

WHY YOU SHOULD BE A COVOCATIONAL CHURCH PLANTER

As a result of declining attendance and the closing of existing churches, every major denomination is focusing more resources toward starting new congregations. In recent years, we have also seen the creation of multiple church planting networks that emphasize church planting across denominational lines.

Amid this proliferation of church planting, one of the most significant trends has been the starting of new churches by bivocational leaders. Historically, the phrase “bivocational pastor” has been used to refer to a leader who served a church that was unable to compensate a pastor with a full-time salary. The pastor would work a second or third job to supplement the salary the church provided. In many cases, it was out of necessity rather than preference. Often the language of “tentmaker” (the Apostle Paul’s trade described in Acts 18) has been used to define this type of church planter.

Today, there is a new movement among leaders away from bivocational to covocational ministry. More church planters are choosing to plant covocationally — merging their sacred and secular professions. In other words, it is becoming a first option, not a last resort.

While there is a place for both covocational church planting and fully funded approaches, there are some significant benefits to planting as a covocational leader. Let’s consider four major advantages.

Reason 1: Missiological

Perhaps the most significant reason for planting as a covocational pastor is that it gives the church planter greater opportunities to connect relationally with people in the community. Their vocation gives them access to a mission field that is not readily available to a pastor employed full-time by a local church. Many traditional pastors work inside a church bubble, spending most of their time with church people. For a covocational planter, their marketplace job isn’t a hindrance to what God is doing; it’s an advantage to engaging their city with the gospel.

Reason 2: Credibility

Covocational planting helps to diminish the sacred-secular divide with respect to vocation. The congregation can see the church planter model that all work matters; It is a sacred calling regardless of what God has called a person to do. As a result, the benefits of being in the marketplace are multiplied exponentially as every member recognizes how their vocation fits into God’s redemptive mission. Further, when the planter has a vocation in the marketplace, the congregation knows that the leader better understands what others experience during a work week.

Working in the marketplace not only builds credibility with those inside the church, it provides greater respectability outside the church. In a post-Christian context, where people are skeptical of the church, non-Christians need to see that church leaders have jobs like everyone else. In a time when Christianity doesn’t have the best reputation, it can provide significant “street-cred” with those outside the church.

Reason 3: Financial

Another reason for being covocational relates to the financial stability it provides in three different areas.

The church planter

When the primary financial support comes from a marketplace source rather than the church plant, there is usually less financial strain on a family. This is especially true when the planter is employed full-time in a vocation that provides benefits like insurance, vacation and retirement.

The new church

A church led by covocational leaders usually finds its financial base is much stronger. Without the need to provide full-time salaries and benefits, the church can direct more of its financial resources toward mission and ministry.

The church planting entity

To reach everyone with the gospel, we must be creative. Covocational planting allows funding entities to embrace a wider range of sustainable church planting practices. This is especially necessary for planters engaging in socioeconomically diverse contexts, including low-income or immigrant populations.

Reason 4: Empowerment

Covocational church planting creates opportunities for leaders in the congregation to use their God-given talents to create a culture of participation rather than one of spectatorship. When the church planter has a full-time vocation, the congregation understands that the planter can't do it all. Therefore, more church members, out of necessity, become involved in the mission of the church. Covocational leadership helps to diminish the clergy-laity divide and highlights the necessity of empowering all the people of God.

Reflection Questions:

- Which of the reasons for being covocational do you identify with most?
- How can you maximize each of these reasons in your ministry?
- How might you communicate these reasons to other leaders?

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