

You are a pastor

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It feels like I'm always constructing my bio. Whether it's for a 140-character Twitter account, a description for a conference, a display of credentials for a consulting client, or meeting someone for the first time, I am always trying to articulate who I am.

As a writer, I have to be caught up in the marketing bit of it. I get odd advice. One agent said he'd like it if I didn't use capital letters when I signed my name and I employed the occupational descriptor, "servant." That was not exactly the empowering, feminist, kick-butt message I wanted to communicate. He was on the cusp of retirement and didn't understand how hard it was for me to claim the title Pastor, with a capital "P," after being told that how I perform certain biological functions made me unacceptable for the vocation.

The agent said he couldn't figure out *what* I wanted to communicate. I was thankful that he was kind and honest. We parted ways.

You see, there are a few pieces that go into my bio. There are the ways I earn money, how I want to spend my time, and then there is my calling. Speaking, consulting, writing, and pastoring all work together, feeding off of one another in a happy ecosystem.

This is how it works. We try to have as few base expenses as possible. Most of our extra money goes into paying off our house. When I speak, I have more income, but I have less time, so a bit of money goes to domestic outsourcing (an on-call cleaner and occasional eating out). When I'm traveling a lot, I don't have as much time to write.

When I write, I have less money, but I don't get invitations to speak unless I'm pounding out words. So when I'm writing, I cook and garden a lot, to cut down on other expenses. Sometimes I paint, because I can usually sell a watercolor for a couple hundred dollars, if we need it.

Being a pastor informs it all. It's my vocation. The manure in the vegetable garden. All of this makes sense, in my day-to-day work. But it becomes complicated when I tell someone that I'm a pastor, and they want to know where I serve. I preach, administer the sacraments, and provide a great deal of pastoral care, just not to one congregation.

I'm writing this, not just to be self-indulgent in my confusing vocational identity, but because I know I'm not alone. There are a lot of scrappers out there, who use their wits and entrepreneurial vigor to live into their calling. Seminary students are increasingly being asked to be innovative, bi-vocational, and create their own calls. With the decrease in the number of stable positions, it's important that we train apostles and tent-makers as well as pastors.

As clergy couples, we often end up as a trailing spouse. There aren't a lot of positions and sometimes a "prophet is without honor in her hometown," so the church next door ends up hiring a pastor from across the country, even if our resumes are identical.

Since most pastoral positions haven't kept pace with other professions in terms of salary and it can be difficult to support a family and student loan debts on the minimum salary, many pastors need to be where their spouse can get a job. And, as I wrote, being geographically bound can be difficult.

Pastors are being laid off. And I mean gifted, talented, awesome, lower-case servants of God are being laid off. Churches downsize, and often their biggest expense is their minister, so they let him or her go. In the most heart-breaking cases, churches think it's the pastor's job to save the church, and when he or she can't, they fire the pastor (even if the church has been declining for forty years).

In all of this turbulence, if you're doubting your call, *you are a pastor*. This is important to know when you get out of seminary, and all of the white guys with good hair and teeth are getting hired, but you're not. Some denominations are like mine, and they have a very tiny understanding of who a pastor is, and they may not want to ordain you without a very particular position. They aren't talking with the seminaries, who seem to understand that vocations look different now. But, you are a pastor nonetheless. You might find yourself pastoring your kid's playgroup rather than a congregation. But you are a pastor. You might have lost your job or closed your church, and you don't feel fit to be a pastor. But you are a pastor. The pastoral

identity is a very difficult thing to sort out, and it can be much harder if you don't have those external cues, if you're not preaching every week to a pews full of people.

But, I'm here to tell you. You are a pastor.