

# *Exploring Distributive Ministry*

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**C**hange. The mere mention of the word seems to spawn coalitions of resistance in the local church. Churches typically do not choose to talk about change until a catalyst sparks a conversation. As I write, the pernicious spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 has become the predominant external catalyst forcing congregations to change their perceptions of what church is and how it should be conducted. The pandemic has rendered churches' previous practices and structures ineffective. Change, however, is what transition to bivocational ministry requires: something must be altered, and something must be lost, so a new thing can be created. Becoming a bivocational congregation is now a change more churches are willing to consider.

The pandemic created a forced-choice environment in which congregations had to reimagine church. Critical questions, such as "What is church?" and "What is church for?" needed thoughtful re-

sponses. Thankfully, many churches learned to pivot and launched innovative ministry practices during the pandemic. Congregations considering how to function in partnership with bivocational pastors have an opportunity to change their current ministry configurations and imagine how non-ordained followers of Christ participate in bivocational congregations.

For these churches, the shift to bivocational ministry includes a shared-ministry framework I call *distributive ministry*. Distributive ministry employs a team approach to leadership in which all persons in the congregation function as ministers. In this radical form of congregational life and ministry, the pastor and congregation flatten the hierarchy that elevates clergy over laity. In distributive ministry as normative practice, the church becomes a bivocational congregation, an egalitarian community in which the ordained and the non-ordained share pastoral responsibilities. Through corporate and collaborative discernment, ministers divide pastoral responsibilities according to their gifts and graces.

## *Conceptualizing Distributive Ministry*

Before beginning an exploration of distributive ministry, it may be helpful to clarify what distributive ministry is not. The current pandemic thrust “the distributed church” into common parlance. The distributed church refers to the forced distribution of the gathered church community. Distributed church attenders congregate via technology. These churches often emphasize equipping and sending congregants to bear witness to Christ wherever they are situated geographically (Briggs 2020). In contrast to distributed churches, which frequently function under a single-pastor model of leadership, distributive ministry features an egalitarian model of multiple ministry leaders.

My distributive ministry model is a radical return to the ancient priesthood of believers doctrine. The increasing online prevalence of the terms “bivocational pastor,” “bivocational congregation,” and “distributive leadership” indicates the need for thoughtful consideration of new shared-leadership models of ministry, such as distributive ministry. I derive my understanding of distributive ministry from four schools of thought: (1) the priesthood of all believers from both scripture and Martin Luther’s articulation of the universal

priesthood of all believers, (2) missional ecclesiology as articulated by Lesslie Newbigin and others; (3) distributive leadership theory, and (4) the distributed pastorate model of Jeffrey MacDonald.

Distributive ministry begins with a biblical examination of the priesthood of all believers. A passage from 1 Peter, “like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5, NRSV), offers strong affirmation of distributive ministry. The passage enjoins believers to build themselves up as the living stones that constitute God’s dwelling—a “house”—which is a common reference to the temple in both testaments (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Kings 3:2; Matt. 21:13; John 2:16–17; Acts 7:47). The passage also establishes Christians as God’s new priesthood charged with offering spiritual sacrifices. I agree with Schreiner’s interpretation of holy priesthood. He stated, “The focus here is on the church corporately as God’s set-apart priesthood in which the emphasis is likely on believers functioning as priests. . . . All of God’s people are now his priests” (Schreiner 2003, 106). The New Testament mentions nothing of reestablishing the type of separate priesthood that existed in Judaism.

Martin Luther’s articulation of the universal priesthood provides further validation of distributive ministry as a viable model. During the Reformation, Luther articulated a robust understanding of vocation and emphasized the universal priesthood of all believers. Nessian (2019, 12) noted, “At the time of the Reformation, the universal priesthood was a radical claim about the equal status of all believers before God based on baptism. It was designed to overcome the dependency of the laity on the ministrations of a clerical hierarchy.” Baptism was the ministry equalizer for Luther. He believed Christians should live out their baptismal vocation in three arenas: home, state, and church. Nessian expanded Luther’s description, adding work as a fourth arena (11).

Revivifying the practice of the universal priesthood remains relevant for the twenty-first century North American church. Nessian declared,

Luther’s affirmation of the universal priesthood largely has remained an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation, insofar as, the churches themselves have perpetuated their own forms of ecclesial *incurvatus in se* and defended a clerical hierarchy instead of focusing their efforts on equipping the baptized for ministry in all arenas of daily life (Eph. 4:11–16). (Nessian 2019, 14)

The priesthood of all believers as articulated in scripture and explicated by Luther support distributive ministry as a normative practice of the *ecclesia*.

Missional church literature, particularly Lesslie Newbigin's provocative articulation of missionary ecclesiology, is my second major influence. Newbigin's comprehensive exposition of ecclesiology highlights the importance of educating congregations about the church's identity. He emphasized equally the church as the gathered community and the scattered community. Newbigin affirmed the formative aspects of communal life together as the gathered community. He emphasized the church's role in helping Christians learn how to be the new humanity resulting from salvation through Jesus Christ. Living into that new reality causes the church to be a distinct community. In *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, Newbigin noted, "The most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order. [When a congregation] understands its true character as a holy priesthood for the sake of the world . . . then there is a point of growth for the new social order" (quoted in Goheen 2018, 78–79).

The scattered community refers to congregants' practice of their vocation in the world. Newbigin noted various ways Christians can bear witness to the gospel revealed through Jesus Christ. Goheen (2018, 78) stated Newbigin's points of special emphasis for the church that feature lay participation in ministry: "The distinctive life of the community, the calling of the laity, deeds of mercy and justice, evangelism, and missions to places where the gospel was not known." Newbigin reaffirmed Luther's emphasis on baptismal vocation that commissions all Christians to engage in ministry through their various callings. In "Our Task Today," Newbigin said, "The enormous preponderance of the Church's witness is the witness of the thousands of its members who work in field, home, office, mill, or law court" (quoted in Goheen 2018, 83). Newbigin clearly stated the ministry charge to Christians. In *Unfinished Agenda*, he wrote, "The entire membership of the Church in their secular occupations are called to be signs of his lordship in every area of life" (quoted in Goheen 2018, 83).

Missional church scholars and practitioners like David Bosch, Darrell L. Guder, Alan J. Roxburgh, Allen Hirsch, Ed Stetzer, Reggie McNeal, Elaine Heath, Michael Goheen, and others build upon Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology and echo its common themes: God is a missional God, the church's primary task is to join God in God's mission, the church is a sent people, the church must engage Western

culture with the truth of the gospel, and the normality of lay participation in incarnational ministry in the community. Collectively, these themes outline a missional mandate to the church's corporate body to partner with God in God's mission in the world.

The abovementioned missional church writers regularly emphasize the importance of all Christians' participation in ministry rather than reliance on a separate class of ordained clergy as the primary ministry conduits. For example, Roxburgh declared,

Across the varieties of today's models of ministry, there remains this underlying notion of church leadership functioning as specialized professionals. . . . This view effectively eclipses the gifts for leadership in the non-ordained contingent of God's sent people, those known in Christendom as the laity. (Roxburgh 1988, 195)

Hirsch highlighted the virtues of lay participation in incarnational ministry. He stated, "By living incarnationallly . . . mission becomes something that 'fits' seamlessly into the ordinary rhythms of life, friendships, and community, and is thus thoroughly *contextualized*" (2016, 144, original emphasis). Newbigin's missional ecclesiology and current missional church literature highlight the missional mandate compelling all Christians to ministry.

My third major influence came from the articulation of distributive leadership in select higher education and business literature (Brown and Gioia 2002; Gronn 2002; Zepke 2007). Distributive leadership emphasizes a team approach to goal achievement rather than dependence on a single leader. This body of work provides clarity about the aim, the function, and the practice of distributive leadership. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced church operations to change, the literature on distributive leadership routinely notes the impetus of change strategies. When some environmental stimulus destabilizes the organization, community, or constituents, the stimulus acts as the initiator of a change strategy. The challenges of leading more frequently under unstable and unpredictable conditions underscores the need to explore more effective leadership practices during times of uncertainty.

My fourth influence is Jeffrey MacDonald's model of "the distributed pastorate," in which "clergy and laypeople divide up pastoral responsibilities according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit" (2020, 111). Distributing the pastorate—that is, pastoral responsibilities—first involves helping Christians identify their call and their gifts to spe-

cific ministry. Once identified, individuals are then prepared to fulfill their ministry responsibilities ethically and effectively.

## *Reorientation to a Distributive Ministry Model*

Congregations that have transitioned into bivocational congregations are positioned for reorientation to a distributive ministry model. The bivocational pastor's focus during reorientation is to nurture the gathered community as they discern their future. At this juncture, the congregation can begin to reimagine *ecclesia* by returning to questions like, "What is church?" and "What is church for?"

Distributive ministry should emerge from the corporate discernment of the gathered Christian community. As the gathered community discerns their future identity, bivocational pastors can encourage congregants to consider adopting a relational paradigm. To move toward this end, bivocational pastors and congregants can explore the priesthood of all believers and the doctrine of vocation together. These central teachings provide the foundation for all believers to respond to the call of God in all their relational spheres of life.

As the congregation becomes "a new humanity" that understands its character as the priesthood of all believers, bivocational pastors can invite members to discern how God wants them to fulfill their Christian vocation. Bivocational pastors can initiate simple conversations to encourage congregants to pray about and discuss specific ways they can live as faithful witnesses to Christ at home, work, the community, and the church.

Lay ministry initiatives can encourage congregants to move from discernment through prayer and conversations to action. For example, Charles Arn offered a user-friendly strategy to invite non-ordained believers into short-term ministry experiences in his book, *Side Door: How to Open Your Church to Reach More People*. Arn referred to these experiences as "side doors." A lay ministry initiative encourages non-ordained believers to create ministry experiences about which they are passionate. People's passions come from myriad sources, such as hobbies, like riding motorcycles, or life challenges, like being a recent widower. The point person forms a ministry team of people with similar passion who collaborate to design and launch four- to six-week ministry experiences. The ministry leaders strive to attract at least 25% of attenders who are non-Christians from the

community. “The goal of an effective side door is to provide a place in which participants (both church members and nonmembers) can develop friendships around important things that they share in common” (Arn 2013, 26).

When the ongoing formation of the gathered community creates a critical mass of Christians willing to live as the priesthood of all believers, bivocational pastors can invite the congregation into conversations about creating a distributive ministry model of leadership. Luther’s doctrine of vocation informs an understanding of the priesthood of all believers. His doctrine claims that “all Christians hear a call to the gospel and God’s Kingdom, and then to a station in life or profession” (Doriani 2016). This declaration indicates a two-tiered aspect of call. First, we are called to be Christians who follow God and promote God’s kingdom. Second, we are called to a particular station of work. In this regard, all honest work is sacred. The work of the pastor and the work of the mechanic, the stay-at-home parent, or the business manager are equally worthy. When Christians view all work as calling, they will no longer believe work outside of the church building is “secular” and discounted as ministry.

Bivocational pastors can facilitate these conversations by presenting distributive ministry as a two-tier configuration for consideration. All Christ-followers populate the first tier because, according to Luther’s doctrine of baptismal vocation, all believers are commissioned ministers. First-tier ministry consists of participation in the general ministry to which all Christ-followers are called, namely: (1) Christian discipleship, and (2) bearing witness to Christ in all arenas. Congregants, as the priesthood of all believers, respond to the call to live as Christian disciples who bear witness to Christ at home, work, the community, and the church. This is first-tier ministry.

More specialized ministry occurs in second-tier ministry. In this category, the bivocational ministry and congregants corporately discern their gifts and graces and divide pastoral responsibilities among them. The corporate body affirms tier-two ministers. Examples of specialized pastoral ministry include preaching, teaching, counseling, visitation, and so on.

## *Implementing Distributive Ministry*

A church cannot begin practicing distributive ministry without undergoing a culture change. In a distributive ministry model, the congregation of bivocational ministers collectively discerns how to distribute ministry among those with the demonstrated call and appropriate gifts and graces for the ministry responsibility. The bivocational minister functions in a supportive role. This designation represents a fundamental change from pastor as primary dispenser of religious services to supporting cast member (MacDonald 2020, 65). This change in the function of the pastor promotes a more egalitarian perception of ministry leadership.

Those called to specialized ministry undergo training to prepare them to serve knowledgeably and effectively. MacDonald urged democratization of theological education by training laypeople for effective ministry. I concur with him that ministerial training be required for all designated leaders of specialized, second-tier ministry. Such training could occur within the local church, at denominational certification education events, or through seminary classes and continuing education courses. Responsible administration of ministry responsibilities includes creation of a ministry training process and curriculum. I contend that non-seminary trained persons have the capacity to learn the theory and practice of ministry to enable them to serve as credible ministers.

Bivocational congregations can develop specialized training curricula for the ministry areas a bivocational minister leads. Instruction may be available through denominational resources or not-for-profit Christian organizations, like Stephen Ministries (Stephen Ministries St. Louis, n.d.). Bivocational congregations could form partnerships with other churches to develop training courses. In-house, bivocational congregations may discover persons gifted with abilities to provide specialized instruction. Non-clergy have an established track record of creating significant instructional resources for Christian service. Consider Catherine Marshall's study on *The Holy Spirit in The Helper* (2002), Dorothy Sayers's articles on work and vocation, such as "Why Work?" ([1942] 2020), or Amy Sherman's theological and practical presentation on vocational stewardship in *Kingdom Calling* (2011).

A distributive ministry model regards leadership as a team function. A major benefit of this model is sharing pastoral responsibilities



among a larger group of people with the gifts and graces to conduct ministry effectively. Pastors are generalists who have stronger abilities in certain areas of ministry. The intent of distributive ministry is to play to the strengths of each believer in the congregation. This model requires faith that God will provide persons with varying ministry gifts that complement those of the bivocational pastor within the local body of believers.

A distributive ministry within a bivocational church culture regards the bivocational pastor and the congregants as egalitarian partners in ministry. To symbolize this egalitarian relationship, I recommend the congregation refer to both clergy and laity as bivocational ministers. The aim of this naming convention is to eradicate the rhetoric that perpetuates the clergy/laity divide—a division that can imply that laity are ill-equipped and spiritually inferior to clergy in matters of ministry.

To ensure clarity of ministry roles and processes, I recommend local churches create a bivocational pastor agreement that specifies the pastoral and administrative responsibilities expected of the pastor by the congregation. Similarly, I recommend local churches create ministry covenants for each non-ordained bivocational minister engaged in specialized second-tier ministry. Additionally, I encourage congregations to create a covenant that outlines how the bivocational congregation will function. This should be a fluid process as the congregation will be learning and refining this definition as they live into this new experience.

There are many ways to employ distributive ministry within the church. By using the team approach to goal achievement, worship teams can be formed consisting of persons responsible for proclamation, music, liturgy, audiovisual technology, and logistics. The worship team can create a quarterly worship schedule with scripture and sermon themes at the center. The advanced notice provided by such a schedule enables the participants to do in-depth preparation for their area of responsibility.

To emphasize collaboration, a Christian education or formation team could work with the worship team to design a comprehensive Christian formation curriculum in which the worship content and Christian formation align. Ample worship, preaching, and music resources are available online. Two examples are [The Text This Week](#)—a curated website of lectionary, scripture study, worship links, and other related resources—and [Hymnary.org](#)—a comprehensive index of hymns and hymnals.

Similarly, teams responsible for external ministries, such as visitation, emergency response, mission, and other ministry areas can create response strategies to address emerging needs. Each team can monitor ministry effectiveness by incorporating an action-reflection review process. Periodically, teams can review the planning and execution of the ministry endeavor and address any problems. Embedding collaborative and action-reflection review processes into the distributive ministry model promotes ministry excellence and effectiveness.

### *Denominational Judicatory Concerns*

Internal organization of the distributive ministry model is not the only task of the bivocational congregation. In addition to the congregants and the bivocational pastor adopting a distributive ministry model, they will need to negotiate with the denominational hierarchy. Denominational judicatories may regard distributive ministry as heterodoxy. Denominational authorities may raise questions like the following: (1) “Who is responsible for corporate oversight of the congregation?” (2) “Who will administer the sacraments?” (3) “To whom do denominational judicatories relate for reporting and for supervising the congregation’s fidelity to denominational polity?”

These questions reflect honest concerns. I encourage bivocational congregations to regard such inquiries as opportunities for creative dialogue about how to be faithful witnesses to the gospel in our quickly changing environment. For example, I believe the distribution of the general oversight of congregational ministries is possible through a highly coordinated communication system among the bivocational ministers. Through technology, ministers can provide immediate feedback to the point persons in the ministry area and to the bivocational pastor. Congregations would need to develop instructional protocols to determine which persons need particular types of information. Likewise, administration of the sacraments can be worked out according to the expectations of the denominational polity. Often, a sanctioned clergy person from a sister church can administer the sacraments in the absence of an ordained clergy. While the bivocational pastor is the likely denominational point of contact, there could be flexibility for allowing the pastor to designate

proxies to attend denominational meetings. Ultimate responsibility to the denomination would still reside with the pastor.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the environment sufficiently to form new spaces for churches and denominations to rethink ministry practice. This liminal environment has created a great opportunity for the church community to dialogue about what distributive ministry could contribute. Denominations are also reconsidering their previously immutable positions on congregational practices. For example, in 2003, the administration of online communion by a pastor in the United Methodist Church sparked a heated debate and launched an episcopal study resulting in a moratorium on the practice. Sixteen years later, United Methodist episcopal leaders, confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, decided to relax the moratorium. One bishop declared “the COVID-19 pandemic a time of *In Extremis*’ (an extremely difficult situation)” (Brooks, n.d.).

There are many other conversations between bivocational congregations, pastors, and denominational leaders to be had. The priesthood of all believers, the doctrine of vocation, and contemporary endorsements of “every member in ministry” provide a solid foundation upon which to discuss the validity of the distributive ministry model in the local church.

## *Conclusions*

This chapter has articulated a clear path for congregational transformation through participation in distributive ministry. Initiating the discussion of distributive ministry presumes the following: (1) a critical mass of congregants self-identifies as the priesthood of all believers, (2) the congregation affirms the practice of bivocational ministry, and (3) the congregation regards the call of non-ordained believers as ministers as valid. These fundamental affirmations provide the environment needed to explore what distributive ministry is and how it affects ministry practice. Implementing distributive ministry in the local church facilitates transformation of the *ecclesia* in several significant ways, with associated challenges.

Distributive ministry promotes a compelling vision for all Christians to take an active part in ministry in all relational areas. It elevates laity from passive recipients of ministry goods and services to active, capable ministers. This approach dispels the clergy-laity

caste system that elevates ordained ministers over non-ordained laity. Distributing pastoral responsibilities among congregants qualified by call, ministry gifts, and proper training decentralizes clergy as the primary ministry conduits. Distributive ministry encourages congregations to build ministry teams of people whose strengths and gifts complement the pastor's strengths and gifts. This collaborative, team approach enables ordained and non-ordained ministers to serve more effectively. Not all members will make the adjustment to distributive ministry. Congregations should expect some membership attrition. Though some members will leave, other new members who favor distributive ministry will join the church.

The distributive ministry model creates a congregational ethos that values Christian vocation and equipping congregants for ministry. This ethos requires a robust ministry training process. Innovative leaders can design a flexible ministry education curriculum in which congregants form affiliate groups that focus on the types of skill development required for ministry in specific community settings. From teachers to mechanics to community developers, affiliate group members can then discuss how best to bear witness to Christ at work or in the community.

This ministry model will disturb clergy and laity who prefer the familiarity of the single-pastor model of leadership. Congregants may resist the communication and relationship changes associated with shared ministry. Congregants may assume they will be forced to contact multiple persons with requests formerly directed to the solo pastor. This highlights the need for a highly coordinated communication process that designates one contact person who directs requests to the proper person. Ministry is highly relational, and people develop preferences for who preaches, teaches, or visits them. Initially, new persons assuming ministry responsibilities previously handled by the pastor will need to demonstrate competency both in ministry practice and in interpersonal relationships.

Denominations can benefit from the ministry multiplication produced through distributive ministry. More members actively engaged in meaningful ministry creates more church vitality. This is good news for denominations, as church attendance and congregational rolls in North America continue to decline. Correspondingly, the deployment of bivocational ministers will only increase in the future. Distributive ministry offers denominational judicatories a viable option to address these factors.

Denominational judicatories may regard the commissioning of ministers by the local church as a threat to the established ministry credentialing system currently in place. To minimize confrontation, a collaborative investigation of the potential of distributive ministry will be helpful. The initial aim of the collaborative process is to create allies who engage in spectrum thinking, which considers multiple options, alternatives, and possibilities.

A think tank consisting of innovative thinkers from denominational judicatories, credentialing entities, seminaries, and bivocational ministry practitioners could study the distributive model, note its desired outcomes, and create an educational support system. The aim of the think tank is to design an endorsed ministry education system that prepares bivocational pastors and congregants to develop and implement distributive ministry. Denominational decision-making processes are slow and cumbersome; nevertheless, investing in such collaboration can attract the denomination's imprimatur.

The distributive ministry model commissions believers to serve as ministers in all relational areas, which extends the congregation's reach into private and public spaces. I believe bivocational congregations that use the distributive ministry model are well positioned to offer the gospel to people in an ever-changing environment.

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