastor. In the next polity review, a more positive view of this much needed ministry could be stated.

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³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 130.