

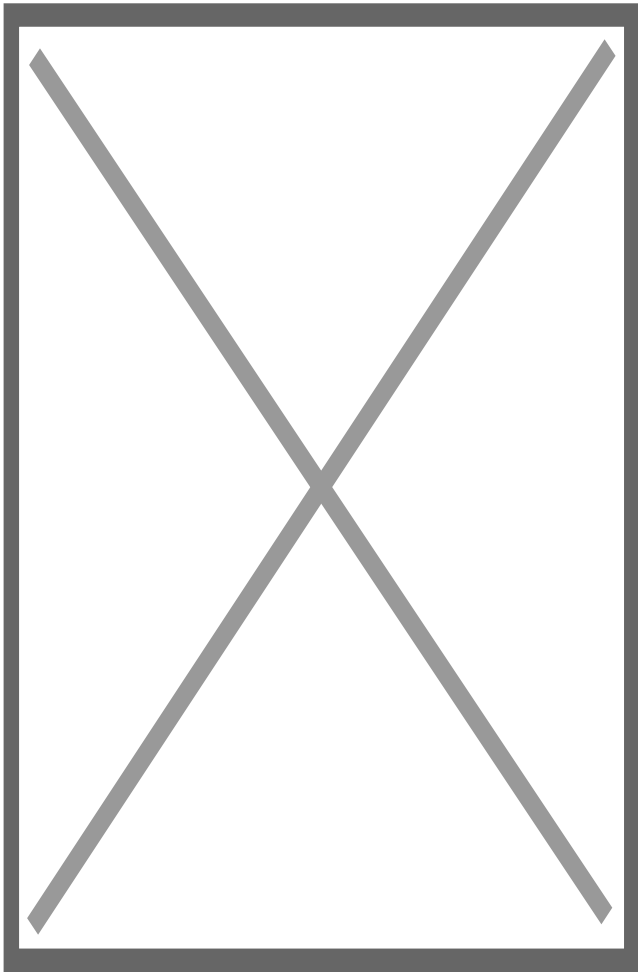
Ministry and other callings

Kristen Bentley's research indicates that there is no single right way to be a bivocational pastor.

by [Susan Willhauck](#) in the [January 2026](#) issue

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In Review



Bivocational Ministry

Field Notes for Congregations and Ministers

Kristen Plinke Bentley

Chalice

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It's difficult to determine exactly how many ministers are bivocational, but one survey estimates that one-third of US congregations have lead pastors who also hold other employment. Many other ministry personnel, such as youth pastors and Christian formation ministers, also have jobs outside the church.

The term *bivocational* has multiple meanings, notes Kristen Plinke Bentley in this excellent report on the multiple vocational callings embodied by church leaders and the ministry models that result. Bentley, who has served as a bivocational pastor and is now based at Lexington Theological Seminary, received a Lilly Endowment grant to research this model of ministry. She conducted case studies of Disciples of Christ congregations in Kentucky and expanded her research with surveys and interviews elsewhere to include 24 congregations.

Bentley's research shows that there is no single right way to do bivocational ministry, and that churches continually adapt to find new ways. People arrive at bivocational ministry through different routes, sometimes intentionally and other times through circumstances beyond their control. Bentley expands the term to include those who serve as pastors without being paid at all but who understand ministry as their highest and truest calling. She also stresses that the expression of bivocational ministry differs across various racial and ethnic contexts.

There is certainly a school of thought that views bivocational ministry as just another nail in the coffin of the church—an admission of decline and a concession to a lack of financial resources. Bentley reports that some people view bivocational ministers negatively, assuming that they fail to give adequate honor to a call from God simply for the sake of making more money. On the other hand, bivocational ministry has been around for millennia, with roots in the New Testament as the apostles supported themselves with fishing, tent making, and other professions. The professional model of ministry and the bias toward full-time ministry have never been the whole story. Unfortunately, those views have sidelined other models—models that might be a better fit for some congregations.

Bivocational ministry has unique benefits, according to Bentley's interviews. It can allow ministry leaders the flexibility they need to fulfill parenting or other family responsibilities. It can work well with a lack of geographical mobility due to a spouse's employment. It can provide small congregations with trained leadership while allowing ministers to make a sustainable living. It can help relieve clergy of student debt.

Bivocational ministry may also be more collaborative rather than pastor-centered. Because the congregation is not the minister's sole employer, the temptation to expect ministers to do it all may be reduced. The congregation's self-sufficiency may be enhanced. There may also be cross-pollination of skills from the minister's other workplace that benefits the church.

Yet bivocational ministry has its challenges. Time management, for example. Can the pastor get time off from the other job for a pastoral emergency or funeral? Exhaustion and overextending oneself are common. Boundaries are another issue. When is it appropriate for a pastor to say no? There may be perceived gaps in the ministry, with some things not getting enough attention. There can also be ethical concerns. Some denominations in the past have strongly discouraged "moonlighting" because of possible conflicts of interest. Bentley notes that one Black pastor in her study felt that the term *bivocational* was imposed on his context, making the way his congregation has always done ministry seem abnormal. She suggests that "the ideal minister for any congregation is the person whom God has gifted in the way that helps that congregation serve God best in their situation and context."

Bentley's goal is to raise up practices and perspectives that will help congregations and ministers involved in bivocational ministry to thrive. This succinct volume provides wisdom for congregations and ministers,

questions for groups, and worksheets for clarifying expectations. A fertile environment for bivocational ministry, Bentley suggests, includes lay leaders who take initiative and responsibility for worship bulletin preparation, property management, financial recordkeeping, and developing a network of congregational care. She offers practical considerations regarding compensation for pastors and discernment of gifts in the congregation. She encourages rethinking some of the ministry assessment standards geared to larger churches that do not fit well for measuring vitality in bivocational congregations, such as numbers in worship and extent of programming.

All of this practical wisdom is offered within an open-minded account of the stories and experiences of those doing the work of bivocational ministry. In Kentucky, during the pandemic, residents displayed green lights on their houses to say, “We are in this together.” The stories Bentley has collected suggest that it is time to give the green light to bivocational ministry.