

THE NEED FOR BIVOCATIONAL MINISTRY

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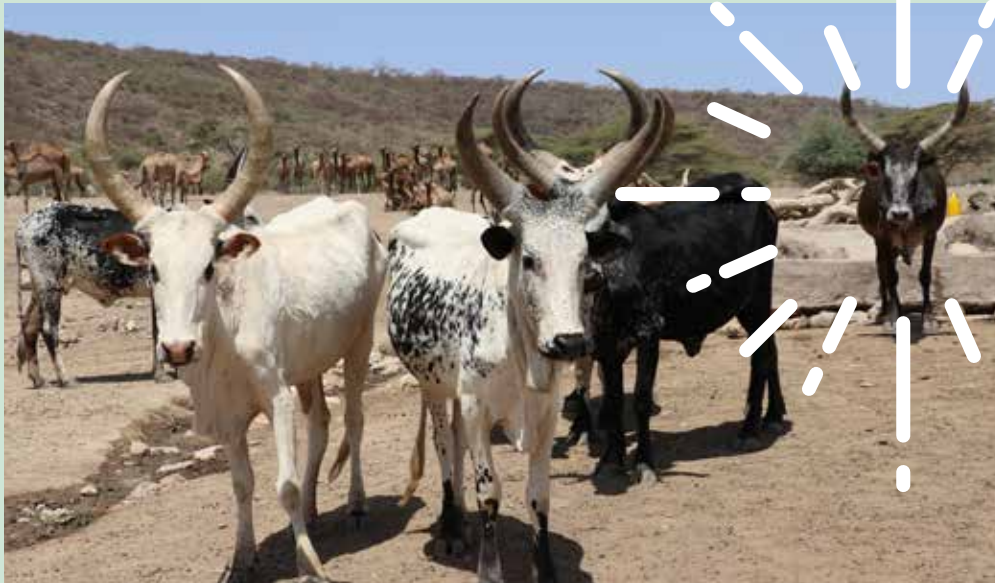


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An evangelist from India arrived at a Christian college in North Carolina to raise funds to support some 60 fellow evangelists and preachers in Chennai. He asked to use the college as a base for fundraising and was given free room and board in order to do that. Since I was the missions professor at the time, I had several conversations with him and asked him whether bivocational ministry might not be a viable option for his work. He replied that the American missionary who started his work had always insisted that once a man committed himself to work for God, he should be a full-time worker and not accept any other work. I mentioned to him that the Apostle Paul had worked as a tentmaker in Corinth, and that I had met a pastor of a tiny Nazarene church in Vermont who had to support himself by frying hamburgers at a fast food restaurant! He answered that such a lifestyle would be unacceptable in his ministry.

Consequently, he made yearly trips to the USA to raise funds for the following year's work, continuing the precedent set by his founding missionary of using American money to pay salaries for Indian workers.

The rejection of bivocational ministry has existed for a long time. Almost a century ago, Roland Allen tackled this thorny issue in two books published in 1923 and 1930. This famous missionary to China was deeply concerned with how much a paid clergy in mission situations was damaging the impact of Christianity. In the first book, entitled *Voluntary Clergy*, he said that his own Anglican mission had "abandoned the Apostolic

conception of the ministry," since the precedent set by the Apostle Paul was a voluntary clergy (1923:72)¹. In the second book, *The Case for Voluntary Clergy*, he added that paying local mission workers divided all who preached and evangelized into two classes: those who were employed by the mission and those who worked without pay, with the former enjoying higher prestige (1930:201). Yet the paid worker "is financially dependent upon the mission. . . . In relation to his own people, or his congregation, he feels no responsibility to them, and they feel no responsibility for him" (1930:209). Ultimately, this system teaches Christians that "all growth depends on money" (1930:212). This in turn slows down the growth and maturity of the churches planted.

On the other side of this sad picture stand those who do God's work whether they are paid or not. In a short article published in *Mission Frontiers*, I related some of the story of Isaac Ndlovu (whose Tonga name is Ndendela), a remarkable evangelist with whom I worked and whose main ministry was in the Zambezi River Valley of Zimbabwe (Sept-Oct 2013:36). In 2014, based on interviews and with his permission, I published Ndlovu's story under the title "Who Needs a Missionary?". One chapter is devoted to how he made a living, since he gave up a good job in order to share the blessings of the gospel with his own Tonga people, yet he never asked anyone for financial support. How, then, was he to support his growing family while doing ministry? From the start he planned to be a farmer like most Tongas.

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We missionaries wanted to help him get off to a good start, so we helped him buy two cattle in order to start a herd of his own. The nearest cattle for sale were a hundred miles from Isaac's home due to the tsetse fly whose bite is lethal to livestock. But the fly had recently been eradicated, and he personally walked the two cattle to his home on foot! After some years, he had a good-sized herd that provided milk, manure for fields and a source of money (by selling a cow) should the need arise. But he still lacked the regular cash needed for some things like school fees, soap, matches and some food (he grew most of his food as a subsistence farmer).

A fellow missionary loaned Isaac the funds to purchase what he needed to grow cotton, such as seed, insecticide and fertilizer. This gave him a paycheck once a year when his meager cotton crop ripened, but that was enough to provide the cash he needed for a while (including the repayment of the loan). When global cotton prices dropped due to the US government subsidizing American cotton growers, Isaac had to find other ways to make ends meet. He tried numerous other schemes to make money, but discovered that most of them took him away from his calling to ministry. Finally, he found a way to corner the welding market in his area, buying the necessary equipment from the sale of some cattle. Part of the equipment needed was a generator since his area has no electricity, but he still had an 80 mile round trip to buy diesel for the generator at the nearest gasoline station! In order not to detract from ministry, he partnered with his

grown sons in this small business. Isaac's first priority was ministry, with the bivocational part added on only to support his family, and he increasingly relied on his sons to conduct business as they came of age.

We often forget that bivocational ministry was used extensively on the American frontier, especially during the Second Great Awakening (1800-1830). Open-air revivals at camp meetings were followed by fiery evangelists who planted churches across the thinly populated countryside. Most of these preachers were neither well-educated nor financially supported. Only later did Americans come to rely on professional ministers, yet we often insist that our later model should be adopted even in situations where a bivocational ministry would be more appropriate. Especially in mission situations, shouldn't we heed the advice of the Apostle Paul: "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ." (1 Cor. 9:12, NIV) In many mission situations around the world, American support for local ministers of the gospel is undermining the gospel.

Credibility is established, however, when those like Ndlovu who are self-supporting evangelists prove by their lifestyles that their priority is making disciples. We as outsiders need to be especially careful not to stifle local initiative but to encourage all those who believe God has called them to ministry for the sheer joy of sharing the Good News. 