Increasing Interest in **Bivocational Ministry**

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary

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About the Religious Workforce Project

Building on previous research, the Religious Workforce Project is an effort to understand the nation's religious workforce in a comprehensive way. The Project includes a national meta-analysis and a qualitative study in the Washington, DC, metro area. Funding for the project is generously provided by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project seeks to answer the following questions: Given today's changing religious landscape, how are leaders of U.S. congregations adapting? How do these changes shape the staffing, financial models, priorities, and the work of U.S. congregations? And what is the state of the religious workforce today?

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When the Pastor is Your Plumber

Ronda Rich, a syndicated columnist about Southern life, tells about driving some of the backwoods of her native north Georgia mountains with her husband, who grew up in California. Now they had left the paved highway onto a graveled dirt road. "This is a little church that Daddy used to pastor," she said, motioning ahead to a simple white clapboard structure on a picturesque hill. There was a sign that gave the name of the church, the pastor, and meeting times. Her husband read the pastor's name aloud and asked, "Do you know him?" "Yeah," Ronda replied. "He's my plumber." Her husband wasn't sure if she were joking or not.

She was surprised that he was surprised. In those parts, bivocational pastors were common and had been for years. The denominations that flourished as the mountains were settled depended for pastors on relatively uneducated persons who had a call to ministry but little formal authorization beyond the congregation. Ronda's father pastored churches while serving as a teacher, undertaker, farmer, and car salesman. She also reminded her husband that "my cabinet maker is a preacher, too."[1]

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Through the years, many congregations and church leaders assumed that the goal for every church was to have a full-time pastor with a seminary degree. However, this model has never been the actual staffing pattern for many congregations. History, tradition, and financial realities have led many churches to meet their pastoral leadership needs in a variety of ways, including the deployment of part-time, bivocational, and shared pastors, along with lay leaders and volunteers.

1 Ronda Rich, "The Bi-vocational Preacher," syndicated column, December 13, 2016.

Is Bivocational the Right Term?

The ministry we are describing is sometimes called multivocational, dual career, or tentmaking ministry. While bivocational ministry is not a precise definition, we use it because of its close association with Christian ministry. As Darryl Stephens notes, "bivocational refers almost exclusively to persons in ministry."[2] Bivocational ministry is far broader than the term might denote to many. The specifics of how bivocational pastors and their congregations shape their lives cover a broad range of patterns. There is no one dominant approach. Some have full-time jobs beyond their church work while others have jobs that are part-time. For some, the "other" vocation is retirement, family care, or volunteer work. The Church of the Brethren, as one illustration, is a denomination in which most of the churches are served by part-time and bivocational pastors. A denominational survey found that twenty-two percent of those serving congregations have full-time jobs outside of pastoral ministry, and another 23 percent have part-time jobs. Eleven percent have multiple part-time jobs in addition to their ministry work.[3] We will follow Stephens in using the term "bivocational ministry" and his definition as "a combination of employment (paid or unpaid) within and beyond the local congregation by someone called to pastoral ministry."[4]

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A Long and Rich History

Bivocational ministry has a long history beginning with the "tentmaking" example of the apostle Paul, who supported himself by making tents while living and preaching in Corinth (Acts 18:3). Paul did not insist upon his model for all situations. There were times when he accepted gifts. However, his model often fit churches with few resources.[5] Drawing from Paul's example, versions of tentmaking ministry have continued across the centuries. It is not a new practice even if it seems so to some modern constituencies. For many traditions, bivocational ministry is the norm rather than the exception. Bivocational ministry, contends Steven C. Van Ostran, "has been the most common form of pastoral ministry throughout generations" and "is still the

2 Darryl W. Stephens, "Introduction," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 1.

3 "Part-Time Pastor, Full-Time Church" project survey results.

4 Stephens, "Introduction," 1.

5 Kristen Plinke Bentley, "Pitching Our Tent with Bivocational Ministry," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 116-118.

most broadly practiced model in most areas of the world."[6] Or as Jackson W. Carroll notes, bivocational ministry "is as old as the Christian church."[7] The model assumed as the norm by many today, that of a full-time pastor supported by the contributions of a congregation, comes only later.[8]

The tradition of the Black church provides perhaps the richest history in the practice of bivocational clergy. Jessica Young Brown observes that the combination of church work and secular work began with the inception of the Black church in the United States.[9] She also notes the important role that unpaid ministry staff have played historically as well as in the contemporary Black church.[10] While generations of experience with this bivocational, part-time, and less than adequately funded ministry does not make the challenges of these ministry leaders easier, lessons from their experience are essential as bivocational ministry expands into traditions without such rich experience.

For the first two hundred years of Church of the Brethren history, paid ministry was against Brethren practice. A group of elders led the church and performed pastoral functions. All earned a living from work outside of the church. The 1856 Annual Meeting declared paid clergy "against the gospel." In 1911, the policy changed to permit paid clergy. Despite the growth in full-time, seminary-trained clergy, today the earlier pattern of part-time and bivocational pastors is predominant.[11]

Denominations today facing the prospect of increasing numbers of bivocational pastors might well review the Church of the Brethren's earliest traditions and consider this observation by Dana Cassel, a Brethren pastor, about her church's experience. "History reminds us that the practice of every congregation employing a full-time, seminary-trained, salaried minister was a fairly recent adaptation. We might even call it an interesting experiment that lasted approximately two generations before proving unsustainable for the life of our congregations."[12]

6 Steven C. Van Ostran, Incarnating Christ through Bivocational Ministry," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 159.

7 Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 78.

8 Jackson W. Carroll and Robert L. Wilson, *Too Many Pastors? The Clergy Job Market* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980), 126.

9 Jessica Young Brown, "Black and Bivocational," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 67.

10 Ibid.

11 Dana Cassell, "Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church: The Gift of Multivocational Pastors," *The Messenger,* October 2019, 16-19.

12 Ibid., 17.

Black Church Bivocational Tradition

Jo Ann Deasy tracks bivocational ministry through surveys by the Association of Theological Seminaries. She reports that there are race/ethnicity, gender, and age differences among those preparing for bivocational ministry.[13] There are also economic factors that impact the churches and communities from which bivocational ministry candidates come and to which they plan to return to serve. Race and class have long been factors associated with whether clergy and churches operate with full-time or part-time clergy, including bivocational clergy. The "new interest" in bivocational ministry as a clergy deployment option arises partly from denominational traditions whose makeup racially and economically have not required such extensive use of part-time pastoral arrangements. Today, economic challenges from the depopulation of heavily churched areas and shrinking membership bases of congregations put many congregations in a different status from that which they previously had.

The strong Black church tradition of bivocational ministry is seen in the high percentages of Black seminary students anticipating bivocational ministry, higher than any other racial or ethnic group.[14] Deasy cites previous research from 1990 and 2003 that show patterns similar to her findings of bivocational ministry among Black clergy to be around 41-43 percent.[15] Seminarians of all ages anticipate bivocational ministry, but those age 50 and older are more likely to see bivocational ministry in their future. Both men and women are pursuing bivocational ministry, with more women included when volunteer ministry is included.[16]

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Volunteer ministry is significant in the Black church. Many positions of ministry responsibility are comparable to what other congregations would include as paid staff positions. These persons often have titles and duties that not only resemble those of paid staff but are regarded as key leaders for the congregation. These positions normally require skills and preparation beyond those of traditional church volunteers.

13 Jo Ann Deasy, "The Multivocational Plans of Students in Graduate Theological Education," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 255.

14 Jo Ann Deasy, "Black Student Perspectives," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 82.

15 Ibid., 85. Carroll, *God's Potters*, 81.

16 Deasy, "The Multivocational Plans of Students in Graduate Theological Education," 258, 269.

Often those holding these volunteer ministry positions have major responsibilities in their secular employment from which all their financial support comes. These are some of those whom Deasy finds among seminarians who anticipate bivocational ministry without compensation.[17]

Black Church Bivocational and Public Servant

> Bi-vocational ministry is a reality for many pastors because of financial necessity. However, not all who serve in public office serve because of financial reasons. Many see their public service as an extension of ministry. While not commonplace, this is not a new model of ministry especially in the African American Community. This type of bi-vocational ministry does come with challenges, stresses, joys, and fulfillment.[18]
>
> — *Clementa C. Pinckney (July 30, 1973-June 17, 2015)*
> *Pastor, Mother Emanuel AME Church, Charleston, SC*
> *Senator, State of South Carolina*

As soon as I saw the television images of Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston on the early morning news, my heart sank. The caption below said nine people had been killed, and soon there appeared the picture of the church's pastor, my friend and student, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, one of the victims.

Clementa Pinckney was called to ministry as a young teenager and soon began his expansive ministry. He pursued ordination in the AME Church, a powerful force in his home state of South Carolina, both in numbers and impact. He was elected to the state House of Representatives at 23. Four years later, he was elected to the State Senate where he still served at the time of his death. He was equally at home with the humblest and the most powerful of people, both of whom he encountered almost daily.

17 Ibid., 267-270. See also Jessica Young Brown, "Black and Bivocational," 65-80.

18 From his proposal for his project studying bivocational ministry and public service in the Black church as part of his final work for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. At the time of his death, Pinckney had completed all his course work in the Church Leadership Excellence track and had begun working on his project and thesis. His degree was granted posthumously to his widow and two daughters on May 9, 2016, at the National Cathedral in Washington.

Clementa was a bivocational pastor from his teens until his death. He was a pastor and even a presiding elder, a judicatory official overseeing many churches and clergy, prior to his service at Mother Emanuel. The tradition of a pastor serving in public office, as Clementa did, is not unusual in the Black church tradition, and active engagement with public affairs by clergy and lay leadership is even more common. Such involvement grows out of a church tradition that embodies what at one time was more prevalent across all churches, a strong identification with their communities and a concern for the common good of all.

Renewed Interest Today

There is renewed interest in bivocational ministry today. Several factors are now bringing bivocational ministry to the attention of new constituencies.

One major factor is the considerable increase in the number of very small churches with the consequent economic limitations these churches face in providing pastoral leadership. Fewer congregations now can financially support a full-time pastor.

In the United Methodist Church, the number of churches with average attendance of 25 or fewer increased by 2,059, from 8,530 in 2000 to 10,589 in 2019.

Between 2000 and 2019, it was common for the overall number of churches within many denominations to decline, while at the same time the number and percentage of very small churches (with an average worship attendance of 25 or fewer) to increase. In the Church of the Nazarene, for example, the number of those small churches increased by 81 percent and now represent 29 percent of all churches in the denomination.[19] In the United Methodist Church, the number of churches with average attendance of 25 or fewer increased by 2,059, from 8,530 in 2000 to 10,589 in 2019. This increase in churches occurred as the overall number of churches in the denomination declined by 5,233.[20] Many of these small churches share a pastor with another church or churches. In other cases, the pastor does not serve another church but does provide part-time ministry to the congregation. While some pastors in this latter group of pastors are retired clergy serving part-time, most are not. For example, about 10 percent of very small United Methodist churches are served by retired pastors. As in other denominations, many of these churches, of which there are more every year, are served by bivocational pastors.

19 Data from Research Office, Church of the Nazarene.

20 Data from General Council on Finance and Administration, United Methodist Church.

Even churches with full-time clergy where participation levels have not declined significantly have faced economic challenges each year. They faced declining income first from a recession and then a pandemic while, at the same time, costs increased beyond their income. Such increases are especially evident in the cost of personnel and particularly in the substantial increases in funds required to cover personnel benefits.

While declining constituencies and income, along with increasing costs, appear to be the dominant factors in more churches turning to part-time and bivocational pastors, there are missional goals for which many have found bivocational clergy appropriate. Church planting is one example. When limited funds are available to establish new congregations, especially among the poor, bivocational clergy can often get a new worshiping community off the ground. For many of these churches, the bivocational pastor model will continue after the early days.

While our focus is on the United States, it is important to remember that around the world some type of bivocational ministry works well and for reasons that may increasingly apply to the U.S. context of a rapidly diversifying population. Steven C. Van Ostran notes that bivocational ministry is thriving worldwide where the church is thriving, "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."[21] In the United States, many denominations that assume full-time clergy as normative are finding it difficult to go beyond their traditional constituencies to reach growing populations that are more diverse and less affluent than their typical members. Michael S. Hamilton notes that evangelism is "most successful when the evangelist is from the same people group as those being evangelized."[22] Often such cross-cultural outreach requires partnerships with those available to serve as bivocational clergy or lay pastors.

21 Steven C. Van Ostran, "Incarnating Christ through Bivocational Ministry," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 159-160.

22 Michael S. Hamilton, "American Evangelicalism: Character, Function, and Trajectories of Change," in *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*, eds. Candy Gunther Brown and Mark Silk (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 44.

Numbers of Bivocational Clergy

Multiple sources estimate that bivocational pastors are serving about 30 percent of churches. There is some debate about whether, in the current context, the numbers and proportions are remaining relatively stable or growing. Often differences in numbers and interpretation depend on how bivocational pastors are defined and counted. Personal and congregational circumstances vary so greatly that, while there are some similar and common dimensions of bivocational ministry, often neat categorizing for reporting purposes is not easy.

While some research puts bivocational percentages ranging between 13 and 22 percent in the 1960s and 1970s, those figures may be low if enough Black and evangelical denominations that utilize bivocational clergy in large numbers were not included.[23] Darryl W. Stephens has done the most recent pulling together of research data on the number of bivocational clergy. He reports that over one-third of U.S. congregations are served by a bivocational pastor, and 30 percent of seminary graduates in North America plan to have a bivocational ministry.[24] There is no statistical evidence that the percentages are increasing even though many church leaders see bivocational ministry as critical to the future. Few denominations track numbers for bivocational clergy though sometimes it is possible to monitor churches without a full-time pastor. The Church of the Nazarene, with their history of bivocational clergy, began tracking the number in 2013. There has been modest fluctuation from year to year, but the percentage of churches served by a bivocational pastor was 41 percent both in 2013 and 2019.[25] The largest Protestant denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist

Stephens reports that over one-third of U.S. congregations are served by a bivocational pastor, and 30 percent of seminary graduates in North America plan to have a bivocational ministry.

23 Dean Hoge, Jackson W. Carroll, and Francis K. Scheets, *Patterns of Parish Leadership: Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 24.

24 Darryl W. Stephens, "Introduction," and "Preparing to Educate for a Thriving Bivocational Ministry," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 2, 226. Stephens draws from the research of Jo Ann Deasy reported in the same volume, "The Multivocational Plans of Students in Graduate Theological Education," 253-275, as well as National Congregations Study findings. He also engages a significant article, Samuel L. Perry and Cyrus Schleifer, "Are Bivocational Clergy Becoming the New Normal?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 2 (2019): 513-525.

25 Research Office, Church of the Nazarene. Some figures from the early 2000s broken down by some denominations and theological traditions is in Carroll, *God's Potters*, 82.

Convention, depends on many bivocational pastors. We do not have trend data, but we do have the bivocational numbers for 2019 for the 79 percent of their 49,843 churches that reported both worship attendance and pastor status.[26] Their figures show what is probably typical across traditions in that bivocational clergy are primarily, though not exclusively, in smaller congregations (see table 1).

Table 1. Over a third of Southern Baptist churches with 50 or fewer worshipers were served by bivocational pastors in 2019.

Average Worship Attendance Range	2019 reporting churches	Number of Churches with Bivocational Pastors	Percent of Churches with Bivocational Pastors
1,000+	561	2	0%
501-999	914	11	1%
251-500	2,342	65	3%
101-250	7,649	665	9%
51-100	10,468	2,433	23%
26-50	9,991	3,459	35%
25 or fewer	7,450	2,711	36%
All reporting churches	**39,375**	**9,346**	**24%**

Source: Lifeway Research, Southern Baptist Convention

Perceptions of Bivocational Ministry

Perceptions of bivocational ministry seem to vary considerably depending on whether people are responding to bivocational ministry already present or to the prospect of bivocational ministry for them as an option. Bivocational pastors stress the strengths of their teamwork with laity, a chance to live out their ministry, additional income, the ability to stay close to the experience of laity through their secular work and feeling greater freedom in preaching and interactions with laity given their separate source of primary income. They also name the challenges of inadequate income, the need for accessible training, denominational structures that do not account for bivocational clergy, and the pressures from limited time to devote to their ministry.[27]

26 Lifeway Research, Southern Baptist Convention.

27 Cassell, "Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church: The Gift of Multivocational Pastors," 19.

A different picture emerges when clergy and laity are asked about the possibility of practicing bivocational ministry for themselves as a pastor or congregation. While survey data is limited, it tends to be consistent that the prospect of bivocational ministry is viewed by clergy and laity with caution and ambivalence. It is one of those things that people think may be wonderful for others but not for themselves. Some responses that capture lay attitudes include that it "should be encouraged in some cases but not generally" and that it is "a regrettable but financially necessary development." We know that the same type of reluctance comes when a congregation is asked about the possibility of sharing their pastor with another congregation. When such decisions are presented as stand-alone options, it is not possible for people to put the option in a broader context of competing values and commitments.[28]

Bivocational Ministry as a Mission Strategy

Much of the talk of bivocational ministry is driven by financial considerations. Congregations that no longer can support a full-time pastor often turn to bivocational pastors. At the same time, bivocational pastors name the extra income from the church as a positive feature of bivocational ministry. However, there are many circumstances in which finances are relevant, but there is a more missional imperative behind the enlistment, training, and deployment of bivocational pastors. Some traditions find that available and credentialed clergy are not effective in reaching constituencies for which they have little to no cultural and social affinity or understanding. In some cases, the issue is as simple as clergy not knowing the language of the group for whom ministry is desired. Beyond language, often matters of race, class, and education are so different between available clergy and the new arenas of mission that effectiveness is limited. Hartness M. Samushonga, writing about bivocational ministry in the British context, speaks of how bivocational clergy are beneficial in offering "ministry in a style and expression congruent with working-class culture."[29] Bivocational pastors are often more adept than other clergy in starting new faith communities among immigrant and other constituencies often not reached well by established church traditions.

28 Hoge, et al., *Patterns of Parish Leadership,* 105. Stephens, "Preparing to Educate for a Thriving Bivocational Ministry," 231-232, 244.

29 Hartness M. Samushonga, "British Perspectives on Bivocational Ministry," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 45.

Bivocational clergy often bring strong community connections as well as the possibility of longevity in communities where churches often see a rapid turnover of pastors served by those without local ties and seeking to serve larger churches. This excerpt from an obituary in a weekly county newspaper in Mississippi illustrates just how local and connected some bivocational pastors are.

> Johnny Ray (not the real name) was well known in central Mississippi not only as a pastor and carpenter but also as an avid and dedicated community activist. He was pastor of Center Church for twenty years thus making him the longest tenured pastor at one church in the county's modern history. He led the church in a total remodeling of the sanctuary and later a fellowship hall addition. A talented and caring pastor, he was dedicated to serving not only his church congregations but also the youth, elderly, and sick in the county. Johnny Ray was the current president of the county livestock association and one of the most active in 4-H activities. A cattleman and horse lover, Johnny Ray had been a member of the Mississippi Cattleman's Association for years. He had a passion for John Deere tractors and owned several vintage machines. A talented carpenter, he built and remodeled houses and barns all over central Mississippi. He was a Master Mason.

This description not only illustrates the connectedness of some bivocational clergy, but also points to a downside to locally-rooted ministry so closely tied to the culture and mores of the society. Some worry that these pastors do not bring sufficient critical distance from the social and cultural assumptions that are accepted as givens among the people and which outsiders might see as injustices. This is certainly possible and occurs in some cases. There surely is a continuum on which most clergy fall between such cultural distance from the context that effective ministry is not possible on one end, and such cultural identity with the context that effective ministry is not possible on the other. The goal is to ensure sufficient cultural sensitivity and knowledge required for a genuine human connection between pastor and context so that ministry is possible. With no perfect answer to this dilemma, some are finding that when trying to reach new constituencies, it is useful to have a pastor who can have cultural identification with those whom the congregation is seeking to reach.

What Might
This Mean?

Implications for Congregations

As we have seen, bivocational ministry can be a frightening possibility for some clergy and congregations. It need not be. However, neither party can continue to function as if their situation has not changed. If the roles and responsibilities can be shaped properly, both pastor and laity can feel new life for their respective ministries. The future is just as likely to feature growth as decline, though most churches will remain relatively stable. But coming to an agreement simply about changes in hours worked by the pastor and the adjusted budget allocations for clergy will not make for a healthy future without the faithful work of visioning for shared ministry. There must be discernment, sharing of hopes and dreams, and hearing each other in order to navigate a future with hope. Such an arrangement is a covenant of shared leadership to accomplish God's will, not a contract for services rendered.

Jeffrey MacDonald has contributed much to a better understanding of part-time ministry in congregations with all its possibilities and challenges. Since his focus is on mainline congregations, much of the attention goes to those clergy and congregations making a transition into part-time or shared ministry, including bivocational ministry. One lesson from the churches he studied is that life cannot continue as before with the only change coming in a pastor spending fewer hours for the congregation. Adopting a bivocational ministry means becoming a bivocational congregation in which laity become an integral part of the ministry team. This involves a commitment by the entire congregation and not just a contract with a clergyperson.[30] Ed Peace captures this lesson in his definition of bivocational ministry as "a sharing among pastor and participants in the congregation of ministries that traditionally were done only by the pastor."[31] Or as a bivocational pastor put it, "In order to hire a part-time pastor, you have to have a full-time congregation."[32]

30 G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Part-Time Is Plenty: Thriving Without Full-Time Clergy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020).

31 Ed Peace, "The Bivocational Congregation," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 188.

32 Cassell, "Part-time Pastor; Full-time Church: The Gift of Multivocational Pastors," 19.

Implications for Denominations

Denominational traditions in which churches having a full-time pastor has been the desired norm, even if never met completely, make almost no provisions in planning events, training, and education for bivocational pastors. But such pastors have commitments and limitations quite unlike full-time pastors. Some traditions in which bivocational ministry is most common do attempt to recognize the unavailability of clergy for meetings and training during the work week in sharp contrast to other denominations in which such considerations are nonexistent. However, even in denominations in which half or more of churches are served part-time, there are limited resources and training designed specifically for bivocational pastors. In addition, some mainline denominations have policies that discourage or limit their ordained clergy from having employment outside the congregation. Others discourage part-time service by requiring special permission to serve less than full time.

Even denominations with strong records on justice and equity across their diverse leaders and constituents often have not examined policies that may make life more difficult for their part-time pastors.

Even denominations with strong records on justice and equity across their diverse leaders and constituents often have not examined policies that may make life more difficult for their part-time pastors. This is a complex subject but not one that eludes logical examination by judicatories. One common dilemma for part-time workers in general in our society is access to benefits such as health insurance and pension plans. Denominations, judicatories, and congregations have differing policies regarding who qualifies for benefits as do benefit agencies and governmental regulations. The key decision-makers regarding benefits may vary due to polity or other regulations. In some cases, part of the rationale for a congregation to transition to a part-time pastor is to avoid requirements to pay benefits that often represent a far greater portion of total compensation than even a few years ago.

It is true that bivocational clergy often have benefits through their secular employment. Still others who have “retirement” as their “other vocation” may have no need for benefits. However, it would be well to understand what options those bivocational clergy who fall between the cracks of existing programs may have or what may be made

available through changes in denominational, judicatory, or congregational policies. In one denomination for which we had available data and with a mandatory retirement age of 72, the retirement age for part-time clergy was age 70 compared to 67 for full-time clergy.[33] Sometimes a higher retirement age indicates fewer provisions for retirement income.

Apart from the limitations of scheduling, training, and policies, many bivocational pastors speak of their marginalization as "less than" full-time clergy as what hurts the most. A perennial concern is that clergy who practice bivocational ministry often experience lowered or demeaned status from colleagues and society. Somehow their ministry is viewed as "not as good" as that of full-time clergy. Some even feel that other clergy see them as those who failed to "make it" full time or even as having "left the ministry."[34]

The sense that a "real church" has its own full-time pastor is deeply ingrained in the self-understanding of many churches.

Congregations sometimes experience a sense of failure when they move from a full-time pastor to a part-time pastor. The sense that a "real church" has its own full-time pastor is deeply ingrained in the self-understanding of many churches. Denominations have often fostered this attitude as they encouraged churches that previously shared a pastor to become self-sufficient as a stand-alone congregation or churches with a part-time pastor to "go full-time." Those encouragements were based on a context in which many churches were indeed growing sufficiently to move from part-time pastors to full-time pastors as their resources expanded. Few churches today can move from part-time to full-time, but the idea that such a move would be ideal remains. Denominations helped create the full-time ideal, and they now need to help foster a culture in which vital ministry is described and assessed in ways other than how many hours are designated for the pastor's work in the congregation. Both the laity and pastors of these usually smaller congregations need the affirmation and some new language and images to describe a fruitful ministry and congregation.

33 In the United Methodist Church, pastors who complete the denominational Course of Study program instead of a seminary degree are called "local pastors." There are approximately 7,000 local pastors who are either "full-time local pastors" or "part-time local pastors." In 2021, the average retirement age for full-time local pastors was 67, and for part-time it was 70. For elders (approximately 11,000, typically with seminary-degrees and overwhelmingly full-time), the average retirement age was also 67. Data from Wespath Benefits and Investments, the pension agency of the United Methodist Church. *Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church, 2022 Report* (Washington, DC: Lewis Center for Church Leadership, 2022), 23.

34 Carroll and Wilson, *Too Many Pastors?* 132.

Implications for Seminaries

Most seminaries have changed over the last fifty years in their delivery systems for their degree offerings. Much of that has been caused by changes in their students. New diversity in most student bodies required changes in systems designed for previous demographics. An enrollment made up of predominantly residential full-time students gave way to more part-time students. Some changes came from the increasing age of seminarians as "second career" students entered. The higher cost of theological education with higher percentages of the cost carried by students in the less well-endowed schools required more students to have church or secular jobs during their education. For these students, evening classes and sometimes weekend classes were needed. With the resources of the internet, many schools began online and hybrid classes that the pandemic moved to a higher priority even for schools most resistant to distance learning. Seminaries today mirror changes in religious leadership occurring across many traditions in which those pursuing clergy education are more diverse, older, and likely already to be in ministry. The contours of their vocational plans are varied as well. Bivocational and other part-time ministry are now realities facing more and more seminaries.

As striking as the changing needs of seminarians in degree programs in schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), even more changes are taking place outside of ATS. Those seeking education for their bivocational and lay worker ministries are increasingly looking to other schools and providers of ministry education. We certainly know that persons in need of such training far outnumber those currently enrolled in degree programs at ATS schools. One important question for any theological school regards the scope of the constituents they seek to serve. Many schools began to provide the education required for students to be approved for pastoral ministry in one or more denominations. Today most schools serve multiple denominations as well as non-denominational students. The vocational plans of those students range broadly. Not all are seeking ordination or full-time ministry employment.

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A related question faced by seminaries and denominations is where and by whom should various types of ministry preparation be offered? For students seeking ordination and full-time ministry, denominations have looked to seminaries to provide the basic graduate theological degree. The denominations then were seen as responsible for follow-up orientation, training, mentoring, and supervision as new clergy make the transition from seminary to full-time ministry. The situation is more complex today. Along with the presence of bivocational clergy, there is a greater presence in some denominations of various types of "lay pastors." Denominations are increasingly developing alternative ways to meet educational requirements for clergy standing within the denomination. Some of the alternate routes engage theological schools, and some do not. Training for the "lay pastor" categories normally is limited and is provided by denominations or judicatories.

If one thinks of the religious workforce as those that congregations "employ and deploy" to accomplish their missions, the potential constituency for theological schools is even more expansive and diverse. Much of the growth in church employees has come in recent decades from lay staff, not clergy. One factor is the increasing concentration of worshipers in the largest of churches. These churches not only have multiple clergy but even more lay staff. Many of the lay staff hold ministry positions both as full-time and part-time staff. They often have secular training related to their ministry areas, but most have not had graduate theological education. Even among smaller congregations, increasing numbers of laity are assuming ministry roles for which they do not have specific training.

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The need for both theological education and practical skills will require the gifts and resources of seminaries, denominations, and perhaps other partners. Each will need to expand and enhance their capabilities. Determining what is proper and fitting to the calling of each partner is essential. Collaboration in making these judgments will be important. Kathleen Owens develops three focus areas needed for bivocational clergy: discernment of gifts, education and training, and ongoing support.[35] Denominations are in a better position to accomplish the discernment of

35 Kathleen Owens, "Empowering the Full Body of Christ," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 219-223. She cites a related discussion covering some of these categories in MacDonald, *Part-Time Is Plenty*, 111-132.

gifts and ongoing support components. While seminaries may be the appropriate providers for education and training, aspects of this work would benefit from gifted practitioners who become colleagues in this educational pursuit.

All that seminaries have learned through their efforts to make theological education more accessible will benefit them in expanding the reach of the mission. Technology will continue to be an ally if used appropriately. At the same time, theological schools will probably need to go beyond accessibility adaptations to a traditional educational program to meet new needs. Delivery systems and the cost of them will continue to be critical. But more serious matters of what is taught and how it is taught are being raised by students who often are already in ministry, need help with integration of their learning with their current ministry, and can learn in manageable units that are culturally relevant.

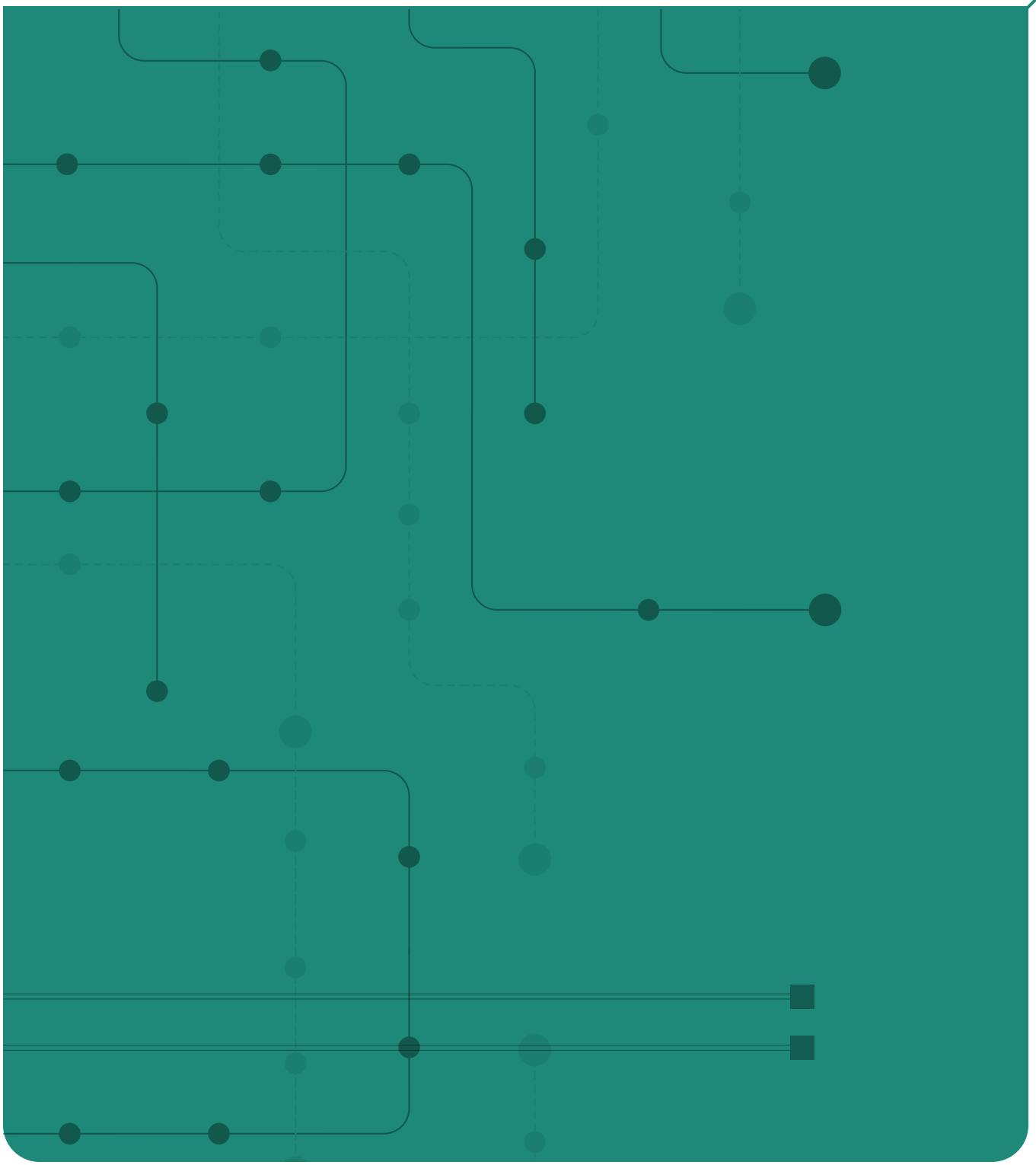
Perhaps the educational challenge is at the heart of the future of vital bivocational ministry. Daniel Aleshire is correct to ask, "Can theological schools continue to operate alternative educational models out of their back pockets as these models become increasingly dominant?"[36] It is not possible. That is why seminaries need serious engagement with their mission and constituencies. It will not be easy. Much more is at stake than bivocational ministry. What is at stake is the relevance and viability of theological education in a social and religious landscape that has changed so much since the founding mindsets of most seminaries when they were established. Seminaries are "in between" institutions with built in tensions inherent in the first place. Taking sides in tensions between academy and church is not useful. Today requires greater creativity and a deeper confrontation with many cultural, social, and racial biases that may underlie inherited practices.

36 Quoted in Darryl W. Stephens, "Reimagining Theological Education with a Multivocational Mindset," in *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephens (Chicago, IL: ATLA Open Press, 2022), 330.

Conclusion

The renewed interest in bivocational ministry today arises from multiple trends primarily on the "demand" side of the equation as more and more congregations are unable to achieve or sustain the financial resources needed to provide for a full-time pastor. Such need for less than full time pastoral leaders will only increase, at least for several more decades. On the "supply" side, many seminarians are open to ministries other than full-time congregational ministry. Some bring secular work that they wish to continue even as they take on ministry roles. Others understand that the ministry they envision for themselves may require income from secular work due to the circumstances of the communities in which they seek to serve. Beyond seminarians, laity are being called to a church ministry in addition to their current employment. Still other laity are being encouraged by congregations or judicatory leaders to consider such ministry because of both their gifts for ministry and the needs of churches.

Bivocational ministry is one lane in the pathway to the future that needs careful and sustained attention. There is much history and experience from which to draw for it to be practiced in ways that sustain and enrich both congregations and pastors. Perhaps the first step is to develop new mental models of what faithful and fruitful pastoral ministry looks like today in ways that are far more expansive and inclusive than more limited images that shape current policies and practices.



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