Team players: What do associate pastors want?

by Jason Byassee in the January 24, 2006 issue

My friend had a dazed look when I asked how his work as an associate pastor was going. Then he ripped into his senior minister: “He won’t communicate! He thinks ministry is only for ordained people—preferably him alone! He doesn’t even seem interested in what I do at his church!” Then he grew pensive: “We’re like strangers passing on the street—in the same place, but not connected at all.”

Another associate minister in the room tried to comfort him: “Hey, it’s not his fault—seminaries were terrible back when he came through. Anyway, you’re smarter than he is.”

When I told a senior minister about this exchange of commiseration, he sighed. “Sometimes with my staff I feel like my dad did during a long car trip with the family. When the kids would get rambunctious in the back, he’d take just so much before turning around to give us a good whack.”

The metaphors—strangers in the street, rambunctious kids—suggest lonely young associates who are alternately insecure and arrogant, unsure of how to take those first toddling steps out of seminary and onto a church staff. They also suggest the plight of senior ministers who’ve been given no resources for handling a staff other than whatever people skills they happen to have.

The relationship between a senior pastor and associate pastors is often key to the health and ministry of a church, yet it receives next to no attention in seminaries or in the literature on ministry. The attention it does receive is often thin theologically—a pinch of God in a broth of dated managerial theory.

I spoke with several associate and senior ministers, hoping that what they’ve learned can help other pastors think through their lives and ministries more thoroughly and theologically.

What do associate pastors want from a senior pastor? The associates invariably mentioned “communication” first. They do not want micromanagement, or a senior pastor constantly glancing over the underlings’ shoulders. Instead, associates want clear direction for the areas of ministry over which they have charge, and then they want to be left alone “to make the church’s vision a reality” in that area.

This concern suggests the importance of having a well-articulated vision toward which all can aspire, and a certain amount of freedom for each staff member as he or she works toward it. Carol Madalin sees this happening at the church she serves in Naperville, Illinois. She compares her senior pastor to Captain Jean-Luc Picard in *Star Trek*: *The Next Generation*, who regularly tells his first officer, Commander Riker, “Make it so!”

Says Madalin, “When I say I’m thinking about doing something new or different, he listens, and then says, ‘Great, I like it!’”

Another associate struggles with a head pastor who doesn’t communicate as well. “He’s not into details; he just wants to cast the vision. But when I come back with details worked out, he’s not happy. You have to be OK with the way an associate achieves your goals or else the associate just spins her wheels.”

In addition to being able to communicate, ministers have to be able to get along well with other staff members. Kelly Lyn Logue, an associate in Cary, North Carolina, worked for a senior minister in her first job. When the senior pastor was moved to another church, the two ministers petitioned their bishop to move Logue so that the two could work together again. Clearly something had gone right! Her secret? “We just hang out with each other—shooting the breeze. It’s no fun to work with someone you don’t want to be around.” The willingness to talk about trivial and personal matters builds the trust that allows colleagues to be blunt with one another. “When something negative is brought up about one of us, we tell each other.”

Associates often become sounding boards for unhappy members who don’t want to confront pastors directly. This can lead to unhealthy triangulation. A senior minister of a large congregation in suburban Chicago compared the associate’s job to a sewage treatment plant. “The associate takes in all the crap and people imagine he or she will filter it before passing it on to the senior.”

Other seniors and associates responded to stories about unhappy staff members by insisting that triangulation between associate pastors, unhappy members and senior pastor must be stopped if the associate pastorate is to be successful. And trust is crucial. Both senior and associate pastors often compare their relationships to friendship and even marriage.

Les Longden, a professor at Dubuque Theological Seminary and formerly the head of a large church staff in Michigan, said that the social times his staff spent on retreat were “worth their weight in gold. If I were a senior again, I’d be even more intentional about having fun.”

Many clergy don’t have many positive staff experiences to share. William Willimon says, “We preachers have no training in how to supervise other human beings, and it shows most dramatically in a multiple staff church.” Willimon, a United Methodist bishop in Alabama, suggests that a staff find a management coach who will observe and help the senior pastor through such headaches as job evaluations, budget management, and hirings and firings.

Some pastors come to a staff with management experience; they may have worked for a corporation or small business. These mid-career individuals are wiser and have more life experience. They also know that partnerships function better when all parties are generally intentional about teamwork. Cynthia Anderson, who worked in communications in the corporate world and is now an associate pastor in Barrington, Illinois, says her corporate experience gave her a settled ego, an eagerness for teamwork, and the conviction that a senior pastor’s authority must be respected in front of staff and other church members. “Never air disagreements with her or him in public,” she advises.

Darryl Franklin, associate in a large suburban African-American church outside Chicago, also brings corporate experience to his ministry. Franklin told his senior minister he was eager to learn from him, and promised to protect his interests in front of church members and never to disagree publicly with him. In return, he asked for “an open door and mind” when he disagreed with the senior privately. “This almost immediately turned me from an outsider to a trusted colleague,” Franklin said.

Loyalty works both ways, of course. The senior must be confident enough in himself or herself to hire talent, let staff members have space to roam, and trust them to

remain loyal. The senior must also be an advocate for the associates. This includes being sure the associates' needs in salary and public recognition are met, and being willing to let them take some risks. Sometimes these are risks that senior ministers are not able or willing to take themselves.

Craig Kocher, associate dean of Duke Chapel, says, "Associates can be a bit more subversive. They are frequently young and passionate, recently out of seminary, and can use the role to speak gospel truth to the congregation in a way the senior can't."

Alisa Lasater, an associate in Charlotte, North Carolina, recalls attending a meeting to discuss grant proposals to fund local missions. The committee was ready to reject a proposal that had come from a minority applicant. Lasater spoke up for the applicant, tentatively at first. "Then I saw the look from my senior—it said 'Go!' He had to moderate, but he wanted me to advocate."

Senior ministers can choose to cultivate a gift of prophetic advocacy in an associate, or squelch it by turning the associate into a personal assistant. One associate in Texas was looking forward to a retreat for planning his church's ministry for the next year. "I was fresh from a top seminary and passionate to begin leading others in ministry. Then the night before, my senior called and told me to be sure to pick up juice and donuts the next morning."

Lyle Schaller writes about the importance of recognizing certain ministerial tasks as "winners" and others as "losers" in *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church*. "Winners" are the tasks that lead people to sign up for ordained ministry: preaching, presiding over sacraments, being present at key life transitions such as weddings and funerals—in other words, the prominent, visible and generally rewarding parts of ministry. The "losers" are those areas that are less visible and more likely to invite ecclesial disquiet: youth ministry, administration, fund-raising—and breakfast procurement. Satisfied associate ministers consistently point to senior pastors who share the winners.

Christy Sharp, an associate in Asheville, North Carolina, praises her senior for allowing her to choose the Sunday a month when she'll preach. One year the senior pastor even took vacation at Easter and left the leadership in her hands.

Logue and the senior pastor at her church refer to each other with pastoral titles: "the Reverend Logue" and "Pastor Charles," and intentionally make references to what the other has previously said in sermons and teaching. "This requires paying

attention to each other," she said—a task more difficult and crucial than it sounds.

Sara Webb Phillips, a 26-year veteran of solo pastorates and chaplaincies, took a job as a late-career associate pastor in Evanston, Illinois. At a meeting of area clergy, she had to swallow hard before introducing herself as an associate, and at the last second decided to say, "I'm one of the pastors at Evanston First." When her senior introduced himself, he said, "I'm another one of the pastors at Evanston First." "It meant a lot for him to recognize my need at that point," Phillips said.

Senior pastors have high praise for associates whose work reflects well on the senior. This dynamic is a bit tricky. A senior pastor must have a healthy ego to hire an associate with talent, and then to mentor that talent well. The relationship between senior and associate requires that both practice humility. The associate may have far less power in the relationship, yet bring energy that leads to success within a congregation as well as to personal pride and a sense of accomplishment.

Lillian Daniel, a senior minister in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, says, "No young associate can imagine how her church ever functioned before she got there." The lack of energy that some associates perceive in the parish explains the short duration of many associate pastors' tenure. Says Daniel, "I know a fair number of people who spent 18 months as associate pastors, then left to do Ph.D. work, and spent teaching careers disparaging the local church ever after."

Freshly minted associate pastors, with their high ideals, may collide with senior pastors whom they perceive as lazy, or parishes they perceive as lifeless. One associate recalls: "Although lazy would not be the word I would use, he was a minimalist. He was, however, extremely religious about walking across the street to the parsonage at the exact same time every day to watch week-day soaps."

It is not surprising that some associates who encounter such situations leave the ministry. One effort to stem this problem is the Lilly Endowment's Transition into Ministry Program, coordinated through the Fund for Theological Education. Churches that apply for grants from the program receive some $750,000 and anywhere from two to six ministerial interns to train for two years. In their first calls, these interns are given partners who serve as peers, and they work with a senior minister who has been recognized as an effective mentor in experiences with other associates.

Ann Svennungsen, president of the FTE and a former senior pastor in the program, says that "if we are to raise up the next generation of pastoral leaders, pastors must

be intentional not only about inviting people to consider ministry, but also about retaining those trained for ministry through times of disillusionment."

Svennungsen recalled her role as mentor with fondness. "We met once a week over breakfast to talk and pray and read and talk about books we were reading—it was a renewing experience for me too."

Even a less-than-ideal senior minister can be a blessing for an associate. "Minimalist" seniors may let associates do a lion's share of the work, thus encouraging growth and pastoral maturity. Associate pastors may also enjoy a surprising degree of freedom (as Chris Smith argues in *Leadership* magazine). It's not the associate's job to worry about budgets. The associate doesn't receive the phone call in the middle of the night if the youth do something outrageous, or are stranded roadside in the middle of nowhere. Associates may be able to avoid more weeknight meetings. The greatest benefit may be that associates are often able to develop more genuine friendships with church members than their head pastor. For such reasons Willimon counsels new pastors to seek out associate positions for their first ministry experiences. "Ministry is mostly learned through apprenticing," he said, comparing it to an art to be mastered rather than a technique to be memorized. "I sure would have been a disaster if I hadn't had my first two years as an associate. Even when it's terrible, it's valuable learning."

Jeffry Bross, an associate in Batavia, Illinois, remembers that "even though I was the pastor who called on people when they were sick, and even though I was the one who was there when their spouse passed away, it was always the senior pastor whom they wanted to do the funeral." As Lyle Schaller has said, it is the higher salary that determines who is charge, despite what we say about team play and equality. The contrast in status between pastors may tempt associates to view their positions as trampolines to something "better," or a route to more prestige and salary.

But long-term associate pastorates show that the associate role can be a vocation, and not just a step toward something else. William Green has been an associate in the same church in Cary, North Carolina, for almost 20 years. Senior minister Rodney Hamm says of Green: "William works longer hours than I do. . . . He's invaluable to me. I don't mind the attention he gets, and I salute his ministry as often as possible. I don't know how we could replace him." Green launched a Bible study outreach that involves dozens of prisons in the area. He is a leader in Emmaus

Way’s retreat ministries. He also leads a men’s group with over 100 participants. Those ministries are vital to his church’s life.

There’s no fixed formula for senior-associate relationships. They’re as variable as the gifts of each party. Several seniors swear by the importance of “spiritual gifts inventories” that show staff members what they do well, what needs work and how staff members can complement one another.

George Thompson, a former senior pastor, oversaw associates who were “polar opposites” in personality, but who “continue to be like members of my family.” Several had exceptional gifts for preaching, so he asked them to preach more than usual. Another had a legal background and became a resource in the community for prophetic ministry and civic action. A visionary, bored with details, was allowed to delegate details to others on the staff. The key is flexibility and a willingness to let associates’ gifts shine without forcing them into the mold left by a previous associate. In Thompson’s case, several who were pastors on his staff are now presiding over associate ministers of their own.

Most of the suggestions for healthy relationships can be found in secular studies of leadership and management: the need for humility, public deference, team building and so on. Where does God fit in the discussion of staff relationships? Green says that this is part of the secret to a long associate pastorate. “The best thing a senior and associate can do is simply sit down and talk. They need to tell their faith stories so each can appreciate the other in light of how God has worked in their lives.”

Bill Gattis, a former senior pastor, talks about the importance of giving his staff spiritual leadership. To Gattis, staff meetings are “worshipful work,” with times of silence for prayer and discernment woven into them. He would have his staff members pass a “prayer rock” around the table, with the one holding it charged to pray for whatever topic of conversation was at hand.

Melinda Hinners, an associate in St. Charles, Illinois, suggests that senior and associate pastors go on an annual retreat to a local Christian counseling center. With the aid of a facilitator, staff members review the year and prepare for the coming year in an atmosphere of contemplation. Spiritual relationships among members of the pastoral staff—relationships of the sort to which ministers are ordained—are not a prerequisite for the work of the church. They *are* the work of the church.

Relationships between associate and senior pastors are neither more nor less complicated than other human relationships: they hold the potential for abuse as well as for transformation. The gospel promises to transform human relationships as Jesus changes us from enemies to friends of God. Therefore any and all theological claims about relationships—about everything from sin to reconciliation and the eschatological summing-up of all things under Christ—are important to consider.

Yet theological reflection is surprisingly lacking in materials that discuss the associate pastorate. Books from conservative theorists present scripture as a sufficient resource by itself, as if our modern bureaucratic church structures can be enlightened without difficulty by chapter-and-verse talking points (see Robert Radcliff's *Effective Ministry as an Associate Pastor*). Mainline thinkers who have broached the subject do so clumsily. In *Leading the Team-Based Church*, for example, George Cladis suggests the popular theological description of social trinitarianism as a model for staff relations. As the Trinity is a society of mutually indwelling persons, the argument goes, so the staff should be a team of players without one figure dominating the others. It turns out, however, that the managerial visions of mutuality are presumed in this argument before the theological mystery of the Trinity is explored. (And if the Trinity model is taken seriously, then someone must become incarnate and die!)

Many associate pastors frown on any comparison of senior and associate to Jesus and the disciples. For them, the analogy confirms a dated, CEO-type model of ministry. Several pointed instead to Paul's mentorship of Timothy. Lasater made this comparison, saying, "It helps when my senior 'knights' me publicly, and sends me out with his authority."

Most pastors with whom I spoke invoked Paul's metaphor of the church as a body in which every member has an indispensable role. The image validates the ministry of every member of the church, and not simply the "professional" clergy. It also implies coordination between members, with the head responsible for orchestrating things, but with many other necessary parts. Paul's metaphor also insists that the "least honorable" be treated with the greatest honor. Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson explore this theme in their book *Leading from the Second Chair*. Being humble and giving others public recognition and spiritual encouragement should sound like familiar tasks: they are descriptions of being Christian.

The desert monastics talked of fleeing the world and other people in an effort to love others better. By isolating themselves from the sorts of self-inflating fantasies that

choke love, they would learn how to love as God does. Rowan Williams summarizes the activity this way: when you win your neighbor for God, you “become a place where God happens for somebody else.” Logue and her senior pastor are doing this work when they “pay attention to one another”; Green and others are doing this work when they listen to and pray for each other. Those in the ministry offer themselves as “places where God happens” for the church. For associates in ministry, this difficult but rewarding process starts with the office next door.