

CO-VOCATIONAL MINISTRY IN PRACTICE

Manitoba Report Brief

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Design by: Emily Duffield
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INTRODUCTION

This mixed methods case study explored the factors that contribute to the thriving of a local, rural co-vocational congregation. Surveys were designed using Co-Vocational Canada's Thriving Congregations' and Pastoral Leaders' Framework and follow up interviews were carried out with church leaders and congregants.

The findings suggest that the Framework is a helpful tool for assessing the holistic thriving of churches using a co-vocational model. They also suggest that the leaders and congregation at this church are content with a co-vocational ministry model. 70% felt their church was stronger because of it, and no one indicated that they would prefer to have a "full-time" pastor.

The findings also reveal that this congregation has many strengths, including: wise stewardship, authentic worship, vibrant prayer, caring community, a theology of the priesthood of all believers, robust relationships with friends and family, leaders' vocations outside the church offering opportunities to connect with and better understand the broader community, supporting leaders as equipper (rather than doers), leaders having adequate family time, prioritizing personal spiritual growth, and a shared appreciation for shared ministry and leadership. Although the survey results in other areas were by no means alarming some areas where additional consideration might be helpful are:

- the congregation actively engaging in evangelism ("I share the gospel regularly")
- theological education and training in leadership in congregational settings being readily available for leaders
- opportunities to disciple others

- feeling equipped for ministry by church leaders
- silos amongst teams
- being justice-oriented and intentional in blessing the community
- leaders making time to access trusted mentors/prayer partners/coaches/accountability partners on a regular basis
- clarity of role definitions
- leaders and congregants being aligned in their vision for CoVo ministry in their context



Since biblical times, it is not uncommon to find pastors who earn their wages with employment in the community. The Apostle Paul was without a doubt a great example of this approach.

Thousands of years later, this approach to ministry has received several terms such as bi-vocational, co-vocational, multi-vocational, dual-vocation, shared-time ministry, and tent-making (as a direct allusion to Paul's trade). Often there are differences in how these terms are used by different authors and even how such terms are defined in specific contexts. At Co-Vocational Canada – a ministry of Briercrest College & Seminary – we use the term “co-vocational” (CoVo) as an umbrella term to reflect the lived experience of a pastoral leader who is appointed to serve in a local church while also working in outside employment.

Much has been learned about CoVo ministry in recent years. The benefits of this approach to ministry have been shown to include reduced ministry costs (Bickers, 2007; MacDonald, 2020; Samushonga, 2020b; Watson et al., 2020), missiological flexibility/missional focus (Bakker, 2021; Puddicombe, 2022), a stronger point of contact with the community (Brown, 2022; Jones, 2017; Samushonga, 2019, 2020b), greater financial independence to the minister (Bentley, 2022; Samushonga, 2019, 2020b), and greater encouragement to the congregation to be active in serving the church as a priesthood of all believers (Hamilton, 2022; Samushonga, 2020a, 2020b; Stephens, 2021a). CoVo pastors, for whom this model is a good fit, expressed much higher levels of emotional and spiritual wellbeing and much lower levels of wanting to leave ministry than their uni-vocational peers” (Chapman and Watson, 2020; MacDonald, 2024).

One of the challenges most commonly connected to CoVo ministry include difficulties with time management and scheduling (Bakker, 2021; Bentley, 2021; Bickers, 2007; Brown, 2022; Draper & Chapman, 2022; Jones, 2017; Lundquist, 2019; Samushonga, 2019; Stephens, 2021b). This can become increasingly more difficult when having to respond and attend to different bosses, demands, and workplaces. As a consequence, pastors often forego rest or do not have adequate home, family, and personal time (Chapman & Watson, 2020; Stephens, 2021b). This may put them at greater risk of burnout (Brown, 2022; Samushonga, 2019). It has also been reported that it is often difficult to manage the expectations of the congregation, who sometimes expect that the pastor will be available 24/7 (Jones, 2017; Lundquist, 2019; MacDonald, 2020; Samushonga, 2019; Siebert, 2022). Another very recurrent challenge is the stigma, or the “feeling lesser than” that surrounds CoVo ministry (Bentley, 2021, 2022; Bickers, 2007; Lundquist, 2019; MacDonald, 2020; Stephens, 2021b). In some contexts, being paid part-time is perceived as less important, CoVo pastors may be seen as less committed, and CoVo congregations may be viewed as less successful or less healthy.

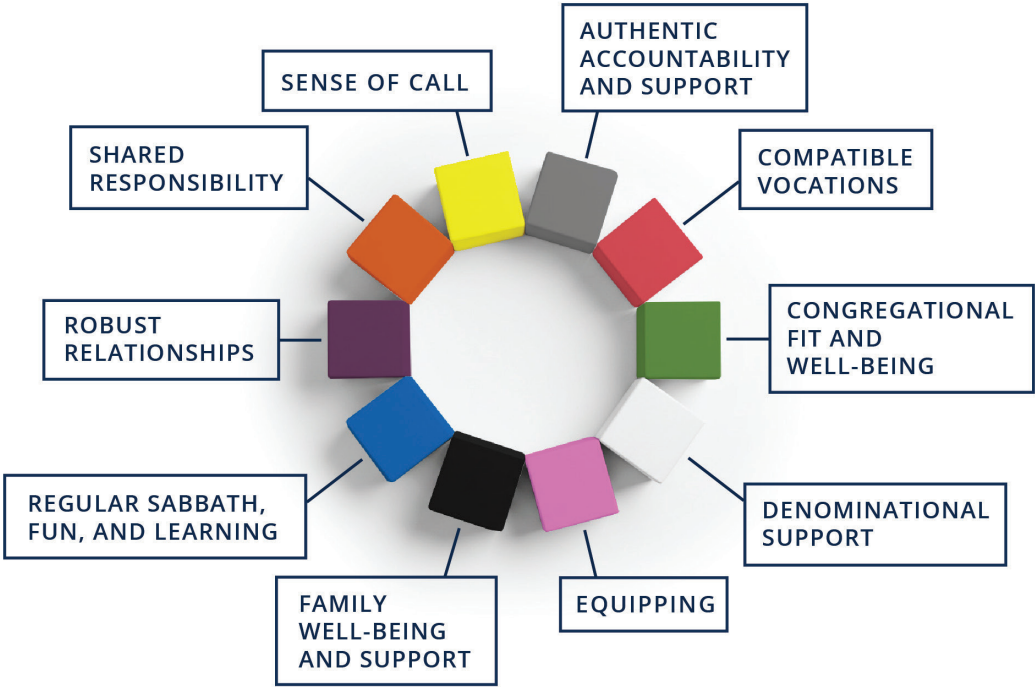
Amid these well-known potential benefits and challenges, discussions about co-vocational ministry continue to increase in North America in the last decade as many co-vocational pastors strive to promote a healthy and sustainable ministry. Yet, many questions still remain, especially in the Canadian context where there is a paucity of empirical studies focused on CoVo ministry.

In response to such demand, in 2025 Co-Vocational Canada brought together 23 denominational leaders, CoVo practitioners, and academic leaders from across Canada to talk about CoVo ministry in their context. One of the most predominant findings from that study was the urgent need for a framework which could provide the necessary structure

to co-vocational congregations (while still remaining flexible to respond to their specific needs, strengths, mission, etc.). Additional research identified 10 key areas for thriving CoVo pastoral leaders. As you can see in the following graphic, many of these are similar to uni-vocational ministry models. However, there are a few important distinctives.

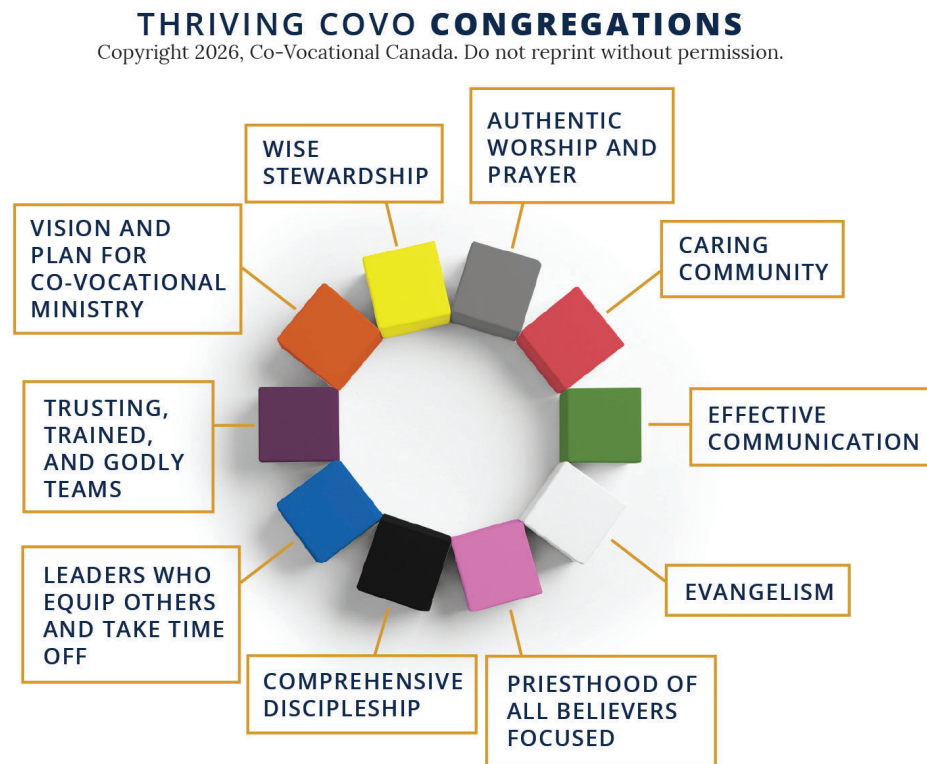
THRIVING COVO PASTORS

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Additional research also identified 10 markers of thriving CoVo congregations. Similar to the framework above, some of these indicators (like worship, evangelism and discipleship) would be found on uni-vocational frameworks as well. However, in CoVo congregations these ministries may look different as the other factors are considered. For example, in thriving CoVo congregations a grounding theology of

the priesthood of all believers informs a model where the leaders spend more time training congregants to do the work of ministry and less time doing this ministry themselves. One of the key findings is the importance of having a well-articulated vision and plan for how a theologically informed CoVo ministry model will look in their context.



These studies were conducted with a myriad of leaders and pastors from across Canada. This present case study enabled us to test and apply the findings in a specific local CoVo church.

The main purpose of the present study, therefore, was to understand how co-vocational ministry is experienced by leaders and congregants in a church in rural Manitoba.

We also hoped to learn how Co-Vocational Canada's framework for congregational thriving reflect the lived of experience of their congregation. Our goal is not only to support the local church in this study in their co-vocational practices, but also to disseminate knowledge of best practices so that churches and denominations in other parts of the country may also grow and flourish in their co-vocational endeavors.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings of this survey indicate that this is a thriving, growing, co-vocational church, grounded in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and acting as a robust community of faith.

The recommendations below are offered in a spirit of humility, understanding that each context is different and that every congregation faces many competing priorities. Co-Vocational Canada exists to support thriving CoVo congregations and their leaders. If we can assist in any way, please do not hesitate to reach out.

CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTHS



Wise Stewardship

The results indicate a shared understanding of wise stewardship and generous giving.



Caring Community

There was strong consensus that the church emphasized caring community.



Authentic Worship and Prayer

This was an area that evidenced great strength in the congregation and community.



A Theology of the Priesthood of all Believers

This includes support for leaders as equippers (rather than doers) and a congregational appreciation for shared ministry and leadership.

CONGREGATIONAL AREAS THAT MAY BENEFIT FROM ADDITIONAL FOCUS



Evangelism

Especially engaging the congregation in this work. A minority of people indicated that they share the gospel regularly.

We recommend that this becomes an even greater focus of teaching and training, especially for those identified with the gift of evangelism.



Comprehensive Discipleship

Opportunities to disciple others, being more justice-oriented, and intentionally blessing the community, were areas identified as needing additional focus.

We recommend that this be the topic of conversation at an upcoming leadership team meeting where avenues to develop opportunities can be explored.



Trained Teams

Participants identified the need for more theological education and training in leadership in congregational settings. They also identified the need to address silos among teams, and clarify role definitions to prevent overlap and understand expectations.

We recommend that this be a topic of conversation at a series of extended leadership team meetings with the goal of developing developmental plans, creating strategies for minimizing silos, and creating written role descriptions.



Vision and Plan for Co-Vocational Ministry

Although there was strong support expressed for the concept of co-vocational ministry, there were some concerns regarding leaders and congregants being aligned in their vision and plan for CoVo ministry in their context.

Churches often benefit from having a facilitator assist the leadership team in finding consistent language and processes to help churches align around a vision and plan for co-vocational ministry in their context.

LEADERSHIP STRENGTHS



Robust Relationships with Friends and Family

Leaders indicated that they have strong relationships within their family, church, and community.



Compatible Vocations

Not only were CoVo leaders' vocations seen as compatible but also leaders' vocations outside the church were seen as offering opportunities to connect with and better understand the broader community.



Regular Sabbath, Fun and Learning

Leaders reported prioritizing personal spiritual growth and refreshing, as well as having adequate family time.

LEADERSHIP AREAS THAT MAY BENEFIT FROM ADDITIONAL FOCUS



Equipping

Some leaders reported not feeling personally equipped for ministry.

We recommend that leaders be polled for specific areas of training that they would find helpful and that budget be allocated for the theological and/or ministry training that would be most beneficial at this time.



Accountability and Support

Some leaders said they were not able to make time to access trusted mentors, prayer partners, coaches, and/or accountability partners on a regular basis.

This is understandable in the busyness of life and ministry but can lead to challenges later. We recommend simple personal development/support plans for each church leader that would be reviewed twice per year.