



Collaboration or Competition: The Relationship between Senior Pastors and Associate Ministers

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Western society has become so achievement-driven, its product being individuals who are too goal-oriented, too focused on maximizing time, and too self-indulgent. The pressure to “keep up with the Joneses” and “beat everyone else to the top” has caused many financial and moral failures. Finances have been depleted. Families have been torn apart. Friendships have been destroyed. Sadly, most do not realize the severity of these losses until it is too late.

What may have started as a business trend has found its way into the Church. Churches compete to have the best choir. Pastors compete for the largest congregation. Members brag on what celebrities attend their church. Jesus pleaded with his Father for unity among all believers (John 17), yet “spiritual competition” too often takes the forefront, in complete opposition to collaboration.

In any church, infighting among the elders and ministers is devastating! An associate minister who makes it his or her goal to “out-do” the senior pastor is in direct violation of scripture. If any associate minister has this mindset, he or she is tearing down the Kingdom from

the inside. By definition, an associate's job is to assist, not to compete. Also, a senior pastor who has no interest in preparing associate ministers for productive lives in ministry is violating scripture. Pastors and associate ministers should never be in competition. It does not fulfill Jesus' prayer for unity in the church, nor does it edify the members of the congregation.

A perfect example of a functional leader/associate relationship is that of Paul and Timothy. In First and Second Timothy, Paul teaches Timothy the keys to being successful in ministry. He exhorts Timothy to pray for all men and all things (1 Timothy 2:4), to practice Godly living before all he teaches (1 Timothy 4:12), and to preach truth, even when it's uncomfortable (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul offers words of advice, seemingly derived from his ministerial experiences, and he offers words of encouragement because he knew difficult times lay ahead for Timothy. Paul could effectively mentor Timothy because he knew he was a vessel used by God in a particular season. He did not believe the ministry was all about him, nor did Paul try to hold on to Timothy's reigns once Timothy was prepared to take on more senior roles in ministry.

This is the biblical model of collaboration between a senior pastor and an associate. The associate should glean as much wisdom as possible from the senior pastor, and the senior pastor should be willing to prepare the associate for a life of ministry by sharing successes and failures openly. There has to be openness, honesty, support, and mutual respect. If these elements are not in place, the need for self-fulfillment at all costs and a hunger to compete will show their ugly faces.

Several arguments could be raised: "You do not know my pastor. He's/She's old and it is time for change. He/she is just in the way. The people want me to preach more. I do not want to stand by and let the church die. I would do such a better job." All these arguments could be valid,

but through the example set by David in his relationship with Saul, we learn that God does not need us to do God's work of deciding whom should be in what position and when.

In 1 Samuel, David was anointed the future king of Israel, but it was many years of working for Saul before this promise came to fruition. David was a servant of Saul during this time—playing music, going to war, and any other tasks assigned to him. Saul, on the other hand, is a perfect example of the “boss from hell.” He continuously tormented David and tried to kill him because he did not want to accept that his time of being king was swiftly coming to an end because of his disobedience. Saul never offered to mentor David. Saul never desired to teach David “the ropes” of running a kingdom. Saul tried to kill David, he chose to compete with David, and he was opposed to collaborating with David.

If the situation exists where the senior pastor acts more like Saul than Paul, it falls on the associate minister to respond similarly to David—with humility, continued respect, and peaceful patience. David did not shy away from Saul, nor did he discuss Saul's character flaws with anyone. David still held his leader, his king, in utmost respect and patiently waited for his time to reign over Israel. There were times David could have killed Saul, but David valued his relationship with God more than his position before the people. David kept his priorities in place, obeying God first and then serving the people of God.

How do you work with a senior pastor who acts like Saul? You continue to fulfill your obligations to the best of your ability. Go above and beyond. Do more than is expected. Also, never attack the senior pastor's character in conversations with others. Remember that he or she is still a person of God, and God commands that we treat such with utmost respect. Another point is that associates are to learn from any cold shoulder they may receive from a senior pastor, being sure to never be “Saul” to anyone else. Do not become what you dislike. Lessons not

learned are usually mistakes repeated. Lastly, pray that your senior pastor rid himself or herself of the “Saul” mentality and adopt a “Paul” mentality. If all of this fails, then leave the church in a respectful way and do it quietly and without fanfare; no long discussions, weeping, or moaning is necessary. Do not discuss the matter with those who remain at the church or those at other churches. Also, if possible, get a letter of transfer.

If the associate minister is the problem—if he or she is too ambitious and subverting authority—then the senior pastor must rein in the associate before he or she self-destructs. There may need to be a review of the associate minister’s value system. The senior pastor should remind the associate of God’s order in the Church and the importance of humility in service in any capacity.

Jesus pleaded for unity. Unity starts at the top, in church leadership. Jesus is still pleading for unity. Whatever your role, will you take the first step?