

The Bivocational Congregation

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Editor’s note: What is the shape of tomorrow’s church? The authors of this chapter answered this question in 2009 by describing an array of bivocational congregations. They presented five case studies illustrating a variety of ways that churches faced mounting pressures to adapt to declining membership in North America. Their prescient analysis remains timely and relevant and is still valuable for teaching and learning. The names and locations of the congregations have been de-identified in this adaptation of the text.¹ The authors pose several questions for discussion at the end of this chapter. Additionally, Ed Pease provides a new epilogue on how to prepare a congregation for bivocational ministry.

Any garden-variety atheist, agnostic, or even religiously indifferent materialist knows that *if*—and we do mean *if*—the church is to survive well into the future in the northern hemisphere, it will not be through a linear extension of today’s church. (The only ones who do not seem to realize this are pastors, seminar-

ians, and some denominational people!) Every index of the church as it has been indicates a decline, and many indicate a precipitous decline. So, what might tomorrow's different church look like? What should we call it? And what are its qualities?

We believe the bivocational congregation offers a viable model for tomorrow's church. We begin with the initial premise that a bivocational congregation is a local church that operates upon (and may even self-consciously understand) two callings: the first is the calling of function and the second is the calling of mission. We believe the bivocational congregation is more likely to survive into tomorrow to do God's will and be God's people because it is essentially organized around spiritual realities in tune with God's redemptive work. These include:

- healthy team functioning
- a high commitment to place and to being a ministering presence in that place
- a willingness to die to self, if need be, in the cause of serving others
- an acceptance of this expression of the church as a full expression of the church, not a second-rate, temporary, expedient form of the church
- a willingness to experiment and trust that a higher power has something wonderful in store for tomorrow

The following five cases help to illustrate these qualities of bivocational congregations as they exist in very different churches.

Case 1: The Always-Been Bivocational Congregation

Fellowship is a small Baptist church in southern New England that recently celebrated its 175th anniversary. The two to three dozen people that gather on Sunday mornings know each other well, and each of them has a role to play that helps keep the church going. A shopkeeper is their pastor, a schoolteacher their treasurer, and a retired woman their clerk.

This congregation needs someone to fill the pastoral role—a very strictly defined role of preaching and pastoral care. Otherwise, the people expect to work together to accomplish whatever needs doing. “The pastor preaches and guides us, but he doesn’t really have to do much else,” they told us. “We know what needs to get done and we each pitch in and do it. If something out of the ordinary arises, we huddle up and figure out how to handle it.”

The members’ relationships with one another have morphed over the years so that they exhibit a high degree of complementarity. They function as a team. People know what motivates their fellow members and for the most part they stay out of each other’s way. Realizing that energy is limited, they do not waste much time on turf battles. New members are incorporated slowly into this dynamic organism. Giftedness and interest are discerned over time and offered and used for the common good. Occasionally something may happen that galvanizes the congregation around a new opportunity or threat, but usually business as usual prevails. The members are “not anxious about tomorrow.” They are comfortable living out the mutually determined roles that are so familiar to them as to hardly need conscious definition. This semi-aware team functioning may not respond well to a rapidly changing environment, but, since it has a nearly two-centuries-long life, that fact is seldom brought to mind. This bivocational congregation functions as a simple organism. Each part has a role to play. The pastor is important but not crucial. In fact, this type of congregation can keep on going for long periods of time without a pastor, if need be.

Recently we had conversations with two people from different congregations. Each of their churches has a full-time pastor and each is considering closing! Why? Fatigue. “We’re just too tired to do everything,” one explained. In contrast, Fellowship, despite not having a full-time pastor, has members who have developed focus and complementarity. They know what needs to be done (and what does not) and who is going to do it (and who is not). Yes, their ministry is basic and not extensive. But they own it, they do it, and they will keep on doing it indefinitely. And maybe that is enough.

Case 2: The Rooted-Here Bivocational Church

Savior Church is in a blue-collar section of urban Boston that the majority of the residents have made their permanent home. Most can tell you where their best friends in elementary school lived—and often where they live now—and whose mother always sets an extra place for you for dinner.

Savior Church combines two different denominational heritages in addition to at least two other neighborhood churches and their members who have been subsumed into it over the preceding half-century. Its ecumenical spirit is even greater now, as Roman Catholics, shut out of their old sanctuary just around the corner, are finding their way into Savior. Their bishop intended for them to move into a Roman Catholic parish nearby, but that parish just does not seem like home to them. Instead, they have found a home at Savior, which has existed for over a century to minister to the people of its neighborhood.

Savior is an example of what happens when a congregation is truly bivocational. When, after a successful 20-year part-time ministry, Savior's pastor left for a university position, the congregation began a search process for a new pastor. Their goal was clear: they desired a clergy companion for a bivocational ministry. There were no illusions about getting a replica of their outgoing pastor nor about switching to a full-time pastor. They sought someone who could serve as pastor and who was as committed to bivocational ministry in this place as they were. That meant having local roots and being committed to doing outreach to the local community.

This bivocational congregation has a ministry not only to its own members but also to its community. They understand the need for a presence in the local setting—a presence from which outreach programs can flow. Since their pastor's departure, Savior received a denominational award for exemplary work in operating a successful food pantry. The commitment of Savior to the community was also seen when, upon the closing of the local Roman Catholic parish church, Savior immediately extended an invitation to continue the work of its branch of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul—an outreach program. Today, the St. Vincent group operates from Savior's facilities. Although they could have relocated to another Roman Catholic parish, they, like the members of Savior, understood the need to stay in the neighborhood where they had been serving.

Members of Savior told us that, even if they had the funds available for a full-time pastor, they would use those funds in other ways, especially for community outreach. The congregation understands the need for roots in its community, and it also understands that the concept of bivocational ministry is not just a clergy thing—that it needs to be embedded in the minds and hearts of all the members.

This bivocational congregation was missional long before the term came into vogue. They know that their internal life and health depend on their external service. Churches in their neighborhood that didn't understand this have long since closed. Savior lives incarnational ministry right there in their neighborhood, and, consequently it, too, lives.

Case 3: The Transitional Bivocational Congregation

In Massachusetts, on a residential street near a large university, is Founder's Church, which emerged from the closing of three churches in the 1960s. Today, Founder's Church is in the midst of what it calls its Five-Year Holy Experiment, which involves two congregations working together in the same building. One is a small congregation of English descent and the other is a new, large, and growing congregation primarily of Korean heritage. The English congregation of Founder's Church is bivocational, with a call to live its own life as a congregation, yet also with a call to house and nourish the Korean congregation.

Founder's Church Council, made up of five members from each congregation, meets monthly. Church committees also comprise members from each congregation. The treasurer of the church was appointed from the Korean congregation—a move supported by the English congregation. The budget for the church is supported by both congregations, with some help from the regional judicatory. Lay leaders in the English congregation monitor telephone messages and follow up as needed—for both congregations. They also lead a weekly Bible study session open to all. One Sunday a month both congregations worship together.

The church has a paid staff, including two paid clergy. One is a Korean-speaking man who works with the Korean congregation full-time. The other is a woman who works with the English congregation

20 hours per week. The two pastors see themselves as sharing worship and preaching responsibilities.

The two congregations also share a custodian, and one church member is a choir director who supervises a full music program and leads a choir largely composed of Koreans, many of them students. The choir performs primarily for the Korean congregation but also for the English congregation on special occasions.

The English congregation is concerned about its continuing decline in numbers, but its overall attitude is one of joyful celebration for the blessings of the present and the unknown but promising future of this vibrant parish venture. Where will they end up? God only knows, but this transitional bivocational congregation is enjoying the ride!

Founder's Church is ready to die to self—the worship style they are accustomed to, their identification with “our” pastor and building, indeed their whole self, if need be—to see that ministry to their community continues. Unlike so many other congregations that ensure their death by holding on tightly to life as they have known it, Founder's Church will live on—possibly in resurrected form and speaking Korean! They understand that letting go of “what has been” is the only way to see what will be.

Case 4: An Experimental Bivocational Congregation

Five small, centuries-old congregations sit sprinkled around the Connecticut River valley. A few decades ago, each struggled to make ends meet, to maintain its high-maintenance building, to keep its Sunday school staffed, and to manage with a part-time rector. Then along came a rector who introduced to them to a concept he called “clustering,” an arrangement in which certain functions are collectively managed by a board comprising members from the different churches in the cluster. He had heard of such arrangements in Nevada and had developed one in northern Vermont. He was convinced of the efficacy of clustering. He had charts and reports to show that clustered congregations were better off and did more mission than isolated, atomized, suffering-in-silence parishes. One by one, the five congregations agreed to cluster.

Under the cluster arrangement, each parish maintains its own building and vestry. Each votes its own budget and raises its own

funds. Each may have its own ministry in its own community. And each sends representatives to the cluster board. There, such synergies as common missions, Christian education, music, and social activities may be developed. But the critical task of the cluster board is to develop and execute a plan for a staff of professional leaders. Typically, this is done by assessing the needs and desires of the constituent parishes and, within the various parish contributions to the cluster budget, call and deploy an array of leaders. Clergy coverage for the worship of each parish is arranged on a rotating basis. Other staff members contribute from their skills and calling as the cluster board determines best. What this means in practice is that any one parish has access to a wider array of skills than it could afford on its own. But it also means that their pastor is a functionary, rotating in and out of their pulpit every eight weeks or so, according to a set schedule. So, parishioners do not develop the same kind of dependence on their pastor that they might otherwise.

Although potentials are always variously attained, clusters offer the potential for parishioners to develop the kind of ownership and commitment that occurs in what we are calling the bivocational congregation. Clusters call forth the lay leadership of the congregation. Clusters clearly say: “The responsibility is yours. The rector will assist you in achieving your call, but he or she is not going to do for you what is yours to do. You are the permanent part of this equation.”

That is both freeing and challenging. Clusters are hard to sustain over time. In fact, this one is currently in the process of breaking up—but after 27 years! Cluster boards must keep working constructively together while being pulled in various local directions. Another layer of organization is added, and some may mourn the lack of a priest they can call their own. But clusters also allow congregations to mature in vibrancy and self-direction if they are willing to accept a new role for pastoral leadership. This is not always easy. As one weary vestry member notes, “The cluster fosters independence. [The clergy] were able to keep their distance and let the lay people do the work. We found and are still finding it hard to balance doing the deeds of Christ and learning the Mind of Christ and sharing the love of Christ and still have a family and a job.” Even so, she concludes, “the premise of the cluster model is a very good one.”

Clusters are one experimental form that aligns with this emerging concept of the bivocational congregation. Undoubtedly others will become visible now that we know what we are looking for.

Clustering invites lay ownership of the ministry. Yet there are dangers inherent in this model, which tantalizes the laity with the ability of more professional resources, inviting more extensive ministries, and—due to the additional time and energy necessary to manage such ministries—eventually resulting in more fatigue. Clearly this model will not work everywhere, nor forever. But for churches willing to define their ministry and focus, it offers hope.

Case 5: The We-Backed-Into-It-and-We-Want-Out-of-It Bivocational Congregation

Unless the concept of bivocational ministry is firmly rooted in the minds and hearts of the congregation, it can fall apart when the pastor leaves. St. Luke's is such a church.

St. Luke's was originally organized in 1893 as a mission. It provided worship, fellowship, and settlement help to the town's small population of English-speaking immigrants, most of whom had moved from the British Isles and the Canadian Maritime Provinces to work in the town's mills. In 2002, after serving for 119 years as a mission, the congregation finally attained the status of parish. However, despite growth in the town and, to a lesser extent, in the size of the congregation, in recent decades St. Luke's has not been able to afford a full-time priest. As a result, it has been served by a succession of bivocational pastors.

Today the congregation continues its original mission of worship, fellowship, and help, and it has turned outward to provide the same opportunities to people in the area who are not members of the congregation.

Strong lay leadership has emerged to maintain and expand the ministry of the congregation. The Sunday school, youth ministry, routine pastoral care, and outreach efforts are organized by members of the congregation. One person has organized a weekly women's spirituality group. It has grown over time to include a number of people living in the community who would not consider themselves members of the congregation. The pastor orders the worship services, presides over the parish vestry, gives encouragement and counsel to the lay volunteers, and makes emergency calls on parishioners.

After their last “permanent” part-time pastor of seven years retired, the congregation struggled to find a successor. In the course of searching for three years, the vestry decided to use the congregation’s small endowment to seek a full-time pastor. They hope to be able to support this person at full time for three years, during which time the congregation may grow sufficiently to be self-supporting. If not, they will have exhausted their financial reserves, failed at growing, and possibly become terminally discouraged. Though the laity have taken on significant and fruitful responsibilities in mission and in the life of their church, this church seems to have been simply a congregation with a bivocational pastor rather than a bivocational congregation.

This example, replicated so very often, is not a particularly hopeful one, barring a miracle. The desires deeply rooted in the hearts of the parishioners for their own full-time pastor, to be a “legitimate” church, and to have someone to define and do ministry represent a model of doing church that is unlikely to lead us very far into the future. Spending broke in that quest will not be as productive as learning the lessons God desires to teach us in order to move into a new future.

Embodiments of Change

Each of the first four of these examples lifts up qualities of faithful congregations that may presage the characteristics of the church in the future. Fellowship illustrates the power of focus and complementarity of functions. Savior is an example of presence, rootedness, and the primacy of mission. Founder’s Church embodies the willingness to take risks and even die to self, if need be. The cluster model demonstrates a willingness to experiment and take responsibility for one’s congregation. And St. Luke’s teaches us of the danger of giving in to the constant temptation to slip back into old patterns.

Does a congregation need to have a bivocational pastor to exhibit the positive qualities of a bivocational congregation? We think that, though it may help, it is not necessary. What makes a congregation bivocational and more likely to thrive into the future is the dual calling of the congregation to fresh understandings of mission and function—mission that is rooted locally, focused, and so primary that the church is willing to risk self in the cause, and functioning that is re-

sponsible, complementary, experimental, and not pastor-dependent but lay-owned. Such a church, we believe, will warm God's heart and serve its neighbors for years to come.

Questions for Reflection

- Which case comes closest to describing the character of your congregation?
- Under what circumstances would your congregation consider becoming a “bivocational congregation” as distinct from offering a bivocational-level clergy salary package?
- Would your congregation ever consider engaging a bivocational pastor to work in a bivocational setting?
- How might your congregation develop the qualities identified in this chapter?

Epilogue

BY ED PEASE

How can the congregation prepare for bivocational ministry? My conviction that congregations benefit enormously by increasing their understanding and commitment to bivocational ministry has grown over the years because of my experiences of working in them. Reflecting on those experiences, I have learned a few lessons about preparing the congregation for bivocational ministry. My definition of bivocational ministry is a sharing among pastor and participants in the congregation of ministries that traditionally were done only by the pastor. Whether a congregation is about to make a fresh start on a new phase of its life or could benefit from a refreshing change of pace in one or more areas of ministry, I believe that two steps will be useful: forming a leadership team and initiating a project.

The first step is to form a leadership team for bivocational ministry. If the team is not identical to the parish council or vestry, it should report to them. The team would include volunteers from the

congregation, the pastor, other paid members of the staff, and, of course, God, who is present and should have a voice in the deliberations. That is why, when the team meets together by Zoom or in person, the first order of business really must be a time of Bible study and prayer.

The team should then engage in ongoing discussion to understand the emotional and spiritual condition of the congregation. Many congregations have been badly damaged by the decline in membership that has been taking place since the mid-1960s (see Wright, chapter 3 in this volume). Remaining congregants may be exhausted from still trying to do the things they used to do in the days when the congregation was growing. One of the differences between then and now is that there are far fewer people to do the work and provide financial support. In the decades immediately after World War II, congregations would call one or more pastors to do all the pastoral care while the people of the congregation made sure that the buildings were in repair, that there was enough food made for every spaghetti dinner, and that there were enough dollars coming in to cover all the costs. Decline can be traumatic, and members may be numb from the experience.

The next task for the team is to survey the current needs of the congregation, seeing to it that as many as possible are being met, particularly those that require immediate attention. The congregation should be informed via newsletter or email of every action of the team, preserving the privacy of individuals as appropriate. In starting a bivocational ministry team, it should always be made clear that the ongoing needs of the parish are, and will continue to be, met. Maintaining trust in the running of the parish is most important.

When everything is running as smoothly as possible, the leadership team can then turn its attention to discerning a project in bivocational ministry. A study of the texts of the temptations of Jesus after fasting in the wilderness can be helpful for discerning a project in vocational ministry (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). What does God want the church to be like? A Baptist minister in Bellingham, Massachusetts, frequently told our ecumenical clergy Bible study group, “Remember, God has a bigger stake in this than we do.” The team could use these texts in its Bible study time for meetings while the congregation could hear sermons on the same texts. If the congregation has experienced a significant level of trauma, an additional approach might be appropriate.

In the past ten years or more, scholars have increasingly developed a theological understanding of trauma. *Spirit and Trauma*, by Shelly Rambo of the Boston University School of Theology, is a great example of these writings (2010). The book is about what happened in Jesus's tomb between Good Friday and Easter Day. How was Jesus resurrected? In a moving description of the events of the Resurrection, Rambo described the love poured out on the cross from Jesus and toward Jesus. In the tomb, Jesus was brought back to life through the Holy Spirit. Jesus descended into hell. On Easter morning, Jesus rose from the dead, but that was only the beginning. The women who stayed at the grave became the first witnesses and provided the first sign that there was more to the Resurrection. They did not recognize Jesus at first because he did not look like they expected. When they did recognize him, their tales of witness went out among people and continued to spread so that, on Pentecost—the fiftieth day from Easter—the church itself burst into existence. Pentecost—the birthday of the church—is part of the Resurrection.

Those who have remained active in the church throughout this current decline are like the women at the tomb. They are the first witnesses that the church that existed in the 1950s and 60s is now rising from death. This resurrected church will come in a form that no one has fully imagined—and many may not recognize, with a strength that no one has anticipated. This resurrection includes the clergy and the people of the church—the body of Christ. Bivocational ministries are among the most important events of the unfolding resurrection. Bivocational ministry builds on the Reformation concept of the priesthood of all believers—that all who are followers of Jesus are called to ministry, including but not limited to the ordained. Biblical studies among the team members and preaching of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Resurrection appearances of Jesus, the Ascension, and the Day of Pentecost are important at the beginning of a new bivocational ministry.

The second step involves starting a project in bivocational ministry. When the team members are ready to begin an activity, they should ask for volunteers to help in the chosen area. One of the most successful introductions to bivocational ministry I have seen took place when a consultant was engaged to gather and train volunteers from the congregation for the ministry of pastoral care in partnership with the clergy. The pastor alone could not do all the work of pastoral care in the parish. Volunteers generously made themselves available. Working with the consultant, the volunteers devised a

method of communicating with the parish office and with the pastor. One person assumed the role of dispatcher. The pastoral care visitors called on people in their homes, in nursing homes, and hospitals. Volunteers asked the pastor to step into situations of the greatest need for care. In addition, they consulted privately with the pastor about the visits that they had been making. The volunteers and the pastor met together occasionally to talk about how the ministry of pastoral care was going among them. Over time, the volunteer pastoral visitors became acceptable to the other parishioners.

It is important that the people doing the bivocational ministry of pastoral care be visible to the congregation. It is easier for people to understand what bivocational ministry is when seeing the people involved in this work. The first chosen activity of bivocational ministry may not be the one described above—assisting in pastoral care. Whatever project is chosen will go a long way in the preparation of a congregation for more bivocational ministry.

A congregation usually does not go from zero to full speed ahead in bivocational ministry overnight. It is important for the pastor and the leaders to begin with one activity and then go on from there. It might take a year or more for one bivocational ministry project to be in place before any other projects are undertaken. Sometimes the original plan may not work, and a new one will have to be substituted. The pastor and leadership team should hear from people how they see things are going and be guided by listening to advice from as many as possible. Over time, an understanding of the possibilities of bivocational ministry will develop in the congregation, and a rich sense of God's activity in the life of the congregation will grow.

Works Cited

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- Rambo, Shelly. 2010. *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.

Notes

- 1 Adapted and reprinted with permission from Alban at Duke Divinity School. Pappas, Pease, and Faramelli (2009).