

## HOW TO ENHANCE THE MINISTRY OF ASSOCIATE PASTORS

As one of the best and brightest seminary students, Chris delighted in his first pastoral appointment—the associate pastor of First United Church. Chris reveled in all his ministry responsibilities, such as developing a thriving lay ministry program, helping to set up a much-needed homeless shelter, and growing a strong youth ministry. In addition to regular worship leadership, he looked forward to the opportunity to preach once a month and officiate at weddings and funerals. Chris felt that this ministry setting was the perfect place to initiate new ideas and broaden the range of his ministry gifts.

### What Does an Associate Pastor Do?

Many associates carry out the same ministry duties and responsibilities as the senior pastor or head of staff. In addition, they may hold a leadership role in two or three specific ministry areas. Other associate pastors serve as specialists and take on primary responsibility for a single program, such as music or education. Some large congregations call an associate to serve as the Administrative Pastor, who manages the day-to-day operations, supervises other staff members, and coordinates multiple programs.<sup>1</sup>

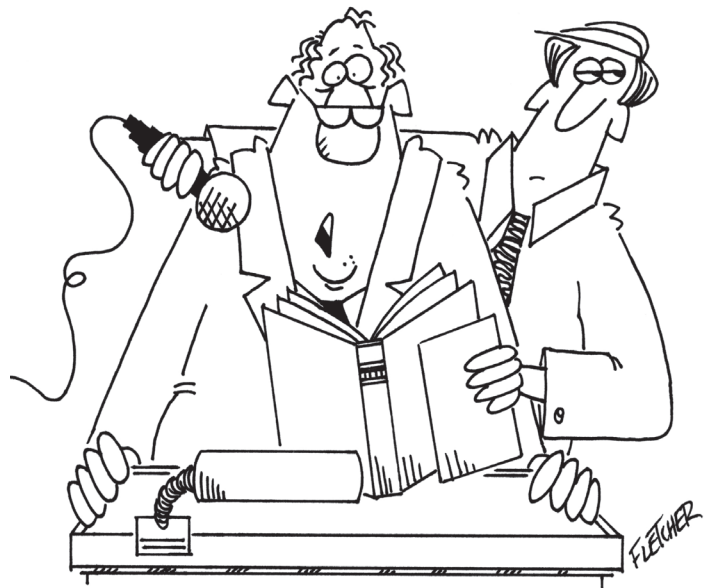
Church size determines, in large part, the associate pastor's work profile. Congregations with fewer than 100 in worship are unlikely to have a part- or full-time paid associate pastor. Thus, two out of three U.S. congregations (including Catholic parishes) do not employ an associate pastor.<sup>2</sup> As churches reach the 150 regular worshiper threshold, their leaders begin to consider calling a full-time associate pastor. Some churches call a part-time associate long before they reach this size in order to help the congregation grow its ministries. A program church—one that averages between 150 and 300 in worship services—typically employs one or more associates to lead the larger number of activities associated with their increased size. Because there are more worshipers at larger churches, about half of all churchgoers attend a church served by one or more associate pastors.

### What Are Our Expectations?

How do associate pastors differ from senior or solo pastors? Do they see their ministry role as a lifetime vocation or a required step toward advancement? Our expectations contribute to the effectiveness of associate ministry.

*Do we expect short tenures?* Too often, churches assume an associate will remain on staff for a short time—between eighteen months to three years. As a result, members do not invest in the associate's work or support his or her leadership. Yet associate staff turnover is only slightly higher than that of senior and solo pastors.

*Do we expect less experience or training?* The stereotypical associate profile is a recent seminary graduate, young, and assuming a first pastoral call. Yet the average age of associate pastors is forty-six, which is eleven years younger than the average for senior or solo pastors nationally.<sup>3</sup> Further, two out of three associate pastors worked in one or more occupations before entering ministry. At least half served in a previous pastoral position prior to their current call as an associate



...NOT HOW THE NEW ASSOCIATE PASTOR PICTURED,  
"SHARING THE PREACHING RESPONSIBILITIES."

pastor. Mainline Protestant associate pastors are more likely to be ordained with a seminary degree (79%) than conservative Protestant associate pastors (62% ordained; 48% with Bible College or seminary degree).

*De we see it as an internship position?* In many denominational traditions, recent theological school graduates find their first placement as an associate pastor. The idea is that the senior pastor assists in the continuing development of the new pastor's professional identity and skills. However, the majority of first-call pastors serve as a solo pastor rather than as an associate. Many pastors feel called as associates for their entire ministry and others find associate ministry as a calling after decades in solo pastorates.

*Do we expect specialized gifts?* Every congregation's ministries require a leader with a diverse skill set. But the essential traits for effective ministry—whether the leader is a senior, solo, or associate—always include hopefulness about the future, a sense of humor, the ability to laugh at oneself, humility, openness to new ideas, and deep respect for the ministry of others.

### **Can Associate Ministry Have Negative Side Effects?**

A ministry team works when it consists of emotionally healthy people. The quality of effective associate ministry is strongly related to the quality of the senior pastor-associate relationship. If this relationship is problematic, the toxicity eventually affects the whole church. Healthy relationship patterns involve seeing differences among staff as opportunities to learn rather than threats to authority. All pastors should strive to unify people and groups rather than divide them.

*Caution: age and gender dynamics.* Because associate pastors are disproportionately women while senior pastors remain disproportionately men, in many instances the senior pastor is an older man and the associate pastor a younger woman. Emotionally mature and older senior pastors of both genders refrain from authority struggles. And mature associates fully support the senior ministers' leadership. In the best teams, both pastors invest equally in making the relationship work.

*Caution: language dynamics.* Titles matter. The language used to describe each pastoral position speaks volumes about job status. For example, introducing the associate by first name only and the senior pastor as "Reverend Smith" doesn't accurately represent the associate position's value. Wise congregational leaders consider how positions are listed on the church website and in all publications. In a multi-pastor church setting, pastors should be introduced in a parallel fashion that reflects

they are ministry colleagues, such as "the associate or senior pastor," or as "one of the pastors of our church."

### **How Necessary Is Congregational Support?**

The congregation lays the foundation for successful associate ministry before any ministerial candidate arrives by constructing a clear job description. A clear contract outlines all responsibilities (such as preaching, worship leadership, and specific programs or initiatives), compensation, benefits, vacations, and regular meetings with the staff-personnel committee.<sup>4</sup> This groundwork protects both parties from future conflict and disappointment. To support the ongoing growth of an associate pastor, churches can provide book allowances, education reimbursement, conference budgets, and study/travel time. Part-time and unpaid associates benefit from these same considerations.

### **Do Associate Pastors Find Satisfaction in Ministry?**

Rachel began her associate pastor work after serving ten years as a solo pastor. She loved being part of a creative ministry team. For many years, she frequented small venues that featured live music but discovered that even some of the best musicians had difficulty finding places to perform. With the multiple responsibilities of a solo pastor, she wasn't able to think about how her love of music might create opportunities for others. As an associate, she proposed that the congregation start a coffeehouse in the church to host weekly acoustical performances. The church venue quickly gained a regional reputation as a great place to hear exceptional talent. Rachel found satisfaction in combining her passion for music with the congregation's expanding outreach ministry.

Pastoral leaders report high levels of job satisfaction. And associate pastors report even higher levels of satisfaction in ministry than senior or solo pastors.<sup>5</sup> In what ways does our congregation affirm the associate pastor's ministry? What additional steps could we take to support our pastoral leaders?

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1. A comprehensive overview of this important ministry is found in Alan Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012). Kindle edition.

2. C. Woolever, et al., "Associate Pastors," U.S. Congregational Life Survey ([www.USCongregations.org](http://www.USCongregations.org)), 2012.

3. Ibid.

4. See the appendix in Rudnick's book, which contains example job descriptions and where he makes a strong case for associates to preach at least once a month.

5. Woolever, 2012.