

The Intentional Associate

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Pete, a friend who is an associate pastor, called me aside after the meeting. "John, do you have a few minutes to talk?" His question led to over an hour of discussion on the pro and cons of the associate pastorate. He was at a crossroads in his ministry and wanted to know, "Should I consider becoming a senior pastor?"

Later that month, following a gathering of pastors, another associate pastor told me that a church wanted him to candidate as senior pastor. "Is a senior pastorate really where the action is," he asked candidly, "or is the grass just greener on the other side of the fence?"

Having been on both sides of the senior/associate fence, I know this question is worth examining. For over ten years I served two churches in associate roles. In Colorado I worked as a youth pastor under the direction of a sharp, CEO-type senior pastor. In Arizona I worked as a minister of education and associate pastor in a team relationship with a loving, general-practitioner senior pastor. As I developed personally and professionally, I felt an increasing desire to give more leadership direction and to preach more frequently. Those desires led to a fulfilling six-year senior pastorate on the East Coast.

From those experiences, I've learned that each position — senior or associate — enjoys unique advantages.

Advantages of the Senior Pastorate

The associate looking over the fence will notice many advantages of the senior pastorate. The senior pastor has greater influence, is more visible, and possesses greater power. If the senior pastor wants a faith-promise program or two worship services, he or she can usually lead the congregation in those directions. The senior pastor makes, shapes, or is consulted about every decision.

In addition, the associate and his well being are at the mercy of the senior pastor. Some associate pastors enjoy a team ministry, while others chafe under the senior. Some associate feel they are "go-fors," handling details with which the senior pastor does not want to bother. Yet other associates are given a specific area of ministry, treated as professionals, granted freedom to serve, and reimbursed well for their service. But in either case, the level of esteem, amount of salary, and details of the job description are all greatly dependent on the senior pastor.

Advantages of the Associate Role

But within the senior pastorate's green grass are many weeds. In fact, there are many advantages of working as an associate staff member:

Freedom for pure ministry. The missionary who wants an evening service, the mother who wants a wedding for her pregnant daughter, the betrayed wife who wants counsel—they all have expectations of the senior pastor. So do the denominational executive, the shut-in, the township official, and the parents of the suicide victim.

Higher quality in performance. The senior pastor's time is divided among so many areas that often he or she is performing well enough to survive, but rarely to a level of excellence in all that is satisfying. The associate pastor, on the other hand, gives 100 percent of his or her time to a specialized area. As a youth pastor, I gave fifty to sixty hours a week to junior highs and senior highs. I was able to produce a high-quality program. In fact, many associates can do a better job than the senior pastor in overseeing a specific ministry program because they are able to give more time to that role than senior pastors can.

Less pressure. Expectations are not as great for an associate. If elderly Mr. Smith could not hear the sermon, no one got on my case. If the budget was behind, no one asked me to preach on tithing. If the visiting musical group was too upbeat, no one spoke to me after the service. But as senior pastor, when the young people returned from a social at 3 a.m., I was called; when the building program was launched, I was asked to help motivate the funding.

More congregational tolerance. As an associate, my dress could be less formal, my grammar less precise, my candid observations less filtered, and my mistakes less critical. To begin with, few people understood my role. People know what a senior pastor does, and even what a youth pastor does, but what does a Christian education director do? The situation is similar in politics: We are embarrassed when one of our diplomats commits a faux pas, but we are really troubled when the President makes an obvious blunder.

While Pondering the Senior Pastorate

Many associates will feel a desire to move toward a senior pastorate; others will see the value of remaining in a team ministry. Let me close with three principle I found helpful as an associate.

Be valuable. The best way for an associate pastor to help a senior pastor, as well as to prepare for a possible senior pastorate in the future, is to be valuable — to do the task well. The church will benefit from, and the senior pastor will appreciate an associate who maintains a good attitude, is loyal, and is happy to serve in the assigned area.

Valuable staff members cover not only their own base, but are willing to help when there is a need in the senior pastor's life. Last week as senior pastor friend spend half his day ministering to a grieving family through a funeral and graveside service. The afternoon was spent at the hospital with an 87-year-old parishioner being prepared for surgery. He was grateful when a former associate, still working in the area, said, "Bill, would you like me to cover your Bible study this evening?" This type of attitude is eagerly welcomed.

Be visible. The influence of an associate is directly related to his or her visibility and involvement in the life of the overall church. I am proud, for example, of the associate pastor who serves as chair of his state denominational fellowship.

Be vulnerable. As an associate, I tried to share my needs and concerns with the senior pastor without simply dumping them—or pressuring the senior pastor to meet those needs. It helped me to realize that some senior pastors have much in common with their associates. They'll play racquetball together, and their families will meet together regularly. Others have little in common. If they were both lay people in the congregation, they would not naturally choose each other as friends. But both types of relationships can result in effective ministry.

I also wanted to be open to appraisal. Regardless of whether I felt the senior pastor's evaluation was accurate, it at least let me understand how he perceived my ministry. Since his perceptions were reality to him, I needed to know his feelings.

Many search committees believe their new senior pastor should first have served as an associate pastor. The rationale is “to get some experience first.” My conviction is that every youth pastor or associate pastor would benefit by first serving as a senior pastor.

When one large church was looking to fill two associate positions, they called two individuals who were both serving as senior pastors. For two years previously, the church had experienced tension, largely because of an associate who continually challenged the senior pastor's decisions. Today, the church is growing in both harmony and ministry. The senior pastor hasn't changed, nor the lay leadership. The big difference is the maturity, understanding, and team spirit these associates bring to the church. They understand the demands of the senior pastorate, and they are also enjoying their new freedom in ministry as associates.

Are there good reasons why an associate pastor should remain an associate pastor? As they say in Minnesota, “You betcha!” In fact, there are some good reasons why senior pastors may enjoy becoming associates.