

Bivocational Ministry as a Path of Unexpected Spiritual Growth

BEN CONNELLY

Everyone loves unexpected outcomes; from the surprise ending to movies like *The Sixth Sense* and *The Usual Suspects*, to the heart-racing twists of spy novels, to the breath-taking excitement of sudden turns in a theme park roller coaster, people are often thrilled when things turn out differently than they expected. Bivocational ministry—like so many other aspects of life—often leads to an outcome unexpected by those who pursue it.

Throughout the holy scriptures, we see that God is in the business of unexpected outcomes: “so those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last,” our Lord Jesus tells his first disciples (Matt. 20:16, NLT). The Apostle Paul echoes the Messiah’s words: “God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful” (1 Cor. 1:27). And, of course, the Gospel account portrays the greatest unexpected outcome

of history. There is one expected outcome of death: the dead person stays dead. But in earth's greatest surprise ending, "the Spirit of God . . . raised Jesus from the dead" (Rom. 8:11). The story does not end there. To finish the verse, that same "Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, *lives in you*" (emphasis added). Christianity affirms that God created each human in the divine image and for God's glory. God uses every circumstance in one's life to form us, God's children, increasingly into this image. God guides both our lives and our ministries.

In this chapter, I share the results of a survey administered to bivocational ministers regarding their motives and outcomes related to ministry and spiritual growth. I begin by discussing a hypothesis based on personal experience and observation: bivocational ministry is often an unexpected path of spiritual growth for the bivocational minister. The results of the survey validate and reinforce this hypothesis. Individuals pursue (or, perhaps, find themselves in) bivocational ministry for many reasons, including finances, missional motives, and personal convictions. And, my research shows, bivocational ministry often leads to unexpected personal spiritual growth within the bivocational minister. The pattern proved surprisingly common; nearly every minister surveyed entered bivocational ministry for one or multiple reasons, hardly any of which related to their personal spiritual growth, and nearly every minister surveyed shared personal spiritual growth as an outcome of this unique form of ministry.

A Hypothesis Based on Personal Experience and Observation

I have served in bivocational ministry for over 20 years. Early in my ministry, I worked part-time in churches while in school. Later, I taught at a local university while planting a church. Most recently, I have worked with parachurch ministries while pastoring. My initial impulses for pursuing bivocational ministry were primarily pragmatic (for example, pastoring while pursuing a degree or, later, trying to save the church plant money). But, as with many things in life, there were unexpected outcomes.

I had not considered the missional implications of teaching at a university while planting a church. While many North American churches excel at teaching disciples, the making of new disciples is more commonly forgotten or neglected. My own conviction came from the Lord Jesus's final charge to his followers at his ascension: "go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19–20). Indwelt with the Spirit of God, the rest of the New Testament contains, among other elements, the story of Jesus's followers displaying and declaring the gospel, both individually and collectively. Based on similar reasons and convictions, many ministers I know choose to be bivocational so that they can be proactively and regularly sent into the world as the Father first sent the Son into the world (John 17:18). In my case, God used my teaching to grow his kingdom on campus. Over the years, God has drawn me closer, grown my own faith, and changed my view of the church in deep and unexpected ways, specifically because of being bivocational.

Having trained other ministry leaders and church planters across the world through my work with the Equipping Group, I am aware that my story is not unique; ministers choose to be bivocational for certain reasons (often logistical, as in my case) but commonly experience unexpected outcomes from their bivocational lives. Over time, I observed that these unexpected outcomes were more personal and spiritual than the initial motives; bivocational ministry is often an unexpected path of spiritual growth for the bivocational minister. In early 2021, I set out to test this hypothesis and learn from my bivocational peers.

Survey Participants

From March 1 to April 12, 2021, I surveyed bivocational ministers (also called covocational, tentmaking, and so on) specifically around the motivations and spiritual formation involved with this unique form of ministry. This online survey, open to any practitioner of bivocational ministry, was administered via Google Forms by Saturate, a non-denominational resource and training organization for which I served as director of training, largely focused on North Ameri-

can church leaders. Participants were found by posting invitations in various online groups dedicated to supporting the practice and philosophy of bivocational ministry. In addition, a link to the survey was posted in four Facebook groups: Covocational Church Planting, Saturate the World, Soma Leaders, and Acts 29 Family.

The “Bivo/Covo Ministry Survey” produced over 500 pages of data from 80 respondents, giving insights into trends across various organizations.¹ The survey focused on motivations, factors, and tangible and personal outcomes of ministry. Geographically, participants were mainly located in North America: 82.5% in the United States, 7.5% in Canada, 5% in Australia, 2.5% in the Netherlands, and 2.5% in Northern Ireland. The survey allowed anonymity, although 83% of respondents chose to divulge their identity. Information about age, ethnicity, and gender was not solicited, but, based on names given, nearly all participants were male. Other information offered voluntarily in responses indicates that, of the 20 pastors quoted in this chapter, 18 are male, 17 are White, one is Native American, and two are anonymous.

Respondents spanned several Protestant denominations and networks. More identified themselves by affiliation with church planting networks than denominations, though 20% of participants indicated some form of dual-alignment—thus the following percentages add up to more than 100%. Of participants, 30% were Southern Baptist and 10% affiliated with other Baptist organizations, such as the Canadian National Baptist Convention; 23% were part of Acts 29 church planting network (Acts29.com); 15% were involved with the Soma Family of Churches (wearesoma.com); 10% were affiliated with Wesleyan traditions, such as the United Methodist Church and Free Methodist; 13% were affiliated with other networks and denominations, such as Vineyard, Assemblies of God, or localized networks; and 8% indicated unaffiliated churches (“none”).

Eighty-seven percent of respondents identified themselves as “Senior/lead pastor or minister (or team leader, regardless of title)”; the rest filled other pastoral or support staff roles within local church ministry teams. Forty-two percent had been in full-time ministry before becoming bivocational. In addition to serving in local churches, respondents worked across the vocational spectrum, as postal carriers, educators, city, state, and federal employees, healthcare workers, retail workers, drivers, psychologists, maintenance workers, consultants, students, realtors, handymen, beverage and hospitality industry workers, as well as serving in non-church ministries, such

as chaplaincy or parachurch ministry. Among those surveyed, 40% reported that their non-church job provided 100% of their income, 42% said it provided half or more, and 18% said it provided less than half of their income. As one might expect, none of these bivocational respondents said, “My ministry role supports 100% of my income.”

Motives for Bivocational Ministry

Multiple factors contribute to consideration of bivocational ministry. Seventy-five percent of participants in this survey “intentionally pursued bivocational ministry”; the rest were bivocational due to factors beyond their control. One Australian Baptist captured a common theme of many respondents: “I didn’t originally pursue [it], but now wouldn’t have it any other way.”² Participants were asked to evaluate the following motivations for their own bivocational ministry: missional living, biblical/theological convictions around money, biblical/theological convictions around ministry, your personal ministry philosophy/methodology, your church’s ministry philosophy/methodology, your personal spiritual formation, your personal financial needs/abilities, and your church’s financial needs/abilities. The survey asked respondents to rate each motivation on a five-point Likert scale: “not at all a factor,” “not very much a factor,” “somewhat a factor,” “very much a factor,” or “the primary factor.” Participants were also given the opportunity to add further explanation as an optional follow-up.

Financial Motives for Bivocational Ministry

The most commonly expected motive for bivocational ministry is financial. Historically, bivocational ministry has been viewed by many North American churches as a consolation prize. This viewpoint assumes that ministers are only bivocational because either the church’s finances could not support a full-time minister or the minister’s household necessitated greater income than their church could provide. Survey respondents indicated that finances—both personal and congregational—were indeed a common motive for their pursuit of bivocational ministry. On one hand, 73% of respondents cited “personal financial needs/abilities” as somewhat, very much, or the

primary factor in their consideration, with 20% claiming it as “the primary factor” for their being bivocational. On the other hand, 68% of respondents cited “your church’s financial needs/abilities” as at least “somewhat a factor,” with 23% claiming it as their “primary factor.” When asked for further explanation of their answers, one participant candidly summarized a theme common to many responses: “our church cannot financially support full time staff, and our family has not been able to raise funds for full time support.”

While many full-time ministers view bivocational ministry through a negative lens, it is worth noting that most ministers who added further explanation in this survey did not view a lack of finances as a negative reality: many saw it as neutral—simply a fact of life—while others viewed bivocational ministry as a positive way to provide for their household needs without putting undue strain on the church. As one minister said, “I found freedom and wisdom in Paul’s example of being supported, working, and being able to support his own team.” Other ministers saw bivocation as a proactive way to free up funding to support other ministers or to give more financial support to their church’s mission and ministry. To this end, one lead pastor offered a representative perspective: “My education/skills afford me the ability to work outside the church. My associate pastor and other church planters do not have as many options, so I’ve opted to free up the church finances to fund them.” Sometimes mission and finances were intertwined, as one participant explained:

the people I know and love in my own sphere of influence are skeptical of organized religion, particularly because of its association with money. So when we planted, we wanted to do everything we could to remove the things that might cause people to question our motives and allow them to see that we’re loving/serving them with no strings attached.

In summary, while situations and views varied, finances were a primary, real, and prevalent motivation for bivocational ministry among the survey respondents. But, perhaps contrary to common views, finances were not always seen as negative among those who minister bivocationally, and finances were not the only motivation for this unique ministry pursuit.

Missional Motives for Bivocational Ministry

The minister's and local church's role in God's mission emerged as a significant motive for many ministers being bivocational—even more than finances, according to the survey. Fully 90% of respondents cited “missional living” as at least “somewhat a factor” in their consideration of bivocational ministry, with 33% claiming “missional living” as “the primary factor” for bivocationality. This was the highest reported “primary factor” of the eight categories on the survey. The ability to participate in God's mission personally, equip churches for collective mission, see churches multiply, send and plant new churches, and see their ministry outside the church as complementing (rather than competing with) their ministry inside the church body—these are all factors that participants affirmed in multiple-choice and open-response survey questions.

When asked to explain their missional motivation, respondents were unified in their views. One said frankly, “full-time vocational ministry was not getting me in the path of people.” Another echoed, “By working outside the church organization, I'm able to stay connected to the wider culture while also serving as a model for people who want to follow Jesus while still working (i.e. bivo/covo is a great way to destroy the clergy/lay divide).” A bivocational minister in the Netherlands served as a reminder that this is true outside North America as well, in a more post-Christendom culture: “Working in [a] high tech industry gives me credibility in the mission field.” As indicated by these and similar responses, some ministers intentionally pursue bivocational ministry so that they can personally live out God's mission, even while concurrently serving as a minister in their local church.

Related to their desire for personal missional living was a focus on the church's collective missional impulse. One survey participant chose to be bivocational so that his church could be involved in “church planting with a reproducible model.” Another saw his bivocational role as an opportunity to equip his church's members to view their workplaces, neighborhoods, and cities as a mission field:

We want to be and raise up leaders who spend a majority of their time in everyday spaces where they live, work and hang out and less time spent in a church office or building. A simpler, multiplying structure with covocational leaders allows for this in ways traditional ministry does not.

Two questions about the compatibility of work and ministry employed a five-point spectrum, from “Not well at all” to “Very well.” When asked, “How well do(es) your other job(s) complement your bivocational ministry role’s FOCUS/MISSION?” 95% indicated a three or higher. In a separate question, “How well do(es) your other job(s) complement your bivocational ministry role’s SCHEDULE?” 95% also indicated a three or higher.

Convictional Motives for Bivocational Ministry

A third motive for pursuing bivocational ministry pertains to convictions about money and ministry. Many layers to this term were explored and inquired into throughout the survey, some of which also relate to finances and mission. For example, just over half of participants agreed that “Biblical/theological convictions around money” were at least “somewhat a factor” in their “decision to pursue bivocational ministry,” while 55% named their “church’s ministry philosophy/methodology” to be at least “somewhat a factor” in their decision. Very few indicated either of these reasons as “the primary factor” in their decision to be bivocational (3% and 13%, respectively). Meanwhile, nearly three-quarters of participants said their “biblical/theological convictions around ministry” were at least “somewhat a factor” in that decision, with 20% responding that it was “the primary factor” in that decision. And 88% of participants indicated that their own “personal ministry philosophy/methodology” was at least “somewhat a factor” in their decision to be bivocational, with 25% responding that it was “the primary factor” in being bivocational.

Two survey respondents captured a common theme behind these statistics. One declared, “Being covocational really had nothing to do with church finances or personal finances, but a conviction on how to most effectively reach our culture for Jesus with principles of how Jesus made disciples.” A second minister explained a shift in his personal ministry convictions, from initially pursuing full-time ministry toward becoming bivocational:

Despite having a desire to become a full-time pastor—not to mention having the social pressure to do so by other pastors within my denomination—I continued to work full-time [at another job] as the church did not have the budget to hire a full-time pastor. After a few

years of being bivocational I came to the personal and theological conviction that being bivocational was a GOOD thing that should be pursued rather than dreaded . . . I'm currently a few years into a new church plant and I have no desire to become a full-time pastor working for a church organization.

Many ministers indicated that their bivocational experience led to a shift in personal views of church finances, ministry roles, and vocation. Several of these shifts are echoed in another bivocational minister's convictional motives: "My calling, personal conviction and our church's ministry philosophy dictates here. We want to be and raise up leaders who spend a majority of their time in everyday spaces where they live, work and hang out and less time spent in a church office or building." Yet another wrote, "I wanted our church to be generous. It was the only way. . . our staff of five is all bivocational, and we only support and send bivocational leaders and missionaries."

Whether one agrees with all the convictions listed above is beside the point. For many ministers in the cross-section of this survey, the point is simply that various convictions, around a variety of factors of mission and ministry—whether personal or informed by their church—proved a common motive for many ministers to become bivocational.

An Unexpected Path of Spiritual Formation

For all the common motives that led various ministers to pursue bivocational ministry, one motive was uniformly low. When responding to a survey question regarding one's "personal spiritual formation" as a motive for pursuing bivocational ministry, only 10% of participants referenced it as "the primary factor"; 62% said that it was only somewhat, "not very much," or "not at all" a factor. And yet, when asked more specifically about their experience in bivocational ministry, participants consistently indicated that their bivocational experience influenced their personal spiritual formation. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which "bivocational ministry enhanced or hindered the following: your view of God; your view of God's care & provision; your view of the church; your view of church leadership; your view of Christian community; your view of God's mission; your personal identity in Christ; your personal spiritual

thriving; and your personal sanctification.” Respondents were also asked to rate the degree to which “bivocational ministry has enhanced or hindered your view of” nine different areas: “dependence on God; dependence on others; personal humility; realizing personal limits; accepting personal limits; embracing others’ giftings; ministry as a team; activating the ‘priesthood of all believers’; and seeing Jesus as ‘head of the church.’” Both questions utilized the following Likert scale: greatly hindered my view; somewhat hindered my view; neither hindered nor enhanced my view; somewhat enhanced my view; greatly enhanced my view. Specific themes emerged, each of which plays a part in bivocational ministers’ personal spiritual growth. Through bivocational ministry, respondents reported growth in humility and dependence, a deepened need for a team, and growth in sanctification. The survey also revealed a few hindrances to spiritual growth.

General Spiritual Growth

Over 75% of respondents indicated that bivocational ministry had somewhat or greatly enhanced their view of God, “God’s care and provision,” “Christian community,” and their “personal spiritual thriving.” Additionally, over 80% of participants said that bivocational ministry had at least somewhat enhanced their views of the church, Christian leadership, their “personal identity in Christ,” and their “own sanctification.” Furthermore, 90% responded that bivocational ministry had either somewhat or greatly enhanced their views of “God’s mission” and “Jesus as ‘the head of the church.’” Correspondingly, bivocational ministry had somewhat or greatly hindered the views of these areas in no more than 10% of participants, with “your view of church leadership” as the highest (10%). Responses to these questions indicated a consistent pattern: while “personal spiritual formation” was seldom a motivator in participants’ pursuit of bivocational ministry, it was a common outcome.

One survey participant explained specifically how bivocational ministry had formed him spiritually:

Being bivo/covo allows me an additional context through which to view myself outside of ministry. This helps me recognize and battle my idolatry of ministry and ministry success. It also challenges me

to be a faithful witness of Christ where others do not care about my ministry leadership role. Here I find a unique type of accountability.

Another credited his bivocational pursuit for helping him focus his ministry—and reveal temptations to pull away from what matters most:

The simplicity of discipleship being loved by God, church as family, and hospitality-based mission has removed a lot of the veil on my own character (and those with us). It keeps a laser focus on whether we really trust God, listen to his voice, and are dependent on his grace. So many other organizational opportunities and hurdles were distractions to the simplicity of life with God and his family.

Yet another respondent said, perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, “I have seen God provide over and over and am ‘forced’ to give Him credit. With a larger budget I might think I played a bigger part than I did.” Each of these quotes represents the general spiritual formation that occurred because of participants’ pursuit of bivocational ministry.

Growth in Humility and Dependence

Humility and dependence on God and on others are specific forms of spiritual growth commonly produced in those who pursue bivocational ministry. Of the bivocational ministers surveyed, 80% responded that their humility was greatly or somewhat enhanced by being bivocational; only 5% said their humility had been “somewhat hindered.” Since increased humility, in part, leads to increased dependence on God and others, it is worth noting that over 75% of participants said that bivocational ministry has greatly or somewhat enhanced their dependence on others, while a full 90% indicated that bivocational ministry has greatly or somewhat enhanced their dependence on God. No participant said their dependence on God was hindered by bivocational ministry. One participant explained his answer, saying that bivocational ministry “makes me realize that I have limited capability and that I am not my church’s savior. He [Jesus] is!” Another confessed, “This really comes back to the struggle I have with viewing myself in a healthy way when I’m in ministry full-time. Working another job allows me another context to simply be with Jesus, follow Jesus and live on mission with Jesus.”

Deepened Need for a Team

Further explanations by many participants showed their growth in personal humility and dependence accompanied another area of spiritual growth: accepting personal limits and thus trusting and equipping a team to pursue mission and ministry together. As difficult as these things may be, participants viewed both as signs of God's work in their lives. Considering their own capacity for humility and dependence, 88% of survey participants noted that bivocational ministry has greatly or somewhat enhanced their view of "realizing personal limits," and that 80% said that bivocational ministry has greatly or somewhat enhanced their view of "accepting personal limits."³ Nevertheless, some of the highest percentages of the survey came from questions regarding ministry with others: 85% of participants indicated that bivocational ministry had somewhat or greatly enhanced their view of "embracing others' giftings"; 90% said bivocational ministry has somewhat or greatly enhanced their view of "activating 'the priesthood of all believers,'" and 95% of participants said bivocational ministry has somewhat or greatly enhanced their view of "ministry as a team."⁴

Perhaps as a natural overflow of ministers' personal growth in dependence and humility, respondents reported that bivocational ministry nearly always deepened their need for a team to minister with them. Three respondents summarized their view of teamwork. One said, "having a full-time job outside of the church has made me understand the importance of 'equipping the saints for the work of ministry.' With a bivo ministry philosophy, everyone gets to play . . ." Another wrote,

The ONLY way bivocational works for a lead pastor is if he is able to raise up other leaders and trust God to use them. It has forced me to avoid having the 'CEO pastor' mindset and embrace having a strong leadership team. It's helped to highlight the importance of the congregation's role in ministry.

Still another said, "I am cognizant of the fact that there is absolutely no way we can reach our city and mobilize laborers to the nations with Jesus without being part of a multi-functional team." And the vital nature of a team is perhaps perfectly captured by this respondent: "Empowering others to use their gifts is a must. Delegation and discipleship are your friends." Humility, dependence, sharing work,

and activating others' giftings were all common elements of spiritual growth revealed in the survey.

Growth in Sanctification

While humility and trusting a team are signs of spiritual growth, many participants also saw bivocational ministry as a venue by which they became more holy. Multiple answers in the survey pointed to this theme of sanctification. Survey participants were asked, "What are specific ways that your personal sanctification has been enhanced by your involvement in bivocational ministry?" Respondents explained many ways that they had seen themselves becoming more holy and credited bivocational ministry as a means of that growth.

Many said bivocational ministry helped grow their awareness of God in everyday life outside of the church, with implications for their own daily lives. One said,

I have become more aware of the hand of the Creator around me—in the workplace, my neighborhood, etc. The importance of walking out the faith in daily life has become more and more real as I have to push into Jesus in order to deal with the stress of life. There is no separation of "holy" and "unholy", "sacred" and "secular." It is just life and him around me.

Another echoed,

It has introduced me to incarnational living, which strengthens my dependence on Jesus and leads me to pursue his likeness. Being with people who are either marginal followers of Jesus or not at all on a consistent basis makes me more conscious of his presence with me and his work through me.

Others listed many areas of life that have been refined because of their involvement in bivocational ministry. One participant said, "My personal growth in Christ likeness is directly linked to my ability to merge worship as a lifestyle, life together in community, and mission and service for the sake of Jesus and good of the world," while another answered with a list of areas of growth: "Work ethic. Marriage. Parenting. Friendships. Money. Purpose. Identity. All these things

have been refined by the fire of bivocational ministry in a way that is clarifying because none of them can be overshadowed by ‘success.’”

Still others said they found that bivocational ministry enlarged their view of God and Jesus, while concurrently giving a more accurate view of themselves and their abilities. Many shared the implications of that view for ministry. “It’s helped me to realize that the sacrifices I’ve made in being bivocational are nothing compared to what Jesus has done for me. It’s shown me that I am not sufficient, but he is,” said one. Another referenced one of Jesus’s miracles, saying, “I feel like I don’t even have five loaves and two fish. But with the few resources I have, I realize more and more that God can multiply them.” As a bivocational minister myself, I certainly concur. I cannot be 100% of what my church needs! Only Jesus can be that.

Hindrances

The survey also revealed a few hindrances to spiritual growth. In addition to asking about ways personal sanctification has been enhanced by bivocational ministry, the survey also asked, “What are specific ways that your personal sanctification has been hindered by your involvement in bivocational ministry?” Only 15% of participants shared a response to this question, and every one of them mentioned time and energy. Capturing the heart of these responses, one participant said, “Time is definitely an issue as it is easy to get overbooked. I have to be careful not to plan too many things within a week or to dream too big as my family and my soul cannot handle it. Slow and steady are words that have grown on me as well as patience and humility.” Another explained how time and energy relate to his inner life: “Time management, performance pressures, and responsibilities becoming too much have at times hindered sanctification simply because I have gone through seasons in which I didn’t handle [these] well and might have been ‘performing’ but without joy [and] without trust, burning myself out.” Another response simply stated, “I am often envious of full time ministers and the flexibility of their schedules.” However, 85% of participants in the survey did not share any areas in which bivocational ministry hindered their personal sanctification. Rather, the overwhelming majority indicated that, because of their bivocational ministry, their own dependence and humility grew, their own need for a team deepened, and their own personal sanctification increased.

Reflections on Spiritual Growth

An overwhelming majority of survey respondents greatly valued the areas of personal spiritual growth they experienced because of their involvement in bivocational ministry, notwithstanding the pressures of time and energy required. But most did not expect such outcomes as they first pursued bivocational ministry. It is common, even expected in most Christian traditions, that ministers are used by God to enliven biblical truths in the hearts and minds of their congregations. Ministry is generally thought to enhance the growth of others. But, as this survey revealed, God often uses bivocational ministry to enliven biblical truths in the hearts and minds of bivocational ministers themselves, regardless of their motive for pursuing this unique calling.

While most entered bivocational ministry for financial, missional, and convictional reasons, many survey participants found themselves drawn closer to God through bivocational ministry, promoting the minister's own spiritual growth. One bivocational minister summarized this theme beautifully:

Bivocational ministry increases my sensitivity to the mission of God and what the Spirit is doing to pursue people far from Jesus. This has a forming effect on me spiritually because it heightens my desire to draw near to God and walk with him as I find myself in need of his guidance as I pursue gospel opportunities. In addition, it forms me emotionally because it puts me in situations to slow down, listen carefully to and empathize with people.

Another explained the freedom in Christ he feels by being bivocational:

I feel far less pressure than when I was a senior pastor, I'm having way more fun, ministry is still challenging, but more natural. My position/title as pastor was at times a hindrance to normal relationships with some people. It's relieving to be accepted as just another person.

Still another minister saw bivocational ministry as a test of his calling: "Bivocational ministry, above all, has deepened my commitment to pastoral ministry. It's made me consider whether or not being a pastor was what I was really being called to do simply because of how easy it would be to quit." Bivocational ministry also helps ministers

live for God in everyday life: “My Christlikeness isn’t restricted to a sacred space but is formed in very secular places as I choose to respond to the spirit,” and “it’s taught me to integrate faith into all of life, as we ask our people to do.” But the overarching reminder for the heart of every bivocational minister is that “the work of God doesn’t rise and fall, nor is it dependent on me.”

These responses resonate with my own experience in twenty years of being bivocational. I have long known that I am gifted in a few areas of ministry—and very “un-gifted” in many others. Bivocational ministry has thus helped produce humility in me, which has in turn led to my need for a diversely gifted team to minister alongside. With everyone thriving in their gifting and helping to shape a local church in their gifts and from multiple perspectives, the church’s ministry is more holistic and stronger. Together, our team points our congregation to Jesus, rather than shaping them into the image of “me.” (As it should for any self-reflective minister—the alternative makes me shudder!)

Conclusion

My own experience in bivocational ministry and working with other bivocational ministers in various contexts led me to anticipate the major findings of this research: that the outcomes of bivocational ministry are more personal and spiritual than the initial motives for pursuing them and that bivocational ministry is often an unexpected path of spiritual growth for the bivocational minister. I was not surprised to learn that this dynamic was common among bivocational ministers. The surprising element of the survey was how common the pattern was: nearly every minister surveyed entered bivocational ministry for one or multiple reasons, hardly any of those reasons related to their personal spiritual growth, and nearly every minister shared personal spiritual growth as an outcome of this unique form of ministry.

There are many benefits to bivocational ministry and many motives for pursuing such a path. Some of these relate to finance, mission and ministry philosophy, and theological conviction. But in God’s grace, God often has more in store for bivocational ministers than they know when they start that journey. There is often an outcome that matters far more to the life of the minister than even the

best surprise ending to a movie or the thrill of a roller coaster. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Church at Rome, made the bold claim, “everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory” (Rom 11:36a). “Everything” necessarily includes bivocational ministry. Bivocational ministry exists for the same reason “everything” exists: “for [God’s] glory . . . forever! Amen” (Rom. 11:36). In addition to other ways bivocational ministry glorifies God, it is a pathway to unexpected spiritual growth in the lives of those who pursue it. It is that spiritual growth, produced by this form of ministry, that leads me to close this chapter with the words of two survey respondents: “I went bi-vo mostly out of necessity, but would never go back to anything different,” and “I recommend it to every pastor.”

Endnotes

- 1 The survey instrument is available online: benconnelly.com/bivoandbeyond-chapter-survey.
- 2 All quotations from survey participants are used with permission.
- 3 Concurrently, 10% of respondents said bivocational ministry has “neither hindered nor enhanced” their view of “realizing personal limits,” while 18% said it has “neither hindered nor enhanced” their view of “accepting personal limits.” At the same time, 3% of participants said bivocational ministry has “somewhat hindered” both their realizing and also their accepting personal limits.
- 4 Only 5% to 15% of respondents expressed that bivocational ministry has “neither hindered nor enhanced” their need for others’ giftings or teamwork, and none stated that their view of others’ giftings or teamwork has been hindered by bivocational ministry.