

The care and feeding of a bivocational pastor

Implications for the congregation to consider when hiring a bivocational pastor

Bivocational pastors experience the same needs as do all other pastors:

- The need for nourishment, rest, and recreation.
- The need for love and affirmation.
- The need for spiritual renewal and growth.
- The need for close interpersonal relationships.

But dual-role pastors experience some challenges that are unique to their calling as well. Committed to a minimum of a 60+ hour-work-week, we will find fatigue a constant obstacle. The bivocational pastor is tempted to “cut corners,” putting health, rest and family activity on hold. The “day of rest” can become an “hour of rest” here and there. Personal study and meditation can melt into preparation time for the next sermon or Bible study. Bivocational pastors have a real propensity to accept additional roles beyond those for which they are already responsible. And some congregation members feel that, since the pastor is the one getting paid, the pastor should carry on what work the church does get done. But thankfully, there are other dedicated members who feel that the church functions best as the body of Christ when all actively participate in the work to which God has called us.

We might make several observations as to the care and feeding of a bivocational pastor. First, the pastor and congregation both must own the problems inherent in this form of ministry. Time limitations, fatigue, unmet needs of those who don’t vocalize their needs, discouragement, and feeling inferior to those churches able to afford a fully paid pastor are some of the inherent problems that both pastor and congregation need to recognize and work to resolve together.

Second, small churches have a definite advantage of being friendlier and more family-oriented. Make the most of who you are instead of trying to be someone you’re not!

Third, the church and conference need to periodically determine the viability of the congregation in that community as well as evaluate the bivocational role in it. There are times when the church really needs to be closed, but bivocational ministry allows it to remain opened as a dead church.

The pastor and the congregation must both own responsibility for his/her care and feeding.

The pastor will need to:

- Establish and maintain a schedule that will allow enough time to adequately prepare for the various aspects of the pastoral ministry, balancing the need for rest and family time. Set aside regular (weekly) family time—nonnegotiable time, except for life-and-death emergencies. Church members and leaders should know of this time and respect it.
- Take vacations. Don’t use vacation time from one job to “catch up” on the other.

- Establish a prayer life, praying for congregation members, family, self and any other prayer concerns. This is an area of fierce battle for most pastors.
- Maintain an adequate rest schedule. This is mandatory, not an option.
- Plan periodically a “time away” for spiritual renewal. This could be in the form of pastor and spouse retreat, pastors’ week, a retreat dedicated to prayer and fasting or any number of other creative (but necessary) time apart from pastoral responsibility.
- A sabbatical is absolutely necessary, even if both jobs can’t schedule a leave at the same time. If the sabbatical is only from the pastorate be sure not to use the down-time to catch up on your other job.
- Maintain a schedule for obtaining Continuing Education Unit (CEUs) for both occupations.
- Maintain a physical fitness routine.
- Formulate and maintain professional relationship with neighboring pastors, such as a ministerial alliance.

The congregation can have a vital role in the care and feeding of their bivocational pastor:

- Form a pastoral council (or pastoral/congregational relations group) that will be available for the pastor to consult when needed. This group should regularly ask the pastor about the rubs and the joys, and ask specifically how the congregation can partner with the pastor.
- Protect the pastor with a circle of prayer. A suggestion would be a small group that would gather (at pastor’s discretion) before the morning worship service to lift up the service. A group covenanted to form a continued circle of prayer is another suggestion.
- Offer friendship to the pastor. Invite the pastor’s family to dinner, or out for a meal (even pay for it).
- Offer to be there for the pastoral family when times get rough. Remember that your pastor needs a friend, but must as well earn and retain your respect as your spiritual counselor.
- Be available to participate in services when asked. If God has gifted you, offer to lead a study group. Be ready to put your spiritual gifts into practice. There is no end to maintenance to be done, flower gardens to tend, special music selections or any number of other tasks.
- Be observant of your pastor’s needs and surprise him/her with tasks that will lessen the workload.

Remember that the bivocational pastor has the same needs as everyone else. But at the end of a work day there is still another task to perform, someone else to visit, another one in the hospital, a Bible study to prepare for, a sermon to write or a family to tend. Bivocational ministry is entered into by both the congregation and the pastor, and both need to take responsibility to help it succeed.

*Mervin Hershbberger, radiologist and pastor at Argentine Mennonite Church, Kansas City, KS,
with Diane Zaerr Brenneman*