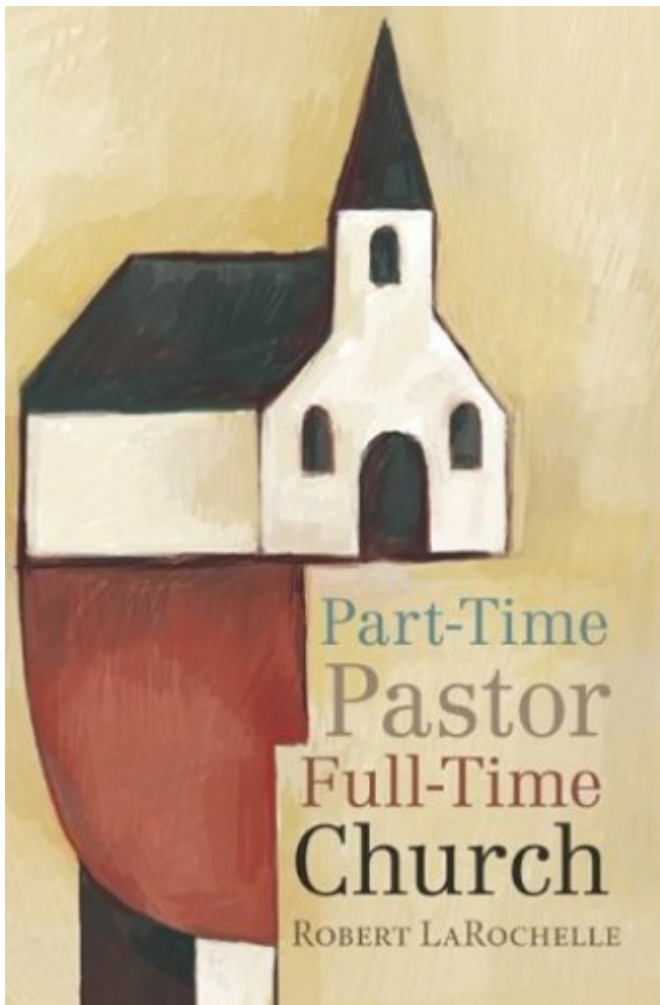


Part-Time Pastor, Full-Time Church, by Robert LaRochelle

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Part-Time Pastor, Full-Time Church

By Robert LaRochelle
Pilgrim

A majority of congregations in the United States average fewer than 100 in attendance. While some congregations manage to employ a full-time minister with the requisite M.Div. and standing in their denomination, many others can't afford this desirable arrangement. And many congregations that currently have a full-time pastor sense that the time is coming when they'll have to downsize their expectations for full-time pastoral leadership. This is especially disconcerting for mainline Protestantism, which prizes an educated ministry. Many congregations wonder if they can continue to be a vital full-time church if all they can afford is a part-time pastor.

Robert LaRochelle's *Part-Time Pastor, Full-Time Church* is an answer to the prayers of all those concerned about the future of the small church, whether they're denominational officials charged with helping congregations find pastors, local church leaders looking for ways to provide effective leadership or seminaries needing to offer appropriate educational opportunities for clergy called to bivocational ministry. In addition, this book is a gift to clergy considering such a call.

LaRochelle is a current practitioner of what he preaches—he serves as a bivocational pastor of a small United Church of Christ congregation while working full-time as a high school guidance counselor. Beyond this experience, LaRochelle draws upon the years he spent as an ordained deacon in the Roman Catholic Church. This earlier role provided him with important insights about training and about how pastors can fulfill expectations of congregations when they are also employed outside the church.

The book's premise is that congregations without a full-time pastor can be fully functioning and vital if they're willing to think creatively and plan carefully. The decreasing number of people dropping in to visit the pastor during business hours and the new technologies that allow pastors to keep in touch with members and staff without being in the office make it possible for someone to serve part-time and still give appropriate attention to the needs of the congregation.

There are trade-offs to consider—for example, part-time pastors may lack flexibility in their schedules and be less available for ecumenical and denominational meetings. But if congregations and clergy are creative and discerning, a part-time pastor can provide effective ministry so the congregation can continue to be a vital force in the community. Having served as a part-time pastor of a vibrant small

congregation that was served for much of its existence by an ordained minister who was also working as a high school math teacher, I found LaRochelle's analysis to be on target.

Small churches have always found ways of making do, but too often their solutions lead to diminishment of the congregation's ministry. If they take the shortcut of hiring whoever comes cheapest, the church can suffer mightily. Many of these congregations either drift away from their denomination or cease to exist. Therefore, whatever steps are deemed necessary to provide pastoral leadership for congregations, "the mainstream church must never back away from its responsibility to train theologically literate and pastorally skilled clergymen and clergywomen."

Churches need to take time to carefully discern who they are and what they require in a pastor, and prospective ministers need to have the right mixture of gifts and abilities that match the needs of a particular congregation. Two skill sets that LaRochelle considers to be especially important for a bivocational pastor are conflict management and executive management. With regard to the latter, even traditions that highly value the priesthood of all believers need to recognize that if the pastor does not have strong leadership abilities, the church will become rudderless and moribund.

Pastoral leadership is just one side of the coin, as these congregations will have to take on responsibilities that are often reserved for clergy—such as visiting the homebound and the hospitalized. Congregations will have to take a close look at their structures to make sure that they are flexible enough for them to work effectively with the pastor. Finally, congregations must decide what they value most in a pastor: good preaching and worship leadership, ability to advise and counsel members, effectiveness in supervising other staff members, or other qualities.

This book provides both needed analysis and concrete, practical guidance for local congregations and clergy. LaRochelle draws on his own experience to provide questions for congregations to use in assessing their own situation, including their readiness to move toward having a bivocational pastor. There are also guidelines for search committees, which, LaRochelle notes, must be very upfront about their expectations of a bivocational pastor. This is especially important for churches moving from full-time to part-time leadership.

We need effective part-time leaders because, LaRochelle reminds readers, "the mainstream church of the future" needs congregations that are "small, progressive,

and alive."