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## 'Very very stressful': Bivocational pastors losing income during COVID-19

by Diana Chandler, posted Monday, April 20, 2020 (7 days ago)

EL PASO, Texas (BP) -- Bivocational missionary Jesus Galarza financially supplements his ministry in El Paso and northern Mexico by coaching volleyball, but he can neither minister nor coach during the COVID-19 pandemic that has stymied livelihoods across the U.S.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas will continue to pay Galarza as a contract employee through the end of the year and will include him in an economic relief program for bivocational ministers. To further compensate for his loss of income as a volleyball coach, Galarza will rely on savings and the economic supplement the U.S. government is sending taxpayers through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

"I hope to be rehired [as a coach] in October," Galarza said. "I trust completely in the Lord by that date everything is coming to a normality."

Galarza is among many Southern Baptist bivocational ministers and pastors facing challenges in making financial ends meet during the COVID-19 pandemic. He doesn't pastor a church, but statistics gathered from state conventions indicate that between 22,000 and 35,000 Southern Baptist churches are led by bivocational ministers, according to the Bivocational & Small Church Leadership Network.



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"We've discovered many of our pastors have been laid off from that second position," said Joe Wright, the network's executive director. "The churches have by and large stayed strong and have continued to employ their pastors. But many of those pastors have lost their second stream of income.

"And so those churches need to be aware that that places a bivocational pastor in a precarious position, if the church is not able to step into that void and continue to operate, then that pastor truly will be totally unemployed."

Jerad File, pastor of Redeemer Baptist Church in Panama, Ill., hasn't worked in his job as a substitute teacher since March 13, but expects a couple of checks to trickle in for substitute work completed before schools were shut down to prevent spread of the coronavirus.

In Wilkesboro, N.C., Booneville Baptist Church children's and youth pastor Dana Blankley is being paid his full salary as a middle school English and social studies teacher, teaching his students from home on Zoom during the pandemic. His church salary is also continuing, with increased financial gifts to the church generating a 20 percent budget surplus the first two weeks of April, according to Blankley, through online and mailed giving.

Dusty Marshall, pastor of New Life Baptist Fellowship in Alamogordo, N.M., has lost much of his income as CEO of Smiling Foamworks, a small business selling foam swords, shields and other equipment used in live-action role-playing community games across the U.S. and Canada. While sales are largely online, the events that generated a large portion of his sales have been canceled through July, and potential customers are no longer able to play the games in which his equipment is used.



Donald McKinnon, lead pastor of Legacy Church in Sutton, Mass., can neither work as a substitute school teacher nor collect unemployment for the lost income, he told BP, because his work as a substitute "is considered a gig job. I am not eligible for unemployment so it has been very, very stressful for me and my wife."

Wright said many state conventions are working to provide supplemental income for bivocational pastors during the pandemic. Pastors at least 65 years old can apply for Mission:Dignity funds through GuideStone Financial Resources. The program, originally established to help retired pastors and their widows, has been expanded during COVID-19 to help those still in active ministry.

At least 51 percent of the more than 47,000 Southern Baptist churches have Sunday School attendance of fewer than 50, based on Annual Church Profile numbers, Wright has said. A full 83 percent of churches average 125 or fewer.

"In most areas when a church gets over 100, they're pretty self-sufficient. And they tend to have their own ability to meet their needs," Wright said. "Once you reach 100 ... the need for bivocationalism goes way down. But for those churches that are 75 and below, the need for a strategy of bivocationalism is very, very high, and so we see the percentages go way up, the smaller the church gets. That's just economics."

McKinnon receives \$150 a week as a pastor, he told BP, and has received financial gifts from the Baptist Convention of New England and a local church.

"My wife is disabled and gets Supplemental Security Income, which is our current main income," McKinnon said, "but still not a lot. I know everything is in God's hands, and that 100 years ago the world was in a similar place, but it does weigh on us as we miss gatherings and doing life as normal."

In Texas, the Baptist General Convention of Texas has issued short-term financial grants to more than 275 pastors across "a very diverse ethnic and cultural network," said Ira Antoine, the convention's director of bivocational ministry. About 50 percent of Baptist General Convention of Texas churches have a bivocational pastor, Antoine said.

"The purpose of the Texas Baptist Pastor Grant is to meet the needs of Texas Baptist churches by providing short-term financial support to bivocational and small-church pastors who have experienced economic difficulties through the loss of employment or church salary as a result of COVID-19," Antoine said. "We want to help our bivocational pastors and small church pastors who lost their secular jobs or income get over a two-month hurdle."

Galarza has qualified for one of the Texas grants, capped at \$1,000 for up to two months.

"I'm still OK because I saved a little bit of money," Galarza said. "The hardest part for me is I live by myself." Galarza said his faith has sustained him during this time of isolation.

In Illinois, File is receiving help from family and awaiting a CARES Act stimulus check.

"If what I've heard in media reports is correct about the stimulus checks provided by the CARES Act, then it should come at just the moment of our need," File said. "Because of our family size, the stimulus check we receive should be more than two months' worth of what I have made substitute teaching. I'm hopeful that we can get back to work before that runs out."

Marshall, a small business owner, is not allocating himself a paycheck for at least two months because of a decline in sales.

"It hurts us financially at home," Marshall said. "As a bivocational pastor, this business is what helps sustain us as we pay for any bills we have, buy groceries, put gas in vehicles, etc. Currently to make up for shortfalls, we are relying on family and friends as they have helped out in any way they can. My wife still has her job but it is part-time and online based. She teaches ESL online but her bookings for classes have significantly dropped since the outbreak of COVID-19 as well."

Blankley, who continues to receive pay as a teacher in North Carolina, sees blessings during the pandemic's stress.

"This is a historic and worrisome time in our world, but this is also a blessing to our world as well! What I mean by that is the Gospel is being spread quicker, faster and farther than at any other time in history," Blankley said. "Churches and pastors who might not have a strong online presence are now reaching much more of their communities via the internet, people are able to see multiple church and multiple speakers at any time, and by reposting and sharing messages we are spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ to people who may not would attend church or listen normally.

"I praise God for this opportunity to serve Him," Blankley said.

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Diana Chandler is Baptist Press' general assignment writer/editor. BP reports on missions, ministry and witness advanced through the Cooperative Program and on news related to Southern Baptists'... [Expand Bio]

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