

A bivocational minister warns against bivocational ministry

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I started as a parish associate at Rivermont Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga this week. I'm excited about it, but I have to say, my family is holding their breath. They didn't allow me to enter into this agreement without a series of promises that outweighed my ordination vows with their urgency. ("Do you promise to take your day off? Will you say 'no' when you need to?")

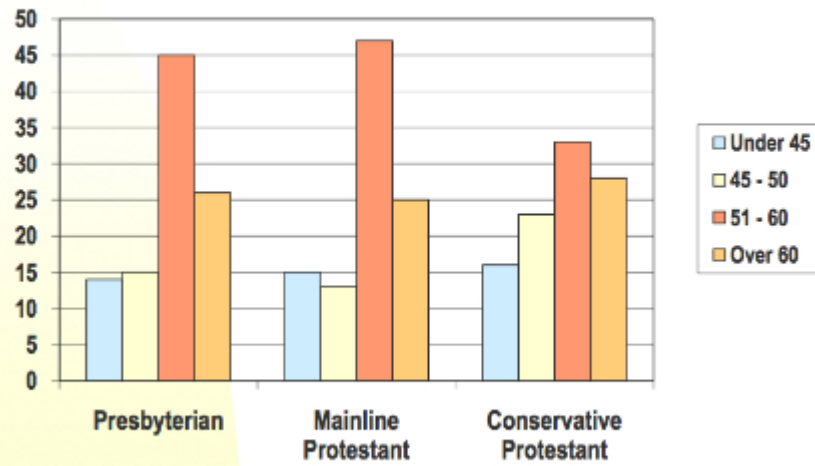
I write, speak, and consult a lot already, but I had a bit of a lull between now and when my next book comes out, so it seemed like the perfect opportunity to jump back into bi-vocational ministry. But, I jump into it with a bit of trepidation, and I think that our churches should have some concern as well.

We know that there's a crisis right now, as many (perhaps roughly half, and some say 70%) of our congregations can no longer afford a full-time minister. We've tried different models—particularly **yoking congregations** (where two or more congregations stay as a worshipping community and a pastor goes from church to church to lead services and serve them) and **merging congregations** (When two or more congregations combine into one). Now, it seems that bi-vocational ministry is all the rage... at least in our minds. I have written about this before, but it's good to keep reflecting on it.

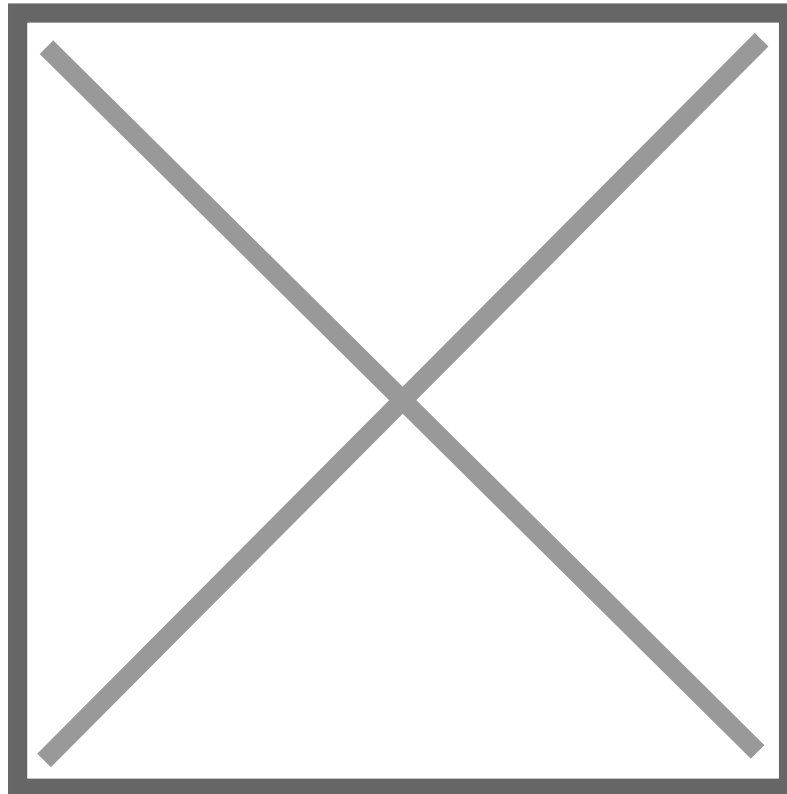
I am bi-vocational. I love it. I feel called to it. I know what people say in support of it. I know that many of our African American and immigrant pastors have been bi-vocational for a long time. But I want to raise a red flag against the model as a path to our vital future, for the following reasons:

There is a bottleneck of ministers, which may soon be a shortage. I have pointed out charts like these before:

Age of Clergy by Faith Tradition



U.S. CONGREGATIONS



I think it's an important to keep going back to them. They are a few years old now, but the lessons remain. In the next ten years, about 70% of our pastors will be at retirement age. So if we tell our pastors who are entering the ministry that they need to get part-time jobs, it may not be sustainable for them. Many will end up going into the other career, when a full-time position is available.

So what will we do in the next ten years, if we have choked out all of the available pastors in this bottleneck and the shortage comes upon us? Even if we simply plan for 70% of our positions to go away as 70% of our pastors retire, we will still need the 30% who are left.

We will not be able to sustain our educational, internship and ordination requirements. When I went to school, most people who borrowed money were leaving with \$40k of debt. That was 15 years ago. The costs have gone up while some seminaries have provided less tuition support. On top of it, we ask our students to do internships and Clinical Pastoral Education, without any consideration of the costs. Often the three-year degree takes four. How can we ask students to go through all of those requirements and expense, and then say that they are only going to get a part-time job at the end of it?

Part-time work has a different sort of commitment level. Part-time pastors love to say, “There is no such thing as a part-time pastorate!” Our calling is to serve God and serve people, and so most of us would do it, no matter what the check looked like at the end of the week. I understand the sentiment. It’s not as if we’re going to be on the phone with Margaret, listening to how she found her husband without a pulse on the bathroom floor, and interrupt her with “I would love to be there with you, but it’s time to punch the clock. My hours are up this week.”

But if you’re expected to make a living doing something else, then there should be a different commitment level with part time. Your other job will need some energy.

Your family and your personal life outside of church need nurturing. I am part of a [Red Letter Christians](#) group--people who work and speak about social justice issues. Tony Campolo reminds us that there are only so many hours in a day, “You’re going to have to steal from your family or steal from God,” Campolo told us, “So you better learn how to steal from God, because God can handle it.”

We have enough. I know that we cry about not having enough money, and we certainly don’t have enough money to be doing things in the same way, but our denominations have great abundance. We have property, assets, and foundations. We have wealthy members. In many denominations (like the PCUSA), there are great income disparities among our clergy. One pastor is living off food stamps while her neighbor makes six figures. Sometimes they’re on the staff of the same church.

To be starving off our leadership seems like a determination to dwindle. We can do without a lot of things, but it would be difficult for us to thrive without our pastors. We have enough, can't we learn to be creative and support our clergy?