

Considerations For Multiple Staff Ministry

Expectations and Reality

Multiple Staff: “Two or more ministers serving one congregation and forming some kind of a unit or team. Sometimes deacons/elders and musicians/choir leaders are considered part of a multiple-staff unit” (p. 136, “A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership”).

Hence, multiple staff ministry describes two or more persons forming a ministry team. These may be credentialed and salaried staff, un-paid staff and/or credentialed or un-credentialed lay ministers.

A healthy approach to ministry is based on the assumption that all members of the body of Christ are called and gifted to serve and minister; some in pastoral roles, others in areas of program leadership. Hence, it is strategic to empower members to serve as they are gifted. It should then be normative to form multiple staff teams.

Pastors entering such multiple staff ministry teams tend to begin with high hopes and idealistic expectations. Many see it as an opportunity to share ministry with one or more persons in a way that will be nurturing, supporting and enhancing to their own ministry. At its best it is all of these.

But equally often the experience is of another reality. Working together in multiple staff ministry is complex, often difficult, and sometimes conflicted. Those who have worked in such settings report both very good and very challenging experiences with multiple staff.

Reflection can lead to self-doubt about one’s own functioning, about one’s ability to judge other persons, about one’s responsibility for the problem. Honest analysis can bring awareness that one did at times contribute to the breakdown of good relationships; perhaps that one acted inappropriately. On the other hand it is possible to experience a profound gratitude for the colleagues without whom one might never have survived in ministry.

Within the Mennonite world, traditionally very little has been done to prepare and support pastors for multiple staff ministry—almost nothing on what it means to be a lead pastor or to be an associate pastor. Worse, we have embraced an idealism of equality that makes it almost impossible for us to deal with issues of power, authority, roles and experience.

That means that almost everyone who serves in a multiple staff situation has to learn on the job. Experience has been the teacher, and while experience is an effective teacher, it is slow and often painful.

Biblical Precedents

It is helpful to begin with asking about biblical precedents. There are several Bible stories which can stimulate reflection about multiple staff. One might begin with Moses and the advice he received from his father-in-law, Jethro (Exodus 18). From that one might think further about the family leadership relationships of Moses, Aaron and Miriam (Exodus 32, Numbers 12).

Another biblical story that provides several options and models would come from the stories of David. One might reflect upon the team relationship of David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 23). On the more negative side, the stories related to David and Saul provide a whole list of insights of what goes right and what goes wrong in leadership relationships (1 Samuel 18ff).

Within the New Testament, it is possible to think of Jesus and the disciple group as a model for multiple staff. Or one might consider the division of labor evidenced in the story of Mary and Martha. But the classic biblical text follows the great Jerusalem conference with its grand conciliation and compromise regarding the most sensitive theological issue of the day. Immediately after that highlight, however, the greatest missionary staff of the first century fell into bitter dispute about how they would or would not work together. This multiple staff issue ended with a division sending Paul and Silas as one team and Barnabas and John Mark as another team. (Acts 15:36-41). "The division became so sharp that they parted company." It seems that even saints and our heroes found themselves in trouble around issues of multiple staff.

Models of multiple-staff ministry

- A. Hierarchical models.¹ – The basic hierarchical model consists of a leading or senior pastor and one or more assistant/associates, all of whom are specialists and professionals in ministry. There are many variations on this theme. What defines this is that there is one person who is designated and understood as the leader and therefore the one ultimately responsible and to whom the others have some measure of accountability.
- B. Equalitarian/Egalitarian models – In these models two or more persons with specific understandings of equality of authority and responsibility and with mutual accountability to each other function together as equals in a multiple staff setting. They may differ in assigned tasks and functions, but in every other respect are viewed as equals.

The most common form of this model is husband–wife couples in ministry, though in some settings they may follow a more hierarchical model also. A second form of this model is in various forms of co-pastoring. Not only must pastors use the title of co-pastor, but they must be perceived as equals by the congregation. This will usually involve some significant symbols of equality or ways of balancing the relationship.

- C. Combination of professional and lay ministry – There have been variations of this model from specifically commissioned lay ministers to perceiving the elders/deacons as part of the ministry team.
- D. The "Bench" – There is a Mennonite Church tradition with the threefold ministry of bishop, preacher and deacon in each congregation, each of whom shares in the ministerial leadership with defined roles.

It is useful to reflect on these options. If you are in a multiple-staff congregation, what is your model and how is it functioning? Do you understand what is happening to you? What are the assets and liabilities of each model? The "polarity management" model may prove to be a helpful way to test the upside and downside of hierarchical versus egalitarian models.

Observations

Most of our models are hierarchical and probably should be because it has the clearest and cleanest lines of authority. In some sense it is the most reliable in what is always a highly unstable system. Equalitarian models are more difficult to sustain, and should be embraced only as the exception when the specific situation seems to call for it and the persons involved are highly skilled and capable of living inside a "professional marriage relationship!" Generally they should be viewed as short term, with the possible exception of a husband-wife couple in ministry.

¹ The term "hierarchy" has strong negative emotional meanings to many people, usually out of some perceived authoritarian past. Objectively it means that persons working within a single system are not all equal in authority or responsibility and that there are relationships of supervision and accountability which flow more in one direction than the other.

There are many assistants who like to think they are co-pastors and sometimes we even give them that title, but the reality is usually otherwise. Always, congregational perceptions will determine the reality.

In most multiple staff settings the preferred model is one with hierarchical/authoritative structures and equalitarian/collegial relationships. What is most confusing is to have egalitarian structures and hierarchical relationships. If the relationships are open and genuine, the hierarchical structures are no problem. Never assume that a restructuring of the models will solve problems of relationship. What the hierarchical model does is to give a back-up system of appropriate power when relationships fail.

What all of us want and seek are relationships of equality and mutuality. Where we truly experience that, the formal structures are of little consequence; we hardly know they are there. Beware of those who want to assert their power by rigidly adhering to authoritative structures, and beware of those who grasp for power in the name of equality.

Assumptions about multiple staff ministry

- A. We all function as saints and sinners within the church, even within the leadership of the church. There is no perfect model and no perfect relationship, but there are better and worse of both. Both can be improved and strengthened when we see ourselves in growth and development. We are pilgrims on the journey with God, and we are all in the process of being made new.
- B. Triangling is endemic and inevitable and can sometimes even be useful. The point is not to do away with triangling relationships; they are always present. The need is to be alert and aware of the times and situations where they become inappropriate and destructive.
- C. There will almost always be some quest for a greater share in the public ministry roles; that is where most of us receive the strongest affirmation. Along side of that is the need of associates to be perceived as full-fledged pastors.
- D. Relationships and the quality of the persons with whom we work are the ultimate issues; models and structures are always secondary. Good people make any model work well; but no model or system will correct or heal bad relationships.
- E. Most naive pastors (and that's most of us) think that if only we had additional help in some form of multiple staff, all our problems of overwork, burnout, conflicts with the demanding parents of youth—everything would be solved. It's a lie. That's the devil tempting us.
- F. It is not easy to be the pastor in multiple staff settings! It is not easy to be an associate or an assistant pastor! And it is definitely not easy to be an office secretary in multiple staff congregations, because you will almost inevitably find yourself in triangled relationships.
- G. Another naive assumption, one often shared by the congregations in their expectations of pastors, is that if we double the staff size from 1 to 2, we will have double the effect in output and work from the pastors. Simple reflection around issues of duplication and communication tell us that is never true; at best it may be as high as $1 \frac{3}{4}$. At its worst, 2 equals less than 1!
- H. The values you want to encourage and support within a multiple staff are these:
 - Effective ministry through specialization. Enlarging the range to meet the inevitable diversity within the congregation.
 - Efficiency and effectiveness.
 - Modeling cooperative working relationships, teamwork, mutuality, collegiality, relatedness in a common task. (Note: there are dangers here too, especially if this relationship involves both genders and the collegiality becomes friendship and then more than friendship to sexual attraction and ultimately to sexual relationships and abuse. Who helps you monitor that?)
 - Experience the upside of creative team effort and creative independence.

Determining when and why to add more pastoral staff

There are several reasons why a congregation might decide to add additional paid pastoral staff.

- A. "The pastor is too busy." This is an inadequate reason. You will in all likelihood make your life only more complex and possibly even busier by adding staff.
- B. The tendency of pastors to want someone to do the things they don't want to do. Typically these are things like youth ministry and visitation, or the things in the bottom five of the 20 pastoral tasks. Pastors tend to give the "loser" jobs to associates!
- C. To expand the program and broaden the person contacts. New staff ought to do more than enrich what is already there. They should add specific, visible new programs to the life and work of the congregation.

Lyle Schaller, a church administration specialist, proposes the following formula for determining how many pastors a congregation needs. One pastor is adequate for the first 200 persons in average Sunday attendance. An additional pastor staff person should be called for each additional 100 persons to maintain the status quo. And if the church is seeking to grow, it should add an additional staff person to the above, usually with specific responsibilities for evangelism and outreach.

The most efficient (cost to member ratio) congregation is the one pastor to 200 members with one secretary. Larger and smaller congregations offer unique and special benefits; the increase of size does not increase financial efficiency as is often assumed.

Identifying areas of conflict

Conflict in multiple staff ministry is normal, predictable and routine. It can be expected and accepted. What it cannot be is ignored. You are not abnormal if you experience conflict in staff relationships. Staff conflicts may occur because there is something wrong with you, but not necessarily. The challenge is to figure out what is going on.

There are several distinguishable kinds of problems that arise in team ministry.

- A. **Task Problems.** Who does what? This must be clarified, both for long term understanding as within a job description and on a weekly or sometimes daily basis. What tasks are winners and losers? Whoever is to be perceived as a pastor must share in some traditional pastoral roles in order to be perceived as one by the congregation.
- B. **Authority Problems.** Is anyone in charge around here? Regardless of the language of equality, something will usually define who is ultimately responsible. When the chips are down and conflicts occur it matters relatively little as to who is right and who is wrong; the issue becomes one of position and power. The bias in the typical multiple staff team needs to be with the leading pastor. Associates who cannot live with that need to be job hunting.
- C. **Communication Problems.** What gets shared with whom? Walt Lacey says: "Communication problems are normal, predictable and recurrent." Communication is the oil and glue of relationships. Communication energizes and builds trust. Associate pastors tend to be hesitant to share information, fearing intrusion into their work. Leading pastors tend to forget to share information, underestimating the need of other staff to know.
- D. **Performance Problems.** How well are we doing, individually and collectively? High levels of competence on the part of all staff members are essential to successful team ministry. You need to take pride in each other's work, both privately and publicly, in order to be mutually supportive. Incompetence leads to cover-up, denial and a host of complicating problems. Competition for excellence is healthy. Jealousy and envy are absolutely destructive; they are the cancer of multiple staff and will surely destroy it.
- E. **Relationship Problems.** What attitudes prevail? Who needs and receives how much affirmation? Respect, trust and confidentiality are essential. We know that there is a significant difference between those persons whose presence brings you pleasure and

empowerment versus those who presence drains and diminishes you. Make sure the persons with whom you work are the former!

- F. **Turf Problems.** Why are you doing my job? Taking too much of my time? Giving me too little of your time? Why are you doing my job rather than the one assigned to you? Many details raise turf problems: weddings, funerals, preaching, office location, access to technology, priority with the office secretary.
- G. **Loyalty Problems.** Who cares about this congregation? Who is willing to sacrifice when necessary? Who attends what and how many meetings? Leading pastors tend to interpret and defend what is; their loyalty to the congregation is perceived as very high. Associate pastors tend to critique what is; their loyalty tends to be suspect. Different perceptions of reality are based upon different experiences, different relationships and different positions in the system.
- H. **Personality Problems.** Who are you anyhow? The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator identifies normal differences between people. But there are also people serving as pastors who have personality disorders, which are abnormal differences. These will not be changed by mediation, counseling, or other attempts to make relationships work. Understanding MBTI can help to understand and deal with acceptance of differences. Understanding personality disorders can offer the possibility of changing administrative style, which may enable the relationship to work in some cases.

A word about job descriptions

Job descriptions are essential and helpful in setting boundaries and clarifying roles and responsibilities. They need to be reviewed and even changed at times, but no change in job description ever solves relationship problems. In fact, Kenneth Mitchell says that reworking job descriptions never solves multiple staff conflicts!

Every pastoral person needs some clear pastoral responsibilities in addition to more limited job responsibilities. Every person needs some responsibilities that are almost always perceived as “winners.” Youth ministry is not generally a winner, but the person assigned to that can do some things that are winners. All staff members must live within the paradoxes of freedom, independence and accountability.

A word about family systems theory related to multiple staff

Lyle Schaller says that the family model describes both the best and worst of how multiple staffs function. Who is the father? Who is the mother? And what is expected of the children in this relationship? And is there a patriarch or matriarch? How do they all get along with each other?

In family systems theory, the single most significant factor in enabling multiple staffs to function appropriately is to have a leading pastor who (1) has a well defined sense of self; (2) has clarity about her/his role in the system and accepts that role; (3) is a person who is well self-differentiated; (4) and one who claims appropriate forms of authority and responsibility while (5) sharing that authority and empowering others to function in wholesome ways. In the language of mediation, what it takes is a leader who is hard on issues and soft on people.²

A word about the special and important role of the office secretary

Over the years we have too many situations where the office secretary becomes the center of conflict. Beware of inappropriate triangles. The office secretary must be absolutely committed to professional ethics in regard to issues of confidentiality. The secretary is a person of power, even though it may seem otherwise. The office secretary must have an overarching sense of loyalty to

2 *Multiple Staff Ministries*, by Robert Mitchell, uses family systems theory as a basis for looking at this issue.

and support of the leading pastor that is not different from that required of associate/assistant pastors.

A word to those in congregational positions responsible for overseeing ministerial staff

Your role in this is every bit as difficult and tricky as is the relationship within a multiple staff. Beware of becoming part of triangles with conflicted staff. Beware of taking on management responsibilities that belong to the pastor. Be careful in roles of mediation and conflict solving—you may do well to seek conference or other outside assistance. You are really a part of the church leadership team and thus on the inner circle. Know where and when to turn to the conference or other professionals when you need help. You also have to operate from assumptions of loyalty to and support for the pastor. If that is under question and doubt, then that is the issue with which you must deal first.

A positive and hopeful word on multiple staff ministries

There are many other issues related to multiple staff ministry which have not been addressed here, such as the role of the pastor in hiring additional staff members or issues of gender relationships and sexuality. We have only touched the surface of what is a highly complex system.

When it works well, it can be one of the most fulfilling of ministry experiences. It provides

- Immediate collegiality and built-in support relationships—you are not alone;
- Shared responsibility with specialized areas allowing you to concentrate on your strengths;
- Opportunity to mentor and train persons new to ministry;
- Opportunity to learn in an experience-based setting;
- Potential to offer more diversity of experience to the congregation through a more diverse program that is enriched by heightened levels of specialization and competence;
- Appropriate time off with back up persons to cover for special needs.

When it is going well for you in a multiple staff experience, stop to give thanks at least daily—probably both to God and to your colleague(s) knowing that if it does not go well you will certainly repent three times daily for ever having gotten into this!

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1 *Multiple Staff Ministries*, by Robert Mitchell, uses family systems theory as a basis for looking at this issue.