



## *Illusions . . .*

### **The Perils of Serving as Associate Clergy**

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In Sears or in the sanctuary, whatcha see is not always whatcha get! In social, cultural, or spiritual settings, vision and expectations dominate our other senses. Physically or spiritually, *vision* often is the driving force in our lives and ministry. What we think we see with the naked eye, or envision spiritually, often has far more to do with our expectations than what actually lies before us! Thus, we fall prey to many illusions.

You could hardly find a more fired-up, ready-to-go group of clergy than recent graduates from any seminary: full of life—*Hefty Bag*-sized portions of *joie de vivre!* Exuding faith! Joyous in spirit! Steeped with a sense of urgency, most of them are fully focused on what they must accomplish within a very short time—and *ALL TO THE GLORY OF GOD!* Sadly, many experience grand illusions—even delusions of grandeur—stimulated by both appetites from the world and/or insufficient seminary and life training.

Graduating from seminary, one is most often prone to hold onto expectations of ministry in which they have been steeped professionally and spiritually. They are least prepared to grasp

realities of the congregation into which he or she has landed. Major adjustments will ensue for sure. Until such a time, however, associate ministers will possibly suffer greatly from a few *illusions* that I will present in this article. I, too, once suffered a few ministry illusions.

My seminary graduation was filled with wonder and excitement, family and friends, a great sense of accomplishment. A strong sense of readiness to do ministry pervaded every known sensibility I possessed. There had to be a congregation ready for me: ready to hear all that God had poured into me during three years of theological education plus a full year's internship. ***An illusion.*** Having grown up in the church and having served the pulpit in myriad ways, little did I realize that congregations would not be waiting for female clergy or expecting a preacher who had been taught how to "*change the world!*" For most congregations—not just in the 1980s—the last thing they wanted was someone to change *their* world.

In seminary we were taught to deal with ***vision(s)***, not illusions—about “hearing from God” discerning ***what to do*** in ministry—forcing us into a few false expectations about congregations we would encounter in most churches. Not that God didn't know what to tell us; rather, we were not adequately prepared to apply what we heard!

Reflecting upon some old learnings and a few fresh insights that have recently bubbled up, it is joyous now to share insights that might impact another soldier's set of relationships as he or she seeks to serve the body of Christ. Perhaps my ministry would have been even more successful had I not labored under so many illusions having graduated from a leading, conservative seminary with grand expectations of what could be accomplished in church and community. Great exploits for the Lord were certainly anticipated. Such expectations' impact can be devastating since they destined inexperienced clergy, initially, to less-than-fruitful

ministries. The level of pain is often off the Richter scale and full of calamity. It is also grist for lingering hurt, harm, and hate within the body of Christ!

I do not recall *any* seminary course—at any seminary with which I am familiar—offering *any course* on being #2, #4, or #10 on the staff of a church. Seminaries prepare you to be #1—the person in charge, the pastor, or an impressive title with a well-defined portfolio. There is no course on “staff relations,” nor is there a course about the relational dynamics between assistants, or associate ministers, and members of the congregation, much less pastor/subordinate relationships! Seminaries prepare young prodigies to be independent, which hardly helps them function within an inter-dependent staff, or team, serving at the pleasure of the senior pastor.

***Illusion #1: You were brought there to perform your ministry.***

Reality: It is not *your* ministry you were brought there to perform. It is the pastor’s ministry you were brought there to help complete.

Every seminary graduate wants to accomplish something great for our Lord. Steeped in the vision of *conquering the world* for Christ and provided with theological, biblical, and ministry tools to do just that, too many associates suffer significant discouragement within the initial months of their church positions. Much of that training has run counter-culturally to the position of being an “assistant” in any ministry. They now serve under a pastor whose vision of ministry has been shaped by an entirely different cauldron of circumstances, church realities, ideas, and even theological underpinnings.

The seedbed for many challenges and conflicts within ministry are set even before a new ministerial staffer signs on the dotted line, or in the case of most women there is no signing—they start out serving without pay. A set of challenges and conflicts for which the assistant is not prepared or oriented to handle ultimately blindsides him or her. It takes a while to realize that

one does not do his or her “ministry” in someone else’s vineyard. You prune *their* vines and nurture *their* grapes to maturity. You first learn what *their* ministry is all about from *their* perspective, even *their* idiosyncrasies.

To immerse oneself into the history of that ministry, seeking to understand the *soil* within which that congregation has been planted and nurtured is the initial challenge. From announcements to attitudes and from wishes to worship, all that has so profoundly shaped the current ministry and how the senior pastor has shaped that congregation’s future is the new staffer’s task at hand.

***Illusion #2: The congregation loves you.***

Reality: The congregation does not love you; they are only seeking to discern your level of loyalty so that they will know whether to come to you to complain or affirm their support for the pastor.

This is my favorite trip wire to which to alert new staff ministers: members don’t “love you.” They don’t even know you! They are sizing you up to learn whether your behavior will convey to them that you are either fully supportive of the pastor or that there is a *crack* in that relational veneer which will eventually emerge to their particular (and peculiar) benefit. Remember that most of these members have been at that church for quite some time. They have an *established* relationship with the pastor: good, bad, or indifferent. Their antennae are tuned into your relational, pastoral frequency so that they will know whether to pull you to their side (always in confidence, of course) or keep you at arm’s length because they see you as being too close to (or supportive of) the pastor.

Certainly, the congregation is delighted that you are there. They want to welcome you to the best of their ability, but do not confuse that effort with any initial emotional ties to you.

Accept their care and hospitality. Don't confuse it with any preference of you over the pastor, or over any other staffer, regardless of the visible cracks within the pastor's capabilities to which even they might allude such as: "*Well he's . . . but you're . . .*" or "*I've been asking Pastor all these years . . . but now you can . . .*" They will use you to foster their own agenda. I have learned that *when people bring the "butter" you had better prepare to be "fried!"*

***Illusion #3: You are automatically trusted.***

Reality: You are not "trusted" until you have been *tested* as to how you will serve the pastor and his or her ministry.

Only a small percentage of seminary graduates begin as senior pastors. Most begin as associates seeking to earn appropriate credentials for a later, more senior ministerial position. The challenge, then, is to be patient and learn the dynamics of various "loyalties" within that congregation.

Oh, if I had the space to list and elaborate "the paces" I've been put through to test my loyalty instead of my abilities. That would be a separate book altogether. It's almost like pledging a sorority or fraternity. You will be tested to discern where your loyalties lie. Believe me, loyalty far outweighs any abilities you think you might have! To overcome the illusion that you are automatically trusted, work on your ability to clearly demonstrate your loyalty to the person(s) you are hired to serve. That will take you further than any ministerial skill or ability you might have shaped or sharpened in seminary.

***Illusion #4: Ministry is free of competition and comparison.***

Reality: Human beings are naturally competitive and comparison-oriented! Don't you dare think the ministry is free of it!

How often I have wished, wanted, and prayed that folk could see “difference” as welcoming and wonderful rather than threatening. From outfits to oratory, from teaching to preaching, from styles of leadership to emotional demeanor, folk will constantly hold you up to the “sunlight” in an act of comparative analysis. Whether verbalized or not, it fosters a dynamic undercurrent in staff and congregational relationships. They cannot allow you to opt out of their comparative analyses because they have not been set free of it themselves. If you cannot fit into the mold (read “image”) that is crafted for the staff of that church, your ministry may not flourish within that branch of Zion.

That does not mean that it cannot flourish elsewhere. Ultimately, your ministry is in the hands of the living Christ who guards, guides, and bequeaths you to accomplish what He has called and sent you to be and to do. So don’t be afraid of what makes you different or unique; learn to offer what God has shaped within you. That’s a journey in and of itself.

***Illusion #5: The women of the church will be most supportive to female clergy.***

Reality: Being a woman and expecting women in the church to be supportive of the ministry you provide is another *trip wire* that too often is the converse of such expectations. Over the past 30 years of ministry, from my observation men by far have demonstrated a greater level of support and cooperation for female clergy.

In the mid 1980s, a very senior man in a little North Carolina town approached me after worship as I was collecting my belongings to leave. He grabbed my hand and with a tear trickling down his cheek declared, “Daughter, I don’t *bleeve* (believe) in no women preachers; but don’t you never let no one stop you from preaching!” Though he recoiled at the thought of female clergy, he could not deny having heard from God through that sermon. That was sufficiently authentic for him to lend support and encouragement to this clergywoman. His words

still stand as the high-water mark reflecting the quality of support from most males in the church as compared to females. Receive affirmation as it comes, when it comes, and from whom it comes, knowing that most often it will not come from within your own gender.

***Illusion #6: You will automatically be mentored by your senior pastor.***

Reality: Though times have changed now and senior clergy are more cognizant of mentoring responsibilities, mentoring is a more recent phenomenon that still does not pervade the church as a critical necessity for staff persons. When a few of us female clergy carried our concerns to a senior pastor in our ministerial alliance, he was bold enough to tell us to NOT EXPECT being mentored because “we were not mentored either,” referring to himself and most of the senior pastors in our city at that time.

He recounted the advice of his uncle under whom he had served: “Get on out there and learn like I did!” Though that sounds harsh, it *set us free* so to speak, and it convinced us that the lack of mentoring was not a male/female problem but even a male/male problem within ministry. Why? They could not give us what they had never experienced. Though a few pastors had tucked a young minister or two under his wing at that time, it proved to be far more rare than we had envisioned.

Younger clergy need to be encouraged to plumb the depths of their own spiritual needs and to possibly fulfill their mentoring needs outside of the congregation where they serve. This will prevent one’s growth in ministry from being stunted. Like wise squirrels for the winter, store up a few “nuggets” of wisdom for a later time in ministry. Should you be fortunate enough to have a mentoring pastor, cherish it, submit to it, and allow that mentoring to help hone your gifts. It is the mother’s milk of ministry.

***Illusion #7: You will begin ministry as an insider.***

Reality: Most staff clergy leave churches where they never enjoyed a close relationship that was nourishing of both their spirit and their ministry. Much to their dismay, instead of being a Miriam or Aaron to the Moses they served, he or she all too often spent his or her time there more as an outsider than an insider.

Most clergy tend to think that if they have been hired by a senior pastor, then they have been received into the heart of that senior pastor. Staff clergy long to have a close relationship that shall serve them both him or her and the senior pastor in glorious ways. But too many pastors drink from the faucets that drip “he said, she said” among their staff in an attempt to discern who’s with them and who’s not with them. This erodes the quality of relationships among staff and spills over into staff-congregation relationships, and it hinders quality of ministry. Few other comments that I could make on church life sadden me as much.

My experience is that few senior clergy know how to foster serious, significant, and strong relationships among their staff or help them to have a *team* focus that is spiritually healthy and mutually supportive. Senior pastors face the challenge of not fostering among the staff the *big-I-little-you* mentality of employing the world’s hierarchy instead of the church’s circle of cooperation. How much more important it is to coalesce staff around a core vision and a set of core values that characterize ministry within that branch of Zion.

The seven illusions discussed are trip wires that blind-side new and up-coming clergy. The realities are shared to sound the alarm regarding some pitfalls within staff ministry and to protect you from many circumstances that could potentially dampen your spirit or your zeal and zest for ministry. May such awareness help usher your ministry onto new levels of spiritual discernment and wisdom as you function within any congregation. To God be the glory!