

Rethinking Bi-vocational Church Planting

Introduction

Over the past several years, there has been an increasing interest in church planting. As a result of declining attendance and the closing of many 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.

In the midst of this proliferation of church planting, one of the most significant trends is the starting of new churches by bi-vocational leaders. Historically the phrase “bi-vocational pastor” was used to refer to a leader who served a church that was unable to compensate a pastor with a full-time salary. Therefore, the pastor would work a second, or third job to supplement what the small salary the church could provide. 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 bi-vocational leaders. More church planters are choosing to plant bi-vocationally. They are making this decision out of the conviction that bi-vocational church planting actually provides a more desirable way to plant a new church, rather than on the basis of limited funds. In other words, it is becoming a first option, not a last resort.

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

Missional Engagement

Perhaps the most significant benefit of planting as a bi-vocational leader is that it gives the planter greater opportunities to connect relationally with people in the community. Their jobs give them access into a mission field that is not readily available to a pastor who is employed full-time by a local church. Many traditional pastors find themselves working inside a church bubble, spending the majority of their time talking with church people about things of the church.

Even when a fully funded pastor makes the effort to engage people in their community they often find it challenging to fully relate. It is not until a person actually incarnates into the local context that they begin to understand the values and interests of the people. It is difficult to really love and serve the people God has sent us to from a distance. Some people have referred to this as “marketplace mission” because the majority of relationships that are developed are the result of the planter’s vocational connections. Their marketplace job isn’t a hindrance to what God is doing; it’s actually an advantage to engaging God’s mission.

Bi-vocational planting also helps to diminish the “sacred-secular” divide in respect to vocation. The congregation has the opportunity to see the church planter model the fact that all vocations are sacred. Regardless of what God has called a person to do, it is a sacred calling. As a result, the benefits of being in the marketplace are multiplied exponentially as every member recognizes how their vocation fits into God’s mission of redemption.

This line of thinking provides a helpful way to reframe how we think about bi-vocational ministry. Often the language of bi-vocational invokes the thought of two distinct vocations. We compartmentalize, seeing little, if any, overlap between what a leader does to earn a living and his full-time ministry.

To overcome this disconnection, we might use the language of “co-vocation.” The prefix “co” is the reduced form of the Latin *com* which means “together” or “in common.” English words like *cofounder*, *copilot* or *companion* are examples of words that denote partnership and equality. Co-vocation embodies the reality that if a person is called to be a dentist, a teacher, or a plumber; and at the same time are called to start a church, the different callings are not isolated from one another, instead they are actually interlinked and equal. The language of co-vocation pushes against the temptation to compartmentalize different aspects of our lives. When we begin to understand that each of our callings are legitimate and necessary aspects of God’s mission, they can be leveraged together for His purposes.

Another missional benefit of bi-vocational ministry is that working an occupation in the community builds credibility with those inside and outside the church. In a post-Christian context, where people are skeptical of the church, it is important for non-Christians 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.

It is important to understand this new breed of “bivo” planting is missiologically driven. Planting the church begins by engaging in missionary behaviors in the local context, rather than focusing on the creation of a Sunday morning worship service. The planter allows their missiology to inform their ecclesiology. By thinking and living like a missionary in a local context, new communities of faith are birthed out of missional engagement.

Financial Stability

A second major benefit of bi-vocational church planting relates to the financial stability it provides in at least three different areas.

1. 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.

2. The new church

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

3. The church planting entity

Many denominations have made the commitment to plant hundreds, if not thousands of churches over the next several years. However, there simply aren’t enough finances to plant the needed churches with the current funding model. Bi-vocational planting provides the opportunity for funding entities to embrace more sustainable church planting practices. This is especially necessary for planters who are engaging socioeconomic diverse contexts that are made up of the very poor or immigrant populations.

Many traditional church plants start with a large annual budget supported by multiple funding streams, including partnering churches and denominational entities. Because most funding models are structured over a three to five-year period, it puts pressure on a church planter to grow the church quickly so it can become self-sustaining before funding runs out. The unfortunate reality is that a planter is often forced to attract financial givers rather than engaging the brokenness in their community. Bi-vocational church planting, on the other hand, provides a more viable financial model that allows the planter to focus primarily on mission.

Shared Leadership

Bi-vocational 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. More church members, out of necessity, become involved in the mission of the church. Bivocational leadership helps to diminish the laity-clergy divide. If pastoral leadership is reserved only for the “professionals,” then many gifted leaders will miss opportunities to pursue what God’s calling for them.

It is important to understand bi-vocational church planting is not simply about having two or more jobs; it is really about aligning one life. It’s about blending our calling to support our families and ourselves, with our calling to live a life engaged in God’s mission. We are called to be a missionary people sent into the world to participate in God’s redemptive purposes. One vital and urgent means to accomplish that task is to plant new communities as bi-vocational, or co-vocational, kingdom leaders.

At the North American Mission Board, we believe there are two major strategies for changing the conversation around this new breed of bi-vocational church planting. First, we need to champion the benefits of bi-vocational church planting, as laid out in this article, but we also must champion the bivo planters. We want to tell the stories of the leaders who have discovered how to leverage their calling in the marketplace along with their calling to plant a new community.

Second, we believe to see a movement of bivo planters from all walks of life and geographical contexts, there needs to be church planting training that is specially tailored for the unique challenges of bivo planting. The training needs to provide a new imagination for starting a church from a missiological, grassroots perspective. But the training must also be immensely practical and accessible. What follows is the description of a 40-lesson training created for the bivo church planting leader.

BiVO Church Planting Training Philosophy

The structure of the Bi-vocational Church Planting training is very intentional. The training is organized around five major sections. The first section is titled **Where the Journey Needs to Begin: 8 Key Paradigm Shifts**. These first few lessons cover the theological foundations. As a result of four decades of church growth thinking, many Christians have developed deeply held assumptions about God, church and mission that may need to be realigned. Without such realignment, we run the risk of simply attaching new language onto what the church is already doing and ignoring the significant changes, or paradigm shifts, that are necessary. A genuine discipleship focused, bi-vocational church planting movement is not about tweaking the way we do church. Instead, it involves a thorough recalibration of the way we understand God's mission in the world and how the church is created to participate in it.

The hearts and minds of people in local congregations must be captured by a revolutionary way of thinking about and living out the Christian life. This simply will not happen if they don't begin the journey with serious theological reflection. Before we ask what should we do; we must first ask why? Why does the religious landscape in America seem to be changing so quickly? Why don't the strategies and models for church growth "work" like they used to? More importantly, why do we need to reconsider the nature and essence of the church? Why does the church in North America need to rethink mission? Why do we need to change the way we live our lives, individually and collectively as the body of Jesus? Addressing questions like these should prompt us to think both theologically and missiologically. As a result, we will begin to think and behave like a missionary. Only today the mission field is not in a faraway land; instead it is in our own backyard.

One of the purposes of starting with theological reflection is that it is the best way to fully understand the practices we should be engaging. In other words, this must be a theological process and not simply a pragmatic one. Without serious reflection on the missionary nature of the church, we will not completely grasp the fact that we are all missionaries sent into a local context. Without thinking well on the incarnation of Jesus, we will not totally comprehend the crucial posture of humility and sacrifice. And without seriously considering the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, we will not recognize the importance of discovery and discernment throughout our missionary engagement.

With this in mind, we encourage you to not move through the training too quickly. Make sure you understand the implications of each of these theological perspectives. Moreover, make certain that as you walk with the people in your core group, or congregation, that they are fully aware of the importance and magnitude of each of these foundational lessons. Without unlearning and relearning, there is no underlying rationale for change. However, when people are captivated by the missionary nature of God and the church, and they realize they were created as a sent missionary people, they are energized to be active participants in God's mission of redemption.

The second, third and fourth sections of the training are titled **Kingdom Thinking, Missional Engagement and Biblical Community**. Each of these sections are in a very purposeful order. We believe our Christology (Kingdom Thinking), should determine our missiology (Missional Engagement), which in turn should determine our ecclesiology (Biblical Community). When we get these three concepts in the wrong order, we often allow our idea of church to govern our sense of purpose and mission. Churches that have got this basic formulation wrong often spend too much time discussing (or arguing) about the forms of worship, church structure and the types of programs, and fail to recognize that our ecclesiology flows more naturally out of a deep sense of mission. It is Jesus who determines our purpose and mission in the world (discipleship), and then it is our mission to follow Him, that should drive us to discover modes of being the church.

The lessons that are a part of the Kingdom Thinking section will help to recapture a robust Christology that includes not only aspects of the person and work of Jesus, but also the ways of Jesus. The person of Jesus stands at the epicenter of who we are and what we do. He must shape everything.

The twelve lessons that are a part of the Missional Engagement section will begin to move people toward practical action steps to better understand and engage a particular context. As we examine the ways of Jesus in the previous section (Christology), it will inform the purposes of God's people—the church (Missiology). Each lesson builds on the preceding lesson to create continuous momentum for equipping and releasing people into their local mission field. These lessons will help people think and act like a missionary as they follow Jesus into His mission, where they live, work and play.

A crucial aspect of becoming more like Jesus, and following Him into mission, involves the fourth section of the training, which deals with the concept of Biblical Community. The lessons in this section will help to recapture the church as a family on mission. If we are not careful, community can become insular. It can become too much about those in the group rather than those outside. It in turn becomes more about safety and comfort, than about being an agent of God's redemptive mission. The bottom line is that we are created for community. We are designed to be in community with God and with each other. But, we must also understand that community can never be fully realized apart from mission.

As a biblical community, we are to be both a foretaste and instrument of the kingdom. We are a foretaste of the kingdom when the manner in which we live gives the watching world a picture of the kingdom that is to come. We are an instrument of the kingdom as we participant in God's mission. As a community, we strive to discover what God is doing in the lives of people around us, and then discern how He wants us to participant in His redemptive purposes. We must see the church as an instrument, created by God, to be sent into the world to participant in what He is already doing.

While we will discuss the disciple-making component more in lesson nine, the following image illustrates the relationship between sections two, three and four of the training:

We believe as the church lives out the implications of each of the circles, the natural fruit, represented by the "sweet spot" of the Venn diagram, will be disciple-making.

The last section of the training is titled **Sustainable and Scalable Life**. The lessons in this section are specifically developed with a bi-vocational leader in mind. We will discuss the unique struggles associated with engaging mission and ministry bi-vocationally. We want to do everything possible to ensure that while you are planting a church, you also thrive in your family life and vocation.

Finally, the over-arching bi-vocational process is illustrated in the following BiVO Roadmap image. The purpose of the current 40-lesson training is to provide the Church Planting Catalyst or other Church Planting Coach with a resource to assist a bi-vocational planters, represented by the letters ML in the image, which stands for Missional Leader.

Once the Missional Leader (bivo planter) has completed the 40 lessons, our hope is that the planter will use the training lessons to equip their church planting core team or missional community, which is represented by the first circle labeled "Leading." Eventually we hope it will be a resource a planter will use to instill a missional-incarnational DNA in a multiplying movement of communities represented by the subsequent aspects of the Bivo Roadmap image.

40-Lesson BiVO Training Overview

Where the Journey Needs to Begin: 8 Key Paradigm Shifts

1. The Importance of Rethinking: Paradigm Shifts
2. Rethinking the Missionary Nature of God
3. Rethinking the Missionary Nature of the Church
4. Rethinking Mission: Incarnational Presence
5. Rethinking the Missio Dei
6. Rethinking Culture
7. Rethinking Vocation
8. Rethinking Leadership
9. Rethinking Disciple Making

Kingdom Thinking: Christology (Let's Start with Jesus)

1. Recalibrating Back to Jesus
2. The Gospel of the Kingdom
3. The Kingdom Agenda
4. Kingdom Prayer
5. Jesus Spirituality

Missional Engagement: Missiology (You've Already Been Sent)

1. Missionary Flow: Engaging Context
2. Contextualization: Place, Prayer & Person of Peace
3. The Spirit in Mission
4. Missionary Behaviors
5. Engaging 1st Places: Art of Neighboring
6. Engaging 2nd Places: Workplace
7. Engaging 3rd Places: Public Space
8. Biblical Hospitality
9. The Power of Sharing Meals
10. Missional Rhythms
11. Missional Discipleship
12. Incarnational Evangelism

Biblical Community: Ecclesiology (Family on Mission)

1. Missionary Flow: Forming Community
2. Shared Life for the Sake of the Other
3. Starting Missional Communities
4. Five-Fold Ministry: APEST
5. Liminality & Communitas
6. Multiplication & Movement
7. Creating New Scorecards

Sustainable and Scalable Life: (Thriving in Family, Work & Mission)

1. Bivo Aptitude: Self-Management
2. Bivo Aptitude: Family Management
3. Bivo Aptitude: Relational Management
4. Bivo Aptitude: Financial Management
5. Sustainability & Soul Care
6. Importance of Margin
7. Identifying & Developing Missional Leaders

Each lesson is structured around four components using Bloom's Taxonomy of learning.

1. Rethink (Knowledge/Understanding): Content; essays, videos and book excerpts
2. Action (Apply): Practical engagement to assist in moving from idea to practice
3. Reflection (Analyze): Consideration with a planting coach on both content and action
4. Learning Log (Evaluate/Create): Journaling for comprehension, innovation and next steps

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