



Divided Loyalties

Leslie K. McDonald is a minister, teacher, writer, and women's ministry leader. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Fresno Pacific University and her Master of Arts from the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

Recently I was looking at photos from my ordination service. There were two photos in particular that captured my attention. In the first photo, I was standing, facing the pastors in the pulpit receiving my charge. In the second photo, I was facing the congregation making my vow of service and receiving their commitment of support. As I looked at the photos, my calling once again came into clear focus. While I received my charge from the pastor, it was ultimately a charge to obey God and to minister and serve the people of God.

I realized from those two photos that there are instances when it is not humanly possible for a minister to simultaneously keep her or his eye on both the pastor and the membership. There may be times when it is necessary, in order to be obedient to the Lord and to serve humanity, that an associate minister may have to refuse to follow the dictates of a senior pastor and leave a particular church. The associate minister must know where her or his loyalties lie when the pastor and God are on different sides.

The news is replete with stories about the shortcomings, sins, failing, and falling of pastors and ministry leaders. These stories tell of larceny, adultery, and sexual indiscretions; there are issues regarding the wealth and lifestyles of pastors. While pastors address these issues and work tirelessly at redemption and restoration, there is a matter that is seldom mentioned—the well-being of the associate minister during these times. It is not always something as drastic as headline news that creates issues within a church. Sometimes it may be decisions that are made regarding internal matters, bad judgment, crude language, dishonesty with the membership, or dealings with the membership. All of this impacts the associate clergy.

When issues arise within the church that are related to the pastor, the associate minister must exercise great discretion with regard to how he or she is going to respond to or engage the issue. It is not enough for the associate minister alone to consider this; the pastor and also the congregation should give credence to the impact that a pastoral issue has on an associate minister.

The Associate Minister

Associate ministers are a vital part of the Church. They serve beside the pastor and in the pastor's absence. They work at the altar, visit the sick, and assist with communion and baptism. Associates teach classes, counsel, marry, and bury. The work that they do helps the Church function and alleviates some of the work of the pastor.

What is required of an associate minister when chaos breaks out in the church that is related to the senior pastor? While I have my own experiences that guide my response to this question, I still inquired of clergy and lay persons as to their opinions on the

matter. I asked a woman, who would be classified as a “Mother of the Church,” what she thought the position of an associate should be if there were problems related to the pastor. Her response was that the associate should consider leaving because it would not be beneficial to that person’s ministerial career to be associated with such conflict.

Loyalty to the Pastor

A colleague who has been in ministry for more than 10 years agreed with the “mother” but also added that there is a responsibility that is felt by associate ministers where their pastor is concerned. When an associate minister is allowed into service at a local church, it is done with the approval of and at the discretion of the pastor. If they are allowed to preach, officiate at services, or bless the offering, it is at their pastor’s choosing. In larger churches, it may be the Head of Ministers who chooses where and how associates will serve from week to week, but they choose from pastor-selected individuals. There is an unspoken (or perhaps a spoken) rule about confidentiality and loyalty. The need for trust between a pastor and their ministers is obvious. The pastor must be able to confide in them and sometimes even share the burdens that she or he is carrying.

There is a sense of betrayal that a pastor may feel if associate ministers leave the church during troubled times. They might view the minister as being ungrateful and unappreciative; they may even question the loyalty that had been originally expressed. There are some pastors who believe that associates should have an unwavering loyalty to them no matter what they do.

What happens when loyalty and secret-keeping involves more than the running of the church and spills over into immoral and perhaps illegal activities? Yes, in some instances, associate ministers are still expected to be loyal and keep the secrets of the pastor. And most of us do. But sometimes it is simply not possible. I liken this to instructions that are given to children. There are some secrets that are not good to keep. If someone has hurt you or is doing something wrong to you or around you, that is not a good secret to keep. What a shame it is that we lose this basic understanding as we get older.

Years ago an associate minister shared with me that while his married pastor visited with his girlfriend, he was made to drive the pastor's car around so that it could be seen in other places. I am not certain if I was more amazed that the pastor required this of him or if I was more shocked that he actually did it. When I asked him why he did it, he told me that "you don't tell pastor 'no' if you want to stay in his good graces." He went on to tell me that there were associate ministers at the church who had never preached or led service because they wouldn't conform.

The decision for an associate minister to leave a church is not something that is taken lightly. If an associate has put in time in service, training, loving the members, and being ministered to, leaving is sometimes a heart-wrenching thing. For many ministers, they may leave behind years of training for ordination, which they will more than likely have to start over with another pastor and church. They feel exposed and abandoned in their spirit. Associate ministers attach themselves to the heart of the pastor and open themselves up to receive correction, instruction, and direction. It takes a lot to make most associate ministers walk away from this only to have to begin again. Most associate

ministers are very loyal to their pastor and congregation. It is not an easy thing for an associate minister to watch as the pastor commits spiritual homicide within the congregation and then spiritual suicide. There is a sense of helplessness that the associate clergy feels that is beyond comprehension.

Loyalty to God and the People

When a minister accepts the call into ministry, there is a work that they believe they are given to do. A portion of this work may be in the pulpit, but ultimately every minister's call is to worship the Lord and serve the Lord's people. When there is a difference between the will of the pastor and the will of the Lord, each minister must do what they believe they are led of the Lord to do. There may be times when the Lord requires that an associate remain at a church, not for the sake of the pastor, but rather for the sake of the call and the people. It is at those times when the associate may even find himself or herself helping to maintain the structure and stability of the congregation. People need something stable and someone whom they can trust. It may be the integrity of the associate minister who helps the congregation through those difficult times.

Another reason that an associate minister may remain at the church is because they trust the heart of the pastor or perhaps they believe that the accusations being leveled against the pastor are not true. The Lord may show them the other side of the storm and call for them to remain. It is in these times that the Lord supernaturally attaches them to the Church, because during some storms, human strength is not sufficient to sustain them.

During a conversation I was having with a former colleague, the topic of ministry and church arose. She inquired of my presence at a church during a scandal that had

recently taken place. I told her that a scandal in church was something that I had grown accustomed to because four pastors in my former church had been either accused of, dismissed because of, or had resigned in light of immoral behavior. When I heard the detached way in which I said this, it disturbed me. Had I become immune to it because of its frequency?

What I recall from those times is how I separated myself from all that was going on and concentrated on the work that I was doing at the church, which at the time was teaching. I thought about the people in my classes—how they enjoyed class, how they were growing and bringing others with them to class. I thought about my relationship with them and how they had become a part of my life. I felt as if I would be abandoning them if I left. I wondered who would teach my class if I left and if they would love them as much as I did. I didn't know if anyone would realize that some of the ladies don't attend church on Mother's Day because even after 10 years, it's still too hard to celebrate without their mother. I was concerned that someone would embarrass the members in my class who had previously shared with me that they couldn't read. My calling was to teach and my pastor's behavior was not going to disrupt that. I also felt that something needed to remain the same for the people through everything that was going on. But, there were more and worse things that accompanied the final pastor of that church while I was there. I realized that it was my time to leave and with much sadness I did. Over time, so did over half of the church.

While it may be for the sake of the call that a minister remains at a church during turmoil, it might also be that the minister leaves during such a time in order to preserve the call and anointing on his or her life. Often it is viewed as *condoning the act* if a

minister remains at a church when the pastor's behavior is under scrutiny. People begin to question the minister's knowledge *of* and participation *in* whatever is going on. While she or he may love her or his pastor and see the hand of God in restoration, if God's work is for another purpose, she or he may be given leave in order to preserve that call.

Conclusion and Call to Action

First Corinthians 11:1 in the Amplified Bible states: "Pattern yourselves after me [follow my example], as I imitate *and* follow Christ (the Messiah)." It is the hope of the associate minister that the pastor has the same mind as the Apostle Paul. We hope that the pastor wants us to follow her or him as they follow Christ, but also that they have no expectation that they will still be followed if they cease to follow Christ.

Disloyalty to God cannot be the required evidence of an associate minister's loyalty to the pastor. This either/or situation should not exist in the body of Christ. If this situation does exist, certainly its outcome should be clear. What is the price that is placed on the position of associate minister? If it includes disobedience or disloyalty to God, the price is too high.

This is not a call for condemnation of pastors. It is not a call for associate ministers to corrupt their calling by thinking more highly of ourselves than we should. But, it is a call to serious conversation. It is time that we consider the impact that the behavior of senior pastors has on associate clergy. We follow them, we learn from them, we support them, but we can also be hurt by and misled by them. This is a conversation that must take place. There are too many associate ministers who believe their lives are in limbo because they have no idea of what is going on in the church in which they serve.

There is an anointing on the life of the associate minister just as there is on the senior pastor. It may be for a different office, but it comes from the same Spirit. The object of the oft pastor-quoted verse of 1 Chronicles 16:21 (KJV): “Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm” also applies to treatment of associate clergy.