

An Interview with Charles Edgar about Bi-vocational Parish Ministry

Charles Edgar with Jack C. Whytock*

** The following is an interview with Charles Edgar, a retired Presbyterian minister living in Huntsville, Alabama. I believe that our readers will find this interview of great interest and hope it will stimulate much discussion about current trends in ministry globally. (Ed.)*

Charles, thank you for engaging with me in this interview. I will begin by making an observational comment and a statistical reference.

The subject of bi-vocational parish ministry or bi-vocational ministry is increasingly becoming a global phenomenon. It used to be thought that bi-vocational ministry was the way of ministry in the majority or developing world only, but evidence suggests that this model of ministry is growing throughout the Christian church community, Western and Global South. For example, I recently read that in non-urban Canada, 47% of parish ministry is being conducted in a bi-vocational manner. I realize there may be a need to get some definitions with that statistic; nevertheless, the statistic reveals a contemporary challenge for us here in the West: the struggle many small congregations face in trying to support a full-time minister. This topic offers a point of discussion with our brothers in the Global South. Likewise, it is a very relevant topic for us to take up in theological education.

Charles, I am going to start our interview with getting a definition of the subject before us.

What is “bi-vocational parish ministry” as you would define it?

Serving a parish that is unable to provide full-time income. Thus, one generally receives a portion of their income from the pastorate but the remainder of their income is from other sources.

That is a very helpful definition and accords well with what others are saying. Two leading writers on bi-vocational ministry have this to say: “one who has a secular job as well as a paid ministry in the church” (Dennis Bickers) and “persons who serve more than one vocation or institution and/or whose income is partly derived from some other source than the institutions of their primary religious employment” (Doran McCarty). Charles, let me now ask what did you do bi-vocationally?

Private investigations and real estate sales and management and serving as a pastor.

How many years did you do this?

Thirty-seven years.

Charles, I have not met many pastors who operated a private investigations business. Could you tell us how you ended up being a private investigator?

I graduated from the University of Tennessee (UT), Knoxville, with a degree in Business Administration and a major in motor carrier transportation in 1956. The Korean War was winding down, and we had a two-year draft requirement. With that hanging over my head, I had a hard time getting a job. A UT alum was the head of the Interstate Commerce Commission, Bureau of Motor Carriers and wanted to hire UT grads to work for them. The position was Safety Inspector and Special Agent enforcing the Motor Carrier safety regulations including hours of service and equipment. We also investigated accidents.

I was able to go to Officer Candidate School in the U.S. Navy and was commissioned and served a three-year tour on active duty. I did this and then spent nineteen years in the Naval Reserve.

I then moved to Huntsville, Alabama as a claim adjustor for State Farm Insurance investigating and settling primarily big claims with bodily injury. I left this to work for a Real Estate Developer for a couple of years, then worked for Allstate Insurance and bought into an Independent Agency. My partner in the business had a law degree but had never taken the bar exam. He was offered a position in the U.S. Army legal office. He had worked fire insurance claims and I did auto and Workmen's Compensation. Since I had little experience in the fire insurance work, we elected to sell the firm.

I then obtained a real estate license and sold real estate for several years. I began doing work for lawyers that I had dealt with on insurance claims doing their investigations. I was able to do that work and sell real estate for a couple of years, but then as more investigation business came in, I had to make a choice and decided to open a private investigation business.

How did you become a pastor?

I had been raised in the Bible Presbyterian Church and when we moved to Huntsville, we found a church that had been in that church but left and became Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES). The developer that I worked for was on the board of Covenant College and Seminary, and he was instrumental in finding the property in Chattanooga that allowed the college to move. I became quite interested in theology and began to read a good deal in that area. I believe I told you of my habit of waking up in the middle of the night and not being able to go right back to sleep. I had been reading *Biblical Theology* by Geerhardus Vos and would fall asleep in

the evening reading the book. My wife had me keep the book on a bedside table so I could read it when I woke up. This has become a life-time habit.

I began to feel a call to the ministry and began to do some preaching. We talked of going to seminary and started to examine my call and continuing education. My mother's family was from South Carolina and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP). We made a trip to South Carolina and I preached at Unity ARP. An uncle wanted me to look at Erskine Seminary and indicated that he would help me if I went there. My wife and I decided to stop and see the seminary on our way back home. We did this and liked the atmosphere at Due West.

Shortly after we returned my wife was killed in an automobile accident and I was left with three children, five, six, and eight years of age. I could not cook or work the dishwasher or laundry machinery. My children told me I should find them a mother.

My wife died in April and in June I decided the children were right. In addition to my domestic inability, I worked many nights until 7 or 7:30, so day care was not an option. My quest for a wife is a story in itself, but I realized that I was still dealing with memories. I mentioned this to a wife of another officer in my reserve unit and told her that I needed to find a widow. She put Joyce and me together – we dated for a week and decided to get married a month later. We had a blended family with children five, six, seven, eight, and nine years of age. Three years later we had a daughter of our own.



Charles, Joyce and their family – many years later!

I went to Presbytery and told them that I was preaching and would like to go to seminary, but the opportunity did not seem likely in the situation I was in. Several of the Presbytery members were faculty members at Covenant College and decided that they would train me under the exceptions clause. I was given about a four-hour oral exam and a reading list. They were concerned about the language requirement and were going to ask for Synod to make an exception when I learned that an historically black, Seventh Day Adventist School in Huntsville, Oakwood University, offered Greek and Hebrew on an undergraduate level and this was accepted. I did this for about four years and wondered what I would do next.

At about the time I finished my languages, I was invited to fill the pulpit at Prosperity ARP Church about twenty-eight miles north of Huntsville in Tennessee. I did this a couple of times and then received a call that the elders wanted to talk to me. The pastor at the church wanted to retire and had some health problems. They wanted me to work with him and fit into the preaching schedule. I was to start preaching once a month and then work into more pulpit time. I was to start the first Sunday in August, 1975. On the Tuesday prior to this first Sunday, the pastor had a stroke and never recovered. I began filling the pulpit every Sunday.

The following spring I was issued a call to be their Stated Supply. The RPCES Presbytery proceeded to ordain me based on a call to labour out of bounds. I was ordained and installed at Prosperity by a joint meeting of both Presbyteries.



Prosperity Church 2012

Tell us what ministry opportunities arose out of such bi-vocational ministry.

We discussed one specific situation in a phone call this morning. It was about a Christian man I met through the business who wanted a divorce. In general, I believe the non-ministry contacts made it much easier to have a “real” conversation. By this I mean that often when you are introduced as clergy, people think you live in a cloistered world that is not like their work-a-day world. My daily work was carried on almost thirty miles from the church, so we never saw a direct result at the church. However, I have helped people in their own church situation. I have been working closely with a church we started here in Huntsville, Alabama and have helped people in that work.

Tell us how you managed all your sermon work.

I have a love for theology and biblical studies so I pursued that in times apart from my daily work. I do not play golf, hunt, fish, or do work around the house. That gave me time to pursue pastoral and sermon activity. I feel certain that learning to preach from an outline is critical. I try to find my three points early and dwell on them in thought process as I drive and whenever I have time to think. I have heard of the formula “an hour’s study for every moment of preaching”. I probably do that, but not behind a desk in the study.

Bi-vocational pastors tend to be in smaller pastorates and may think they are insignificant. Scripture reminds us not to despise small things. Our smaller churches may be more akin to the book of Acts than many of the larger churches and certainly mega churches. Time management is critical to any ministry and dependence on the Lord for help is critical. I am always amazed that when I have been under pressure and feel unprepared, I often get the most compliments. (Not an argument for careless preparation! – more in the shall we sin more that grace may abound camp.)

Bi-vocational ministry requires giving up many things, especially in the hobby and entertainment area, but the Kingdom rewards are so wonderful.

Tell us the stresses and strains of your ministry with being split “two ways”.

I have certainly felt that pressure, but in talking with others who are in “full time” ministry, a term I don’t care for, I feel certain that they have many daily tasks that create the same tensions. There must be a true reliance on the Lord and a recognition that you always fall short, and you are always dependent on Him.

I visited a lady in a nursing home whose physical limitations caused her to be bed ridden but who was mentally sharp at age ninety-two, even seeming to have the mind of a twenty year old. I picked up her Bible and began to read Psalm 136, a litany best used in worship with a response after every statement “His mercy endureth forever”. I realized as I read that it was not very appropriate for a personal devotion. I began to feel self critical and the more I thought about it on the thirty-five minute drive home, the more I was angry at myself, feeling that I was trying to do too many things and was not doing anything right.

Several weeks later I re-visited her and after our initial greetings, she told me that she wanted to thank me for something. She told me that it was difficult to be in such a place with a good mind and seeing some pitiful situations, but she said that in the days after my visit when she was confronted with those situations, she was comforted because “His mercy endureth forever”.

This made me realize that the Lord is not depending upon our imperfect “perfection”, but that He uses our weakness for His advantage.

What advice do you have for those considering bi-vocational Christian parish work?

It would be much the same as to any minister. This is not a job as such – it is the privilege of being able to be a conveyer of the Word. So many enter it looking for many of the “perks” or benefits of being in employment. It is hard and very time consuming but so much better than doing many of the so called “fun” things of life. I hear of ministerial “burn out” and similar terms, but this is the opportunity to serve the KING in using the valuable points of the word. I’d really rather do this than golf.

I do have certain gifts for business and this has allowed me to use the other talents the Lord has given me to facilitate Kingdom work.

When I was preparing for the ministry, I took a course in counseling. The instructor wanted volunteers for a new test of interests. At the time I did not have a ministerial call and was selling real estate and doing some investigation work. I saw this as an opportunity to see where my real gifts were centred. I took the test, and then went to have the evaluation done. I was told by the instructor that he had a problem in that I had too many areas of interest and no one area was dominant. I suppose that meant that I was a “jack of all trades” and master of none. I hope that isn’t the real requirement. Bottom line: Don’t take yourself too seriously and depend on the Lord enjoying His work.

Charles, while preparing for this interview, I did a quick web search to see if anyone has written a book on bi-vocational ministry. I was shocked to see that there is a field of literature on this subject and I had never known about it! This makes me think that this subject, and reading on it, needs to be included in seminary courses and in special seminar topics. Do you have any wisdom to offer seminaries about this?

First, as I believe you are attempting to do, the problem must be recognized. I’m not sure most seminaries give it much of a thought. It should be recognized as a part of the whole seminary experience. Even if bi-vocational ministry is not the end result, I’m afraid many seminary students matriculate viewing themselves as budding theologians who should spend hours in study. We must study and read constantly in theology and trends. Very few realize what is happening in the world with the flaming spread of Christianity in the 40-40 world, and see only the hardness of heart and unconcern of Europe and North America. The changing world requires being prepared to meet changing circumstances on every hand, not merely preparing for the world of three-hundred member churches in small town North America.

Second, to move on from above, we should be students of the Word, but primarily prepared for the battle. I believe General Booth had a great metaphor in a “salvation army”. Not just his model, but the concept. We need to desire an hour of preparation for each minute of the sermon, but not just sitting in the study. I like to have my outline early and then spend thought time arguing these points in my head as I have already said.

Third, we need to grasp how much time we really have, and truthfully, waste. We have 168 hours a week, 56 in sleep, maybe 10 in eating, and about 40 in a job. That leaves over 60 hours. Plenty of time for the battle.

Mark Noll, noted present-day church historian, had a wonderful comment on the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, a conference to strategize ecumenically the missionary work ahead. Noll explains that something like 1,400 were in attendance and only six of colour. He then proceeds to tell how today more Presbyterians are in worship in Nigeria on a given Sunday than in Scotland and all North America. He adds that, likewise, there are many more Anglicans in Kenya and other countries in Africa than in England and U.S. All that to say that we must be like the Army General with a strategy but also the flexibility to change with the situation. We need to be prepared for bi-vocational or other unknown ministries that may lie ahead.

I will close my comments with a situation that I was in a year or two ago. A pastor from the Presbyterian Church in America in Illinois called me to see if we had a vacant church in our presbytery. He was a newspaper reporter and pastored a small town church. We had nothing open and ended the conversation. I then called him back and told him what a great service he was performing. The little church would probably close if he left but was alive now. He was in a vocation that allowed him to stay abreast of what the culture was really like. So many pastors get fenced in by their flock that they fail to see what the real world is. It is quite possible to believe that your congregation is made up of “Sunday School literature saints” rather than saints like those recorded in the Bible that God had to, and still has to, continually deal with.



Charles and Joyce Edgar

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

(Acts 18:1-4, ESV)

“Bivocational ministry is becoming more common in North American Protestant churches. Regardless of how pastors and/or church attendees may feel about bivocational ministry, it is a growing practice in North American church life. ‘The majority of congregations in the United States are small, with fewer than 100 regular members, and cannot typically afford their own pastor.’ This results in a growing need for more bivocational pastors every year.”

– Terry W. Dorsett

“The other job is not the pastor’s career, but a means to support his ministry. It is a way to ensure that his family is provided for and financially secure. It is not a distraction, but an opportunity to have other means of honest employment and also engage the culture in a way he wouldn’t be able to from a church office. . . . He just wants an income that will be able to provide for his family.

“Pastors cannot help but preach! It is what God has called them to do whether they get pay and benefits or nothing at all. It is a ‘stewardship’, a mandate given to them by God to fulfill at church and the secular workplace.”

– Joshua Simpson

**“Bivocational ministry is really less about
‘money’ than it is about missional strategy.”**

– Terry W. Dorsett

Some works to stimulate further reflection on bi-vocational ministry:

Bickers, Dennis. *The Bi-Vocational Pastor: Two Jobs, One Ministry*. Kansas City, KS: Beacon Hill Press, 2004.

_____. "Coaching Bivocational Ministers for Greater Ministry Effectiveness". Unpublished D. Min. thesis, Liberty Theological Seminary, Virginia, 2010.

_____. *The Tentmaking Pastor: The Joy of Bivocational Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.

_____. *The Work of the Bivocational Minister*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007.

Door, Luther M. *The Bivocational Pastor*. Nashville, TN: B and H, 1988.

Dorsett, Terry W. *Developing Leadership Teams in the Bivocational Church*. Bloomington, IN: Cross Books, 2010.

_____. "8 Benefits to Bivocational Ministry". May 15, 2011. <http://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/8-benefits-to-bivocational-ministry.html>. Accessed December 10, 2012.

Simpson, Joshua. "The Modern Tentmaker: The Challenge of a Bi-Vocational Pastor". <http://www.edstetzer.com/2010/11/thursday-is-for-thinkers-joshu.html>. Accessed July 20, 2012.