

Bivocational Ministry Emerging As Option

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ALPHARETTA, Ga. (BP)--In the small town of Gladeville, Tenn., more than a thousand people gather every Sunday to hear a pastor who earns his living with a fulltime job elsewhere.

In Oklahoma City, Leon Wilson planted a congregation that grew to 600 members while he operated a used truck sales business. And in Cushing, Okla., Larry Lehr finds dynamic synergy in his dual roles as pastor of the slightly smaller Council Valley Baptist Church and his secular profession as a marketing coordinator for an educational institution in nearby Drumright.

For at least half a century in Southern Baptist life, according to these leaders in bivocational ministry, there has been a perceived pride on behalf of both pastors and churches in what is commonly called "fulltime" ministry -- in which the pastor of a church has no other employment. In fact, only 60-65 percent of churches have what bivocational ministers prefer to call "fully funded" pastors.

A modern movement advocating "intentional" bivocational ministry is based on the concept that even in cases when churches can afford fully funded leadership, it may not be the ideal. And if new churches are to be started at the accelerated rate needed to reach the nation, they may just be an extravagance.

"The reality is that those churches will have to be started and staffed by laypeople or bivocational ministers," said Wilson, who now serves as a national missionary for bivocational church planting with the North American Mission Board. "The challenge is to make such ministry just as valued and respected as those who are fully funded.

"The idea is not to try to get rid of this external job," Wilson added. "It's to build the church and to build the ministry."

The path to the realization of bivocational ministry as God's ideal in a particular situation often develops over time, but Wilson and others active in the Southern Baptist Bi-vocational Ministers Association hope that more young people called to ministry will accept the calling early enough to prepare for their dual careers in their education.

"As God calls young men into ministry, we need to help them understand that bivocational ministry is a viable option and they perhaps need to gain some marketable skills as they go through their training," said Richard Harris, NAMB's vice president for church planting.

For Wilson, the realization came after 20 years in the pastorate when he decided he would have to seek some other way of fulfilling his calling.

"I knew two things: God had called me to preach, but God had given me a family," he said. "And I knew he didn't want me to destroy one to do the other."

First he went back to his home in Oklahoma and got involved in the family business, Wilson Truck Sales. Shortly thereafter he decided to start a church, beginning with 13 people meeting in a home.

As South Park Baptist Church grew, Wilson began to realize that even when it reached the point it could support a fully funded pastor he saw no reason to leave his other secular career. Part of the appeal was that regular contact with the outside world kept him in touch with the world of his people and gave him experience dealing with people outside the church.

"I think every pastor needs five years out in the secular world," he said. "I found out what the real life was like, and then I began to love the ministry. ... Being out in the real world and knowing what people put up with, I was able to communicate this in the way I lived and the way I speak."

The church also was able to build more buildings and pay for them as they went, freeing up other funds. "We were able to do a lot of missions projects that we could not do if we were fully funding two or three staff members," he said.

An added benefit was that staff members tended to stay longer, because they were finding the career advancement their families required through their secular employment.

For Bruce Grubbs, the dual roles as an associate vice president of corporate affairs with LifeWay Christian Resources and as pastor of Gladeville (Tenn.) Baptist Church allow him a disconnect that makes it easier to do both jobs more effectively.

"The benefit is you can walk away from one and go to the other, " he said. "There's a refreshing in that, so that you're not pushing on the same thing all the time."

Grubbs grew into his ministry as well, initially accepting an interim pastorate of the small country church 14 years ago while serving on LifeWay's staff -- a common practice among ordained ministers who work with a denominational entity.

But when the time came for the church to call a fully funded pastor, the church balked. A candidate presented "in view of a call" was voted down -- not as much because they didn't like him, Grubbs said, as because they ultimately weren't comfortable with going back to having a fully funded pastor.

"Over the course of four years the people had learned how to do ministry," he said, noting a primary role of the pastor at that time was pastoral care, and deacons had stepped into that role effectively. "It was theirs to do, and they didn't have to hire someone to get it done."

Grubbs agreed to stay on as pastor, with a role limited largely to vision-casting, coordination of staff and preaching. And because they are not relying on staff to do the ministry, laypeople were empowered to lead ministries.

In another common benefit of bivocational ministry, Grubbs said his limited role also allows him to minister only in the areas where he is most gifted, he said. Leadership and preaching are his primary gifts, while pastoral care is not, he said. The same dynamics are present in other fully funded pastors, he said, but they don't have the option of limiting their role.

It's a model that could benefit many pastors and churches, he said, if the existing Southern Baptist culture were more accepting of bivocational ministry as a norm.

"A lot of it has to do with church pride. When you get out in the associations, churches are prideful of being 'fulltime' and having a fulltime pastor," he said.

"Some of it is actually pride on the part of ministerial people," he added. "A whole bunch of people think themselves to be fulltime, but actually they are underemployed, undercompensated, and it's not two years before they're heartbroken or their families are in trouble. They're brooding over a church situation that doesn't require them to do all that they can do."

Lehr, who serves as marketing coordinator for the Central Technology Center in Drumright, Okla., said he found himself getting a job in the career he trained for in college while ministering bivocationally first as an evangelist, then as a pastor. He's been at Council Valley Baptist church in Cushing, Okla., for 17 years.

"We've reached a point where we could look at making that a fully funded position, but I've asked the church not to do so because I feel those funds could be put to better use in ministry," he said. "We don't even talk about it anymore. It's assumed that we get a lot more done for the Lord when we concentrate on ministries and I keep my job."

The key issue, he said, is that God calls many men to be bivocational pastors just as he calls others to fully funded positions. The biblical example, he points out, is actually much more skewed to bivocational leadership.

"I wish people would understand that if God calls men to be bivocational ministers, that means he had a purpose in churches being bivocational rather than calling fully funded pastors," he said. "The beauty of the bivocational ministry is that people in the church have to be involved in the ministry."

Another issue noted by all of the men is that bivocational pastors tend to be more stable in their ministries, freed from both the lure of higher-paying positions and what Lehr called the "tyranny of the church."

"If it isn't working, [the bivocational pastor] is in a lot better position to admit that and move on," he said. "And his family doesn't have to worry about making the mortgage payment and having food on the table."

Lehr said both of his dual roles also have complemented each other. He's been able to translate the interpersonal skills he's learned as a pastor to the workplace, and the technical and marketing knowledge he's gained from his secular profession have made him a much more effective pastor.

"We've got a lot of one-dimensional people in the world, and the beauty of this is you get to be a three-dimensional person -- with the secular job, the pastorate and your personal life," he said.

To learn more about bivocational ministry, visit www.bivocationalnetwork.org, an Internet resource for bivocational ministers. Wilson also can be contacted at lwilson@namb.net.

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