
An Overview of Part-Time Ministry

Oscar Stellick

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

Senior Church History

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Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 W. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

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There are a wide variety of names used for the type of ministry that will be discussed in the following pages. Terms such as "shared-time" or "parttime" or "tent-ministry" or "self-support ministry" are just a few that describe the kind of ministry that a number of pastors have found themselves undertaking. The first two terms obviously describe the amount of time devoted specifically to the office of the ministry. The last two terms are descriptive of part of what that man's ministry will involve, namely the holding down of employment in order support himself while performing the duties of a minister.

It is difficult to pin down an exact time or exact reasons as to when and why part-time ministry began to become more and more common in the WELS. Some speculate that financial circumstances in many WELS congregations have led them to look for alternative methods in gaining the blessings and services of a trained pastor. Needless to say our materialistic society has not left our church body nor its ministry untouched. The effects of inflation has made it quite difficult for many WELS congregations to remain self-supporting, in the strictest sense, and offer all the conveniences and benefits that they desired or came to expect. Part of that convenience is simply to have a pastor on call, as it were, 24 hours a day. An example of this can be seen in the difficulty some congregations are having in properly budgeting funds for the church and the grade school. Maintaining both at the high levels some members grew up with has become next to impossible under that congregation's present method of operating its church/school facility.

One reason that was pointed at as having quite a large affect on congregations considering a part-time minister is the economic situation that is present in many towns or small cities. Many of our early congregations were built in rural communities or in sections of cities that at the time were thriving, vibrant, growing communities. Now, unfortunately many of those areas have lost businesses, or the economic climate was such in the area that it was impossible to start new businesses in order to provide jobs in the area. The result of course is that many of the churches in these communities faced declining membership to the point that they were no longer able to pay the wage of a full-time called worker.

This is only one possibility in a large number of potential reasons for a congregation choosing to go the route of calling a part-time called worker. Because there are various reasons, none of which one could point to as being strictly right or wrong, I'll only touch on those reasons as they pertain to the benefits or problems that part-time ministry has in it. In order to better understand this ministry it is important to look at its biblical and historical origins. By doing this we can better see how this special aspect of the ministry fits into today with its peculiar needs.

The principle that is described for us in Scripture is carried out by Paul in his own ministry. Paul's principle has two very important aspects in it related to the church the minister is called. These two aspects are whether the church is a mission church or an established church. These two aspects are related to Paul's principle of a traveling ministry. Paul went to people who had not called him and then insisted on proclaiming the Gospel without charge. Scrupulously he avoided taking anything for

personal support.¹

The term "traveling ministry" is not exactly what one might think. Paul did not simply pass through a city like a Billy Graham crusade. No, Paul established himself in the community as an employed person. It is a traveling ministry in the sense that Paul only desired to stay in an area long enough to firmly establish a self-supporting, self-administrating, self-propagating local church. One can already begin to see the difficulty with this as applied to some of our modern instances of self-supporting ministers in part-time positions. Obviously the minister is not itinerant in respect to Paul's principle. The minister is being called by an established local congregation, which as Paul is careful to emphasize has as its duty the support of its local minister. Prof. Panning sums this up in his paper on mission subsidy by stating, "While Paul accepted personal support from individuals, yet in the interest of not having the Gospel hindered, he declined to accept congregational support for himself and his itinerant co-workers. Within the congregations, however, Paul assumed that the local congregations would support their local clergy--"²

From the above discussion on Paul's principle one wonders if some of our present congregations are trying to skirt some of its responsibilities in supporting called workers. The fact of the matter is that they are using Paul's basic principle which he established for a very narrow use, namely in the establishing of mission congregations where the benefits of a parttime ministry are greater. Established congregations are either disregarding their responsibility in paying the worker who is worthy of his wage or the congregation will suffer in the long ^{run} wrong from other ill effects. One difficulty is that established congregations will naturally work a called worker as a full-time worker. His responsibilities will

still run him into at least 40 hours a week just working with church matters. But now he has the added concern of trying to subsidize the other half or more of his wage.

One young pastor bluntly put it this way that it's a full time ministry with only half the pay. This would seem to hold true when we look at some of the retired pastors accepting part-time ministries. (Granted in the strictest sense a retired person is not involving himself in self-support ministry because he is still receiving a pension.) These pastors are still working full time schedules. Based on Paul's principle and conversation with pastors it would seem that "part-time" ministry is in and of itself a misnomer. In the ministry there really is nothing one could call part time. The only way this could correctly describe a congregation's call in such a context would be if the call actually described a reduction in ministerial duties. For example a church might call a pastor to specifically preach and only preach. All other administrative tasks would be handled by the congregation. All other pastoral duties would be met by the congregation such as education, sick calls, baptism and communion etc. The point of course is that you would actually have to restrict a trained pastor from many of the skills or gifts he may have in order to meet the criteria of what being part-time is. For this reason I prefer the term "self-supporting ministry."

In doing the research and interviewing I came to the conclusion that unfortunately many of the churches calling for "self-supporting" pastors are calling them for purely financial reasons. Reasons which were designed to try to help the congregation but unfortunately end up hurting it more than helping it. There are a number of excellent reasons and excellent times to call "selfsupporting" minister. Yet there are an equal number of

negative reasons. Reasons that strongly suggest to the congregation not to go this route. When these negatives are not properly heeded some congregations will find themselves worse off with a "self-supporting" pastor than they were before.

What benefits then are there for a congregation to seek a part-time self-supporting pastor? Aside from the financial area which is obvious, we would have to divide these benefits into two categories. Those aimed at a mission church and those in an established church.

Concerning a mission church one such benefit would be that the minister is an integral part of the working community. This is important because it gives him many contacts and potential evangelism prospects which he would normally not have opportunity to meet except through this employment. Another benefit would be that the pastor would gain a more thorough knowledge of the economic structure of his community. His preaching would become more practically oriented to the specific needs of those in that church community. In a mission at times it would be opportune to be able to say that we are not preaching the Gospel in order to get people to donate money. At Paul's time it was common to see lecturers and spellbinding orators, expecting monetary support from their listeners as they wandered from town to town. Paul refused to be classed with such people.³ With so many money-hungry religions out there it might be best for a pastor to support himself in order to be as Paul and keep anything from becoming a hindrance to hearing the Gospel. With today's TV evangelist always asking for money, a person may gain a more willing ear to hear if the people knew you would not be taking a collection or that what they give goes directly to support their congregation and not into the pastor's wallet as some might imagine.

In an established congregation from the pastor's stand point there are not many advantages except those that remotely apply from the mission church, because he is still expected to perform the duties of a full-time worker. So long as he is not shirking his pastoral responsibilities maybe certain people are gifted enough to handle such a self-supporting position. The difficulty comes in how do we determine who is and is not capable of handling such work. We do not wish to make less of the divine call and yet God gives us the ability and the right to discuss information about specific calls in more detail with those being called. I'm not suggesting a resume process and interview be adopted but more careful consideration should be given when calling men into shared-time ministries.

Let me give you this example. If a man has certain job skills such as carpentry or welding he would be able to obtain employment in vastly different area than one who has skills with computers. You would not send a scholar into a lumbering community expecting him to operate a chainsaw, nor would you send a person into a highly educated community who lack skills specific to that community. The problem here as mentioned earlier is that some of these part-time ministries are in communities that are dying a slow death. Is it good stewardship or even wise to send a fully trained worker into that community to have him end up flipping burgers or pumping gas because that is all that is available. Granted any soul saved is worth whatever effort it took to lead them to the Word. But are there ways of maintaining the needs of such congregations without tying up fully trained and eager men in positions where they are not able to use their talents to the fullest to God's glory? Better assessment of congregations calling so called part-time ministers must be made.

I mentioned I would discuss the benefits for an established congregation, in reality there are none, unless one places stipulations such as the pastor is an associate pastor, or is a retired pastor picking up slack in the congregation's ministerial needs. The negatives far outweigh the few small benefits gained from a self-support ministry.

In discussing this topic it was not my purpose to go into great detail about benefits and limitations. What I am concerned with is the pastor who is called into a position where he is asked to support himself and still continue his ministry.

Along those lines one thing that is important to recognize is that today in every case full self-support means a full-time job. Even in some cases partial self-support may end up being a full-time job unless you cut your living expenses back to nothing. The trouble with this is that while he may have time to spare for the ministry, after he's given his best efforts and time to his employer. Generally the employer's interests will at some point take precedence over the ministry or become a direct rival to it.⁴

The fact of the matter also is that opportunities for self-support are limited to say the least, in fact in most communities not very good at all. Because someone might think about partial self-support. A congregation may say we'll pay you such and such a sum and you make up the rest through some type of work. The reality of this is that the pastor ends up taking a full-time position because there are not many part-time jobs available that could augment a salary enough and still leave time for pastoral duties.

It was also apparent that a few pastors from time to time take summer jobs for various reasons. Some to augment savings for a special vacation.

Others, because they found, as discussed above under the mission church benefits, that working brings you evangelism prospects. There certainly is nothing wrong with this and it is more of an exception than the norm.

One could also argue that there are a couple of instances where a shared-time ministry really worked out well, and other congregations grew from that. Again these are the exceptions and certainly God's grace is able to make any endeavor work out. On the other hand we do not want to be foolish with the resources God has given us in our trained workers.

It is obvious that a full-time ministry is to be preferred over part-time especially in established congregations. The scope of advantages in a part-time ministry is so narrowly limited to mission endeavors or pioneer/exploratory type missions, that great caution should be used in placing men in such positions. A full-time ministry gives the person more time to devote to the spiritual work he's been called to do. Yet, it is certainly a commendable thing if a minister is so gifted or so inclined as to be able to support himself and his family without the help of the congregation. It's in this that Paul's example can be safely followed.

Great caution needs to be followed for a number of reasons. While it is commendable for a worker to support himself by secular employment during the earlier stages of a churches development, it is harmful for the worker to continue to do so after the church is established. It could be equally harmful if an established congregation were to revert back to a part-time ministry. The worker's sacrifice will prove to be a hindrance rather than a blessing since he is permitting the congregation to excuse its proper responsibility. This can result in a loss of spiritual blessing and a loss of vision for the congregation. The church loses out on the fruits and blessings of a full-time ministry.⁵

An added problem that will eventually arise for that congregation is when their present pastor takes another call. It will be difficult for anyone to fill his present position since the congregation may ask that he also support himself. He may lack skills necessary in that community or may not have the same gifts for organization etc. that the previous man had. If the previous worker is sacrificing his livelihood by accepting a substandard salary it may be impossible for the next pastor to support his family on that same salary, and he may not be able to support himself.

The next caution is directly pointed at the worker himself. He lacks essential time for study, prayer, and meditation on God's Word. He's unable to properly serve, nourish, encourage, or even heal the wounds in his flock because he doesn't have as much of God's Word as possible at his disposal. Consider that if he works a full-time job he will never be able to visit his members on a regular basis. He will not be available for many emergencies. Weddings, funerals, Bible information courses and counseling may all have to be put on hold until it's convenient for the part-time pastor's schedule. Tired from work he is not able to give his best to his sermon preparation. The end result is that the entire church suffers.

Finally the self-supporting pastor may find that his secular job is more rewarding, more pleasurable, less stressful, and has a higher level of personal respect and self-esteem. He might be tempted away from his calling in the ministry. If not entirely then in part. Again the church suffers.

Throughout this paper I've discussed two types of church, the mission or pioneer/exploratory church and established church. There are many points of view regarding full and part-time ministry. In summary I believe there is a place for part-time ministry, but, as I feel, there needs to be

careful consideration of exactly what the congregation means by part-time. There must also be careful consideration of the longer range affects such a ministry will have on a congregation. If the warnings are heeded and more care and especially prayer is used in the calling process many of the difficulties discussed could be avoided. Even in the established congregation a short term use of a part-time minister could be facilitated if the congregation is educated about the draw backs as well as whatever advantages they see. I do not see part-time ministers as a cure for congregations with financial troubles. All too often this is the primary reason a part-time minister is called into an established congregation. I firmly believe every established congregation should support its ministry wholeheartedly. By doing so they will encourage their full-time workers to devote themselves more and more to the preaching of the Gospel and the ministry of God's Word.

Endnotes

1 Ernst Wendland, Missiological Perspectives (Mequon: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1981) p. 238.

2 Wendland, p. 240.

3 Dean Gilliland, Pauline Theology & Mission Practice (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) p. 249.

4 Harold Cook, Missionary Life and Work (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959) pp. 92-93.

5 Melvin Hodges, The Indigenous Church (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1976) pp. 87-88.

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