

AN EXAMINATION OF TENTMAKER MINISTERS IN MISSOURI: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES¹

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ABSTRACT

Bivocational ministers, often referred to as tentmakers, are a growing population in today's churches. The needs of these tentmakers may present an opportunity for churches, universities and seminaries, as well as associations and conventions to provide additional support and training. This exploratory study attempted to investigate the needs and challenges of bivocational ministers. The sample for the study was bivocational ministers as identified by the Missouri Baptist Convention. Using random sampling techniques, 254 surveys were distributed to bivocational Baptist ministers in Missouri with a return rate of 50 percent (127). The survey asked respondents to identify basic biographic information and needs and challenges facing them as tentmakers. Data indicated the primary challenges to include time management, sermon preparation, witnessing and evangelism, counseling, and physical health and well being. Finally, the study suggests ways to better equip and support these ministers.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to provide a picture of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by bivocational ministers, sometimes referred to as tentmakers. Specifically, areas of encouragement, training or education are explored as they relate to ministers who serve churches and also are employed in non-church positions. For the purposes of this study, the scope is limited to bivocational ministers in Missouri, as designated by the Missouri Baptist Convention, and bivocational ministry is understood to refer to a person who has been called to the ministry but whose major source of income is generated from outside the church. As Bickers noted in his oft-referenced book on tentmaking pastors, "A bivocational minister is one who has a secular job as well as a paid ministry position in a church. Bivocational ministry is sometimes referred to as tentmaking ministry because our biblical example for bivocational ministry is the apostle Paul, who supported himself financially by making tents. In Acts 18:2-4, Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth

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because they were also tentmakers. The three of them worked together during the week, and Paul would then minister in the synagogue every Sabbath.”²

BACKGROUND

Tentmaker or bivocational ministers are a vital part of Christian church leadership. Jim Swedenburg of the Alabama Baptist State Convention is quoted in a Baptist Press article by Jason Skinner as saying, “All would agree, pastoring in addition to being employed in another vocation is no job for the lazy or undisciplined. And were it not for the pastors in the state who feel called to minister in this capacity, many hungry congregations would go spiritually unfed.”³ Indeed, Philip Yang, speaking at the Southern Baptist Convention Bivocational Pastors Annual Celebration in 1999, spoke of bivocational ministry as a “second reformation.” “Many people are talking about the coming of the second reformation. Some said that it is the small groups ministry. Yet I think the second reformation is the popularization of the bivocational ministry. . . . The first reformation gave the Bible back to the people. [This] second reformation gives ministry back to the people.”⁴

Bivocational ministry is a growing phenomenon. “If present trends continue, bivocational Southern Baptist pastors will outnumber full-time pastors within 10 years.”⁵ Carl Barrington, national missionary for tentmaking ministries for the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board noted that there are 2.6 persons graduating from seminaries today for every one existing full-time ministry position.⁶

Only since 1948 has full-time ministry been the dominant Southern Baptist model, Barrington said. In 1972, only 32 percent of Southern Baptist pastors were tentmakers, but in 1999 it has risen to 39 percent and is still climbing. By 2008, he predicted more than half of pastors serving Southern Baptist churches will be supporting themselves and their families through a marketplace vocation.⁷

²Dennis W. Bickers, *The Tentmaking Pastor: The Joy of Bivocational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 10.

³Jason Skinner, “Bivocational Ministers’ Role Crucial in Many Southern Baptist Churches,” *Baptist Press*, November 23 1998, [on-line new paper article]; available at <http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=4891>; accessed 1 February 2007.

⁴Philip Yang, “On the Bivocational Ministry,” *The Bivocational Beacon*, Vol. IX, No. 2 (1999): 2.

⁵Linda Lawson. “Tentmaking’ Ministers Predicted to Become Southern Baptist Norm,” *Baptist Press*, Aug 11, 1999.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

According to the website, BivocationalMinistries.com, managed by bivocational expert Dennis Bickers, approximately 12 percent of Protestant pastors in the United States are bivocational ministers.⁸ The Missouri Baptist Convention reports that approximately 33 percent (610) of Southern Baptist churches in Missouri are served by a bivocational pastor.⁹ Additionally, in a 2004 publication of *The Parsonage*, *How do I develop balance as a bivocational pastor?* states that 30 to 40 percent of pastors may be bivocational.¹⁰ Quoting George Barna, Bickers writes that approximately 12 percent of all Protestant pastors in the United States are bivocational.¹¹ And using data provided by Donald Barnhouse, well-known Baptist preacher, W. A. Criswell, and Ronald Kalssen and John Koessler, Bickers writes: “The Southern Baptist Convention has approximately 13,000 bivocational pastors, which means that roughly 30 percent of its churches are led by such pastors. Some believe that out of all the Baptist churches in America, over 73 percent are lead by bivocational ministers. . . . These numbers were much higher than I had anticipated, but I also believe we will see the percentage increase even more in the years to come.”¹² Though many in full-time ministry will privately express concerns about bivocational models of ministry, the Bible is replete with scriptural support—Paul the Apostle most famously known as a tentmaker often referred to his bivocational role.¹³

⁸“Bivocational Ministries,” *Welcome page*, [on-line ministry page]; available at www.bivocationalministries.com; accessed 1 February 2007.

⁹Missouri Baptist Convention. “Bivocational Ministry: Is it right for You?” *Missouri Baptist Bivocational Ministers Association Brochure* (Missouri Baptist Convention, 2004).

¹⁰“Focus on the Family,” *The Parsonage*, “How Do I Develop Balance As A Bivocational Pastor?” [on-line ministry page]; available at www.parsonage.org; accessed 1 February 2007.

¹¹Bickers, 26.

¹²Ibid.

¹³“Surely you remember brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.” (1 Thessalonians 2.9).

“For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.” (2 Thessalonians 3.7-9).

“You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive.’” (Acts 20.34-35).

CURRENT RESEARCH AND DATA

While there is a multitude of articles and anecdotal narratives regarding bivocational ministry, very little formal research is available through academic publications. In fact, the statistical data and research that has been done is gathered and published through denominational entities, affinity groups and interest magazines, and not through formal academic research. Also, while the significance of bivocational ministers is publicly acknowledged, there has not been sufficient research to better understand the challenges and opportunities faced by those who have two callings. Understanding the needs and challenges of bivocational minister is critical.

The Southern Baptist Convention's 2002 Compensation Study provides an excellent data set for comparison between bivocational pastors' compensation packages. In an analysis of Missouri Baptist Convention bivocational ministers, those with 10 or more years of education averaged \$17,364 salary packages. Salary packages for those with 1-3 years education averaged \$15,233; while those with 4-6 and 6-9 years of education had pay packages of \$12,053 and \$12,858 respectively. Bivocational ministers' pay packages ranged from \$3,900 to \$36,000. The overall average bivocational pastor in Missouri earned \$12,236 with a total pay package of \$13,188. This is compared to full-time Missouri pastors earning an average \$39,569 with a total pay package of \$48,010. Other bivocational staff members reported average pay packages of \$11,703 compared to full-time staff minister's \$47,697.¹⁴

This same study indicated that the average number of years a bivocational pastor had served at the current church was 7.1 years, well over the average tenure of all pastors. Of the 75 responses to vacation time, nine churches provided one week of vacation per year, 59 provided two weeks vacation, three provided three weeks, three provided four weeks, and one church provided five or more weeks of vacation per year. The average pay package peaks for churches with memberships of 151-200 (\$19,895). The second highest bivocational pay package is for those serving churches of with over 200 (\$16,780), followed by churches with 101-150 (\$14,634) and 51-100 (\$12,867). Interestingly, the size of churches served by bivocational ministries might surprise some. While 17 bivocational pastors reported serving churches with memberships of 1-50, and 29 pastors served churches of memberships of 51-100, nineteen pastors served churches with memberships of 101-150. Four pastors serving bivocationally pastured churches with memberships of 151-200, and twelve bivocational pastors served memberships of over 200.¹⁵

Two interesting studies were conducted. The first was reported in the book, *Pastors at Risk*, by H.B. London and Neil Wiseman in 1993. The survey addressed ten areas. Eighty percent of the pastors believed that their ministry affected their families negatively. Ninety percent indicated they felt inadequately trained to cope with the demands of the ministry, and seventy percent said they have a lower self-esteem now than when they began their

¹⁴Southern Baptist Convention, *SBC Compensation Study* (Nashville, TN: SBC, 2002).

¹⁵Ibid.

ministry.¹⁶ In another study, the data from the Louisiana Baptist Convention, updated December 2003, revealed similar findings about bivocational ministers. Bivocational pastors have less than healthy images of themselves and have guilt feelings about the amount of time spent with their families.¹⁷ Of particular interest to this study is data provided by the Louisiana Baptist Convention (LBC).¹⁸ According to its website, the typical bivocational pastor, while active in lay church leadership prior to entering ministry, is not necessarily trained in pastoral ministry. They report that 30 percent have never had a course designed for pastors and that nearly 30 percent have no more than a high school education. Furthermore, only 34 percent have had 17 years or more of formal education though many (26.4 percent) attended, but did not finish college.¹⁹

These factors also may affect the bivocational ministers' lack of a healthy self-image, as reported by the same study. According to the LBC, bivocational ministers also report a sense of isolation from their denomination, as well as a sense of a lack of concern for their ministries from the denomination and a lack of acceptance from fully supported pastors.²⁰ Bivocational pastors often report that they feel that fully-funded pastors do not regard them as real pastors. One fully-funded pastor, despite having pastored or worked in ministerial staff positions that were bivocational, referred to his first full-time, fully-funded position as his first "real" pastorate.

In his book, *The Bivocational Pastor*, Luther M. Dorr shares several vignettes supporting the tentmaker's the lack of acceptance. He presents Reverend Granville Watson, the owner and president of Water Quality Science, Inc., who was serving as an interim pastor in Mississippi: "What needs does he (Watson) have as a bivocational? He mentions acceptance first: acceptance and understanding by church people and fellow ministers. He also mentions 'philosophy of ministry' as an area of interest and desire for greater understanding."²¹

¹⁶H.B. London and Neil Wiseman, *Pastors at Risk* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸The Louisiana Baptist Convention (LBC) is widely perceived to be a leader within the Southern Baptist Convention relative to its bivocational ministry support. The LBC was often cited to the researchers in this study as having exemplary programs in support of bivocational ministries and specifically, bivocational ministers.

¹⁹"Louisiana Baptist Convention," *Typical Bivocational Pastor*, [on-line article]; available at <http://www.startelco.net/~wgm/BIVO/index.html>.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Luther M. Dorr, *The Bivocational Pastor* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 51-52.

This same tendency is mentioned by Clapp, et. al.:

Protestant and Anabaptist congregations affirm a view of the church which includes the concept of “the priesthood of all believers.” We believe that all people are called to ministry and that all people have received gifts from God for use in the ministry...The word ministry is sometimes used in a narrowly defined sense to designate a person trained and employed by the church for set-apart work, but almost all denominations also see ministry as service in Christ’s name and as work for which the entire church has responsibility. Although most of us would not put it so crassly, the reality is that we are often tempted to see ministry as a three-tiered kind of enterprise. Those at the top are the full time, seminary trained, set-apart clergy. Bivocational ministers are the next level, followed by laypersons in the congregation.²²

Despite the biblical evidence, many view bivocational ministry as a lesser ministry.

The Louisiana study indicates how the bivocational minister rates his own skills. While, over 81 percent ranked their sermon preparation as moderate or very well, nearly 16 percent also indicated the need for more training. Those who ranked their preaching and witnessing skills as moderate or very well accounted for 91 percent and over 84 percent respectively. The highest percentage, 94.8, was in the area of people skills.²³ Finally, the study reported that 61.8 percent of bivocational ministers ranked their church administration skills as moderate or very well, while nearly 33 percent reported the need for more training.²⁴

An earlier study, 1980, reported by Dorr concluded the following as self-perceived strengths by bivocational pastors:

Preaching
 Relations with deacons and church members
 Relations with other staff members/usually volunteers
 Efficient use of building space

²²Steve Clapp, Ron Finney and Angela Zimmerman, *Preaching, Planning, and Plumbing: The Implications of Bivocational Ministry for the Church and for You—Discovering God’s Call to Service and Joy* (Richmond, IN: Brethren Academy and LifeQuest, 1999), 18.

²³Ibid.; Warren Wiersbe, well-known preacher and perhaps now more famous as a “pastor’s pastor,” has written numerous commentaries and books specifically aimed at pastors. At a pastor’s conference, years ago at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School, Wiersbe was greeting pastors after a class he had just finished, and asking each one briefly about their personal ministry. When one pastor stated he was a bivocational pastor, Wiersbe paused and smiled and held his grip on the man’s hand. “Your people love you,” he stated firmly. “They love you because when they hear you preach a Word from God, they know you’ve been out in the trenches with them all week long.”

²⁴Louisiana Baptist Convention.

Relationship to associational program²⁵

Dorr also found that the study repeated several weaknesses or “needs” amongst the pastors. In descending order of importance, these weaknesses included:

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Christian social ministries | Methods of evangelism |
| Religious education | Relationship to denominational agencies |
| Skill in counseling | Relationship to the Home Mission Board |
| Leadership training | Evaluating church needs |
| Knowledge of other faiths | Evaluating community needs |
| Mission outreach | Time management |
| Leadership enlistment | Relationship to state program |
| Program planning | Developing efficient church organizational structures ²⁶ |

The Brethren also surveyed their bivocational ministers, asking about secular employment. This study reported about 33 percent of bivocational pastors were also employed in business or in self-owned farming, and indicated that 60 percent were employed in a professional field. Examples of secular occupations and fields found in their survey included:

| | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| social work | plumber | doctor | principal |
| government work | banking | clerk | physician |
| journalism | teacher | electrician | coaching |
| real estate | business owner | computers ²⁷ | |

Their study further attempted to identify education and training for bivocational pastors and reported that 35 percent of those surveyed had earned a seminary degree, and one-third had earned a graduate degree in their non-ministerial field. While they reported spending an average of 4 years in ministerial training, they also reported 3.45 years on average training for their non-ministerial position.²⁸

The application of the Brethren survey to Southern Baptists may be limited due to denominational differences. Also, since the number of pastors surveyed was not reported, the statistical significance of these findings cannot be determined.

²⁵Dorr, 103.

²⁶Ibid., 103-04.

²⁷Clapp, et al., 50.

²⁸Ibid., 51.

METHODOLOGY OF THE MISSOURI BAPTIST CONVENTION SURVEY

Survey instruments were developed and provided to a select group of research experts to check for validity and appropriateness. The Missouri Baptist Convention (MBC), through Monty Hale, Small Church Ministries/Bivocational Consultant, provided a list of all MBC bivocational ministers. This list defined the survey population. A random sample of all Missouri bivocational ministers, registered with the Missouri Baptist Convention, (254) served as the sample for this project. All individuals in the defined population had an equal and independent chance of being selected for the sample. The sample size required for the given population was based on the work of Krejcie and Morgan, *Educational and Psychological Measurement*.²⁹ Surveys were mailed with a cover letter explaining the research project. A total of 127 surveys were returned (50%). Responses were tabulated and correlations calculated to determine those with statistical significance.

FINDINGS

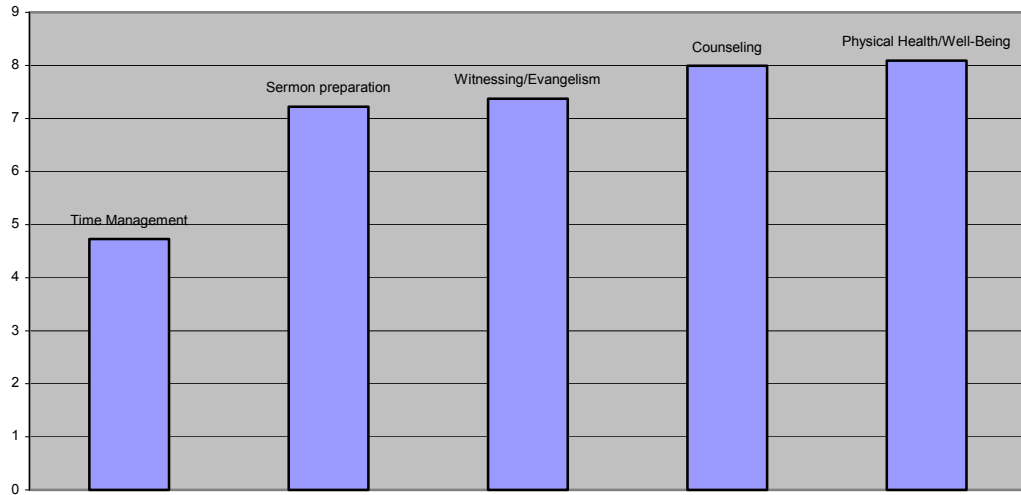
The study asked the respondents to identify themselves by age, education and their other vocation. Forty-nine (38.5 percent) of the Bivocational pastors in Missouri reported themselves as 60 years old or older. One hundred and six (83.4 percent) were 46 years or older. One hundred seventeen (92.1 percent) reported themselves as senior pastor indicating that very few were involved in non-pastoral ministries. One hundred twenty-one (95 percent) reported themselves as married. Educational backgrounds varied among respondents. While, sixty-four (over 50 percent) had earned a graduate degree/seminary, thirty-nine (just over 31 percent) had only a high school diploma.

No secular vocation was common among those surveyed, although a large number support themselves through blue-collar, skilled labor positions. This fact seems particularly interesting, given the average level of education.

Pastors were asked to rank their most significant ministry-related challenges. The top five challenges of all respondents (as shown in the following table) are listed in descending order: Time Management; Sermon Preparation; Witnessing/Evangelism; Counseling; and Physical Health/Well Being.

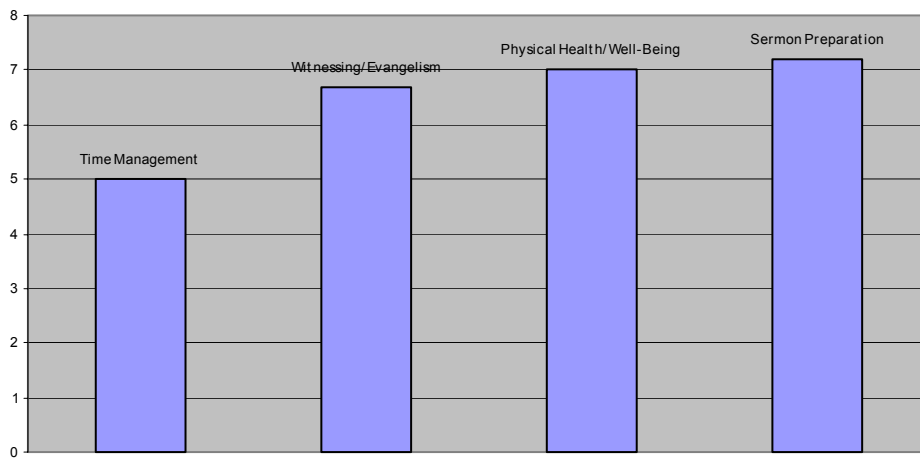
²⁹Krejcie and Morgan, *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, (1970), 30, 608.

Average Rating of Top Five Challenges by All Respondents (Lower Rating Indicates Higher Concern)



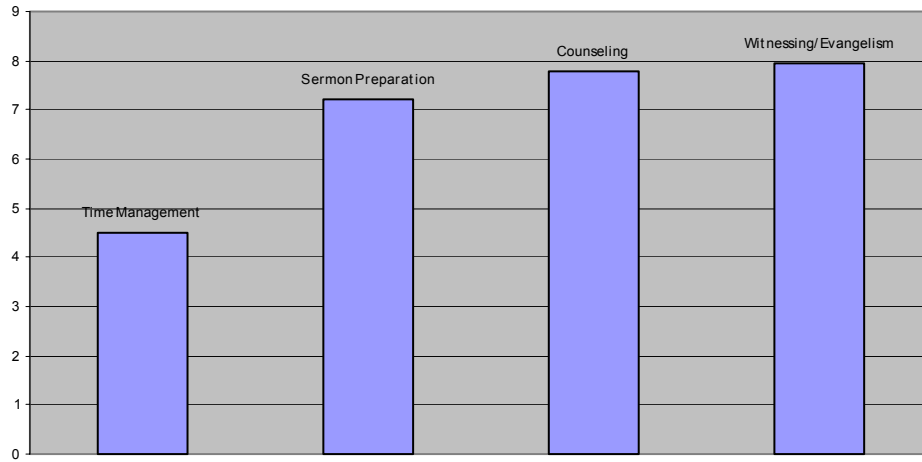
The top four ministry-related challenges for those 56 or older are listed in descending order: Time Management; Witnessing/Evangelism; Physical Health/Well Being; and Sermon Preparation.

Average Rating of Top Four Challenges by Respondents Age 56 or Greater



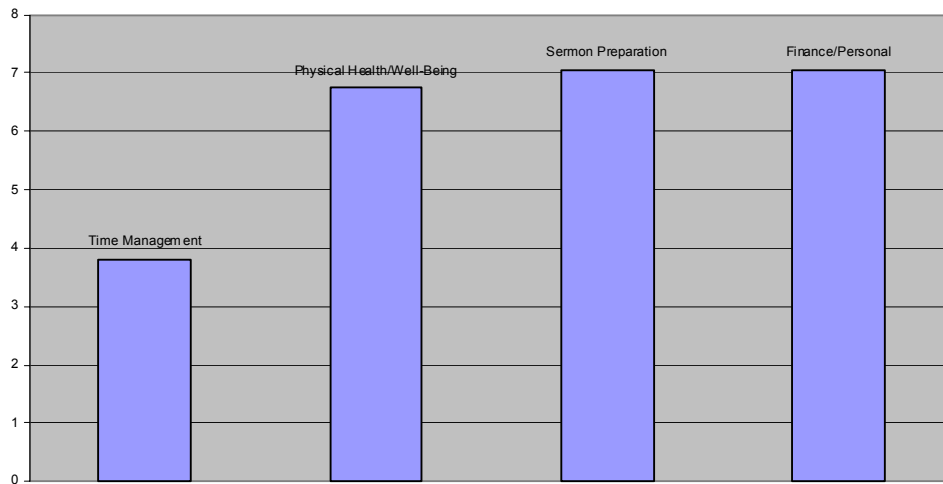
The top four ministry-related challenges for those 55 or younger are listed in descending order: Time Management; Sermon Preparation; and Counseling; Witnessing/Evangelism.

Average Rating of Top Four Challenges by Respondents Age 55 or Less (Lower Rating Indicates Higher Concern)



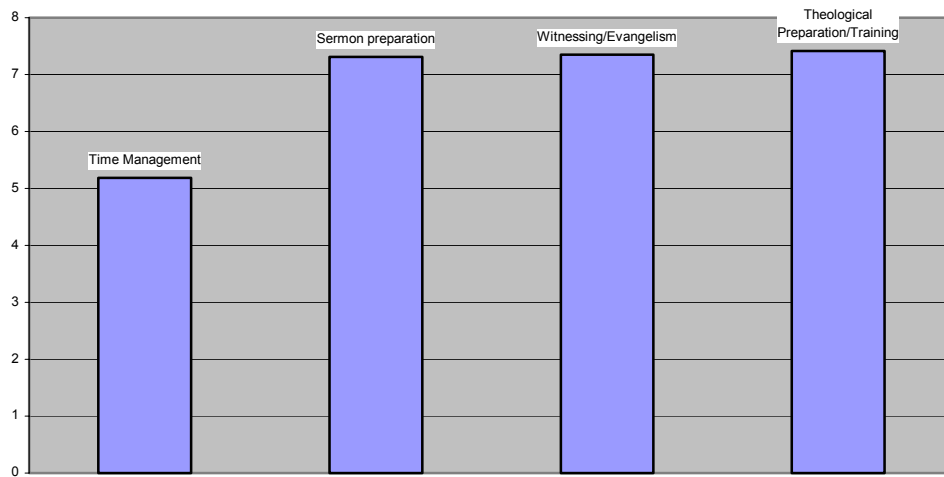
The top four ministry-related challenges for those with a seminary degree are listed in descending order: Time Management; Physical Health/Well Being; Sermon Preparation; and Personal Financial Planning.

Average Rating of Top Four Challenges by Respondents Reporting Seminary (Lower Rating Indicates Higher Concern)



The top four ministry-related challenges for those with no seminary degree are listed in descending order: Time Management; Sermon Preparation; Witnessing/Evangelism; and Theological Preparation/Training.

Average Rating of Top Four Challenges by Respondents not Reporting Seminary (Lower Rating Indicates Higher Concern)



IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION

Obviously, among the many challenges bivocational pastors face, the most significant include: Time Management, Sermon Preparation, Witnessing/Evangelism, Counseling, Physical Health/Well Being, Theological Preparation/Training and Personal Financial Planning. There are several ways of analyzing the data in regard to age and educational background. For instance those without seminary backgrounds are most likely to indicate a greater need for theological training and preparation. Those who have seminary backgrounds may fall into two broad categories. They may be former fully-funded ministers who now are bivocational in the sense that they support themselves through retirement—this may indicate why some with seminary backgrounds reported physical health/well being as a primary concern. Others may be seminary-educated ministers who are working with churches too small or too financially strapped to fully fund a pastor's salary and benefits.

However, the primary findings in this study do indicate that regardless of age or educational preparation, there are some commonalities reported among those classified as bivocational ministers. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Baptist institutions including churches, associations, conventions, colleges, universities and seminaries to recognize these challenges. Local churches should provide necessary release time and financial support for the development of their bivocational pastor and ministers. Associations and conventions should continue their efforts toward ministering to these pastors and explore new avenues and creative partnerships with other institutions such as Baptist colleges, universities and seminaries.

A major implication of this study suggests that there is potential to better meet the needs of bivocational ministers by Baptist colleges, universities and seminaries. These institutions are uniquely equipped to meet the particular needs cited by the ministers in this study. The burden, therefore, rests on the Baptist institutions of higher learning to provide resources to the tentmaker. From focused institutes, to weekend seminars, to formal degree

offerings based on the needs and schedules of bivocational ministers, multiple opportunities exist for these institutions to support this vital ministry in kingdom work. In fact, this is not merely an opportunity; it is a sacred responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the findings of this study point out many of the challenges and opportunities faced by bivocational ministers, as well as the opportunities and responsibilities of Baptist institutions, additional study is warranted. For instance, greater correlations between demographics and specific needs and challenges could prove helpful for better understanding bivocational ministers; therefore, a more focused effort on meeting those needs would be possible. More specific data regarding the differences between pastors, worship leaders, youth ministers and other leadership positions would also prove beneficial for analyzing specific needs and means to address those needs.