

The Senior Minister as Chief of Staff

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While there is seemingly no shortage of models for organizing congregations and the staff who serve them, experience tells us that some models function more smoothly than others. In a multi-staff setting, the most common organizing model is to designate the senior minister as the chief of staff (or general manager, if you will). The rationale for understanding the senior minister as chief of staff is grounded in that minister's breadth of oversight and privilege of call.

Gary McIntosh, a leading authority on church staffing, notes that "the one thing that sets the senior pastoral role apart from the rest of the staff is the breadth of oversight." As just one illustration, McIntosh points out that a youth director has a relatively limited breadth of oversight, in relation to the overall program of the church, while a religious education director has much broader programmatic oversight. Yet both positions have a narrower breadth of oversight than that of the senior minister, who is "responsible for the entire church, not just a single area of specialization." This has clear implications for supervisory authority and relationships, since the senior minister carries the broadest responsibility among staff members for the overall operation of the church, its ministries and programs. "No matter what size staff a church has," McIntosh correctly observes, "the people tend to see the senior pastor as the person where the buck stops."¹

In my work with Unitarian Universalist congregations of every size, I have not yet encountered a single one where, when push came to shove, the senior minister (or solo minister, as the case may be) was not held responsible for the overall performance of the church staff. If the minister is going to be held responsible for staff performance anyway, then it is only fitting that the congregation authorize the minister to supervise the other members of the staff. In any organization, sacred or secular, it is essential that lines of authority and accountability be both clear and congruent.

In seeking to characterize the managerial role of ministers in secular terms, McIntosh sees a shift in roles as churches grow in size. He describes the minister in a church with fewer than 250 members as a "supervisor," while the minister in a church of 250-350 functions more as a "middle manager." Once a church crosses the 350-member threshold, the minister's managerial role increasingly resembles that of the "senior manager" in secular organizations.²

Based on my own observations of congregations across denominations, if a minister is incapable of (or prevented from) exercising the managerial role appropriate for a congregation's particular size and organizational complexity, then the staff team will generally lack focus and direction, decision-making often becomes politicized, the accountability of staff to the membership deteriorates, and lay leaders become distracted by staff issues, instead of addressing the broader concerns of vision and policy. One of the most insightful assumptions of policy-based governance is that boards are not structured to effectively oversee multiple staff members without being drawn into micromanagement and distracted by minutia.

Although the Unitarian Universalist ministry is, in practice, one of least hierarchical expressions of institutional ministry of any denomination, ministerial fellowship and ordination nevertheless carry with them certain privileges and authority, which are commensurate with the high levels of trust and responsibility inherent to the vocation of ministry. As much as it values the role, importance and enormous contributions of its laity, our liberal religious tradition still sets apart its ministers to play a special and esteemed role in the life of its congregations. If Unitarians and Universalists, from the earliest days to the present time, had not intended ordination to convey particular authority and responsibility in the institutional life of our congregations, we would have done away with the practice long ago. The granting of ministerial fellowship, ordination, and the call to serve a congregation are not empty practices—they mean something! The privileges and authority granted to ordained ministers are grounded in the superior training, rigorous screening and demanding vocational standards to which ministers are expected to submit, coupled with the historical expectations and roles associated with the vocation of ministry.

When a Unitarian Universalist congregation extends a call to an ordained minister, it is establishing a unique office in the congregation, unlike any other position for which it might retain staff. Ministers are charged with broad responsibility to oversee the spiritual and temporal welfare of the congregation—a breadth of responsibility shared by no other staff member.

Needless to say, when a program professional, religious educator or administrator is also an ordained minister in fellowship, who has been called to their position rather than hired, then the privilege of call naturally comes into play. Under these circumstances, it might be reasonably argued that such a partner minister report directly to the board on a par with the senior minister or parish minister. Even then, however, the overwhelming majority of larger congregations with more than one minister still have such partner ministers (MREs, associates and assistants) supervised by the senior minister!

The unique authority our tradition extends to ordained ministers should not be seen as somehow diminishing the value or importance of specialized programmatic or administrative positions. The various staff positions in a church—religious education directors, administrators, music directors, volunteer coordinators, pastoral care workers, facility caretakers and so forth—are, each and every one, important to the effective and faithful functioning of the church. But none of them entails the breadth of oversight demanded of a senior minister and none of them can be viewed as having parity with the ordained clergy as long as we continue to profess the particular polity we do.

It goes without saying that the ideal staff is one that is generally able to function as a team, where goals are shared, communications are clear, and working relationships are collaborative. But teamwork and collaboration do not preclude leadership; indeed, they require it. All good teams have leaders and in churches the staff team's leader is the minister.

References

¹ Gary McIntosh, *Staff Your Church for Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 71-73.

² McIntosh, 79.