

I have a confession to make. For years when asked by churches about whether full-time or part-time ministry was the better option, my default position was - full-time.

A recent report of research funded by The BTS Center, a Maine-based think tank, challenges my assumptions. Visits to vital mainline churches that have transitioned from full-time to part-time clergy have revealed that the fears of decline were not always realized.

Nearly 40% of mainline Protestant churches had no full-time paid clergy in 2012. I would guess that this number will have grown closer to over 50% this year. Many of these churches show signs of vitality including growing Sunday attendance, expanding community outreach and stabilized church finances.

What has helped these small congregations become vital is a major rethinking of the pastor's role. The pastor becomes less a provider of religious services and more of an equipper of laypeople to perform the tasks that had previously fallen upon clergy. Incidentally, rethinking the pastor's role is important for every church, whether there is full-time or part-time clergy.

We see signs of this in several of our churches, which may appear at first glance to be small congregations - but they are small, strong congregations.

As Baptists, we proclaim that we are all ministers. We say that the priesthood of all believers is a foundational principle of our faith. Yet in churches with full-time clergy, that principle is significantly diminished - with the pastor doing almost everything, leading to burnout. Looking at the church as it developed in the 1st and 2nd Centuries AD, the distinction between clergy and lay roles was almost imperceptible. It may be time to revisit this framework for ministry.

The move from full-time to part-time clergy has resulted in growth in many churches. But the danger of part-time clergy is the possibility of falling into the chaplaincy model - with the pastor spending his or her time leading worship and visiting the sick, with little time for anything more.

The key to remaining vital, according to the above study, is "revamping the part-time pastorate to make sure it includes more time, not less, for community engagement."

Reimagining the issue of part-time versus full-time need not be consigned to congregational ministry. The Baptist Alliance, as well as some departments of ABCUSA, have discovered the benefits of part-time ministry teams.

In Christ, Alan Newton