

# *Preparing to Teach a Bivocational Ministry Seminary Course*

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**D**uring my first pastoral experience, as director of children’s ministries at a church in north central Pennsylvania in the mid-1980s, I was busy but never felt overworked. Honestly, I loved my job. With almost one hundred children, preschool through sixth grade, involved in various programs—approximately one-third of the congregation—I felt my ministry was vital to the entire church. Unfortunately, church politics led me sadly to resign my position after only two years.

During an exit interview with the church’s governing body, an elder remarked, “You certainly worked hard these past two years, but we always wondered why you never got a second job anywhere.”

“Why would I?” I asked. “I had a full-time job right here.”

“Yeah,” the elder answered, “but we were only paying you for half-time.”

In more than three decades of pastoral ministry, those were the only two years I was not bivocational, even though, as it turned out, I was still only paid “half-time.” Bivocational ministry, also known as tentmaking, less-than-fully-funded ministry, and part-time pastoring, has been a way of life for me and for many others.

When I applied to teach pastoral ministry at Earlham School of Religion, I proposed a class to encourage and assist pastors in self-care, focusing on maintaining spiritual, mental, physical, emotional, and social health when deeply involved in ministry. I included a unit on bivocational ministry because I wanted seminary students to understand the fiscal realities of twenty-first century pastoring. I also wanted them to feel that there was no shame in pronouncing a benediction and asking, “Would you like fries with that?” on the same day of the week.

I got the job. Within weeks of accepting the position, I received a call from the presiding clerk of a small Quaker meeting I had pastored for one year shortly after graduating from seminary. They heard I was moving back to Richmond and asked me to be their pastor again. And I was back to being bivocational.

During my first few years at Earlham, I included units on bivocational ministry in the originally proposed course—Pastoral Spirituality—and another course—Work of the Pastor. Much of what I taught was based on my own experiences delivering pizzas, working in a hardware store, and substitute teaching while pastoring congregations in Ohio and Indiana. I assigned *The Tentmaking Pastor* by Dennis Bickers (2000) as my primary text, along with Michael F. Coughlin’s article, “Full-time Pastor, Part-time Pay” (1991). Since my experience jibed with that of Bickers and others, I assumed mine was typical for bivocational ministers.

After 14 years of teaching about bivocational ministry and seeing more and more of my students graduating to less-than-fully-funded pastorates, I proposed an entire course on bivocational ministry and received grant money to study how best to teach it. In the following pages, I present the research behind the first syllabus for that course, what I have learned through my teaching, and my recommendations for other theological educators creating a syllabus for a bivocational ministry seminary course.

## *Gathering the Data*

Before creating my first bivocational ministry course syllabus, I set out to gather as much data as would be useful in discerning what contemporary bivocational pastors need to know to have an effective ministry. I employed a student assistant with experience in designing surveys to create questionnaires for pastors and congregational leaders. She beta-tested the questionnaires via telephone interviews with a few churches. After sharing her collected data with me, we tweaked the questions.<sup>1</sup> I then set out to conduct in-person interviews with pastors and congregants from a sampling of churches in denominations that provide most of Earlham's students: Friends (Quakers), Metropolitan Community Church, Church of the Brethren, and the Episcopal Church. After contacting judicatory leaders in each of these traditions, as well as receiving some Baptist recommendations from Dennis Bickers, I arranged interviews with representative churches in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Colorado, and Oregon. Those interviews informed the course syllabus.

## *Expectations Based on Practical Wisdom*

Having been a bivocational pastor for 24 years prior to beginning my research, I brought with me certain assumptions about bivocational ministry and certain expectations as to what the research would reveal. For example, I thought there were only two forms of bivocational pastoring. The first is when the minister's full-time job finances their pastoral service. Almost my entire teaching career I have served some local congregation as their pastor. The desire to minister and keep a congregation afloat, not the meager financial compensation, motivated me. My career financed my ministry. The second type is when a part-time job, such as delivering pizzas, supplements an inadequate ministry income. I had a lot of experience with this kind of bivocational ministry as well. I also assumed that most bivocational ministers enjoy the often unusual ministry opportunities afforded them through their work outside the church.

I certainly appreciated those unexpected ministry moments that came my way while "on the job." For example, while pastoring in Ohio, I worked at a Domino's Pizza. It was during the time when a number

of big-name television preachers were getting into all sorts of ethical trouble. That was a topic of much joking at work, so I asked my boss why they were saying such cruel things about these preachers, but they did not include me in their jokes. He said, "Because you're not like them. You're the preacher who lives down the street. We know you." I will never forget that comment. Some months later that same store manager, late one night as we were closing, said,

Phil, it's not like I have anything against the church, it's just that churches aren't open when I can go. I work 'til 4:00 a.m. every Saturday night, and I have to be there to open the store at four o'clock on Sunday afternoon. If there was a church open at 4:30 in the morning, I'd be there, and I bet the other store managers would be there too.

So I replied, "All right, starting next Sunday we'll have church at 4:30 in the morning. The lights'll be on and the doors'll be open. I'll remind you Saturday night."

For the next year and a half, I met with two to ten Domino's workers at 4:30 a.m. every Sunday for a Bible study based on the sermon I would preach later in the morning. One assistant manager's wife and kids started coming to Sunday school and the regular morning worship. It was a great feeling when, the next summer, the folks at the main church changed the time of their annual church picnic from right after Sunday worship (11:30 a.m.) to early afternoon (1:00 p.m.) so the Domino's employees could come right before opening their stores in the afternoon. That day our two "congregations" had joint fellowship for the first time.

A few years later, I worked the opening shift at a Hardee's restaurant. My manager, who was not a church attender, lived with her boyfriend on a nearby military base. One evening a gas explosion tore through their building. Both received severe burns; her partner's were more extensive. For weeks, I visited them both in the hospital. My manager recovered and eventually returned to work. Her boyfriend did not. I was honored to participate in his military funeral and to welcome her into our church family.

These ministry experiences led me to believe that my research would be filled with stories of folks whose careers financed their ministry or of pastors with second jobs to make ends meet, all of whom would have opportunities to minister inside and outside of church doors. While the research revealed some similarities between my ex-

periences and those of other bivocational ministers, I had no idea of the full depth and breadth of bivocational ministry.

## *Interpreting the Data*

As it turns out, my experience was more the exception than the rule. I quickly learned that my way of doing bivocational ministry, while similar to that described by Bickers, was far from the only way of doing it. Among the churches I visited, I found a wide variety of ways of being bivocational: a pastor whose primary occupation was stay-at-home dad, pastors who shared two half-time pastorates with their spouse, pastors who shared one part-time position by dividing the responsibilities according to their personal skill sets, and pastors who used multiple sources of retirement income to support their meager church remuneration. Through questionnaires and interviews, I also found many commonalities among bivocational pastors and congregations.

### *Pastors felt overworked but were not complaining*

Most bivocational pastors worked more hours for their churches than those for which they were paid. Add those hours to their other job, and it would seem bivocational ministry is only for the workaholic. However, they saw it as a reality that cannot be helped. Most of the pastors said their “ideal” would be not to work a second job.

### *Self-expectations were higher than congregational expectations*

The main reason bivocational pastors felt overworked at church was high self-expectations. They wanted to give as much of themselves as possible to the church. Congregation members, however, were quick to recognize that their pastor can only do so much. While most congregants wished their pastor could be full-time, the vast majority did not expect more than part-time work from their pastor.

*Congregations were very supportive of the pastor's need for self-care and time off*

All of the pastors interviewed expressed gratitude for congregations, particularly oversight boards and committees, that encouraged—sometimes demanded—self-care, including taking days off and spending time with family. While most churches preferred a full-time pastor, all were very supportive of their pastor's self-care. This seemed extremely important to the congregations participating in this study. Time and again, pastors and congregants told me about how the congregation encouraged their pastor to take time off and keep family time. One Midwestern Baptist church, when they found out their pastor and his wife had never had a real honeymoon and were planning a trip to Hawaii, asked for all the receipts from the trip and reimbursed them so the pastor could have a completely free and much-needed vacation. Bivocational pastors must be particularly attentive to self-care.

*Pastors in a committed relationship considered communication with their partner essential*

Because of the busyness of two jobs and the tendency of those jobs to supplant family time, the bivocational pastors who were in a committed relationship said they had to maintain a high level of communication with their spouse or partner. None believed they did it perfectly, and the few spouses I spoke with indicated it was an ongoing struggle. Nevertheless, they were committed to supporting their partner's ministry vision.

*Congregations were only somewhat aware of their pastor's other job and time spent pastoring*

Congregants knew generally what the pastor did outside of ministry but not necessarily how many hours they worked in their secular job. As for pastoral hours worked versus perceived hours worked, the data were evenly divided between pastors who worked more hours, fewer hours, and about the same number of hours the congregation

thought they did. Furthermore, nearly two in three congregants responding could not think of any conflicts between their pastor's jobs.

*Congregations were willing to work with the pastor to keep time conflicts to a minimum*

Negotiating potential time conflicts in bivocational ministry required flexibility and transparency. Flexibility in both jobs was key for bivocational ministry to be successful, and the only way for flexibility to work was through transparency. For one pastor, "transparency" meant that as long as both employers knew what the possible conflicts were, they could work around them. I found this true in my own experience as well as in those I interviewed. Most pastors interviewed admitted occasional conflicts between jobs, often worked out due to flexibility by both parties. One pastor worked out occasional conflicts with an understanding employer but felt some tension with other employees who had to work regular Sunday rotations while he was given Sunday mornings "off" to pastor.

*Congregants felt bivocational ministry enhanced their church's overall ministry*

Many responding congregants felt bivocational ministry enhanced their church's overall ministry. They saw their pastor as more aware of what was going on in the community. Respondents referred to the financial advantage—almost every congregation brought up finances at some point in the interview. A typical response was, "We couldn't make it if we had to pay a full-time salary and benefits."

Some interview respondents mentioned how bivocational ministry makes more people active in the church because the pastor is not expected to do everything. Other responses indicated perceptions that bivocational pastors use time more efficiently. Being bivocational shows the pastor "really wants to be here," and part-time ministry has the potential of becoming full-time.

*Overall, pastors saw more advantages than disadvantages to bivocational ministry*

Perceived advantages varied from person to person. Nearly half the pastors interviewed said that having a secular job informed their ministry, citing “real world” experience, meeting people outside of their church, and so on. This sentiment was echoed by every bivocational pastor I spoke to during this study, including a rabbi I interviewed early in 2015 in preparation for this research.

“Daniel” (not his real name) was an associate rabbi at the time. He also managed a fast-food outlet. Prior to my interviews with Christian pastors, I asked him the survey questions. He told me of numerous times when employees and customers who knew he was a clergyperson asked for spiritual help. Some wanted a listening ear. Others asked to be remembered in prayer. Daniel expected to be named senior rabbi at his congregation upon the retirement of the current rabbi and said he would miss the ministry opportunities his secular job gave him. He added that he hoped to do some volunteer work with a social service agency to keep “one foot in the real world.”

My own experience echoes Daniel’s thoughts. I teach my seminary students to be aware of—but not seek—job-related ministry opportunities. I believe ministry opportunities are the result of trust between the bivocational minister and the public or other employees, not aggressive evangelism.

Among other advantages mentioned by interviewees were: flexibility of schedule, being forced to be honest about their abilities (what they can and cannot realistically do), freeing up money for outreach ministries of the church, and spreading ministry opportunities among the congregation.

One pastor contrasted the way their secular job suited their results-oriented personality with their church ministry, which was rewarding in ways not associated with measurable results. “Cal” (not his real name) pastored a small church in Iowa. Most of his income came from managing a bowling alley about twenty-five miles from the church. Cal described himself as “results-oriented,” which did not always match up with pastoral ministry. He told me he loves people, but he knows that nothing about them is ever finished; they’re always in-process. The bowling alley was a different story. If a lane broke down and a bowler reported it, Cal would send a technician to fix it almost immediately. This suited the results-oriented part of Cal’s

personality perfectly, allowing him to minister effectively among people whose problems are not likely to be “fixed” with a phone call. Cal only regretted that the church was too far away for his bowling customers to attend. Still, some customers occasionally sought his advice as a pastor and not just as the guy behind the counter.

Regarding the disadvantages of bivocational ministry, most respondents mentioned their pastor’s lack of time for church activities. Other responses included concern about the amount of time the pastor spends with family, wishing they had a full-time pastor, worry about stress on the pastor, and lower pastoral expectations. Almost all disadvantages identified by pastors had to do with time management and stress, affecting family time, personal time, and a desire to do more for the church. The comprehensive nature of this stress is indicated by the fact that no one gave me specific incidents. They just looked at me as if I would understand. In my own experience, I remember having to think twice before telling a parishioner I needed to be “at work” or telling my son his mom would have to drive him to 4-H because I had to be at the church.

## *Preparing for Bivocational Ministry*

I concluded each interview by asking for suggestions as to what Bible colleges and seminaries could do to help prepare students for the realities of bivocational ministry. Both pastors and congregants offered clear answers.

The pastors interviewed asked first and foremost for educational institutions to give students a reality check on what they can expect in the world of congregations. To do so, they suggested inviting actual bivocational pastors as guest lecturers. Schools should emphasize that being bivocational does not mean the minister is a failure. The second most common response was emphatic: self-care. Seminaries should encourage students to create support systems for themselves, especially when preparing for bivocational ministry. Schools should also provide suggestions or tools to help students create such systems. Bivocational pastors also wanted seminaries and colleges to teach practical skills adaptable to the “outside world.” Some suggested that schools encourage students to work at an other-than-ministry setting while attending seminary. Pastors interviewed felt that seminaries should teach their students how to craft a résumé em-

phasizing the skills ministers acquire and develop. In the event a second job is needed, students should be ready to get that job. Lastly, due to the amount of work expected of them by multiple employers plus personal and family needs, bivocational pastors looked to their educational institutions for time management tools. As long as there are a finite number of hours in a day, the need will exist to use those hours effectively, not just for employers but for the sake of their own health and those closest to them.

Time management was the first thing congregants mentioned in education for bivocational ministers. While congregants approved of how their current pastor was managing time, many felt that pastors needed more training in using time wisely, due to the immensity of two jobs. Congregants also expressed the ideas labeled earlier as “transparency” and “flexibility.” They felt that seminaries and colleges should emphasize these communication skills to build stronger relationships between bivocational pastors and their constituencies. No one wishes to overwork their pastor to the point of burnout. The only way to avoid this, according to congregational representatives, is to have regular dialog about time and responsibilities and expectations. Congregants surveyed did not see this as adversarial but as informative and preemptive of future problems.

Since bivocational pastors have limited time to spend among their constituents, church members felt their pastors needed to learn how to understand their congregation’s geography and demography more rapidly and more intentionally than fully funded pastors would. A traditional pastor has more hours and more days to spend getting to know their parish; they can work at this slowly and deeply. Bivocational pastors do not have that luxury. To be effective they must “read” their congregations quickly and adjust their ministry, if they are able, to meet their needs.

A few congregants suggested that theological education for pastors should include internships that are not ministry-based. They felt that, in addition to doing the traditional field education in ministry that is part of the Master of Divinity degree, students should do an internship in the “real world” by working retail, driving a school bus, delivering pizza, and so on. Further discussion around this response led to suggestions that pastors be able to reflect theologically on their secular job the way they do their church job. This makes a lot of sense in terms of knowing one’s congregation because the typical congregant has only a secular job on which to reflect. For a pastor to effectively encourage church members to be faithful believers on the job,

they must understand what it is like to experience God within those jobs.

## *Creating a Syllabus*

My research confirmed that I had a lot to learn from other bivocational pastors and congregations. While I am still learning, I believe I discovered some significant findings that will help seminaries prepare future bivocational ministers. Bearing in mind the suggestions of both pastors and congregants, I advise instructors to include the following topics in a bivocational ministry course. For each topic, I have provided suggested resources beyond the chapters of this volume. Many of these topics, though not unique to bivocational ministry, are especially critical to the success of bivocational ministers.

### *Validity of bivocational ministry*

Begin by looking at historical and current attitudes toward bivocational ministry. Bring out statistics about the percentage of pastors in bivocational ministry, even explaining the difficulty of obtaining accurate figures because denominations seem to downplay their increasing use of bivocational pastors. Emphasize a theme throughout the course: bivocational ministers are not “part-time help.” They are not second-class pastors. They are, in fact, vital to the success of the twenty-first century church. Resources include Bickers (2000); Coughlin (1991); Edington (2018); Grand Rapids Seminary (2018); MacDonald (2020); New Leaf Learning Centre (2020); Rainer (2016); Small (2018); and Watson et al. (2020).

### *Congregational awareness*

Consider the importance of learning who a congregation is—their demographics and their culture. Bivocational pastors have less time to do this than fully-funded pastors. This topic requires tools to gain congregational awareness effectively within a limited timeframe. Students need to learn the art of looking at a congregation anthropologically—that is, learning the culture via observation, questioning,

and paying particular attention to language, artifacts, spaces, and rituals unique to their congregation. Craig Storti's *The Art of Crossing Cultures* (2021) and Patty Lane's *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures* (2002) can be helpful in this process (see also Frank 2000). Nancy L. Eisland and R. Stephen Warner (1998, 40, 43) called this kind of congregational research an "ecological perspective" and introduced a tool I recommend to my classes—the congregational timeline. If a new pastor can create the space and time for such a congregation-wide activity, the depth of knowledge can be immeasurable. Creating a congregational timeline also helps the bivocational pastor to focus their energy on things that really matter to the congregation.

### *Self-care and family care*

Examine ways of keeping oneself and one's family from becoming victims of ministry burnout by emphasizing physical, mental, spiritual, and social health. In my classes, I ask students to create self-care plans touching on each of these areas. Former students often tell me that they return to this exercise, even after seminary, as their lives and ministries change. I have also used David Olsen and Nancy Devor's *Saying No to Say Yes* (2015) and Bruce Epperly's *A Center in the Cyclone: Twenty-first Century Clergy Self-care* (2014) to reinforce this topic. See also Grand Rapids Seminary (2018); Stephens (n.d.); and Watson et al. (2020).

### *Time management*

Time management is vital to successful bivocational ministry. Assist students in finding a means of managing their time that works for their personality type and ministry setting. Time management systems were always mystifying to me. I once worked for a company that expected everyone to use a Day-Timer religiously. I found myself wasting potentially productive time just keeping track of time. I discovered a hidden gem that I share with my classes: Soorej Gopi's *The Time Management System: The Secret to Productivity that Lasts a Lifetime* (2017). The ambitious title belies a simple system that helps the user discover their own best plan for time management. When students find time management tools that work for them, encourage them to share with their peers. Bivocational resources include Grand

Rapids Seminary (2018); New Leaf Learning Centre (2020); and Stephens (n.d.).

### *Creating a support system*

Bivocational ministers cannot go it alone, even though they often feel that way. It is important to cultivate needed support through a network of friends, mentors, and colleagues. One means of support is to find another bivocational minister with whom they can meet regularly to reflect theologically on aspects of their secular employment. Drawing on the pattern of weekly supervisory sessions experienced during field education, participants should reflect on cases or incidents that take place outside of their traditional ministry. These peer meetings can include mutual sharing, since both ministers have experience in the church and in the larger world.

### *Transparency, vulnerability, and trust*

Transparency about job expectations for both the pastor and congregation, as well as honesty about what the non-church job entails, is vital to the success of bivocational ministry. This kind of vulnerability plays a significant part in the relationship between bivocational pastor and congregation. Students need to understand how vital vulnerability is when ministering bivocationally. The trust level needs to be high when a pastor is not always readily available to the congregation. I use a chapter in Mandy Smith's *The Vulnerable Pastor*, titled "Learning to Like the Mess: How Vulnerable Pastors Create Culture," to demonstrate how pastoral vulnerability can lead to the kind of transparency in congregations and ministers necessary for effective bivocational ministry (2015, 103–20; see also Grand Rapids Seminary 2018).

### *The "other job"*

Getting the proverbial "second job" is harder than one might think. Raise students' awareness of current hiring practices to help them find and attain a second means of financial support beyond pastoring. A key component is creating an effective contemporary résumé

based on one's ministry, life experience, and academic curriculum vitae (CV). Looking into business practices concerning the interview process is another worthwhile component of the class. Representatives from the human resource departments of local businesses have been guest lecturers in my classes. Students have been very keen to learn just what hirers look for in the interview process.

### *Finances*

Since finances are usually the reason clergy are bivocational in the first place, I suggest spending time studying church finances. Record-keeping and budgeting are often weak areas for small congregations. These topics, along with capital maintenance planning, are worthwhile to include in a course syllabus. A discussion of and resources for health insurance, often the missing component in bivocational ministry compensation, is also very helpful. Resources include: Faith and Money Network (2021); Jamieson and Jamieson (2009); and Small (2018).

### *Experience-related lectures*

Invite practicing bivocational pastors to guest lecture. Students appreciate the opportunity to “pick the brains” of people with various kinds of bivocational experience. For example, in 2019, I invited a bivocational pastor as a guest lecturer who not only shared his experiences but also gave the students tools for equipping the laity for ministry. This was greatly appreciated since the bivocational church relies on laypeople to do much of the work traditionally done by the fully-funded pastor. Resources include: Grand Rapids Seminary (2018); New Leaf Learning Centre (2020); Samushonga (2020a; 2020b); Small (2018); and Stephens (n.d.).

### *Conflict transformation*

While this topic did not come up in my research, conflict transformation skills are critically important for bivocational pastors, who often fail to see the conflict present in their churches because they do not spend as much time with the people. Familiarizing students with

tools for dealing with conflict in ministry need not be an exhaustive study, as most students and pastors have access to more in-depth conflict transformation courses at the seminary or workshops presented by various church agencies. See Grand Rapids Seminary (2018).

## *Ongoing Pedagogical Challenges*

A persistent challenge in teaching bivocational ministry is that, for most seminary students, bivocational ministry is not their first choice of career path. Even among the pastors I interviewed, almost all would have preferred a fully funded ministry over bivocationality.<sup>2</sup> Assuring students of the necessity for and validity of bivocational ministry must permeate every class. Celebrate the future minister who chooses bivocational ministry. Their numbers will most likely increase as a new generation experiments with creative ways of doing and financing ministry. For those who follow a call to ministry that they hope to be full-time, make sure they understand how the future in which they find themselves is as much in divine hands as the future they wish for themselves.

Because my research was conducted within the continental United States and because I had no international students prior to 2017, I had not given much thought to the ramifications of bivocational ministry for pastors outside of the United States. However, two students from Kenya attended my second Bivocational Ministry class in 2019. They represented a point of view I was barely aware of and had not included in the syllabus—that of African pastors who are grossly underpaid and yet are told by their churches that they are not being true to their pastoral calling if they try to supplement their income with outside employment. I plan to research this further to see if this perspective goes beyond Kenya and to include my findings in future iterations of the Bivocational Ministry course. Resources include Forster and Oosterbrink (2015) and Samushonga (2020b).

## *Learning and Ministry Continue*

Bivocational ministry is here to stay. The Apostle Paul's example of self-financing ministry was not an aberration in the first century

and may still be the norm in the twenty-first. Even as I tried to identify bivocational ministers to interview, some of the denominational executives with whom I corresponded expressed doubts that I would find many among their congregations.<sup>3</sup> The pastors themselves told a different story. And while bivocational ministry is commonplace among non-White congregations in the United States, too many leaders in White-majority denominations are reluctant to accept this reality. Nevertheless, theological institutions have a responsibility to prepare their students for the kind of ministry they will actually face, not just the dream job we wish them to find. As theological educators, we must help them thrive in that ministry.

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## Notes

- 1 Interview questions for pastors and congregations can be found at <https://esr.earlham.edu/community-resources/economic-challenges-facing-future-ministers/bi-vocational-ministry-project-resources>.
- 2 For a more positive view toward bivocational ministry as a first choice of career path, see Bickers (2000); Edington (2018); Grand Rapids Seminary (2018); MacDonald (2020); New Leaf Learning Centre (2020); Rainer (2016); Samushonga (2021a; 2021b); Small (2018); and Watson et al. (2020).
- 3 MacDonald (2020, 5–7) encountered similar responses in his research.