



## Mark Edington: A vision for bivocational ministry

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So, you've just graduated from divinity school. You've just been ordained. You're finally ready to be set loose on the church, to do the work you've felt so called to do for so long.

There's just one problem: There aren't that many jobs. In fact, as you study your student loan and contemplate your repayment obligations, churches around the country are confronting a difficult reality: They may no longer be able to afford you.

Since the founding of the church, we have understood ministry to be a matter of vocation—of calling. It is an alignment of one's passions and gifts with the church's needs and purpose.

But in the last hundred years or so, particularly in the context of mainline Protestant traditions in the United States, we have also understood ministry as a *profession*. Indeed, the establishment of a set of professional norms around ministry was an important means of asserting our importance as an institution; the leaders of our communities were professionals, prepared by extensive and specialized study and accorded the same social status as others in traditional professions, like lawyers and doctors.

Much of the life of our churches is shaped by an understanding that at the very core of our institutions is a full-time, benefitted professional called the minister, or the pastor, or the rector. Our denominational structures command considerable resources in order to define and maintain the qualifying requirements for admission into the ranks of those professionals. Often they devote effort and energy into maintaining benefits systems for the professions in ministry—pension funds, insurance programs, and so forth.

In this moment of change in the circumstances of churches across the nation, the time may be coming for us to gain some perspective on this trend toward professionalization and to see clearly both the benefits it has given us and the costs it has imposed. Two things seem uncontroversial:

- In mainline traditions, the well-established norm for determining the viability and vitality of a congregation was whether it could support an economic structure shaped around the costs of a full-time, fully benefitted professional.

- This meant that weighing the call of any given individual for ordained ministry implied the expectation that they would enter fully into the ministerial profession and forsake all others.

These two points now both seem due for reassessment. A growing number of congregations are finding that they cannot afford the salary, health-care insurance premiums, pension benefits, and expense allowances that traditionally comprised the pay package for that full-time professional. Yet they have immensely capable lay members, passion for service in the name of Christ, and possibilities for growth—if only they could in some way find ordained leadership that was less costly.

And at the same time a number of immensely capable women and men are being kept out of ordained roles in the church—or not bothering even to consider them—because of a time-honored, but possibly outdated, expectation that to be ordained is to leave all other pursuits.

There are practical considerations to take in view in thinking about stepping away from the decades-long trend throughout the church of greater and greater professionalization. But exactly because we are the church, we need to start with a different question: Are the limits we have accepted both on the economic structures of congregations and the inclusion of some people in ordained ministry, limits that arise from the expectation that ministry comprises a professional class, the desire of the Holy Spirit? Or have we, in a search for social status and economic security, accepted limits on our imagination that are getting in the way of innovative responses to God's call to the whole church in ministry?

The church existed for hundreds of years—and indeed grew for hundreds of years—before the coming of professionalization. What's more, in many traditions (notably Anabaptist communities) the idea of tentmaker ministry has endured as the norm for pastoral leadership in the community.

The idea that ordination would confer on those seeking it the social and economic status of professionalism may have been sources of comfort for those of us who came into this work—but it is by no means clear that it is necessary to the flourishing of the church. In the scale of its long journey through history, this idea of how ministry should be arranged is a relatively recent idea; new ideas may now be ready to emerge.

Many of the ideas that have been tried – part-time ministry (or, as a mentor of mine often calls it, “partially compensated ministry”) or team ministry (in which two or more churches band together to create a single position) still have as a central reference point the norm of the full-time professional.

What may open new possibilities for more congregations is the more intentional development of bivocational ministry—one in which both the ordained leader *and* the whole membership of the congregation understand themselves to be ministers in both the church and in the world, with different gifts and different roles.

Bivocational doesn't really work—at least, it doesn't change anything—if it is merely a way of understanding the employment status of one person in the congregation. Instead it is more appropriately viewed as an ethos for the ministry of the whole community—one in which the

whole people of the church, ordained and lay, see themselves as more alike each other than different, and more joined in a common ministry expressed in different ways and through the use of different gifts.

Writing forty years ago, Donald Scott traced the evolution of ordained ministry in the context of New England in his elegant book *From Office to Profession*. We may be seeing the next unfolding of that story—from office, to profession, to partnership. It may feel a bit disorienting, and even a bit disillusioning. But it may be where the Spirit is calling us. And as Richard Holloway has written, “It may indeed be the case that the world has ceased to respond to the church because the church has ceased to respond to the Spirit, and it is only as the Spirit’s agent that it can win a hearing.”

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