

Changes in Ministry and Bivocational Ministry since the 1960s

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There is nothing like being a student chaplain from Brooklyn, New York, leading a summer worship service facing a once-active volcano with steam still coming out of its vents. Each Saturday evening, I visited campgrounds in Lassen Volcanic National Park in California, inviting campers to come to church the next morning in the amphitheater. The next day, I led campers, park employees, and visitors in worship from a pulpit in the shadow of the volcano with a ten-foot-high cross hanging from the stage rafters. It was a summer ministry, and I did it for two years.

That was my introduction to being a bivocational pastor. To raise sufficient funds to return to seminary each year, I worked for the park company. Early on weekday mornings, I drove the garbage truck as part of the maintenance crew. Then in the afternoons (after taking a shower on company time), I led tours of the park for visitors from all over the Western United States. Who would have guessed

that this experience would help me understand and address the current crisis in US churches?

Today, many churches providing valuable ministries in their communities would not survive without bivocational ministers. Small member congregations are being pressured to close their buildings or adapt by combining church parishes, sharing a full-time pastor, or hiring a bivocational pastor. These changes may be prompted by financial necessity, but bivocational pastors are more than simply an answer to decreased congregational budgets. Bivocational ministry can be an opportunity to revitalize the church in mission to the community at large, including ministries with young people, the elderly, and shut-in members of the parish.

When I began my ministerial career in 1965, I encountered the “traditional,” White Presbyterian structure of full-time, male pastors serving churches that had been in existence since at least the post-World War II era, if not before. However, during the preceding centuries, parishes were served by circuit-riding preachers who not only rode horses between the various services on a Sunday but also carried in one saddle bag the Bible and in the other saddle bag medications that could be used to heal the sick. This kind of bivocationality ceased as preachers hung up their saddlebags and medicine bottles in favor of settled pastorates.¹

In a sense, we have come back to needing circuit-riding pastors in the twenty-first century. Some pastors again have more than one parish to serve each Sunday. Many Presbyterian congregations are being served by commissioned ruling elders (laity) rather than teaching elders (clergy).² Also serving this changing church scene are bivocational pastors.

Bivocational pastors are the circuit riders of the twenty-first century. Instead of carrying medicine bottles, they are expected to perform CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) on dying churches. In a metaphorical sense, many churches today need spiritual and financial resuscitation. Pastors with a background in psychology and counseling, accounting, and finance, or experience as a teacher or contractor may benefit a church as much or more than a pastor whose knowledge of Greek and Hebrew or archaeological sites in the Middle East is unaccompanied by other life skills. While no person can have all the skills and knowledge needed to meet the needs of a vibrant congregation, bivocational pastors, due to their other professions, are able to bridge gaps in the operations of a church’s ministry. Since pastoral ministry is a collegial enterprise that provides and

receives support from various individuals and religious entities both within and outside the congregation, a broader set of skills and talents is often available to churches with bivocational ministers.

Oftentimes, a bivocational pastor is better positioned than a pastor supported solely by a congregation to meet the changing needs of the church in the twenty-first century. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to church leadership, be it a full-time pastor or a bivocational pastor. Both types of clergy may have appropriate theological education. The issue is whether the pastor has a diverse lifestyle that is both solidly grounded in the Christian faith and in the lifestyle and professions of the community surrounding the congregation. The crisis of White, mainline congregations, despite many who have worked to evangelize and overcome the lack of religious faith of many persons in the United States, is the secularization of church and society. Mission and support, when confined to a church's own members, provides minimal outreach to the community at large. Bivocational ministry can reach a much broader community. This chapter presents my personal reflections based on forty-five years in bivocational ministries, serving many localities in the United States as well as overseas. This variety of employment and church service has benefited my own vision of what church service is and, specifically, how bivocational ministry can benefit the church universal.

Becoming Bivocational

I did not set out to become a bivocational pastor. After serving four happy years as a full-time youth pastor at the thousand-plus-member Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church in the San Francisco Bay area, I moved back to Los Angeles and served as an assistant pastor for youth and community outreach. I must admit I struggled in that position because I could not reconcile the teachings of Jesus from the pulpit with attitudes in the congregation. Some long-time members did not see the needs of newly arriving residents, who in many instances were poor and in some instances were homeless, as a ministry of the church. Fortunately, I was able to set up a meals program for seniors in cooperation with the city and county welfare offices. The program was supported by volunteer cooks, helpers, and the small amounts of money requested from those attending. With the mutual consent of the congregation and the Presbytery, I left my full-time position to

become bivocational, helping those needing social service assistance during the day and working in the evenings and weekends with churches in need of pastor.

At that time, most of the White Presbyterian churches in Southern California had full-time pastors. However, the poorer and racially and ethnically diverse congregations did not. The leadership of the Presbytery was happy for me to assist these parishes serving ethnically diverse populations, including African Americans, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and European people. My zeal for civil rights and humanitarian assistance was greatly supported by the diverse parishioners I served and kept me from uncomfortable debates with homogeneously White church boards and trustees. With that, my life and style of ministry were set for the next forty years.

Racism and ethnocentrism are difficult issues for most churches, even those that claim to have no racial bias. Because bivocational ministers are out in the community on a daily basis, these issues may be confronted more regularly. At one time in California, I was criticized by the mother of a young high school-age daughter for featuring the work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during a church program and sharing my own experience in and providing support for the Selma to Montgomery march. From that time on, I did not see her daughter very much. The ministry of the church, however, initiated a biracial nursery school, working with an African American community some twenty miles away.

When working with a high school youth group in another White suburban church, I at times referred to my roots in Brooklyn. The Brooklyn church in which I was baptized closed some years later and sold the building to an African American congregation. The White leaders used the money to pay off debts and transferred the remaining funds to a suburban White church in the name of extending Christ's ministry to the young families moving out of the city. In light of today's environment of political and race relations, this action highlights the need for clergy to understand race and cultural issues more deeply.

New Opportunities for Ministry

Bivocational pastors minister not only in the parish but also in the world, encountering the needs of a much broader community. An is-

sue I have found in churches, not only fifty years ago but also today, is the idea of “separation of church and state.” Many White churches want to keep their pastors out of the politics of the community. In my bivocational ministry, I tried to be non-partisan while addressing the many social issues encountered by the members of the parish and the community at large. We should be able to work together, both church and state. Church people can support food banks that help the needy, provide medical care for those in need, and work with governmental leaders to address problems as diverse as building codes, traffic congestion, and housing of the homeless. As a bivocational minister with two career tracks, ministry and accounting, I learned how to address government paperwork, bureaucracy, and political and civil servant leadership.

As a bivocational minister, I was able to serve a much larger population than that of a local parish in the middle of the city. My dual role in the community afforded me new opportunities for ministry. I was able to converse and work with various governmental units including the mayor’s office, the city council, and various legislators in the area. Serving on a variety of community projects, such as addressing the earthquake issues of California, created a symbiotic union between the churches I served and the governmental and non-profit units with which I was involved.

For example, my position at the American Red Cross Southern California Region created good relations with government bodies, particularly in Los Angeles. Consequently, I received an invitation from a member of the City Council to join, at his office’s expense, an Earthquake Exploratory Commission to China. The purpose of the trip was to study the response of China to the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, one of the deadliest of the twentieth century. The City Council and the Building Department wanted to determine what could be learned to improve the building codes and disaster response in the City of Los Angeles, particularly in light of the devastating 1971 San Fernando Valley (Sylmar) Earthquake, which destroyed five Presbyterian churches in addition to other buildings in Los Angeles.

We attended an International Seismic Conference in Beijing and traveled north to Tangshan to visit the destruction and observe its rebuilding. Los Angeles Building Department engineers on the Commission gleaned valuable information from this visit. This visit resulted in building code revisions and safer buildings in the city of Los Angeles. The need to update sanctuaries and fellowship halls to the new, higher standards was an expensive and contentious issue

for churches. Being a bivocational minister put me in the middle of a debate of earthquake safety versus church financial capabilities. My experience on the Commission helped me to explain to the religious community the reasons for the stronger earthquake building codes. This is a good example of how being bivocational can benefit both the community and the church.

My training as an accountant also helped me bridge church and community. I worked with non-profit and other organizations as well as churches and their staff with financial and tax reporting systems. My secular employment led to international ministry opportunities. In 1984, I traveled and worked in Ethiopia with the “We are the World” response of US and international outpouring of support in response to the Ethiopian famine. Eventually, I was asked to move with my family to Geneva, Switzerland, to work for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. During this decade of international service, I worshiped in and supported local churches as a congregant rather than as a pastor. In Geneva our family attended the American Church, which was a part of the Episcopal Church (US). Due to my ordination, I was allowed to teach the communicants class and to lead services and celebrate the eucharist when the rector was not available.

In 1994 my family and I returned to the United States and settled in Long Island. I once again became a full-time worker-priest (the New York Catholic way of saying bivocational). This time I worked for the tax accounting firm of my family and, with the encouragement of the General Presbyter, served part-time as pastor of a small historic church in Yaphank, New York. (This town gained acclaim in 1918 when a young Army recruit by the name of Irving Berlin wrote songs to raise money for a community building at nearby Camp Upton. This ultimately led after the war to the Broadway musical *Yip, Yip, Yaphank*, out of which one later-released song, “God Bless America,” became an American classic.) By serving the community, we were able to build additional educational facilities, which housed various programs, such as a nursery school, and various community groups, including scouts, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and theatrical productions. Most importantly, these facilities helped the church to interface with the local community.

As a bivocational pastor, I not only preached in the Yaphank Presbyterian Church on Sundays but also became involved in numerous community activities, including the creation of a self-sustaining summer camp for children and youth that grew to one hundred campers

per week for the summer. Needing events to excite the campers, we involved the Yaphank Fire Department, who drove their various fire trucks to demonstrate their usage to the campers. In the process, I was invited to be the chaplain of the department.

On September 11, 2001, my chaplaincy changed my ministry. I became a minister to a grieving community, and the Presbyterian Church became a center for community support. Members of the Long Island Fire Departments died in the collapse of the World Trade Center. Friends and relatives also died as the buildings collapsed. In Yaphank, we held prayer vigils and services in the fire house for the community. This relationship with the community led to more children attending the pre-school nursery at the church, as well as the summer camp. Other activities, including a Halloween Walk fundraiser and special services and events at Christmas and Easter, increased in attendance. Requests for the pastor to officiate at weddings and funerals also increased. To this day, even in retirement, I have continued as the chaplain of the Yaphank Fire Department at their request and with the approval of the Presbytery of Long Island.

Ten years ago, I retired from the Yaphank church to begin a decade of suburban "tent making." Whereas in previous years bivocational ministers were not needed in the suburbs, now, due to lower memberships and budgets, these congregations can no longer afford a full-time pastor. The annual total salary and support package exceeds \$100,000; a Sunday honorarium for a pulpit supply pastor is only \$150 plus mileage. Hiring a bivocational pastor allows these congregations to reallocate monies to children and youth ministries. Needed today are not just more Sunday school and confirmation classes but also after-school tutoring programs, service projects to help those in need, and summer youth programming, which includes opportunities for travel and meeting other young people of various cultures and religious backgrounds. I continue as a bivocational minister since I still own and manage the family accounting business. Many of our clients are pastors or church members and their families. Additionally, the firm does the books and the annual audits for a number of churches and pre-school nurseries. I also continue to be a member of presbytery committees, including the board of trustees, budget committee, and Presbyterian disaster relief committee.

A Shifting Religious Landscape

When I was young, the Presbyterian Church was a major religious institution on Long Island. With a history going back to 1640, hardly a hamlet on the island was without a Presbyterian or Congregational Church. This was true up to the end of World War II, when the rush of city residents moved to the suburbs. With the migration of Irish, Italians, Hispanics, and Eastern Europeans, the Roman Catholic Church became the major Christian denomination. Additionally, the movement of Jewish citizens from Europe and New York City led to a more diverse population. Instead of being the church of the politically and wealthy elite as well as the blue-collar workers, Presbyterians are now just one of many religious groups in the community. Congregations are now either closing or merging due to the smaller number of parishioners.

During the coronavirus pandemic, congregations across the United States had to rethink their worship services and their ministries. The ability to meet and worship online requires ministry and lay staff who can broadcast services to their at-home members and friends. Ministry in the cyberspace world requires an understanding of computers and cameras, which few pastors have, either from their seminary training or their ministerial interests. Into this void, bivocational ministers occupy a crucial role. Given the small size of many Protestant parishes, we need to train bivocational ministers to provide this assistance.

Another difficult issue is finances. With the contraction of churches and church ministries in the last two decades, judicatories have been forced to cut back in all areas. This affects the ability to provide scholarships for students in seminary. It also affects budgets for small church ministries. It also affects support for the work and fellowship of bivocational ministers. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), financial support for the Association of Presbyterian Tent-makers has been eliminated, and the association no longer meets. The need to fellowship and share ministries is still there but is not adequately addressed.

Finding Collegial Support

By attending the bi-annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I met other bivocational ministers, called tentmakers after St. Paul's example. I learned of their lifestyle and ministries. Many were from either rural or urban parishes. Few were from suburban areas. An organization had been set up with the title the Association of Presbyterian Tentmakers. We met annually, often on the campus of one of the seminaries. During that time of fellowship, we also met tentmakers from other denominations and countries. For me, these were always exciting and productive times. To find out that bivocational ministries in Europe had a wider footprint in the church than in the United States was quite valuable to my understanding of the nature of my own ministry. I was particularly impressed by conversations I had with Phil Aspinall of the United Kingdom over the years and with *Ministers-at-Work*, a journal for Christians in secular ministry published periodically by CHRISM (CHRistians In Secular Ministry).

These meetings were also good for my religious mental health. There were times when I felt I did not have what it took to be a minister of Jesus Christ. The institutional church was looking for full-time pastors and preachers, not social workers who held together a small congregation off of the main church row. At times, I felt I was more appreciated by my friends and contacts in the community, governmental, and secular world than by my own church, for which I had spent five years beyond college studying Greek and Hebrew, biblical exegesis, church history, pastoral counseling, and so on, in seminary. My church background as a young person had challenged me "to evangelize the world for Jesus Christ." To preach the gospel was my calling. By meeting with other bivocational ministers, I discovered that there are other good Christians who preach the gospel where they work. They had regular contacts not only with their church parishioners but also with persons who were unchurched and who would find it difficult to come to a church, though they had spiritual needs. In many ways, these modern-day, bivocational Christians were more akin to the evangelists and leaders of the early Church than some of the full-time pastors in the high pulpits of mainline churches.

I need also to reflect on the role of women in the church. When I attended seminary in the 1960s, women were allowed to attend

seminary classes, but they could not graduate with a divinity degree, even after attending and passing the required courses. Today that is not the situation, and I welcome all my female colleagues into the leadership of the church. However, I am also aware that a number of Christian denominations do not allow ordination of women. Furthermore, many families still prefer a male clergy person when it comes time for a baptism, wedding, or funeral. Providing opportunities for women to speak and preach from the pulpit, as well as to hold Bible studies for the entire congregation and to serve on church boards, is a way to help broaden a congregation's understanding of the changing role of women—not only in society but also in our congregations. These are issues that we, as bivocational ministers, need to address and be aware of.

Conclusion

We need more compassion in our ministries, in our churches, and in our communities. The financial bottom line is not the most important part of a successful business, church, or society. As I read the scriptures and live in the world, I find the real need is a theology and ministry of caring, loving, and compassion. I learned this from being a bivocational minister out in the world—not in seminary.

Since 1960, the role of bivocational pastors has shifted from a more rural ministry to one that deals with both suburban and urban life in the United States. This demands not only a good theological foundation but also a knowledge of both urban issues and the onslaught of digital technology. The disparity between the poor and the wealthy is a challenge for the United States as for many other nations. Likewise, the needs of the mission field are great. But, where is the mission field? Yes, it is international, and it is also right here at home. The church needs leadership that understands not only the scriptures but also the world in which we live as well as the communities in which we minister. The challenge is great—definitely more difficult than for the church of the 1960s. We can learn a lot from St. Paul—not only his writings but also his tentmaker's way of life. God is with us. We just need to follow God's directions. Shalom!

Works Cited

Holifield, E. Brooks. 2007. *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Vacek, Heather H. 2015. *Madness: American Protestant Responses to Mental Illness*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Notes

- 1 Editor's note: For a discussion of the medical ministries of clergy in the colonial era and early United States, see Vacek (2015). For mention of post-Civil War clergy working other jobs, see Holifield (2007, 149–53).
- 2 In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a commissioned ruling elder is an ordained lay person with leadership and other responsibilities who has not had the three years of seminary education required of teaching elders but has taken sufficient coursework to administer the sacraments.