



ARE YOU CALLED TO BI-VOCATIONAL MINISTRY?

If you contacted most Free Will Baptist promotional directors across the United States, you would likely find each state has five to eight churches needing a pastor. On average, 40 churches leave the National Association of Free Will Baptists each year. I suspect many of these churches have been unsuccessful securing Free Will Baptist pastors and closed or left the denomination as a result.

Increasingly, many churches are unable to provide full-time compensation to a pastor or to support him adequately (e.g., health insurance, housing, retirement). This is not just a Free Will Baptist problem. Recently Christianity Today published an article entitled, “Here Come the Skinny Cows”¹ from the book, *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics*.² In this book, Mark DeYamaz described how the economic situation for churches has changed and will continue to change, creating financial challenges for churches in the United States. These challenges will be compounded if churches lose tax exemption, an idea likely to be discussed in the future³ and may become a reality.

One way to address these challenges is for more men to answer the call to bi-vocational ministry. Many have already answered this call. In a recent survey of Free Will Baptist pastors, 32% reported being bi-vocational.⁴ However, there seems to be a stigma toward bi-vocational ministry. Gilder points to the misconception that bi-vocational ministers “lack the faith” to do full-time ministry. Others suggest bi-vocational pastors lack the skills needed to pastor a larger church. There may also be a stigma toward churches that need a minister to serve in a bi-vocational capacity. For example, some believe a small congregation does not deserve to be called a church unless it is a certain size and capable of offering a full menu of activities.⁵ If this attitude prevails, some pastors may be unwilling to serve bi-vocationally, and some churches may assume they are ineffective when the trend is for fewer people to attend church and do so infrequently.⁶

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However, the tide of bi-vocational ministry may be turning. Thom Rainer has written positively about what he termed the “marketplace pastor,” someone who works bi-vocationally.⁷ Many marketplace pastors serve churches that could offer full-time compensation. This pastor chooses to work in the community where they often have opportunities to share the gospel they would not have in full-time ministry.

These pastors tend to have a high work capacity and extraordinary leadership skills. Since they are not financially dependent upon a church, they often guide change more efficiently and have longer pastorates. They have more freedom to deal with critics and are found in churches with a wide range of sizes. These pastors tend to pursue ministry and theological training online. Are you called to this type of ministry? Let’s consider how this might look.

Ministry Models

The stigma associated with bi-vocational ministry is foreign to me. As a child, I grew up in a church quite large by Free Will Baptist standards. That church was pastored for many years by David Paramore, and for many of those years, he was bi-vocational. I observed the ease with which he worked with people, and I suspect those skills were enhanced by working with people outside of the church.

Before I was a pastor, I was a staff psychologist at a correctional facility. The program manager for the facility was a bi-vocational Methodist minister. I observed him as he faced various crises, interspersed with occasional church activities. I also observed his discipline and time management skills. For him, bi-vocational ministry worked.

I learned many valuable lessons from these men and began to put them into practice before I realized it. Throughout my university training and early work as a professor, I also worked with youth at our church. When a church asked me to consider serving as pastor, it seemed natural to serve as a bi-vocational pastor while simultaneously working as a professor and later as a college administrator.

However, I too may have been influenced by the negative view of bi-vocational ministry. I set a personal goal (which I kept to myself) to be bi-vocational for three years, after which time I would only work in the church. But as I continued in a bi-vocational capacity, I came to feel called to minister bi-vocationally or even multi-vocationally. Over time, I learned the following important realities of bi-vocational ministry:

Effective bi-vocational ministry is embraced. Bi-vocational ministry must not be seen only as a solution for meeting financial challenges. This type of ministry has great value. Perhaps the Apostle Paul is the most obvious example (Acts 18:3) as he used tentmaking to support his ministry. Paul embraced this mode of ministry, so he would not have to be dependent upon others; it was also a way of personally giving back to the ministry (Acts 20:33-35). He understood the minister was worthy to be paid for his services (1 Corinthians 9:13-14), but the method he chose (1 Corinthians 9:19) allowed him to be more independent and to give to others (1 Corinthians 9:23).

Those who excel in bi-vocational ministry enjoy a variety of work as they live out Psalm 37:4. I too experienced this. I enjoyed my work, first as a professor and later as an administrator. I also learned a great deal in the educational and counseling world that helped me become more effective in the ministry. For that reason, I continued to work bi-vocationally long after those three years passed.

Effective bi-vocational ministry opens doors. When we are effective in the secular world, we find doors opened for us. Sometimes, we interact with people and go places we might never have a chance to go as a minister. My pastor, David Paramore, described how he had Bible studies in the factory where he worked. It is unlikely he would have done that as

a full-time minister. I was standing beside the previously-mentioned Methodist pastor, Don Burns, when he was struck during a melee at a correctional institute. The incident presented an opportunity to turn the other cheek for all of us. In a bi-vocational capacity, we spend time with people who might never walk inside of our churches.

Effective bi-vocational ministry enhances outreach. Being in the world may put you into a better position to prepare your congregation for the world they face. As a bi-vocational pastor it is impossible to cocoon away from society. You really know what the world is like and what your congregation deals with regularly.

Bi-vocational ministers also have a good understanding of the call to unity found in Ephesians 4:3-7, especially in those environments where Christians are not prevalent. Working in a secular environment gives one a greater appreciation for the Christians with whom they interact in the workplace.

Effective bi-vocational ministry is manageable. Being a bi-vocational pastor does not negate the need for a Sabbath. Genesis 2:3 remains true, so if one is to minister in this way, he must learn how to set boundaries and manage time well (Ephesians 5:16). Indeed, our most valuable asset is time. Working in this manner (effectively) forces one to think through how much time each task takes to perform while weighing the benefits of the task. You should find yourself assessing regularly. Unfortunately, one could work a 14-hour day and fail to do the work God has called him to do.

Effective bi-vocational ministry must be conducted with excellence. An effective bi-vocational pastor will have written, biblical goals like those found in 1 Timothy 4:1-16 (preaching, teaching, discipling, evangelizing, mentoring) and plan time accordingly. Further, one can't neglect training and preparing the laity for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Being a bi-vocational pastor cannot become an excuse for being slack or sloppy in either arena. We are called to do everything with excellence (1 Corinthians 10:31). We must do this in the secular world, or we negate our influence (Ephesians 6:5-8). We must do this in our ministry as well. We preach well (2 Timothy 4:2), visit well (James 1:27), do ministry well, and mentor well (Ephesians 4; 1 Timothy 1).

Whether full time or bi-vocational, let us do well and advance the Kingdom.

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¹ M. Deymaz, & H. Li. [Here Come the Skinny Cows: Four Reasons Tithes and Offerings Are About to Drop Dramatically](#). *Christianity Today*.

² M. DeYamaz, H. Li. *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics: Why Tithes and Offerings Are No Longer Enough, and What You Can Do about It*. Baker, 2019.

³ M. Oppenheimer. [Now's the Time to End Tax Exemptions for Religious Institutions](#). *Time*, June 28, 2015.

⁴ [Survey of Free Will Baptist Pastors](#), NAFWB Denominational Research Committee, July 2019.

⁵ R. Gilder: [Eight Reasons to Be a Bi-vocational Pastor](#)

⁶ Pew Research Center: [In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace](#)

⁷ T. Rainer. [The New Marketplace Pastor](#)

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