CHAPTER 9

Incarnating Christ through Bivocational Ministry

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It has been my experience that, despite the best efforts of denominational types like myself, bivocational ministers see themselves and are looked upon by others as second-class ministers—ministers who are not on the same level with those who serve full time. Not all hold this view, to be sure, but most bivocational ministers and most other ministers, church members, and people in the community do—or at least that is how it feels according to the bivocational pastors I know. It has also been my experience that some of the finest, most godly, and long-tenured pastors I have ever had the privilege to serve alongside were and are bivocational.

So why the disconnect?

I suspect a large part of the reason for this is that, in this "Show me the money!!" environment and culture, we naturally presume that the brightest and the best will be called to full-time positions, be paid well, and not have or even want to do anything but live out the

call to pastor God's people. We presume that, when God calls someone to serve in ministry, that call is to full-time ministry. But that simply is not the case.

In fact, while estimates vary, a survey by Faith Communities Today reported that just 62 percent of congregations had a full-time, paid senior or sole pastor in 2015 (Roozen 2015, 8). This percentage was down from the 2010 survey. Accurate data from specific denominations are often unavailable. One Southern Baptist Convention commentator speculated that between 40 and 60 percent, and maybe as much as 80 percent, of their churches were served by bivocational pastors (Gray 2016). My experience as a denominational leader in the American Baptist Churches—where the small, single-cell, solo-pastor congregation is the norm—suggests similar numbers.

Yet, these dedicated, talented, hard-working, and tireless men and women of God are too often looked down upon by their full-time colleagues. They endure questions from friends and family about when they will become "real" pastors. Too often, they are passed over for opportunities to speak to and address their colleagues and constituents at conventions and associational meetings. I say this not to malign full-time pastors—I was a full-time local church pastor for eighteen years and continue to serve in full-time Christian ministry to this day.

Even pastors who are classified as full-time are likely to be involved in some sort of "side-hustle," either for economic reasons or simply because of other advantages that employment outside the church offers. In my own experience, I served as solo or senior pastor to four different congregations. In only one did I not have some sort of outside employment. In the first two ministries, my decision to work outside the pastorate was economic. In my most recent local church pastorate, I served as an adjunct professor at the local university—not because we needed the money but because of the opportunities it gave me to connect with the students, faculty, and staff of the university. Serving on the university staff, even if some would not classify it as being truly bivocational, afforded me and my congregation some critical advantages for ministry in our community that we otherwise would not have had.

In this chapter, I present bivocational ministry as a means of incarnating Christ to the community, drawing on my pastoral experience, my experience as an executive minister in the American Baptist Churches, and the experiences of many bivocational pastors I know personally. First, I offer the "incarnational church," based on 1 Cor-

inthians 12 and Luke 10, as a model of holistic mission. Then, I present four benefits of bivocational ministry that might lead churches and pastors to engage in bivocational ministry even when a full-time ministry is possible. The incarnational benefits of bivocational ministry include breaking down the sacred-secular divide, creating community and relationships outside the local congregation, uncovering new opportunities for ministry and mission outside the walls of the church, and reducing the dependencies of the pastor that hinder authentic leadership and prophetic action, both in the church and in the community. I conclude by encouraging the church to reframe its understanding of bivocational ministry as a positive way of incarnating Christ.

The Incarnational Church Model

The incarnational church model is based upon Paul's declaration to the Corinth church that "you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor. 12:27, NIV). This text is often interpreted to speak to the universal Church, not the local church, and to be figurative and aspirational rather than literal. However, Paul was writing to a local church and, even had he known that the letter would become an encyclical circulated to other churches, his target audience was still local congregations, not the Church universal. Paul was saying, in effect, "You, the church at Corinth, are supposed to be the Body of Christ for Corinth." By extension, the text challenges every local church to be the Body of Christ to its community. This model then offers the church a huge challenge and gives it direction in how to operate. Even if one views this challenge as aspirational rather than fully attainable, it tells us that the core mission of the church is to be Christ to its community!

But how do we do that? One might begin to analyze the Gospels and try to discern and lift out Christ's actions while here on earth to understand how we are to fulfill our mission of being Christ's Body. Alternatively, we might simply look at Jesus's charge to the disciples as He sent them out on mission in Luke 10. Many believe that this passage depicts Jesus's soft opening of the church, like a restaurant has a soft opening before the grand opening to familiarize staff with the menu and how the restaurant will be run. In this passage, Jesus summarized the mission of the disciples in four simple tasks: being phys-

ically present, dwelling with and entering into relationship with the people, doing acts of mercy, and proclaiming the gospel. These tasks summarize not only the mission of the disciples but also the church and Jesus's own ministry here on earth. God's love for humanity offers the opportunity to enter into relationship with God through Jesus.

These four actions are the hallmark of the New Testament church—the incarnational church model, to which reformers through the ages have sought to return. One example of this is Martin Luther's decision to translate the Bible into German (the "September Bible") in 1522. By doing so, Luther was doing all but "acts of mercy" for the commoners of Germany of his time.

Common areas of emphasis for the church—being missional, doing social justice, and even the classic revivalism—often truncate the incarnational model by focusing on a single task without the holistic mission of being present and engaging in relationships before moving to the more measurable goals of hands-on mission work and winning souls. Churches whose leaders engage in bivocational ministry, whether intentionally or out of economic necessity, often find themselves engaged more fully in the community because the pastor is engaged more fully in the community. This engagement leads to more effective missional activities and broader opportunities to proclaim the gospel. Four benefits evolve from being bivocational and, while not directly related to the four tasks of being incarnational, enhance the pastor and church's ability to be incarnational.

Breaking Down the Sacred-Secular Divide

Bivocational ministry can break down the divide felt between sacred and secular. This divide happens in part because of a kind of hyper-holiness. In scripture, the Temple is designated a sacred and holy place. Jesus, in driving out the money changers from the Temple, seems to affirm this view—that the place of worship is holy and set apart. But God's acts of rending the veil in the Holy of Holies and the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit seem to eliminate this separation. Instead of a certain place or certain person being holy, Jesus's action on the cross made everything holy. God can and does dwell within us, and it is God's presence that makes a person or place holy, not the place itself.

Still, this attitude that some places and people are holier than others continues in US culture. Indeed, the actions of many congregations, the architecture of their buildings, and the honor that churches confer to their pastors and leaders proclaim this difference. By creating physical separation between the altar and the people, by limiting access to the altar, and by the costuming and vestments of clergy, we have created an attitude that all clergy and all church buildings are to be treated as sacred. Some churches even extend this separation to the point of having separate bathrooms for the pastors. While the intention for this may simply be for the convenience of the pastor, the implicit message is separation. And, to be honest, many of us who are in ministry like this special treatment. We, like Moses, work to preserve the illusion of our holiness even after the glory has long faded away (2 Cor. 3:13)!

But this special treatment—this separation—creates problems in communicating the message that Christ died for us all and that we are all sinners saved by grace. To combat this false message, one of the members of my doctoral cohort—a former Jesuit who was serving a Lutheran congregation—began sitting in the congregation to visibly make the statement that he was coming from the same place as the rest of the congregation when he went to the pulpit to offer a Word from the Lord. This was a dramatic step for him, coming from his Roman Catholic tradition.

Pastors choosing to work bivocationally take the message of being among the congregation one step further. By working alongside laity in the community to earn their living, they are sending the message that they too are dependent upon God's grace and their own hard work for their livelihood. Yes, we know full-time pastors work hard, as well, but congregants may perceive their tithes and offerings as fully providing for the pastor, creating a feeling of separation and division.

By working alongside their congregants, either literally or symbolically, this division is attenuated. As a student pastor, I worked as a farm hand for members of my congregation. There were many times when my sense of "holiness" was brought into check, either by a ripped seam in my jeans or by some expression of frustration due to an animal or my own clumsiness. While all pastors face the same day-to-day challenges and temptations as their parishioners, the congregation sees this a bit more clearly in those working bivocationally.

In addition to the holiness divide between pastor and parishioner, there is also the "Marie Antoinette divide." Marie Antoinette,

of course, was infamous for reportedly having replied to the complaints of the commoners having no bread by saying, "Let them eat cake." Whether true or not, it speaks to the real perception that many people hold—that those who are privileged do not really understand what the common person faces day to day. Clergy are often perceived as being among the privileged. Further, there is the belief that they (the privileged) are unable or unwilling to do some of the practical things necessary for day-to-day living and are dependent upon others to meet those needs. A practical example of this is the pastoral spouse who called a plumber to change a toilet seat rather than doing it themselves, expecting the plumber to bill the church. This action communicated to the congregation that the pastoral couple should not be expected to do this common task or even to know how to do it and that their privilege and their holiness meant they were above common skills and abilities.

The bivocational pastor who works in the community, even in another professional position, generally communicates that they are not above learning and doing common everyday tasks. When a pastor is willing to serve school lunches or drive a delivery truck, they are saying they are on a par with the other members of the congregation, not above them. They show they are willing to do even menial labor to provide for themselves rather than create a dependency upon the congregation.

Further, when a pastor serves bivocationally, they must count on lay leaders of the congregation to do more of the work of the church, thus further breaking down the sacred-secular divide. A bivocational pastor, for example, may depend on a lay leader to plan the worship service, make hospital visits where they will give communion, or work with vendors and volunteers to take care of the building. The bivocational pastor is forced "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12a) more often than the full-time pastor.

Creating Community and Relationships

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages of bivocational ministry is in building community and relationships outside the walls of the church. One of the great challenges of the US church is its dependence upon full-time staff, whether that be the pastor, a pastoral team, or ministry leaders, to bring people into the church. This dependency is problematic in several ways, including limiting disciple-making

efforts to "professionals." Furthermore, outside of family, most fully compensated ministers limit their primary relationships to other church folks, whether in their own or in other congregations. Full-time pastors must be very intentional about building community and relationships outside of their own congregation. And when they are intentional about this, they often face jealousy from members of their congregation, who may accuse them of dereliction in their service to the membership of the church.

Bivocational ministers, however, naturally build these connections, and their being bivocational often strips away the congregation's idea that they own the pastor's time. Indeed, this idea was communicated to me by a bivocational pastor whose full-time predecessor had come under fire because he was "spending too much time on the golf course," where he was trying to build relationships with young professionals in the community (personal communication, January 7, 2021). While the predecessor may indeed have had some responsibility for not clearly communicating his intentions in playing golf versus being in the office of the church, that church's expectations of pastoral office hours were necessarily changed when they called a bivocational pastor. In this case, the pastor was already working in the school system and had community and relationships established when he came to the church. In fact, those very relationships, built in the community, allowed him to connect with the church when they needed a pastor.

This attitude of owning the pastor's time is common. Another colleague, employed full-time by a small congregation located just outside a metropolitan area, shared the following story. The small town in which the congregation was located had become a bedroom community for the nearby metropolis. My colleague was asked to coach the wrestling team for the local high school. The church was out in the country, and the nearby families all sent their kids to this local high school. In his desire to make this effort a congregational outreach, the pastor made plans for many of the practices to be held at the church building, in their large community room. When the pastor approached the church leadership, however, they were unable to see the community connections that might have been made. They expressed concern about how this program would affect the pastor's availability to them and asked that he not do this. Obviously, when the boss (or in this case the leadership of the congregation) asks you not to do something, the wise employee bends to the desires of the employer. Ironically, this congregation, who were largely baby

boomers, struggled to keep youth in the congregation. Perhaps they were legitimately worried about the pastor's use of time, but, if so, this was not communicated. In contrast, they had no problem with the pastor's involvement with and time commitment to the Christian Motorcycle Association.

Discovering Unique Ministry Opportunities

A third way in which bivocational ministry helps the church incarnate Christ is through discovering unique ministry opportunities in the community. Due in large part to breaking down the sacred-secular barrier and the pastor's broader community and relationships, bivocational pastors find unique connections for ministry.

One of my "side-hustles" during one pastorate was working as day labor for a heating and air contractor who was a member of the congregation. Through his work, he discovered a number of elderly clients and widows who not only needed to have work done on their HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning) systems but also had small tasks around the house that they either did not have the ability to do or were no longer capable of doing. This contractor could have simply taken on these jobs and charged these folks for the work. Instead, he asked me to help. The two of us, along with his teen-age son, took one day a month to do odd jobs for these people—many of them members of my congregation. Some were simply members of the community in need. Sometimes the people would be able to pay for the parts, sometimes not. My friend saw it as a way he could "look after widows and orphans" (James 1:27; see also Acts 6:1–4).

Another pastor, whose ministry career has been largely bivocational, told me about the time he was working in banking, and a relative of one of his customers committed suicide. The customer reached out to him to care for the family because "you're the only pastor I know!" (personal communication, January 4, 2021).

One of my denominational colleagues, who served many years bivocationally, was able to minister to groups of people to whom he would not otherwise be able to minister through his work as an adjunct professor at the local community college. As an African American pastor serving in the South, this professorship enabled him to minister across racial lines, generational gaps, and cultures (Harrison 2021).

Another congregation entered bivocational ministry by calling a full-time, practicing attorney and college president as their pastor. This shift to bivocational ministry allowed them to increase their giving to missionaries to 29% of their budget (personal communication, January 20, 2021). They also increased volunteer leadership support significantly and saw their attendance grow under the leadership of this capable individual.

These examples illustrate the many ways in which a bivocational pastor may open unexpected pathways for the church to encounter ministry opportunities to love others as Christ has loved us.

Reducing Pastoral Dependencies

Bivocational pastors who earn their livelihood outside the church have a freedom of the pulpit not enjoyed by fully compensated pastors. For example, I am aware of many full-time pastors holding egalitarian views on gender yet reluctant to challenge the complementarian practices of their congregation by elevating capable women into positions of leadership, for fear of creating too much turmoil in the congregation. Their reluctance is based on more than simply maintaining order. Job security also plays a part in these actions and lack of action. Bivocational ministry arrangements can reduce pastoral dependencies and increase prophetic potential.

An example of how financial dependency can affect the work of the pastor is recorded in *Rocket Boys* (Hickam 1998). Hickam tells the story of the pastor of the company church in Coalwood—a coal town in West Virginia—who was brow-beaten by the coal mine's ownership into condemning the actions of Hickam and the other young rocket engineers. The pastor initially came out in support of the boys and the opportunity this would provide them to break out of Coalwood through education. The pastor's change of mind came about solely because of the pastor's dependency on the mine for his salary, home, and way of life. This incident—a classic example of how the economic dependency of a pastor can limit their prophetic ministry—was left out of the popular movie adaptation, *October Sky*.

Hickam's pastor was not alone in this experience. During my full-time ministry, economic dependency and pragmatic wisdom also caused me to edit my prophetic stances on various issues. When serving a rural church whose members' cash crop was tobacco, I did not preach about the evils of tobacco. Further, when serving a congrega-

tion whose membership included managers of the Shell Oil Refinery, a major employer in our community, I did not pass along the denomination's call to embargo Shell and other Dutch-owned companies to protest apartheid in South Africa.

In contrast, bivocational pastors who earn their livelihood outside the church have a freedom of the pulpit not enjoyed by full-time pastors. I am aware of another situation where a bivocational pastor confessed it was financial independence that allowed him to move the congregation out of some long-held theological and liturgical beliefs and practices. He led the church to soften their views about the sacredness of the sanctuary and building, leading them to open it up to tenants. This action gave them greater viability and prompted them to consider selling the building and buying another that served their needs better. He also challenged them to move away from a staid, rigid form of worship to a more inviting and culturally relevant style of worship. He was able to accomplish this in a very short amount of time because he was unafraid of the consequences of his actions and could be prophetic from the pulpit—not only in these very pragmatic areas but also in the arena of social justice.

Prophetic ministry is but one of the areas in which financial independence gives freedom. Another is pastoral tenure. One colleague, specifically called to serve as a bivocational minister, served for seventeen years at one small-town congregation. This congregation had experienced regular turnover of their pastors every three to five years as a result of the stepping-stone practice that is a part of our Baptist tradition. Pastors would serve this congregation in their first pastorate and then move on to a larger congregation after gaining experience. My bivocational colleague was able to interrupt this tradition and help the congregation make several critical moves that set them up for future success because of his practice of a personal trade (personal communication, January 6, 2021).

Another pastor came to a church with a similar pattern. He was allowed to work bivocationally as an adjunct at the local junior college, interrupting the stepping-stone tradition. Because he was not financially dependent upon the church, he was able to continue in ministry in the small, isolated community. This pastor will soon retire from the church after thirty-plus years in the community.

Shifting Our Understanding

While the economic benefits of bivocational ministry have long been evident, I believe that the incarnational benefits will be of greater importance to the church in the coming years. For that reason, the church, through its various leadership and training structures, needs to do a better job of preparing and supporting bivocational ministries and pastors. One reason this has not happened is the current bias against being bivocational—a bias shared by church executives, pastors, seminaries, denominational leaders, and even the people in the pews. This does not have to be.

Recognizing that bivocational ministry has been the most common form of pastoral ministry throughout generations and that bivocational ministry is still the most broadly practiced model in most areas of the world should indicate to us that bivocational ministry is formative rather than regressive. The current negative or regressive view of bivocational ministry comes from an established church perspective, which sees bivocationality as a sign of failure. It is the same feeling experienced by a large program church declining to the point of being a single-pastor congregation: the memory of "what was" prevents celebrating "what is" or even dreaming about "what could be." A new, growing church will celebrate having a special service of 100 people while the old, established church laments the same size of service.

If the church can reframe its understanding of bivocational ministry as formative—that its very nature is advantageous to incarnational ministry and helping the church be Christ to its community—great strides will have been taken. Whether or not we make this shift in understanding the value of bivocational ministers, their service will be required for the sustainability of the church. Surely, then, we should be doing all we can to support and sustain this vital work, instead of discouraging it by asking the pastor engaged in bivocational ministry, "When are you going to become a real minister?"

As we enter a new age of the church—as God prepares to do a new thing—I suspect that bivocational ministry will once again become the norm. Historically this has been the case and still is the case in most parts of the world, especially in areas where the church is thriving. And the church is thriving in these areas not because of the economic benefits, but because of the incarnational benefits bivocational ministers offer to the local church and to the Kingdom of

God. Bivocational ministry simply enhances the incarnational model of church depicted in the New Testament. The incarnational model for ministry is what previous reformations have striven to re-create and what I believe will be the aim of the coming reformation as well.

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