

CO-VOCATIONAL MINISTRY

Frameworks for Congregational Thriving

Compiled by Ellen Duffield



Co-Vocational
Canada



BRIERCREST
SEMINARY

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Framework for Thriving Co-Vocational Leaders	3
Framework for Thriving Co-Vocational Churches	7



INTRODUCTION

Co-vocational ministry is an ancient model that was common in the early church, normative throughout many parts of the world today and increasingly prevalent in Canada. Its biblical roots go well beyond the apostle Paul's tent-making to suggest that full time paid church leadership models are difficult to find in scripture.

And yet, research indicates that many churches in Canada are much more likely to 'crash into co-vocationality,'¹ than to prayerfully and purposefully adopt it.

CoVo models may be practiced for many reasons, but the most common are missional, church and leadership flourishing, and financial.

Thriving is a complex concept involving countless variables and defined and measured differently by different people.

To speak of Christian thriving is to challenge traditional views of what thriving looks like. We serve a suffering Saviour, and we are called to cruciform leadership, to experience the joy of forgiveness, the freedom of surrender to God's will, and the beauty hidden in the Beatitudes. Too often these concepts are misunderstood or misapplied however, leading to unrealistic expectations of self or others, burnout, and disillusionment.

When we speak of thriving here, we are referring to the abundant life that Jesus describes. This life includes loving and being loved by God and others, the opportunity to serve in meaningful ways according to our gifts, and practicing regular rhythms of rest and Sabbath keeping. This involves looking beyond our own well-being to the well-being of others. In fact, the Old and New Testaments make clear that thriving, or shalom, includes wholeness in the community and justice for all.

To speak of Christian thriving is, therefore, to think wholistically about personal, congregational, community, and global well-being. This involves an authentic relationship with God, mutually supportive friends and family, growing in our identity in Christ and God-given purpose, and using our gifts, abilities, and opportunities for the good of the whole.

1. Ross Bartlett & Kate Jones, *It's Real Ministry: How Part-time and Bi-vocational Clergy are Challenging and Empowering the Church* (Altona, MB: Friesen-Press, 2022).

Christian thriving is rooted in a relationship with a loving God and God's ideal for humanity.

The following CoVo ministry frameworks highlight what our research has indicated are important elements of thriving for CoVo pastors and CoVo congregations. They are not intended to be prescriptive. It is hoped that they offer ways to think about sustainable, thriving CoVo ministry in your context.



FRAMEWORK FOR THRIVING CO-VOCATIONAL LEADERS

Thriving co-vocational ministers experience and can articulate how their two or more occupations are essential to their unique vocation. They are able to discern changes in their calling and feel satisfaction in their work. They understand what aspects of ministry are difficult for them personally and have cultivated strategies to find rest and renewal while balancing their work and personal lives. When facing new challenges, thriving co-vocational ministers know how to access the supports that best help them navigate these challenges in resilient ways.

Marks of Thriving Co-Vocational Pastors Include:

Authentic Accountability and Support

The demands of co-vocational life make finding time to spend with mentors, prayer partners, coaches, and accountability partners challenging. However, the nature of the work also makes it crucial. Thriving CoVo pastors make time to access their trusted inner circle on a regular basis. They are honest about their fears and failures, and receive support to mature and lead wisely.

Research reveals that co-vocational pastors need more administrative support than uni-vocational pastors and that administrative tasks are twice as likely to be stressors for CoVo pastors as univocational ones.² Many CoVo congregations employ shared leadership and/or team ministry approaches requiring more communication and coordination than other models. There also needs to be great clarity in role descriptions, definitions, and measurements.

Compatible Vocations

Pastors identify the importance of the various parts of their vocation working well together. This refers to flexibility and compatibility of schedules; opportunities to connect with and better understand the broader community; the ability to transfer knowledge, skills, or relationships between vocations; and how vocations offer a welcome change from each other. One study found that 80% of respondents stated that they use their 'secular' skills in their ministry work and 78% can explore gifts and passions they would not have been able to with just one job. In addition, 70% can meet the needs of their congregations and 60% feel fulfilled often or very often.³

2. J. Watson, W. Malcolm, M.D. Chapman, E. A. Fisher, M. Draper, N.F Santos, J. Siebert, & A. Bratton, Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project, Research Report, 2020.

3. Darryl W. Stephens, *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry* (Alta Open Press, 2022).

Congregational Fit and Well-being

Studies show that leader-congregation fit and ministry model-congregation fit are important contributors to leader and congregational thriving. Important differentiators include theological and practical openness to shared ministry, team leadership, and pastor as 'equipper.' Pastors are also more likely to report being healthier and more resilient if their congregation is thriving.⁴ Clergy who do not report congregational thriving need additional support.⁵

Denominational Support

Co-Vocational pastors indicate the importance of denominations offering credence to this ministry model and informed, practical support. In many, if not all cases, denominational leaders must modify their expectations of CoVo pastors (for example to attend certain meetings) and increase their awareness of the unique challenges juggling more than one vocation provides.

Equipping

Adequate theological education as well as training in leadership in congregational settings is important. Several Canadian denominational leaders noted this is a priority, but some noted the challenges of ensuring this is available in accessible ways that work well for co-vocational pastors. Many pastors' calls to ministry came after they were already employed elsewhere and were in response to a congregation's need. Several were surprised when first asked to consider serving since they had no theological education and often found it helpful to take classes after becoming a pastor to build their confidence, credibility, and competence.⁶ Finding time for this training can be challenging for CoVo pastors and accessible models are needed.

Family Well-being and Support

Co-Vocational pastors note how important their family's well-being is to their own. While congregations cannot be responsible for all aspects of this, they can ensure adequate family time. Spouses play a pivotal role in CoVo ministry. A calling that impacts the family as much as this one does may mean they are required to contribute financially, in the church, and with additional responsibilities at home. Spouses of clergy may feel as, or even more, isolated than the pastor. One Canadian study found spousal or family conflict was a hinderance to pastoral resilience.⁷

4. Margaret Clarke, Shelly Spurr, and Keith Walker "The Well-Being and Resilience of Canadian Christian Clergy," *Pastoral Psychology*, (August 2022): 8,11,12, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-022-01023-1>.

5. Ibid.

6. Kristen Plinke Bentley, "Perspectives of Bi-Vocational Ministry: Emerging Themes in Bi-vocational Ministry" Research at Lexington Theological Seminary. See also Lizardy-Hajbi, Kristina & Floding, Matthew. eds. *Explore: Vocational Discovery in Ministry*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022.

7. Margaret Clarke, Keith Walker, Shelly Spurr & Vicki Squires, "Role Related Stress and Adversity

While pastors do not go into ministry to make money congregations that ensure their leaders are cared for are more likely to have thriving leaders. This includes ensuring they have benefits.

Regular Sabbath, Fun, and Learning

Thriving co-vocational pastors expressed that they make sure to dedicate time to their family and some also observed being able to incorporate physical activities during the week.⁸ Participants mentioned the importance of maintaining spiritual disciplines and committing to personal well-being. Flexibility and trust were noted as well. Pastors note the importance of authentic spiritual practices.

Research by Marcus Buckingham found that leaders who get to work within their strengths for 20% of every day are more likely to thrive. Thriving CoVo pastors also continue to grow and learn in their areas of giftedness and strength.

Robust Relationships

Co-Vocational pastors indicate the importance of healthy relationships with family, friends, church leaders and congregants. Ministry and work demands may leave limited time or energy for investing in relationships; however, wise leaders find ways to make this a top priority.

Shared Responsibility

Jethro reminded Moses that the solo way he was leading was not good (Ex 18:17). Any ministry leader, but especially co-vocational pastors, must learn to share responsibility, authority, and power. A theology that underscored the priesthood of all believers in CoVo churches is often matched with practices of team ministry and shared leadership.⁹ This is not to suggest there is no leadership. In fact, CoVo congregations require skilled, collaborative leaders to ensure the various teams are working in alignment.

Sense of Call

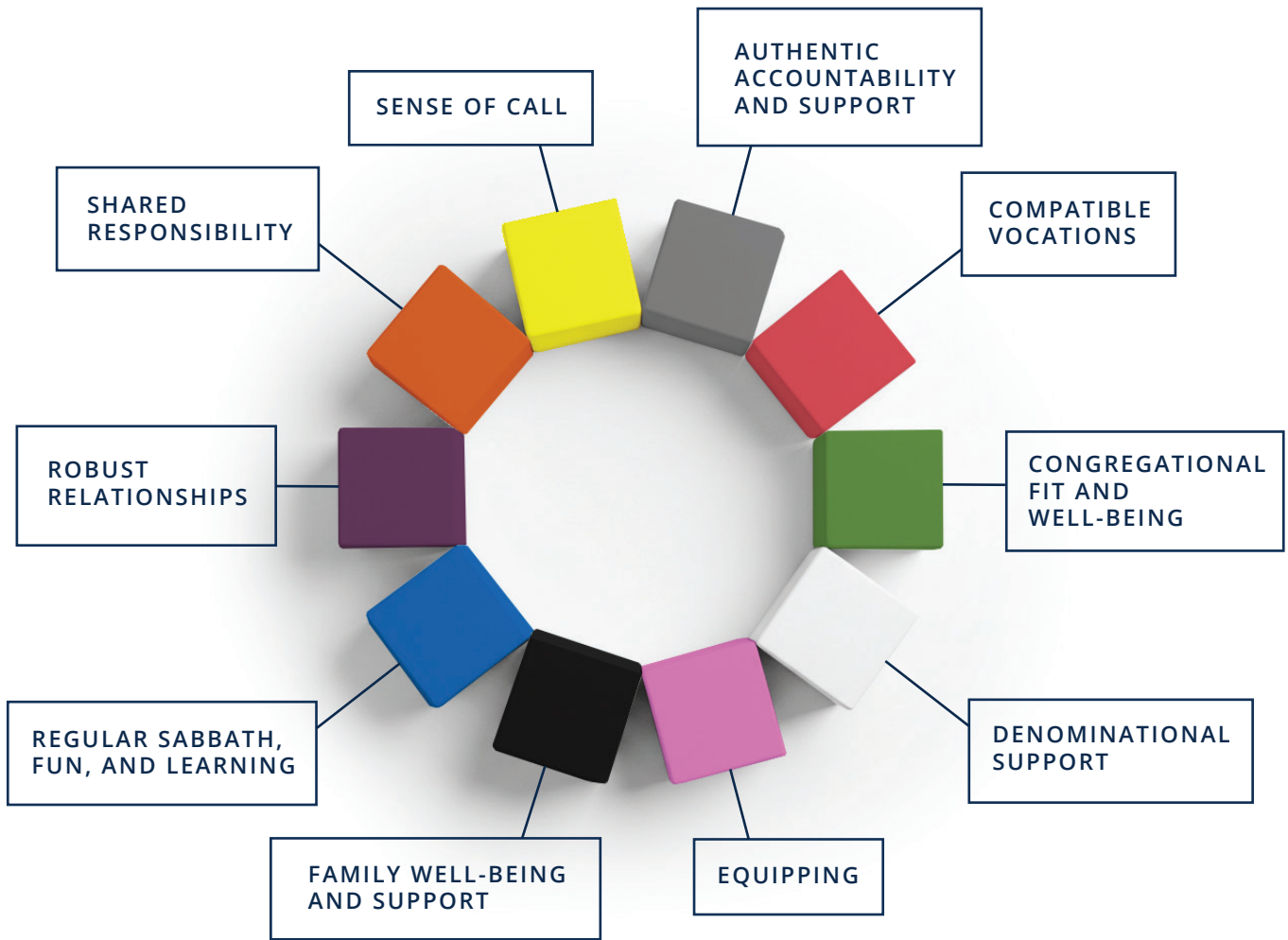
One of the greatest predictors of CoVo thriving was a sense of call to this approach to ministry. CoVo pastors who did not feel called to it were much more likely to express discontent and burnout.¹⁰

Impacting Christian Clergy Resilience: A Pan-Canadian Study," *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Sage, 1-13, (2022): 9, DOI:10.1177/15423050221133033.

8. Rebeca Heringer and Ellen Duffield, "Weaving Threads Research Brief," 7.

9. James Watson and Narry Santos, Eds., *Tentmakers: Multivocational Ministry in Western Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022).

10. Watson et al., Canadian Multivocational Ministry Project, Research Report, 2020.



FRAMEWORK FOR THRIVING CO-VOCATIONAL CHURCHES

Research in Canada shows that there is still a stigma associated with it in some denominations, as if it were a “lesser than” approach. However, there is a growing acknowledgment of the gift and opportunity of CoVo models.¹¹

Co-vocational congregations are not just churches with a pastor who is paid part time. They are “a different breed of congregation”¹² necessitating a different congregational vision and approach to ministry and leadership. Co-vocational congregations that adopted this worldview saw it spill over into their diverse work environments, intentional community development, and the multiplication of leaders.¹³ However, these congregations did not just happen. They were coached toward this model. For many this begins with reframing the role of vocation and our understanding of church.

Thriving co-vocational congregations affirm the biblical call on every disciple of Jesus to serve in the priesthood of all believers. By empowering the entire body of the church to act, onus is distributed among the congregation as all members discern and follow their individual and unique calling. Thriving congregations understand and intentionally set reasonable expectations for paid and volunteer staff, joyfully respecting boundaries that nurture wellness. They raise up leaders who value diverse vocational callings as not only compatible with but valuable for the life of ministry. Thriving congregations see life change in the individuals who make up their church community and contribute toward building flourishing neighbourhoods and cities.

This is a different way of thinking about church and takes time to develop. Many congregations benefit from a facilitated process that enables them to explore their beliefs and assumptions about church and develop pathways toward thriving in co-vocational ministry.

11. Heringer and Duffield, “Weaving Threads Research Brief,” 3.

12. G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Part-Time is Plenty: Thriving without Full-Time Clergy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 7.

13. Marc B. Donaldson, “A Means to an End: The Sustainability of Bivocational Ministry” (Dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2016), 70-74.

Marks of Thriving Co-Vocational Congregations Include

Authentic Worship and Prayer

Worship is arguably one of the most crucial parts of the church. It enables congregations to reorient their lives around the Lordship of Jesus Christ and honor the triune God with their hearts and voices.

One of the marks of thriving CoVo churches is their genuine God dependence and vibrant prayer life. This may look different in different contexts, but its importance cannot be overstated.

Caring Community

Flourishing CoVo churches are marked by genuine caring and robust opportunities for community building. This community building enables people to feel that they belong. However, it is easy for congregations to become inward facing, creating cultures that are not intentional about inviting people in, especially people who are different from them. This is not the mark of Christian community. Christian communities are marked by outward facing hospitality.

Effective Communication

Almost every organization and congregation struggle to maintain effective communication. Thriving co-vocational congregations have established decision making and communication pathways that allow for collaboration, clarity and a sense of ownership that enables people to contribute in meaningful ways.

Evangelism

The Great Commandment calls the church to witness. Some CoVo congregations turn inward, expecting their leaders to dedicate all their time to caring for the congregation. This is a recipe for stagnation. Thriving CoVo congregations release their leaders and mobilize themselves to engage in evangelism, justice work and blessing the community such that, if the church closed, they would be genuinely missed by the community.

Multiple co-vocational pastors observed how they have been intentional about establishing meaningful connections between their congregations and the community where it is located – oftentimes, in churches who had not been very missional prior to their coming.¹⁴ In one large study flourishing churches were found to “think and act in culturally and contextually relevant ways, they can exegete their own culture and context.”¹⁵

14. Heringer and Duffield, “Weaving Threads Research Brief,” 5.

15. Ibid., 5.

Priesthood of all Believers Focused (not pastor-centered)

Previous studies described 'congregational fit:' factors that enable congregations to thrive with this model. These factors include a theological and practical openness to shared ministry, team leadership, and pastor as equipper of others.¹⁶ In addition, congregations that are more 'group centered' than 'pastor centered' will likely find themselves better suited to co-vocationality.¹⁷ A congregation's posture greatly impacts the way they relate to the world.

Those who had an active presence in the community were more likely to also be growing.¹⁸ In thriving co-vocational congregations the church sees the pastor as part of them and are supportive of the pastor's co-vocationality. The congregation understands the leader's other vocation(s) as an extension of ministry and appreciate them working co-vocationally.¹⁹ What's more, in thriving CoVo churches congregants see themselves as active ministers of the gospel, serving within the church and community according to their gifting and ability. Sadly, just adopting a co-vocational leadership model does not automatically translate into the congregation becoming more missionally engaged.

Reflection: *What is needed to enable congregations to re-envision themselves as a 'priesthood of all believers' led by Ephesians 4:11 'equippers,' rather than places of 'one-directional' ministry?*

Comprehensive Discipleship (teaching and preaching)

Thriving co-vocational congregations take discipleship and learning seriously. They provide opportunities for people to be discipled and become active in discipling others. Unhealthy churches are marked by a lack of solid biblical teaching or, in many cases, mature believers who still expect to sit in pews and "be fed" when they could be applying what they have learned and ministering to others.

16. Darryl W. Stephens, *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry* (Chicago, IL: Alta Open Press, 2022).

17. Mark D. Edington, *Bivocational: Returning to the Roots of Ministry* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018).

18. B. McAlpine, J. Thiessen, K. Walker & A.C.K. Wong, *Signs of Life: Catholic, Mainline, and Conservative Protestant Congregations in Canada* (Toronto: Tyndale Academic Press, 2021), 223.

19. Heringer and Duffield, "Weaving Threads Research Brief," 5.

Leaders Who Equip Others and Take Time Off

While leadership models varied in flourishing congregations, good leaders were described as “faithful to the church, servant-like, Spirit-led and people oriented.”²⁰ CoVo pastors are intentional about delegating responsibilities to lay people in the congregation (e.g., occasional preaching, leading worship, praying), aligned with the biblical perspective of a priesthood of all believers.²¹ Thriving CoVo congregations understand that Sabbath-keeping, family and friend time, and times for personal and professional growth must be protected and encouraged in their leaders.

Trusting, Trained, and Godly Teams

In thriving Co-vocational congregations, a theology that underscored the priesthood of all believers was often matched with practices of team ministry and shared leadership.²² Studies of flourishing congregations show that engaged laity correlated to both flourishing and growth²³ and sufficient training for ministry service was a determining factor.²⁴ Trust on teams and between teams is also key. Thriving co-vocational congregations find ways to break down silos, build shared processes, and develop relational capacity.

Vision and Plan for Co-Vocational Ministry

Co-vocational ministry “begins with a different set of assumptions and ends with a different understanding of how the church can be structured to do its work of ministry.”²⁵ Previous research found that “incarnational, neighbourhood churches” can offer “prophetic alternatives to [the] corporate, competitive, [consumer] mindset” that has developed as a result of Christendom and the move towards secularity.²⁶ These types of congregations share important commonalities: they “courageously grasp a new vision of faithfulness,” have addressed “deeply rooted norms” and who have been coached to create a plan and a congregational commitment to the new reality.²⁷

20. McAlpine et al, *Signs of Life*, 43.

21. Heringer and Duffield, “Weaving Threads Research Brief,” 5.

22. Ibid., 6.

23. Ibid., 120-126.

24. Ibid., 127.

25. Mark D. Edington, *Bivocational: Returning to the Roots of Ministry* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 11.

26. Andrew Hamilton, *The Future is Bivocational: Shaping Christian Leaders for a Post-Christian World* (Ark House Press, 2022), 22.

27. Ibid., 17-52.

Studies show that flourishing congregations in Canada have a clear sense of self identity that was grounded in theology and core values and was frequently communicated.²⁸ This contributes to a sense of social identity and belonging.²⁹ This is even more important in CoVo churches who may feel “out of step” with other congregations in town or with the models that congregants grew up with.

Wise Stewardship

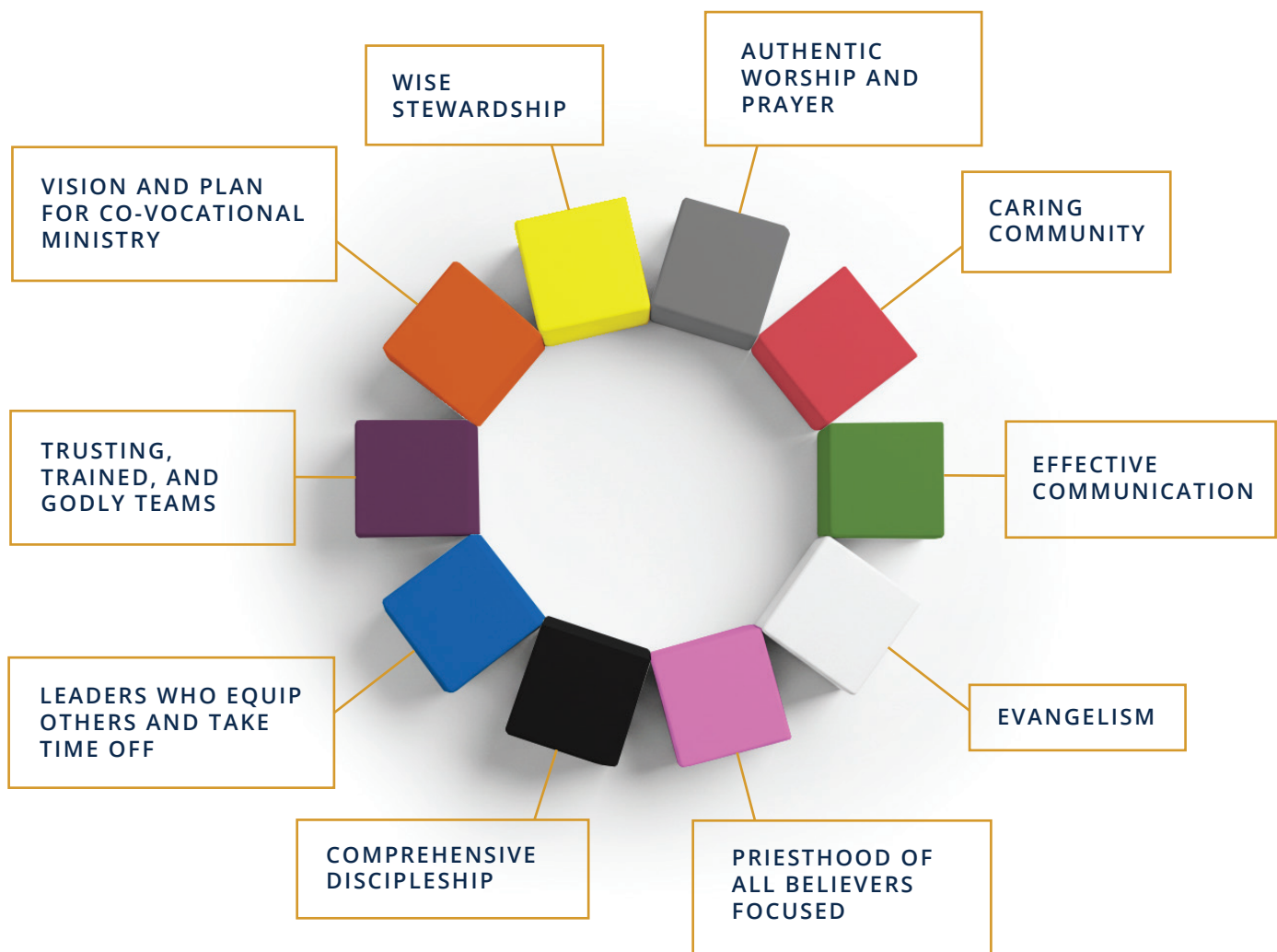
Thriving co-vocational congregations think differently about stewardship. They understand the importance of tithing and generous giving as the work of the people for the sake of the gospel and steward the funds wisely to support ministry and ministry leaders.

Reflection Questions

- What theological perspectives support co-vocational ministry models?
- In your context what narratives undermine this approach to ministry and what fears support these narratives?
- How might we build towards the above-mentioned factors that contribute to thriving in co-vocational congregations?

28. Ibid., 20-22, 29-30.

29. Ibid., 23-24.





Co-Vocational
Canada



BRIERCREST
SEMINARY