

## Bivocational Pastors Making a Difference in Rural America

**Gary Farley**

06-28-02

Most of the row crops have been planted. The first cutting of hay has been made. The wheat harvest is moving well to the north across the Great Plains. Cultivation is underway elsewhere. Gardens are providing fresh vegetables. Rural America is green and beautiful.

Banners along the highways announce Vacation Bible Schools and church homecomings. Beautiful, bright-eyed children line up outside the church houses preparing to march in for the VBS opening exercises. Repairs and improvements are being made on buildings and grounds. Soon more and more revival signs will appear. Prayers are being voiced and people are being contacted in preparation for the revival meeting. There is hope for harvest—material and spiritual—in the weeks to come.

We must not forget that most of the churches in America stand and serve in rural and small town places. Many, if not most, have faithfully served their community for over a century. Across the years they have waxed and waned, in part due to changes in demographics, in part do to spiritual climate changes, and in part due to the health of the local congregation.

Generally, these churches are small in membership and have limited financial resources. Few are able to pay a pastor enough to live on in today's economy. Many actually do not need the services of a pastor "full-time".

Baptists have dealt with this reality by utilizing "bivocational" pastors. These are persons who have a source of income other than the church. In most instances they have a "secular" job that provides income and benefits greater than that which they receive from the church that they serve. Others have a pension and/or investment income that makes it possible for them to do ministry with small, relatively poor congregations and still provide support for their families.

In the Baptist tradition while formal educational preparation for ministry is valued, it has not been required. So, the majority of bivocational pastors are persons who have been "called from the harvest, mentored by area pastors, and serve churches near to where they were raised and called to ministry.

While the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the closure of many Mainline Protestant rural and small town churches, Baptists gained congregations and adherents across much of rural America. Among the reasons given for this difference has been the availability and acceptance by Baptists of bivocational ministers.

This form of ministry is not without its ethical challenges—personal, professional, family, and congregational. Most bivocational ministers struggle with the allocation of their time. Demands from job, family and church often exceed the amount of time that is available. Some experience real stress and guilt as they balance these demands. Added to this is the difficulties related to finding time for personal renewal and refreshment.

Some pass up opportunities for career advancement in order to continue to serve as pastor of rural churches. Many older bivocational ministers, as they reflect upon their ministry, regret that they neglected to spend as much time with their children during the formative years as they now believe that they should have.

The joys of this set of ministers are found in the great revivals in which they have participated; the salvation of hardened sinners that they have witnessed; the little children they once nurtured who have developed into radiant Christians; the good ministers that they have mentored; and the miracles of healing they have witnessed as God has responded to their prayers.

A great strength of many bivocational ministers is that they are much like the persons to whom they minister. Often they hold similar jobs, are at the same "socio-economic" level, share a common world

view, grew up in the same “pre-modern” sub-culture, and have similar levels of educational attainment. This appears to help these pastors communicate to and identify with the concerns of the members of the churches they serve.

However, this strength can allow a pastor to be blind to other ethical issues, to operate with an antiquated hermeneutic, and to hold to a flawed epistemology. The response of some to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and to the “conservative correction” among Southern Baptists of the 1990s is illustrative of this weakness.

Lacking an adequate educational preparation for ministry, some bivocational ministers simply “parrot” the thoughts and phrases of local patriarchs and denominational leaders rather than becoming a well-equipped “prophet.” Just here is the major flaw in our approach to rural ministry. Providing opportunities for bivocational ministers to learn how to interpret Scripture and to distinguish between the eternal truth of God and the cultural distortions of it, remains a critical task for the Baptist movement.

Baptists who have been blessed of God with an adequate education, the kind who visit [EthicsDaily.com](http://EthicsDaily.com), need to share very intentionally with our bivocational brothers and sisters the fact that there is a third way, a biblical way to think, to draw upon the biblical revelation and to act. We need to help them find a middle course between the extremes of Fundamentalism and Liberalism. We must affirm the reality of “absolute” truth without the arrogance of believing that we have fully comprehended it. We can find in the Bible a faithful guide for belief and for practice without proclaiming the inerrancy of our interpretation of the Bible. We can see the truth and the error in both sides of a dispute and find a course of action that is just, merciful and loving.

I believe that you will find many of bivocational ministers to be persons of good common sense, as well as, deep piety. They want to get it right. God has transformed them, and they are passionate about seeing others likewise transformed. They can, should and must be full partners in the work of proclaiming the Good News.

[Gary Farley](#) is partner in the Center for Rural Church leadership, Carrollton, Ala.