

Pros and Cons

Bivocational ministry is not for every pastor. At the outset of this handbook, we do well to take an honest look at the benefits and liabilities of tent-making, or working two vocations at the same time. It is hoped that this gathering of positives and negatives from research and Mennonite bivocational pastors may help discern if God is calling you to this unique form of ministry.

Stephen Norcross admits that part-time clergy can be exploited (expectations for full-time service for part-time pay), and asserts that a good letter of agreement protects all, and offers an Episcopal example.¹ He is honest about some disappointments in his experience as a bivocational pastor: One can feel marginalized by not having the time to attend conference and denominational gatherings and boards. Two part-time jobs can add up to more than one full-time. He has found cell phones voicemail to be a mixed blessing—offering no time off. But he also realizes if he is being taken advantage of, it is probably because he failed to set and stick to boundaries. Machines can be turned off! From his experience, he has been unable to return to full-time ministry and the church has rejected his application because he has not shown the ability to be full-time. Although part-time clergy can return to full-time, it may be difficult.

Respondents to a survey of Mennonite bivocational pastors² indicated bivocational ministry is a creative, fulfilling, imaginative and possible option for smaller churches or as components of a pastoral team. Most needed is a stronger vision and imagination of what is possible, as well as examples to demonstrate where it's working. But also needed alongside more bivocational pastors is a conference commitment not to sustain churches beyond their viability. Serving a congregation that should close is hard on pastoral identity. Mennonite responses are interspersed with other Christian experiences in the paragraphs that follow.

Richard Lyon, in 1995 D.Min. dissertation work among Lutherans,³ found these advantages to bivocational ministry: independence; it serves smaller churches; freedom from expectations of traditional clergy; it melds ministry with workplace; it enables or necessitates shared ministry, new skills and learning develop; and it provides greater options in planning for the future. Dennis Bicker, from his own experience, also has cited advantages for the bivocational pastor:⁴ Two jobs make the pastor seem more real. Natural sermon illustrations present themselves. Carpenter Jesus taught with more authority than the scribes who referred, not to personal work experience, but to earlier rabbis for authentication.

¹ Stephen Norcross, “*The Bivocational Option*”, and “*Four myths about Bivocational Pastoring*,” in *Inside the Small Church*, Anthony G. Papas, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute, 2002). 69

² Diane Zaerr Brenneman, D.Min. dissertation, 2007.

³ Richard L. Lyon, “Bi-vocational ministry: an old paradigm in a new context” (D.Min. diss., Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, 1995).

⁴ Dennis Bickers, *The Tentmaking Pastor: the Joy of Bivocational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

Bivocational pastors are known in the community and have unusual access to unchurched people in it.

Congregations can benefit from bivocational ministry model as well. Pastors who work in the community can concretely relate to the working conditions of members. Outreach is more natural as the pastor models blurred lines between ministry in secular work and ministry in church work. Pastors with second careers in the community tend to stay longer and so can provide longer pastorates. In addition to stability, part-time ministry enables a congregation to minister as a small congregation. Not all congregations, for a variety of reasons including demographics, are likely to make significant growth. There are ministries for small congregations that are just as significant as large ones.

Bicker also finds advantages for the congregation who chooses a bivocational pastor. There are more financial resources available for ministry. There is the possibility of hiring additional staff with other needed gifts. Typically, bivocational pastors have longer pastorates. More is expected of lay people, and they have a pastor who can relate to them in a unique way. One disadvantage he finds is a potentially weaker tie to the denomination. He suggests having conference and denominational mailings sent to a lay person (instead of the bivocational pastor) who is appointed to keep ties strong. Additionally, the pastor is not immediately available as full-time pastors are. Personally, I think this could strengthen a lay ministry team approach where a system of elders is set up to be available when the pastor is at the other job.

Advantages Mennonites cited for serving bivocationally include flexibility, the ability to pursue a range of interests and calling, a broader exposure to a variety of settings and the natural blending of witness in secular and pastoral work. Others liked the rhythm of doing work with their hands alongside pastoring. Some felt a clear sense of secular identity contributes to being less “wrapped up” in being a pastor and provides multiple places to get positive reinforcement. One finds her accounting/bookkeeping business job brings a relief from the ambiguity of ministry. Another strongly believes that manual work helps understand member’s lives, and is more apt to encourage lay ministry to pick up where the pastor cannot.

However, not all is glowing with the Mennonites either. Several pastors who had moved from bivocational to full-time look back on the two jobs and say it felt like having two wives and find the singular focus of full-time a better fit. Deterrents to bivocational work, (cited by all three groups of Mennonite pastors surveyed: full-time, part-time and bivocational) include challenging time management, the difficulty of finding the second vocation that fits well with pastoring, and the lack of benefits in either vocation. At the top of the list was the difficulty of maintaining boundaries in a field with few natural 9-5 boundaries (although some bivocational pastors felt the second job helped maintain boundaries—the church doesn’t “own” all the pastors time). Many pastors in all three groups cited the education deterrent: the understood next step after seven years of training is a full-time pastorate. Not surprising then, the bivocational pastors said they didn’t have educational debt but the full-time pastors did, thus indicating that ministry training debt drives pastors to work full-time. More nuanced but present was the diminished identity, ego, recognition and value placed on part-time ministry from self, the congregation and the conference and denomination.

*Diane Zaerr Brenneman
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