

# *Pitching Our Tent with Bivocational Ministry*

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**W**ithin a few months of graduating from seminary, I was called to a pastorate. Both the congregation and I knew it was going to be short-term, and we acknowledged it from the start. We agreed that, while I served with them, they would continue to look for a permanent pastor, and I would look for a church where I could stay longer. Staying longer with them was unsustainable for me. The commute was two hours each way, my husband and I had three young children at home, and I had just agreed to teach an evening course at a college near where we lived. The congregation was three years old and worshiped in a storefront located in a strip mall. For an hour or so each Sunday morning, the storefront housed approximately twenty worshippers and, on Wednesday evenings, a slightly smaller group for adult Bible study and congregational meetings. It was a great fit while it lasted. The congregation was short on financial resources, but they had enough to cover the storefront and

a monthly stipend for me, as well as some funds to support those in need and the occasional creative mission effort. With a working spouse whose job provided adequate income and health insurance to support our family, I was able to accept what the congregation could afford.

That year-long experience with the United Church of the Cumberlandlands in Somerset, Kentucky, provided a glimpse of vitality that did not fit with my expectations. The congregation's statistics would not catch anyone's attention: small membership, small budget, and short-term pastorate. Yet a positive sense of gratitude and discipleship permeated the congregation. Almost every church member came to worship every Sunday (except for a couple "snowbirds"), and after Sunday worship, the whole congregation ate lunch together at a restaurant down the road (we gave them a "heads up" when we were coming) or in the food court of the nearby shopping mall. They worked on church activities together and communicated with each other during the week. As I came to know this group of Christians, I grew to admire their commitment and positive energy. Some weeks I did not even mind the long commute home on Wednesday night; it was 1997, and the Hale-Bopp comet was high in the night sky. When I was called to a ministry position closer to home, it was bittersweet. The church found their next pastor through the same informal fashion they found me. That pastor was able to stay with them for many years, having additional employment and health insurance. When the congregation closed a number of years later, they had given it all they had. Their members dispersed, and they gave away their material goods, sending items such as hymnals and communion ware to ministers and congregations they knew. Now, as I look back nearly twenty-five years later, I remember that ministry as a late twentieth-century version of what the apostle Paul called *koinonia*.

The goal of this chapter is to share several stories of bivocational ministry from research at Lexington Theological Seminary, much of it resonating with my experience with the United Church in the Cumberlandlands. Expanding the storehouse of strong stories connected to bivocational ministry aids in understanding the diverse experiences within bivocational ministry and congregational ministry at large. In this chapter, we also will step back in time and explore the biblical narrative of the tentmaking ministry of the Apostle Paul and its connections to bivocational ministry of the twenty-first century. These expanded narratives point toward better ways to support and provide resources for those engaged in bivocational ministry, con-

tributing to a better understanding of this model of congregational ministry.

## *Context of Church in North America*

It is increasingly clear that a significant number of churches in North America are led by ministers who hold employment outside the congregations they serve. This has long been the case for many Protestant congregations, especially those in rural geographic areas, as well as for African American, Hispanic/Latinx, immigrant, and refugee communities. It also has been a strategy for planting new churches in a variety of contexts. According to the National Congregations Study, which contacted a representative cross-section of more than 3500 congregations in the United States, roughly one-third of congregations have lead ministers who also hold another job: 37% in the 2006–2007 survey; 34.3% in 2012; and 35% in 2018–2019 (Chaves et al. 2020, 22). The current awareness of the reality of bivocational ministry is also expressed in the vocational expectations of theological school graduates. Responses to the Graduating Student Questionnaire of the Association of Theological Schools show that 30% of graduates from theological schools in the United States and Canada in 2017 expected to hold another paid position in addition to ministerial work after graduation, with higher percentages among African American (57%) and Hispanic/Latinx (41%) graduates (Deasy 2018, 65–66). The vocational expectations of theological students related to bivocational ministry are providing insight to leaders of theological schools as they consider how theological education can best equip and prepare students for bivocational ministry (78).

The number of ministers earning supplemental income outside a congregation is increasing as churches face economic challenges. Because bivocational arrangements supplement what a congregation pays, it contributes to financial stability. This appeals to many congregations, especially those with smaller membership (an average of less than fifty in weekly worship) struggling to adequately compensate their ministers. While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding, it appears to add to the challenges. When most congregations in the United States ceased in-person worship in mid-March 2020 and the majority (86%) moved their worship online, financial contributions were negatively impacted, since most congregational

giving comes through individuals during a worship service (Lake Institute 2020, 3). The Lake Institute's COVID-19 Congregational Study indicates that the pandemic hit smaller congregations particularly hard: 30% reported they had to reduce personnel expenses during the pandemic (more than twice the overall rate of the congregations in the study). This study found that, "with little access to PPP [Pay-check Protection Program] funds and already leaner budgets, clergy in smaller congregations were most likely to feel the direct financial effects of the pandemic" (Lake Institute 2020, 5). In this, the pandemic magnified existing challenges facing smaller congregations, which make up the majority of all congregations (Chaves and Eagle 2015, 5–8). The pandemic exacerbated an already existing resource gap for smaller congregations, impacting their potential for vital ministry and their capacity to compensate ministers. Many of these smaller congregations are led by bivocational pastors.

### *Research with Bivocational Ministers*

The research project at Lexington Theological Seminary focused on Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) ministers serving congregations in Kentucky. We surveyed 110 ministers (44 of whom were bivocational ministers) in 2015 and interviewed 13 solo bivocational ministers and 20 lay leaders in congregations they served (in 2016–2018).<sup>1</sup> In that inquiry, we learned through the experiences of bivocational ministry.

Early in that research, bivocational ministers expressed the nagging feeling that their work was valued "less than" other forms of ministry. Conversations with them helped the research project's advisory team perceive how much bivocational ministry has been peripheral to the understanding of ministry, despite its long and honored history, reaching back to the Apostle Paul and his co-workers. They began to realize more fully how their understanding of ministry had relied on a sense of ministers as the pastor/professional "who can do it all" and as being seminary-educated and ordained, then employed, with full benefits, by congregations as their sole employers. Although many ministers were left out of that description, it has functioned as the primary way of thinking and speaking about ministry within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and other mainline Protestant denominations in North America for some

time. Mark Edington (2018, 3–7) described this as the “Standard Model” and explained how much of what we understand related to the church, ministry, and congregational leadership—and the underlying economic arrangements—has been designed around this model of ministry. However, that model of ministry does not fit with the diverse needs of congregational ministry.

Thankfully, there is more to the story of ministry than that one model alone; congregations in various contexts rely on different models to pursue vital ministry and support those who lead them. It is dangerous, warned novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), to rely on a single story to understand people and places. She stated, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.” Recognizing many stories of ministry, alongside one that has become dominant and standardized, resists the tendency to submerge distinctive differences, and leads to understanding all forms of ministry more fully.

In our research, we encountered diverse experiences. Several themes emerged from the interviews:

- bivocational ministry contributes to financial stability for the pastor and congregation;
- calls to bivocational ministry are often in response to a congregation’s needs and financial limitations;
- individuals frequently become bivocational ministers after they are already employed elsewhere;
- bivocational ministers often pursue theological education and training for pastoral leadership after they are already serving congregations;
- because bivocational ministers are not dependent on congregations for their livelihood, their financial independence realigns the minister-congregation relationship; and
- shared ministry (where lay leadership partners with pastors) is key to successful bivocational ministry.

These themes contribute to a more expansive description of bivocational ministry and the diversity of experiences within it. We learned from pastors who described their experience in various ways. Some

celebrated that bivocational ministry brought financial independence that empowered them to teach and preach more prophetically. Some explained how working outside the congregation helped them better understand the “everyday world” in which their congregations’ members live. Others expressed their sense of being overwhelmed by challenges facing the congregation and demands on their time (in both workplaces). One stated, “The biggest thing is that I find myself, over the long haul, being mentally exhausted at times, and that mental exhaustion can lead to spiritual exhaustion . . . It all hinges on how tired I am, how long I can continue to go without real rest.” The similarities and differences noted in these conversations reflect the importance of learning from those involved in bivocational ministry. Diverse congregational contexts and employment arrangements of pastors lead to different experiences and interpretations of bivocational ministry. To paraphrase an insight about human personality, each bivocational ministry arrangement is, in certain respects, like all others, like some others, and like no other (Kluckhohn and Murray 1948, 35; Lartey 2003, 34). There are no “one size fits all” descriptions of bivocational ministry.

### *The Story of Paul's Ministry*

Often, when the topic turns to bivocational ministry, the apostle Paul is cited as evidence of a biblical model present in the earliest times of the church. Paul’s centrality is reflected in the use of “tentmaking” as a term for certain styles of bivocational ministry (Ferris 2001, 81; Francis and Francis 1998, xv). According to Acts 18:3, Paul supported himself as a tentmaker or leather worker while he ministered in Corinth, and, in Acts 20:34, Paul is quoted as stating he worked with his own hands to support himself and his companions. Paul confirmed this practice himself when he wrote to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 9:3–18), and he referred again to a practice of supporting himself and others when ministering at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:9) and at Ephesus (1 Cor. 4:12).

Paul’s letters provide information about his practice in addition to other ways that teachers, preachers, and missionaries were supported in the earliest times of the church. Four patterns of support emerged at that time, sometimes used in combination: payment from the church to those who preached and taught there, gifts given by the

church to those working in the broader mission, lodging and meals provided by church members, and voluntary labor of some evangelists to support themselves. In working to support himself while teaching and preaching, Paul preferred one strategy while other church teachers, preachers, and missionaries adopted other strategies. These strategies also reflected those widely debated by Hellenistic philosophers and teachers at that time, such as charging fees, entering the household of a wealthy patron, begging, and working (Hock 1980, 52–59). One of the reasons given by philosophers who favored working to support themselves was the way it empowered their independence to speak and think freely. The vigorous patronage system present at that time was understood to undermine the freedom of thought and speech for these philosophers.

Paul gave several reasons he and other companions supported themselves through their labor. The reasons included: not being a burden to those to whom they preached (1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 9:18; 2 Cor. 11:9, 12:13–15); the furthering of the gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 9:12b); his right to relinquish privilege (1 Cor. 9:15); avoiding indebtedness to the church (2 Cor. 12:14b); and serving as an example to the church (1 Cor. 11:1).

His work also provided opportunities to further his evangelistic mission. Although he did not describe it explicitly in scripture, as a tradesperson, Paul would have encountered a variety of people on a regular basis. In Corinth, for example, work such as Paul's took place in shops near the agora, where people of various walks of life gathered and shopped. Archeological work has revealed that, during the time Paul was in Corinth, a series of small shops were located around a central square. Working in one of those shops, with proximity to the agora, ample workspaces, as well as numerous windows and doorways, Paul had access and opportunity to interact with co-workers, clients, and municipal officials, as well as with the crowds of people passing by in the streets (Murphy-O'Connor 1983, 175–78). It is likely Paul followed well-established patterns of Hellenistic philosophers (such as Stoics and Cynics) by using public buildings and workshops of the marketplace for teaching. Paul certainly would have used his workplace as a setting for teaching and preaching to further the gospel, just as he did in local synagogues and in houses throughout his missionary journeys (Hock 1980, 37–42).

While people in the present time look back on Paul's practice with general approval, his practice at the time was controversial, at least in Corinth. His vigorous arguments in 1 Corinthians 9:1–18 and 2

Corinthians 11:5–15 reveal that working to support himself instead of accepting economic support from the church in Corinth was opposed by some in the church. Opponents impugned Paul’s apostolic authority because he did not accept their support (as others had); they implied Paul’s ministry was “less than” those who accepted pay. However, Paul claimed his hard work as validation of his apostleship (1 Cor. 9:1–14). In response to opponents, he put forth his willingness to lower his social status through manual labor for their benefit as an example of the way God works through weakness (2 Cor. 11:7). Paul reinterpreted the perception present in the surrounding Hellenistic culture—that by working with his hands Paul lowered his social status (and perhaps that of the church in Corinth) in an inappropriate way (Bassler 1991, 70–73).

While Paul continued a strong defense of his practice as furthering the gospel in Corinth, he also asserted the right of ministers to be paid for their work (1 Cor. 9:3–18). Paul was aware his model of self-support through labor was one of many models of economic support necessary in the gospel movement at work in diverse contexts. His own practice was not identical in every context. While refusing financial support from the church in Corinth, he accepted it from the Philippians (Phil. 4:15–18). It is not surprising that, in connection with financial support for ministry, Paul found that “what seemed appropriate to the gospel in one setting was not acceptable in another” (Sumney 2014, 170). His acceptance of support from the Philippians and refusal from the Corinthians reveals the complexity of economic relationships—then and now.

### *Contemporary Narratives of Bivocational Ministry*

Much has changed since Paul’s time and place, when various models for financial support for those teaching and preaching in the church were still emerging. In the present time, churches have primarily adopted the strategy of paying ministers who teach, preach, and serve. The model of bivocational ministry is re-emerging as a significant part of the larger conversation about strategies for financial support of ministers who are working in the church or as missionaries. In this re-emergence, bivocational ministry is interpreted in various ways.



In interviews conducted in the research project at Lexington Theological Seminary, three primary narratives emerged as ministers and lay leaders described the way bivocational ministry related to the economic challenges they experienced. They all perceived that “being bivocational” contributed to financial stability, but they interpreted it in different, sometimes overlapping, ways. Some spoke of bivocational ministry primarily as a “sign of the times”—a response to increasing economic challenges that ministers and congregations are facing in the present. Others focused on its missional potential, pointing to its more sustainable use of congregational resources and its natural connection to the wider world; they described it as being on the “cutting edge” of ministry. Others still, such as those in rural contexts, or in African American and Hispanic/Latinx communities, with a long experience with bivocational ministry and economic challenges, said, “It’s the way we’ve always done it.” These narratives were not mutually exclusive; in some congregations, they coexisted as the pastors and lay leaders interpreted what was working well as well as what was challenging in their contexts.

### *The “Sign of the Times” Narrative*

Some pastors and lay leaders interpreted the financial stability related to bivocational ministry primarily as response to the financial challenge and congregational decline they experienced—a “sign of the times.” They understood bivocational ministry to have some benefits but pursued bivocational ministry largely due to a sense of scarcity in their context. Guided by this interpretation, some congregations called a bivocational minister for the first time because of budgetary concerns, or their current minister had to find supplemental income through other employment because the congregation could not provide sufficient compensation. In such cases, they hoped for financial relief but had not yet realigned their way of ministry or their pastoral expectations. Bivocational ministry had extended them a lifeline, but they remained less hopeful about potential for vital ministry.

Lay leaders of one congregation in particular spoke of bivocational ministry primarily with this “sign of the times” narrative. The historically European American congregation, founded in 1829, owned a well-maintained, brick church building on the Main Street of a small town in central Kentucky. The town’s population, now less than 900,

had declined over the past decades, with many young families relocating to larger towns nearby. The pastor and congregational leaders of this congregation reported they had a good relationship; they had learned to share the work of ministry well during the minister's tenure of more than ten years. This was the pastor's first experience with bivocational ministry; he had shifted to it after several years of "trying the full-time route." It was a move that made sense to him over time, and he has not regretted it. For him, the most challenging aspect of serving this congregation is the 40-minute commute from a town where he lives and works as a teacher. He is not this congregation's first bivocational minister. However, he is the first one to commute instead of living in the parsonage near the church. Having a pastor not living in the parsonage required lay people to learn to take care of issues related to the building they had previously left to the minister. The change also freed space in the parsonage, which the congregation began renting at that point.

Both the minister and lay leaders were concerned about the congregation's future. They were concerned with the church's small size (30 people in worship on a "good" Sunday) and advanced age of the membership. The church membership had declined gradually over the previous 40 years, reflecting the declining population of their town. While grandchildren came to worship with their grandparents on some weekends, the youngest member of the church was 45 years old. The congregation was careful with its finances, but lay leaders lamented the increasing costs of "keeping the doors open and the lights on" in their aging church building, and they wished they could pay their pastor more. The pastor was satisfied with what the congregation paid but wondered about the challenge of finding the next pastor when the time came. Leaders anticipated the congregation would look for a bivocational minister again, being all they could afford. They had some investment funds and had discussed (before calling this minister) using those funds to support a minister who could work "full-time" and "perhaps help the church grow." However, they decided that was unsustainable. The church's annual budget included support for the minister, a custodian, and both an organist and pianist. They gave 14% of their annual budget to various non-profit missions and gave faithfully to denominational funds. Years earlier, they had needed help with significant repairs to their church building after a natural disaster, and denominational funding had saved the day. They continued to be grateful for that support and wanted to repay the generosity shown to them.

As this congregation thought about the future, they were anxious. They had tried educational programs to strengthen their understanding and practice of evangelism. However, four other Protestant churches were located in their small town, with three of them struggling to make ends meet. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the congregation suspended in-person worship. As an alternative, lay leaders and the minister expended a great deal of energy to record videos for worship at home. The recordings were made available on the church's YouTube channel and posted to the church's Facebook page. They returned to in-person worship in their building in the spring of 2021 and were experiencing declined giving and participation. While grateful for the financial advantages of bivocational ministry, they were not hopeful about how to sustain themselves as a congregation in the future.

### *The "Cutting Edge" Narrative*

Some pastors and lay leaders spoke of bivocational ministry as offering a unique chance for transformation, for financial stability, and for missional advantage. Some were part of new congregations which have intentionally called a bivocational minister as a strategy to "jump start" their new church and help them connect with the surrounding community. However, not all who understand bivocational arrangements this way are new churches; some are established churches that have caught a vision of new life. They see how realigning financial priorities can reinvigorate the mission and ministry of their congregation and connect them more fully with their community.

One bivocational minister who spoke of bivocational ministry as the "cutting edge" of ministry for the future was a female minister leading a church she helped establish in Louisville, Kentucky. She attributed much of the success of the church's accomplishments to the financial and missional advantages of bivocational ministry. This predominantly African American congregation was less than seven years old. They first began meeting in an office building and then relocated when they began nesting in the building owned by an established congregation, which was predominantly European American. While the two congregations worshiped separately on most Sundays, access was shared to all parts of the building, including kitchen and office space. Over time, members and ministers of the two congre-

gations became more acquainted and combined worship and other activities on occasion. When the pastor of the established church retired, the bivocational new church pastor stepped in to help provide pastoral care for that congregation in the interim period.

This minister received very little financial support from the congregation she pastored; her employment outside the church made up the bulk of her income. She was a small business owner and also employed by the metro city government when the church first started. Later she retired from the job with metro city and continued as a small business owner. As the financial stability of the church increased, the congregation began providing her a housing allowance and contributing to her retirement funds. This minister, who actively participates in denominational activities, has found helpful support for the congregation. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was able to identify grant funding that enabled the church to purchase needed equipment for recording and broadcasting worship services when they suspended in-person worship services.

Lay leadership was very important in this congregation from its very beginning. Church members trained to serve in significant leadership roles and partnered with the pastor in planning and leading worship as well as leading other dimensions of the church's ministry. The church sponsored a social enterprise where many church members volunteered to develop community partnerships and host community programs to help people in their neighborhood. Their work included providing a food pantry, helping people with utility bills, and assisting with workplace development. A large part of the church's identity and mission is related to this community-based ministry, and much of the church's financial resources are used for its support. It is an investment of finances and energy enabled through the model of bivocational ministry the church employs.

### *The "We've Always Done It This Way" Narrative*

Some pastors and lay leaders explained they have been involved in bivocational ministry for decades, some for as long as they can remember. They spoke of it as "the way we've always done ministry" instead of as a sign of decline or enabling new opportunities. Many of these congregations are located in under-resourced contexts with a history of financial distress, due to lower population density, economic and population decline, or marginalization that has sup-

pressed their capacity to call and compensate ministers. They have practiced bivocational ministry as a strategy of financial support for ministry that reduces the burden upon congregations and some also see it as a way their pastors share the financial burdens. In response to their context, these congregations developed traditional practices of nurturing, supporting, and honoring their pastoral leaders. These traditions include making “love gifts” at different times of the year, honoring pastors with well-established “Pastor Appreciation” programs, and identifying gifts for ministry within their congregation. Sometimes this led to individuals becoming pastors in communities and congregations where they were baptized and “raised in the faith.” Some practices emerged from intertwined connections of congregations and their surrounding context—a mutual benefit of pastors’ extended, long-term relationships within the community and to their church ministry and employment experiences outside the church.

The “we’ve always done it this way” narrative was reflected clearly in an historically African American congregation located in western Kentucky. The congregation was founded in 1898. They own a building located on a side street in a town with a population of approximately 10,000 people. They have been led by the same male bivocational minister for most of the previous twenty years. He was called into congregational ministry while employed as a radiation worker and mechanic for a government corporation in the area. He liked to say that God called him into the ministry later in life, as a so-called “second career” minister, because “the church needed a mechanic to fix some things.” As all tend to do, he learned how to be a pastor while pastoring; he also engaged in continuing pastoral education offered over a span of time while serving the congregation. This education led him to become a commissioned minister. He took this route of theological education and training rather than going to seminary and becoming ordained; it fit with the congregation’s needs and permitted him to serve the church while also retaining his employment.

A similar pattern emerged with the person who became assistant pastor and was being nurtured to become the next lead pastor (when the current one retires). This younger man was being mentored by the pastor and the congregation at large while he was also employed in the local public school system, first as a teacher and later as a principal. The congregation had known him since he was baptized there as a twelve-year-old. These two men worked well together, balancing their work at the church to provide time for each one to adjust their

schedules when needed due to other responsibilities related to employment outside the congregation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this congregation struggled like others. The decision was made to enable online giving so members could contribute more readily when in-person worship was suspended for a period. The congregation also began broadcasting worship services via Facebook Live, led by a core group of worship leaders and musicians. They continued both practices after resuming in-person worship. Contributions and participation remained steady, and the live streaming of worship services continued after the congregation resumed worship in the church building.

The pastor of this congregation looked back on his experience and explained that the income and benefits provided through his and his associate's bivocational arrangements had enabled this congregation to maintain committed leadership. He believed it had allowed him to continue a long-term pastorate in this congregation through serious challenges and financial distress impacting the community he serves. He recounted periods of time when the congregation could not afford to pay him anything at all. In this context, "being bivocational" contributed to financial stability for both the pastor and the congregation, even though it had not solved all financial woes. Meanwhile, it contributed to the development of sustainable leadership development practices that fit with the bivocational arrangement in that congregation and strengthened the ministry there.

## *Making the Most of Bivocational Ministry*

Some congregations found ways to make the most of having a pastor who also is employed outside the congregation, even alongside financial challenges. These congregations found ways to experience financial stability, shared ministry, and a sense of hope for the future despite uncertainty.

An historically European American congregation in rural Montgomery County, Kentucky, provided one example of thriving bivocational ministry. Founded in 1829, just down the road from where they meet, this church claims a well-known nineteenth-century circuit rider in the Stone Campbell tradition, "Raccoon" John Smith, as its founding minister. Its approximately 100-year-old white clapboard building sits at an intersection and is well cared for by lay leaders

and a sexton (the only paid employee of the church other than the minister). Through the years, the pulpit has been filled by circuit riders, seminary students, ministers who were called “full-time,” as well as those who were bivocational. This church is not facing financial challenges as many others do. They have a financial reserve due to a generous bequest made decades earlier, designated to pay the pastor. This financial reserve allows them to pay their pastors well enough that pastors often do not seek other employment income. Their pastor was well-educated and had earned both Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees. He came to this church after serving many years in a nearby city where he had pastored a congregation without holding any other steady employment.

In this rural congregation, to hear the minister and the lay leaders of the congregation speak about it, bivocational ministry was the best of all possible worlds. They all were aware that having an available financial reserve designated to compensate pastors was helpful to their congregation. The key to making bivocational ministry pleasurable in this congregation, according to the pastor, was the collaborative leadership he has with the congregations. He attributes some of this to having well-defined boundaries and expectations. For him, the shared ministry leadership in the congregation embodied the “priesthood of all believers.” In this sharing of ministry, he encountered freedom to be creative and to attend to the central things that ministers need to do, such as preaching, teaching, providing pastoral care, and leading worship. He praised the good stewardship of financial resources in this congregation and the way they lived within their means. Regarding his own experience being bivocational, this pastor said flexibility is helpful. He said that it does not hurt for a pastor to have a “large talent stack” that allows flexibility. For instance, he could fill in at the piano when needed. He also pointed to the flexibility of his work as a potter and musician that permits him to adjust his work schedule when important needs emerge for the congregation, such as funerals. The lay leaders also expressed appreciation for the way their pastor saw their gifts for ministry and helped them “better understand the needs of the community” through his work outside the congregation.

Before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the congregation discussed making some building improvements, which they decided they did not need to do. The decision was providential; it allowed them to navigate the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic without significant financial challenges. They made other adjustments during

the pandemic. When they discontinued worshiping in their church building for a time, they shifted worship to Facebook Live. The pastor offered a conversational-style message on Sundays, accompanied by music, prayer, and communion. They were first offered from his home, then later from the sanctuary, and this was received well. When the congregation returned to their traditional, in-person worship in the church building on Sundays at 11:00 a.m., they changed the time of the Facebook Live worship to 9:00 a.m. on Sunday, retaining its conversational-style message. While the Facebook Live crowd grew smaller than it had been months earlier, the in-person crowd increased slightly. Both pastor and congregation are satisfied with having these two different worship opportunities on Sundays. It seemed to be reaching people and was sustainable for them.

### *Living with Bivocational Ministry*

The interviews with pastors and lay leaders affirmed the value of bivocational ministry. In contrast to seeing it as a model that is “less than” others, they experience it as having unique benefits. It contributes to financial stability for pastors and congregations and provides opportunities for missional advantage. It helps reframe the pastor-congregation relationship in ways that support strong shared ministry and resist the temptation “to think of ministry as only the job of the minister” (Bentley 2019b, 2). It serves as a strategy of financial support for ministry needed by congregations that cannot adequately compensate pastors on their own. Despite many of these congregations serving in communities and contexts at the periphery of a larger and “standard” story of ministry, they engage in vital ministry that impacts the lives of individuals and communities on a daily basis. When stories of success and vitality related to bivocational ministry are highlighted, we resist the tendency to associate it primarily with decline and a scarcity of resources (a “sign of the times” narrative).

The survey of ministers and interviews with pastors and lay leaders involved with bivocational ministry revealed benefits and drawbacks. While they appreciated the financial stability and connections to the community of bivocational arrangements, they also noted that ministers had less time to devote to the congregations, to household members, and to the replenishing of their own energy. The minis-



ters would benefit from support and resources. They also benefit from congregation members who appreciate as fully as possible the challenges ministers face trying to meet expectations at both the church and other places of work.

Bivocational ministry does involve challenges, and, because of these challenges, many may fear its growing presence. Yet its growth also provides opportunities for leadership. As Jessica Young Brown (2019) stated, “if we prepare for a future with more bivocational ministers, we can equip both ministers and congregations to thrive in it.” Taking this step requires truly making a commitment to bivocational ministry, “pitching tent” with this model, to use a biblical phrase, and investing in it as a strategy of financial support for ministry. We already know it is a strategy that missionaries have used for centuries, and it helps address needs of congregational ministry in diverse contexts and communities, just as in the earliest days of the church. This investment includes recognizing its significant presence, acknowledging its challenges, and equipping ministers for success. It would lead to strengthened vitality for many of these congregations still lodged in fear of decline.

The signs of vitality are already present, but they are different from those that have been used as benchmarks in the past, such as the number of people in worship or even church membership. Instead, they testify to the unique qualities of diverse bivocational congregational contexts. In relation to vitality in rural congregations, Allen Stanton (2021, 32) stated that, because congregations and communities are “complex and divergent, they require indicators that foster vitality at the local level, respecting both the deeply relational aspects and the necessity of fostering and living out a shared vision.” The same can be said of congregations led by bivocational ministers, many of which are rural: their contexts are tremendously complex and diverse, as we have heard from the various narratives. Perceiving and measuring vitality from a position that understands the realities of bivocational ministry helps move us away from narratives dominated by fears of decline and scarcity.

## *The Hope of Bivocational Ministry*

When the Apostle Paul sat with co-workers, whether as a tradesperson or as church leader, he knew he was but one part of a wider mission in

the world. His collaborative work involved numerous co-workers coordinated across a wide geographic area. He was not a “lone ranger” in ministry, by any means. He frequently referred to a shared ministry or partnership (*koinonia*) in his letter to the Philippians. The gifts they shared with him and the broader mission in which he was engaged were “part of a much larger pattern of reciprocity that embrace[d] Paul, the gospel, and God” (Bassler 77–78). Bivocational ministers and the congregations they serve in the twenty-first century continue to thrive when participating in such patterns of reciprocity.

Today, bivocational arrangements like Paul’s provide financial support to congregational ministry in a myriad of contexts. Congregations led by bivocational ministers are engaged in vital ministry along rural intersections, on Main Street in small towns, nested in established urban congregations, and in the storefronts of strip malls. Being bivocational allows many pastors to serve congregations that otherwise could not afford to support them in the work they have been called to do. The ministry of these pastors and congregations furthers the gospel and provides hope for communities as part of the wider mission of the church in the world. Equipping these pastors for the challenges they experience and supporting bivocational ministry as a viable model of financial support for ministry is a good strategy to strengthen ministry in the twenty-first century.

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## Notes

- 1 The research project included a 2015 survey and semi-structured interviews in 2016–2018. The survey had a 60% response rate. In total, 110 ordained, commissioned, or licensed ministers serving Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations in Kentucky responded. Of these, forty-four identified themselves as bivocational ministers. In 2016–2018, semi-structured interviews were held with thirteen bivocational solo pastors and twenty lay leaders in congregations they served. The survey was a quantitative study supported with qualitative responses and provided insight regarding ministers' education, ordination status, compensation and income, the positions and types of congregations in which they serve, the congregations' stewardship practices, and their economic challenges. The interviews shed light on the experience of solo pastors and lay leaders within their congregations. Additional information about this research project can be found in Bentley (2019a).

