



NEW CHURCHES

MULTIPLY THE MISSION.

BI-VOCATIONAL OR STAFF IN A LARGE CHURCH?

By: David Fitch

Over at our house last Friday night, we had another ‘missional’ discussion on planting communities. I discussed the value of multiple bi-vocational ministry. I said there are three good things (among many others) that come from such an arrangement of the pastoral leadership of a community.

First, multiple bi-vocational (MU-BI) ministry breeds congregational participation in the life of a church because it works against the passivity that can so easily set in on a congregation. Human beings tend to relax and allow someone else to do ‘the tasks’ of ministry whenever possible. They can become passive when they look to one person or a staff of persons to do the various tasks of church ministry. In other words, a professional, full-time clergy can actually encourage passivity in a congregation.

Second, MU-BI ministry guards against excessive organization and programming. By sheer necessity MU-BI leadership cultivates organic forms of life that arise from within the rhythms of the congregation and its surrounding neighborhoods. Bi-vocational pastors simply do not have time to strategize programs to meet the needs of the congregation. One of the participants in the Friday nite conversation talked about the mindset of working 40 hours for the church and finding that fulfilling. I responded “when we no longer see the Sunday morning gathering as attractational, we are not forced to spend 40 hours on music and programming, 40 hours on sermon prep etc. to make it “the Thing.” The gathering on Sunday instead must become an organic,

living, liturgically driven encounter with the living God and His mission sending us outward. It must become something done out of the regular rhythms of our lives. This kind of gathering takes less work because the 'slick' factor is off the table. All these gifts can now be used in the surrounding context. Think of how we can support a musician to play in local contexts and engage the community instead of perfecting a performance for the Sunday 'event.'

Third, MU-BI ministry fosters a church culture that is outward focused. It is inherent in the very dynamic of MU-BI leadership that church ministry is pushed outward from the center of the church. The pastors, after all, spend a good chunk of their week in the workplace. This gives the pastors a different mindset. So, whereas in many institutional structures the life of the church tends to be pulled into the orbit of the professional clergy, we naturally shape ministry around what is going on "out there." And as people working in the marketplace in some way, we model a missional lifestyle for our congregation.

There are several more positives - the blessing of collegiality and co-ownership of the ministry among a band of brothers and sisters cannot be over estimated, especially if you're planting a new community—the blessing of not being controlled by a few members who give a lot money for your support. No one however denies that there are many challenges and pitfalls to this kind of clergy organization.

As we were listening to these challenges, one brave soul voiced about how unrealistic this all was. He said that I (David Fitch) had not reached the ability to truly do bi-vocational ministry until I'd been in the workplace 5-6-7 years (until I was an old man of 35). He said we're in effect asking new pastors to go out and get jobs, spend several years in them, get good at them, so they become flexible and capable of earning a meaningful income sufficient to support at least half of their salary. I replied, well, yes. But look at the other option. The other option for the new seminary graduate still in his/her 20's (this demographic is getting smaller and smaller BTW) is to get out of seminary, get your first job on the staff of an established large church, be a youth pastor, worship leader etc. earn poor wages, be worked to death, never see your family or friends, and work your way up to the senior pastor job in ten years by the time you're 35 (Okay, I overstated my case). This is the standard route to senior pastor status in American church life. I said the toll this is taking on new pastors is stunning. (We can speculate why another time). One seminary reports over 90% of their grads are not in the ministry after 5 years. I said I much prefer the bi-vocational bi-ministerial route.

Is this therefore unrealistic or does it just require a set of adjusted expectations, a long view of the truly amazing missional life we can be a part of as pastors-leaders in missional communities? It requires doing seminary on a longer term basis acquiring little or no debt. (The new

MACM degrees are being built for this). I seriously think this is the way of the future.

NEWCHURCHES

MULTIPLY THE MISSION.