

From the Other Side

Dr Forrest Lowry

Houston -- For over 30 years I have served Southern Baptist Churches of all sizes and shapes as Senior Pastor. For the past fourteen years I served as Senior Pastor of Spring Baptist Church, a large Southern Baptist congregation of nearly 5,000 members in the growing suburbs of Houston, Texas. With an average Sunday School attendance of nearly 1,600 (and growing) we were one of the largest churches in the area. It is the kind of church we all dream about as young pastors – great location, great people, great staff, great opportunity. New subdivisions going in all around you in one of the fastest growing areas in the Houston area.

I thought I would be there for the rest of my ministry - but God had something far different in store for me. I still don't understand all that lies ahead – but He has definitely changed my life and my perspective. That is the reason I entitled this article – From the Other Side.

God called me to ask our great church to phase me out of salary and support and send me out to facilitate church planting. I had a vision to see businesses started that would dedicate a portion (and when possible all) of their profits to fund ministry projects that would otherwise go unfunded.

I also believe we must have a saturation church planting movement in America if we are going to see our cities transformed. For that to occur, we will have to have men and women who already have their financial support secured so they will not have to take their primary salary and support from the church.

But this cannot happen if the traditional mentality persists. It cannot happen as long as we believe that "tentmakers" are not "full-time" ministers. It cannot happen as long as we hold up the "fully-funded" model as the best - indicating that our "first-choice" should always be the "full-time" pastorate or staff position.

Far too many bivocational pastors and staff members are made to feel that if they do everything right and they are blessed by God they will one day graduate – to the other side – they will be allowed the privilege of serving in "full-time Christian service." Others refer to the "vocational ministry" as the goal of every God-called man and woman. I understand what is meant by all these terms – but I believe that God has a "new paradigm" for these last days – and it may resemble the first century pattern much more than we ever imagined.

Paul chose to make tents to support his ministry. I am sure that many of the elders in the early churches were businessmen and leaders in the marketplace. "Tentmaking" in God's eyes is ministry. We all need to remember: God called every believer to "full time Christian service." Every believer is called to minister. As Pastor, I am not "more called" than anyone else in the body of Christ. Every member of Christ's church is uniquely gifted for ministry and as such they need to be equipped and empowered for their unique and special ministries. The Christian life and ministry is 24 hours a day 7 days a week; everywhere we are; ministering God's grace to anyone we may be with at the time; whether at work, at home, at play, in the workplace, in the neighborhood – always ready to give an explanation for the difference Christ is making in our lives. There is no "secular" and "spiritual" designation in God's vocabulary. The Great Commission is not limited to the Church building or the Church program.

Since people spend from 65% to 70% of their time at work – just maybe the most important ministry is the one that is being done by what we have labelled the "bivocational minister." After all, these men and women are interacting with unbelievers continuously – and as "salt" and "light" they are living and sharing the Gospel with the people who need Christ. What we may need is not "less" bivocational pastors and staff members – but "more" Bivocational pastors and staff members. With 50% to 60% of the average growing church's budget going for salaries and support for "fully funded" staff members – just maybe God will raise up more "tentmakers" freeing up more and more of our budgeted funds to go into missions and evangelism and ministry projects. It is time to encourage, equip and empower visionary laypersons to "do the work of the ministry." It is time to empower

these visionary men and women to make the necessary adjustments to get in on what God is doing - which may be "outside the box" and which may not originate with the Pastor and Staff.

I am also convinced that we need to validate the godly men and women serving in "full-time ministry" positions that we refer to as bivocational pastors and staff members. Rather than trying to find ways for them to leave the workplace – we need to help them grow their churches using a "team ministry" approach as they continue to minister "in the workplace" as well as "in the church."

So, as one who has come "from the other side," God is teaching me a lot about what can be accomplished through an army of men and women willing to serve in the exciting arena of bivocational ministries. "May their tribe increase".