"Associate pastors remind me of someone assigned the middle seat between two overweight men on an airplane—the senior pastor on one side and the congregation on the other. It can be tough to get comfortable and get anything done. Dr. Michael Mauriello has written a thoughtful and well-researched guide for associate pastors who want to understand the dynamics and strategic advantages of their role. He not only understands the position, but he can help pastors serve effectively from the middle seat."

—Lee Eclov,
retired pastor;
adjunct professor, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School;
columnist, PreachingToday.com;
author of four books for pastors

"Dr. Michael Mauriello is a trusted wise guide to associate pastors seeking to understand their complex role in church ministry. Michael's research is fueled by his love for God and the desire to see pastors flourish. *Associate Pastors: Ministry from the Middle* is a must-read for Christian leaders."

—Deborah Colwill, PhD,
associate professor of Educational and Leadership Studies,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"As Michael Mauriello points out, associate pastors must be secure in their own relationship with God and skilled in the art of facilitating ministry from 'the middle.' By thoughtfully synthesizing insights from current resources, the author presents six critical tasks that the associate pastor would be wise to adopt. This is a much-needed contribution to resources addressing the unique role of associate pastors—those who 'navigate complicated relationships as a pastoral practice.'"

—Donald C. Guthrie, EdD,
executive director, Center for Transformational Churches,
Jeanette L. Hsieh Chair of Educational Leadership
and director of the PhD (Educational Studies),
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Associate Pastors

Ministry from the Middle

Michael Matthew Mauriello

KREGEL
MINISTRY

Associate Pastors: Ministry from the Middle

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Printed in the United States of America

To Londa, Lee Eclov, and to the memory of
Ted and Margaret Ward

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The Challenges of Being in the Middle

Pastoral ministry is a complicated, stressful, and relationally taxing vocation; associate ministry is no exception.[1] This book is about and for associate pastors. It examines the nature of their work and how they can steward the stressful complexity and ambiguity of being in the middle of congregational dynamics.

Let this metaphor unpack the stress of the being in the middle: Ever get your finger pinched between a closing door and the doorjamb? You probably weren't expecting it; you just had your finger carelessly resting against the door frame. Maybe the door wasn't swinging shut with a lot of force, but it didn't matter. The pressure of the door closing on the jamb pressed on your finger, and you experienced a sharp, perhaps excruciating pain. For a few days, your finger was very tender—and you were pretty wary of putting your finger anywhere near an open door.

Associate pastors often feel that way. Without realizing it, they are pinched between intense pressures and expectations from different relationships in their churches. The next two personal stories are examples from my own ministry: the first a negative experience, and the second a positive example of being in the middle.

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1   Esa, "Issues in Ministry Effectiveness for the Associate Pastor," 1; Hawkins, "An Evaluation of Selected Dallas Theological Seminary Alumni of Assistant and Associate Pastor in the Local Church;" Danyluk, "The Process of Hiring Associate Pastoral Staff in Congregationally Governed Churches with a Worship Attendance of under 300," 30; Ngo, Foley, and Loi, "Work Role Stressors and Turnover Intentions."

My first church had just implemented a new child protection policy for students in our children's and youth ministries. The policy required that all volunteers submit to a background check to serve as chaperones and mentors. Much energy, work, and passion had gone into designing, passing, and communicating this policy. Ministry leaders were responsible for enforcing it.

My middle school ministry had just begun a monthly hangout time with sixth graders. This new program was a dream of one set of parents who recruited another mother of a sixth grader in the church. Unfortunately, she had not yet submitted a background check. Just as the first evening was getting under way, the mother entered the church gym, plopped down her purse, and looked expectantly at me.

"Sorry I'm late. What do you want me to do? I've come to help out."

Anxiety and fear coursed through me. "But you haven't gone through our background check."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I'm a parent. I want to participate."

I was pinched. I was caught between my need to fulfill the requirements of an elder-approved policy that was immutable, the intense desire of a mother to participate in her child's ministry, and my volunteer parents who had recruited this mother who had been in the church for years. I searched for the right words. But my anxiety didn't help me find them.

"I'm sorry. Our church policy says you can't until you've completed a background check," is what I wanted to say. But what came out was just, "You can't."

She looked at me with eyes full of her own anxiety and confused anger. "I thought this was our church," she said passionately as she left.

I had fulfilled the policy, but deeply hurt a member of our congregation.

About a year later, she and I restored the relationship through the shepherding of a caring elder. It took courage on both her part and mine. The story ended well, but it also illustrates a clear point: associate pastors of all stripes—whether children, youth, worship, adult, or outreach—are often caught in the middle of complicated

relationships and groups in their congregations. It's a genuine struggle many associate pastors feel. Being in the middle is complicated, organizationally confusing, and emotionally taxing. Yet it also brings with it a form of power that can only be gathered and utilized from being in the middle: the power to steward ambiguity.

Take this second story: In my first youth ministry role, I found it odd that the sixth graders in our church didn't attend our middle school youth group, especially since they attended the town's public middle school. Our church had a robust Wednesday night elementary school program which went through sixth grade, but several sixth-grade students along with their parents wanted to participate in middle school ministry. The elementary program director and I talked about moving sixth graders to the middle school ministry several times, but we couldn't come to an agreement about where the group belonged.

An elder met with me and the elementary program director to resolve the question. I planned my presentation to ask that sixth graders be moved to the middle school ministry. I didn't think my proposal would be accepted. I was caught between two other leaders in an ambiguous situation. So, I created a third option: the church could treat the sixth grade as a transitional year. One week a month the sixth graders would participate in the middle school ministry; the rest of the month they would participate in their regular ministry. At the meeting the elder and the program director passed on my first idea, but they both agreed to the other option! I had been pinched in the middle, but had stewarded the ambiguity by proposing a new course of action that worked for everyone involved.

Where Did the Idea for This Book Come From?

As you might guess, this book was born out of my experiences as an associate pastor. This short life history explains where my passion for this topic came from.

While studying architecture at college, I experienced a clear call to pastoral ministry. After college I went immediately to an evangelical seminary just north of Chicago. On the second day of class my ministry professor warned the class, "Seminary does a great job of

preparing you for your last ministry position, but it doesn't necessarily prepare you for your first two or three positions. Let me encourage you to take education and leadership classes that will help you in roles like youth ministry, worship, or other associate ministry roles."

Wanting to do well when I graduated, I took his advice and took several classes in youth ministry and Christian education. I did my field education at a local church in the youth group, children's ministry, and outreach ministry. I thought I wanted to be a "lifer," a pastor who spends his or her entire life working in youth ministry, so I took a role as a youth pastor at an evangelical church in rural Illinois after graduation.

That first pastorate lasted five years to the day. While I started out in youth ministry, soon I was also in charge of a summer young adult program. Eventually I had an adult Sunday school class. I left that congregation to embark on a new journey to earn a PhD, unsure of what the future would hold. Shortly thereafter, I received a second call to the church where I served while in seminary. I was there for almost six years and had broad responsibilities including children, youth, adult, outreach, and pastoral counseling ministries.

I had fruitful ministry in both churches, developed amazing friendships, learned, and grew in my relationship with Jesus. I am deeply thankful that the Lord directed me to both places. I am particularly grateful to my senior pastor at my second church, Lee Eclov, who mentored me and risked having a PhD student as a full-time associate minister. It was here that I could see a new vision for my life as a teacher of ministry students.

That said, ambiguity was a regular experience in both of my churches. There were challenges in relating to senior pastors as superiors and friends, and to my volunteers as *their* superior and friend. I had ambiguous relationships with my elder boards as a non-elder in my first church and as a nonvoting elder in my second. I felt ill-equipped to handle these relational issues when seminary ended; I had to quickly develop new skills in managing resources, developing teams, and coaching volunteers. I felt squeezed between different constituencies within the churches: volunteers, parents, elders, youth, and staff. I was often

confused about when to ask leaders to follow specific instructions and when to let them "do their own thing." While much of my ministry in both churches was fruitful, I often doubted my overall effectiveness. I particularly struggled with casting vision in ways that both honored my senior pastors and respected my volunteers.

Many of my associate pastor colleagues described similar tensions in their ministries. Some had comparable experiences; others had far more difficult pastorates. Some considered abandoning ministry but chose to stick out the stress and painful relationships; others left ministry for other careers. I wanted to discover how associate pastors move in complicated and ambiguous relationships in order to have fruitful pastorates. So, after researching what others had written about associate ministry, I interviewed twenty-five associates to listen to and understand their experiences. The result is this book.

Who Are Associate Pastors, and What Do We Know About Them?

When I write for and about associate pastors, who do I mean? An associate pastor is any clergy in a local congregation who does not occupy the senior pastoral role in a church. The following description captures associate ministry well: "All pastors must be servants, but the associate pastor, by the nature of the position, is charged with serving, supporting, and equipping God's people and to do so under the direction of the senior pastor."[2] According to this definition, youth pastors or worship pastors are associate pastors, even though they only oversee one specific area of ministry. However, associate pastors are also sometimes generalists with a wide array of responsibilities, and not just specialists in a specific niche ministry such as children, youth, young adults, worship, or other focused ministry.[3] In my first church, I was a specialized youth pastor. In my second pastoral role, I was a

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2   Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor*, 2–3.
3   Johnson, "Preparing an Associate Pastor to Become a Senior Pastor"; Haskins, "An Examination of the Role and Function of the Associate Pastor in the United Methodist Church"; Radcliffe, *Effective Ministry as an Associate Pastor*; Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor*.

generalist over children, youth, young adult, adult, small group, and some outreach ministries. But in both my roles I directly reported to and had direct contact with my senior pastor.

While associate pastors have wildly differing roles and responsibilities, research on associate pastors describe three common elements to associate ministries. First, associate pastors depend on having constructive relationships with their senior pastors. Second, associate pastors are the managers of their congregations. Third, associate pastors have ambiguous roles.

Relationships with Senior Pastors

Senior pastors are certainly critical partners for associate pastors. While associates are under the direction of the senior pastor,[4] who they support,[5] assist,[6] and who prescribes their duties,[7] there is often substantial overlap in those duties[8] which might also create ambiguity. The term "collaborator" is sometimes used to refer to the associate.[9] Associate pastors are often encouraged to be supportive of their senior pastors either through upward management,[10] through noncompetitive relationships,[11] and/or through exercising compatible gifts.[12]

Associate Pastors as Managers

As you might expect, there is more to the associate's role than the relationship to the senior pastor. While management clearly intersects with being in a subordinate position to a senior pastor, associate pastors are often referred to as "second chair leaders" in their

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4   Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor,* 2–3.
5   Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor*; Hawkins, "An Evaluation of Selected Dallas Theological Seminary Alumni of Assistant and Associate Pastor in the Local Church."
6   Hawkins and Sallman, *The Associate Pastor*, 17.
7   Radcliffe, *Effective Ministry as an Associate Pastor*, 144.
8   Sam, "The Formation, Mentoring, and Socialization of the Associate Pastor into the Pastorate in the Roman Catholic Church"; Overman, "Associate Pastor as Collaborator."
9   Esa, "Issues in Ministry Effectiveness for the Associate Pastor," 171; Overman, "Associate Pastor as Collaborator," 11–12; Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor*, 95.
10 Smith, "Playing Second Fiddle on One String: The Role of the Associate Pastor," 92.
11 Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor*.
12 Esa, "Issues in Ministry Effectiveness for the Associate Pastor," 62–64.

organizations.[13] Bonem and Patterson coined this term and describe a second chair leader as someone "in a subordinate role whose influence with others adds value throughout the organization."[14] Second chair leaders provide relief for senior pastors in terms of implementing a church's specific vision: "They are managers of the process towards a realized vision."[15]

"Management" can sound rather alien to the pastoral identity and imagination. What does it mean to be a manager? Management has classically been understood as a linear or cyclical process of planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling.[16]

If this definition sounds a little bit like the floor manager in a factory, or a middle manager in an organization, that is exactly what is being described. In fact, one researcher suggests that associate pastors share critical tasks and are essentially identical to mid-level managers in mainstream workplaces in their practice of leader-manager practices.[17] Other authors describe associate pastors as those who create, implement, and manage "specific functions" of a congregation;[18] support the vision, mission, and staff of a church;[19] or plan, organize, staff, direct, and control as managers.[20]

But most seminarians or Bible school students don't imagine pastoral work as managerial. They want to preach, teach, disciple, care

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13   Gilbreath, "An Administrative Manual for the Associate Pastor"; Haskins, "An Examination of the Role and Function of the Associate Pastor in the United Methodist Church"; Woodruff, "Executive Pastor's Perception of Leadership and Management Competencies Needed for Local Church Administration"; Griffin, "Vision Building as a Second Chair Leader for a Large Congregation"; Akinde, "A Study Comparing the Leadership and Management Characteristics of Associate Church Pastors and Mid-Level Corporate Managers and Leaders."

14   Bonem and Patterson, *Leading from the Second Chair*, 3; emphasis original.

15   Griffin, "Vision Building as a Second Chair Leader for a Large Congregation."

16   Mintzberg, "The Manager's Job," 49; cf. Mackenzie, "The Management Process in 3D;" Kraut, et al., "The Role of the Manager," 123–24.

17   Akinde, "A Study Comparing the Leadership and Management Characteristics of Associate Church Pastors and Mid-Level Corporate Managers and Leaders."

18   Hawkins, "An Evaluation of Selected Dallas Theological Seminary Alumni of Assistant and Associate Pastor in the Local Church," 10; Hawkins and Sallman, *The Associate Pastor*, 17.

19   Rudnick, *The Work of the Associate Pastor*, 2–3.

20   Radcliffe, *Effective Ministry as an Associate Pastor*, 144.

for other people, or actively evangelize nonbelievers. Management is often not taught in theological education.

When you work in a factory, management is guided by a common goal of creating the product the factory and its staff were hired to create. But a church does not create a product, because it is not a factory, nor is it a business. The church is a miracle community of the new humanity redeemed by Jesus Christ. But congregations are nonetheless organizations, networks of intentionally structured relationships working toward a common goal or vision.

Congregations ought to have a theological and biblical vision for contextualizing ministry. However, associate pastors, like senior pastors, are often caught in a culture of ambiguity.

Ambiguity and Associate Pastors

What do we mean by ambiguity?

Have you ever been sent on an errand to the grocery store to buy a specific brand of tomato sauce, but that tomato sauce was sold out? Your phone is dead, so you cannot call anyone to get advice or direction. You face the shelves and see a myriad of options: different brand names, different prices, different flavors, different ingredients for customers with different allergies or food sensitivities. What do you pick? If you are at all like me, this scenario can produce anxiety because there is no way to get more information about which jar to pick. I am forced to choose, and that choice requires me to navigate ambiguity—a lack of information, direction, or structure that impedes action or decision-making.

Here is a more relevant example to ministry. As a newly hired associate pastor, I was reviewing files when I discovered a volunteer who was already serving but had not completed a required application and background check (the previous pastor had forgotten the paperwork). I called the volunteer to explain, and asked him to complete the forms. He was irritated, since the previous pastor had given him permission to serve. The volunteer was caught in ambiguity; he had the previous pastor's support but didn't have the technical clearance from the church. I too was caught in ambiguity; I didn't know that

the volunteer had been incorrectly onboarded, and now I was unsure what to do to rectify the situation without hurting feelings or disrupting the ministry.

Ambiguity is obviously a form of stress. In fact, stress and ambiguity go hand in hand, and they can benefit or plague any number of people in any number of roles. Stress is generally defined as a person's perception that the demands of their environment are greater than their ability and resources to meet that need.[21] Stress is a dynamic state of uncertainty[22] coming from or concerning a person's specific role, organizational sources, or relationships.[23] Environmental situations within organizations put extraordinary pressure on an individual.[24] Two major sources of stress in organizations are role conflict and role ambiguity.[25] Role conflict occurs when expectations of the role do not match reality.[26] Various kinds of role conflict include:

- Experiencing different expectations from one person
- Experiencing different expectations from different people
- Experiencing different expectations arising from membership in multiple organizations
- Experiencing a moral conflict based on roles
- Experiencing role overload: expectations exceed the holder's ability to perform within a limited time[27]

Role ambiguity is a particularly powerful, though not always negative, form of organizational stress.[28] Role ambiguity can be de-

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21   Stout and Posner, "Stress, Role Ambiguity, and Role Conflict," 747; Cooper, et al., *Organizational Stress*, 27.

22   Stout and Posner, "Stress, Role Ambiguity, and Role Conflict," 747.

23   Cooper, et al., *Organizational Stress*, 1, 27.

24   Stout and Posner, "Stress, Role Ambiguity, and Role Conflict," 747.

25   Kahn, et al., *Organizational Stress*; Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, "Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations"; Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler, "Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity"; Faucett, Corwyn, and Poling, "Clergy Role Stress."

26   Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler, "Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity," 44.

27   Kahn, et al., *Organizational Stress*, 20; Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler, "Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity," 44.

28   Kemery, "Clergy Role Stress and Satisfaction."

scribed as a lack of required information necessary for an incumbent to know how to perform his or her role.[29] It can also be defined in terms of predictability of outcomes due to behavior and the existence of environmental guides for behavior.[30] Role ambiguity can also relate to available information about the expectations associated with a role, methods for fulfilling known role expectations, and the consequences for role performance.[31]

Role ambiguity is often tied to task conflict, or conflict about how tasks are performed in the opinions of different stakeholders, as well as relational stress such as tension, animosity, and annoyance. Therefore, role ambiguity and task conflict are often emotionally charged. Further, role ambiguity can have a negative relationship to self-efficacy, since it reduces available information on which to evaluate performance and visualize performance.[32]

Let's attempt to illustrate role ambiguity with the following story that describes role task conflict. One of my churches initiated a summer New Testament reading program composed of two elements: an individual reading plan to be completed at home and weekly gatherings where participants would discuss the week's reading. The program consultant emphasized the need for *both* the individual reading and the weekly gathering. My senior pastor felt that the weekly meetings were unnecessary and did not want to require them. As the program implementor, I was caught between different expectations placed upon me by the senior pastor and the consultant. Both gentlemen were polite yet assertive in their positions. After some debate, we proceeded by holding weekly meetings but not requiring attendance.

Here is another illustration that describes role ambiguity, this time through lack of information. Our church was fortunate to have a military band leader as a member. My senior pastor thought it would be a wonderful outreach to our neighborhood to ask one of

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29   Kahn, et al., *Organizational Stress*, 73.
30   Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, "Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations," 156.
31   Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler, "Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity," 44.
32   Li and Bagger, "Role Ambiguity and Self-Efficacy," 368.

the bands stationed at the local military base to perform a church concert, and he gave me the responsibility of putting the concert together and advertising it in the surrounding area. I had never done this kind of task so I had to learn quickly and through trial and error where to gather resources, where to advertise, what to set up, and what people to recruit. The nature of the task was ambiguous and produced stress. In the end the concert was successful, and I had gained new skills in promoting events, but it took some time to shake off the anxiety.

To review, ambiguity is the presence of stress from numerous sources that inhibits identifying or resolving problems, usually combined with anxiety in the form of relational pressure or the lack of resources to discover or enact solutions to a problem. In other words, ambiguity implies the stress that accompanies unknown situations or conflicting expectations, with the accompanying pressure to resolve the unknown in an effective or fruitful manner.

The Uneasy Relationship Between Pastoral Ministry and Management

It is no wonder then that associate pastors often struggle to make sense of their roles. Theological schools from Bible college to seminary do not emphasize management in their curriculum. In addition, pastors are often suspicious of leadership, as well as of management practices and literature in the church, compounding the problem of poor management.[33] Pastoral theologian Thomas Oden suggests that seminarians often reject administrative studies toward ministry as crass, manipulative, and corruptive; and he concedes that "business leadership techniques" are sometimes uncritically adopted into congregations.[34] Branson and Martínez, without denying the importance of leadership, describe modernity's influence on leadership in the church, and push back on command-and-control styles of strategic

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33 Radcliffe, *The Effective Ministry of an Associate Pastor*, 26–28; Boersma, "Managerial Competencies for Church Administration as Perceived by Seminary Faculties, Church Lay Leaders, and Ministers," 2.

34 Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 154.

planning, consumerism, and "the church's self-understanding as a volunteer organization."[35] Guder voices a similar set of concerns:

> At the denominational, local, and seminary levels, the management paradigm dominates models of leadership development as if it were a neutral set of techniques and skills. The nature of leadership is thus transformed into the management of an organization shaped to meet the spiritual needs of consumers and maximize market penetration for numerical growth.[36]

Particularly, there is suspicion of the church growth movement and "McDonaldization."[37] McDonaldization is a form of management that promotes a more bureaucratic and hierarchical approach to organizations.[38] McDonaldization emphasizes efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control—and results in a dehumanizing rationalism as well as anonymous or impersonal relationships.[39] Watson and Scalen suggest that churches are "restructuring themselves according to a corporate business model."[40] Smith and Pattison go so far as to write,

> Western Christianity's symbiotic relationship with industrialization had led to attempts to circumvent the messy or inefficient facets of faith. Many churches, particularly those driven by church growth models, come dangerously close to reducing Christianity to a commodity that can be packaged, marketed, and sold.[41]

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35   Branson and Martínez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership,* 210–11.
36   Guder, *Missional Church*, 198.
37   Smith and Pattison, *Slow Church*; Watson and Scalen, "Dining with the Devil"; Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church.*
38   Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*; Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church.*
39   Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society,* 13–14.
40   Watson and Scalen, "Dining with the Devil," 17.
41   Smith and Pattison, *Slow Church*, 14.

Drane summarizes many pastors' fears when he writes, "An over-emphasis on what is quantifiable will generally hinder if not undermine personal and spiritual growth."[42] Willimon, while stating that a manager is a good image of the pastor, echoes this concern and suggests that pastoral management cannot be measured purely by efficiency or productivity, especially when unexpected events or concerns occur to occupy the pastor's time and attention.[43]

Yet Oden also states, "Experienced clergy . . . know all too well that they must function effectively as leaders in the church and community and be responsible for complex organizational processes."[44] Nonetheless, while most pastors enter the ministry to pursue preaching, teaching, and discipleship, they are often surprised by the tasks of leadership and management for which seminary did not prepare them.[45]

The Shift in Management Paradigms

There has been a shift in how management is perceived by scholars and practitioners. With the emergence of learning organizations, managers have developed a new role described as a facilitator of learning[46] who functions much like a coach in their organization.[47] Such a leader is tasked with helping others achieve their goals by programming learning to enhance creativity.[48] Facilitative leadership is a large shift from a command-and-control understanding of management to an understanding of manager as a people developer,[49] which may require

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42   Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, 47.
43   Willimon, *Pastor*, 61–62.
44   Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 154.
45   Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 199–200.
46   Ellinger, Watkins, and Bostrom, "Managers as Facilitators of Learning in Learning Organizations"; Ellinger and Bostrom, "An Examination of Managers' Beliefs about Their Roles and Facilitators of Learning."
47   Ellinger and Bostrom, "Managerial Coaching Behaviors in Learning Organizations"; Ellinger, "Antecedents and Consequences of Coaching Behavior"; Hargrove, *Masterful Coaching*, 2008.
48   Guastello, "Facilitative Style, Individual Innovation, and Emergent Leadership in Problem Solving Groups," 226–77.
49   Ellinger, Watkins, and Bostrom, "Managers as Facilitators of Learning in Learning Organizations," 106.

a shift in identity,[50] as well as a shift in belief and mental models to lean into that identity.[51] Facilitative leadership is the opposite of impositional (or command-and-control) leadership,[52] and could be described as "helping people in groups transform themselves, their community, and their world."[53] This new paradigm reflects that direction and knowledge are not locked at the top of an organization; they are spread throughout all of the constituents.

While management is indeed unavoidable, it should not be seen as the ugly stepsister of ministry responsibility. A shift to a facilitator of learning or facilitative leadership seems to fit pastoral responsibilities, especially when one considers the pastoral responsibilities of teaching and preaching against the backdrop of Ephesians 4.

The Benefits of Stewarding Ambiguity

So far in this chapter, I've stated that associate pastors are pinched in the middle of critical agents and constituents in their churches as significant managers of their congregations, even if that is not how they prefer to understand their role. This pinched middleness with its managerial emphasis comes with intense stress, often in the form of role ambiguity.

That said, Kemery[54] notes that in pastoral ministry, role ambiguity is not always a bad thing. In fact, when role ambiguity is high but role conflict is low, pastors tend to report a high level of job satisfaction because they have the ability to make decisions in order to act on the ambiguity they experience.[55]

It is simply a given that organizations experience ambiguity in the face of making decisions and accomplishing goals. Forester states that decision-makers face incomplete information about problems

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50 Ellinger and Bostrom, "An Examination of Managers' Beliefs about Their Roles as Facilitators of Learning," 159.
51 Ellinger and Bostrom, "An Examination of Managers' Beliefs about Their Roles as Facilitators of Learning," 148.
52 Fryer, "Facilitative Leadership," 26.
53 Hargrove, *Masterful Coaching*, 15.
54 Kemery, "Clergy Role Stress and Satisfaction," 566.
55 Kemery, "Clergy Role Stress and Satisfaction," 566.

and their backgrounds, alternatives and their potential consequences, and the range of values and preferences among stakeholders—all in the context of limited time, skills, and resources.[56] This requires managers to assist in sensemaking in their organization,[57] but it also requires them to lead organizations to steward the ambiguity so that possibilities for moving forward emerge through organizational discernment.[58] In short, if managers can navigate the complexities of their organizations from their inherent middleness,[59] they may become stewards of ambiguity through the process of facilitating learning in their organizations.

This opportunity, then, is what makes the associate pastoral role significant and unique. Associate pastors can make a big difference by acting as stewards of ambiguity, particularly if they can take on the identity of a facilitator of learning within their congregations.

Good News for Associate Pastors!

This paradigm ought to be good news for associate pastors, especially those associate pastors who serve in congregations large enough to have significant complexity but small enough where associate pastors have regular ongoing contact with all levels of the organization. This new paradigm made me wonder if associate pastors, while perhaps being unaware of the role of facilitator of learning, functioned as such in their congregations—and if they did, how they went about it.

I researched how associate pastors functioned as facilitators of learning in their congregations. In order to discover this, I attempted to answer three important questions:

1. How do associate pastors navigate complexity in their congregations?
2. How do associate pastors facilitate their own learning?

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56   Forester, *Planning in the Face of Power*, 50.
57   Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations*.
58   Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*; cf. Scharmer, *Theory U*, 7–8, 60.
59   Oshry, *In the Middle*, 80.

3. How do associate pastors facilitate the learning of other con-
    gregational members?

How Was the Research Conducted?

Before moving on, it is important to share how I conducted
the research presented in this book. I knew I was asking significant
research questions about associate ministry, so I wanted to be able
to capture the experiences, perceptions, and language that associate
pastors use to describe themselves. I relied on participants sharing
their stories, thoughts, and experiences, in order to gather data that
could be organized into themes. This research methodology, called
qualitative research, usually engages in forms of interviews, focus
groups, and site visits to gather data. While the participants provide
the data, the researcher is the "instrument" of discovery.[60] While I
used an interview protocol to guide the conversations I had with
associates, I interjected questions in real time and used the protocol
as a guide to answer my research questions.

As you read, I'll introduce you to twenty-five different associate
pastors who perform a variety of different tasks for their churches. They
come from a wide variety of Protestant denominations including the
Evangelical Free Church of America, Evangelical Anglican Church,
United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church USA, Nazarene
Church, Assemblies of God, different Baptist churches, and nonde-
nominational churches. Nine of the participants were women, three
were African American, and two were Asian American. Most of these
associate pastors work in suburban areas, but four serve in an urban
context, and four minister in a rural or small-town setting. I found
these participants through a snowball method: I interacted with people
who knew associate pastors or were themselves associate pastors and
asked them to suggest participants who would be able to provide rich
experiences, and therefore helpful data, for the study. By following this
approach, I was able to meet and interview many Caucasian males, but
it was much harder to find women and minorities to interact with in the

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60   Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research.*

study. I found most of these minority participants either by cold-calling or through networking with friends in different denominations.

In deciding who to interview, I looked for associate pastors who met three common attributes. First, all of them ministered in churches that were larger than one hundred regular attenders but were smaller than 1,750 regular attenders. Why is church size important? A megachurch is described as having membership or regular attendance of two thousand worshippers or more. Megachurches can have dozens of associate pastors or staff, and I am sure that they also experience a middleness of a kind. But there is an important difference with pastors and staff in megachurches: they are not in a position to have access to all the levels of organization. Put another way, associate pastors in megachurches cannot see the top and bottom of their congregations the way associates in smaller churches can. The associate pastors interviewed could all see the top and bottom; they were familiar with all the ministries and layers of responsibility of their churches. This type of access also brought a reciprocal benefit: everyone in the church had some level of access to the associate pastors.

Second, all the associate pastors had at least five years of pastoral ministry experience. Why be concerned about time? Five years or more of tenure provides associate pastors with enough time to be able to commit to professional reflection. Five years of elder board meetings, staff meetings, volunteer interactions, teaching, constructing, or buying curriculum. Five years of good, mediocre, or bad events that have shaped their pastoral identity and practice.

Third, all of them were in a reporting relationship to a senior or executive pastor; if they reported to an executive pastor, the associate pastor also had consistent recurring contact with the senior pastor. This may seem an obvious requirement, but as we have already seen, the senior pastor relationship is a potent partnership. There are many churches that are not megachurch-sized which now employ executive pastors, but associate pastors still have formative relationships with their senior pastors in these relationships. I'll show you how the executive pastor relationship impacts the associate pastor role as we discuss our findings.

In addition, all the associate pastors had two of the following three attributes: 1) they had completed at least one theological degree in a seminary, Bible college, or liberal arts school; 2) they had received ordination in their denomination, or had an equivalent ministerial endorsement from their congregation; 3) they had five years of pastoral experience in addition to the minimum five years listed above, giving them at least ten years of experience with congregations.

Why do these criteria matter? These three attributes describe significant steps on the path to forging the pastoral identity of a minister, not only in their own minds but also in the minds of their congregations or larger denominations. These three criteria also ensured that enough training, effort, or time had gone by that the associate pastor could reflect biblically and theologically on his or her own ministerial experience.

I gathered the data for the study in two stages. For the first stage, I interviewed each of the associate pastors in their church offices and spoke with them for about an hour, recording the conversations and taking notes as our interviews went along. Afterward, I transcribed and examined the interviews for themes, and then organized the themes into different categories. When I met with the associate pastors, I went through an interview protocol that allowed me to interject new and different questions based on the answers of their pastors:

1. Tell me about your church and how you serve your congregation.
2. Which people do you interact with most in the congregation? What is it like to work with them?
3. How do you partner with key people in the congregation to do ministry?
4. What does being an associate pastor look like in your congregation?
5. How do you develop yourself professionally as an associate pastor?
6. How has your professional development assisted you in your pastoral role?

7. How intentionally does your congregation determine learning goals for itself?
8. How intentionally do you determine learning goals for your ministry?
9. What learning is occurring in your congregation?
10. How are you able to nurture learning in your congregation?

For the second stage, I invited seven of the participants back for focus groups. Four participants were in the first focus group; three were in the second. In this stage, I presented my preliminary findings and asked the groups to offer feedback on my categories. As before, I recorded these meetings, transcribed them, and coded them for themes, revising my initial categories. I had no interview protocol for the focus groups; I simply presented the data and started a free-flowing conversation.

What to Expect as You Continue to Read

Allow me to give a little roadmap to the remainder of the book. Chapter 1 will provide a biblical and theological argument that situates management as a genuine element of Christian ministry empowered by the Holy Spirit. With this foundation in place, chapters 2 and 3 will set the stage for describing associate pastors as facilitators of learning. Chapter 2 will describe how roles and complexity emerge in organizations; chapter 3 will review how learning occurs in organizations and apply that knowledge to the facilitator-of-learning role. Chapter 4 will integrate organizational theory with theology to make the case that associate pastors are facilitators of learning.

In chapters 5 through 7, I will describe the themes that came out of the interviews with the twenty-five associate pastors I interviewed. Chapter 5 will answer the question, "How do associate pastors navigate the complexity in their congregations?" Chapter 6 will answer the question, "How do associate pastors facilitate their own learning?" And chapter 7 will answer, "How do associate pastors facilitate the learning of others in their congregation?" In these

chapters I will use the stories and words associate pastors share about their ministry positions, the tasks they perform, and the relationships they encountered there.

In chapter 8, I will describe the implications of that research and will argue that the most important skill an associate pastor can possess for facilitating learning and managing ambiguity is relational competency. The Afterword will suggest how theological education can better equip associates for their roles.

Summary of the Study

Now remember, the associate pastors who participated in the study came from churches that were of more than one hundred regular participants and less than 1,750; they can see the top, the middle, and the bottom of the organization. The findings can be summarized by one essential word: "pinched." What does that "pinchedness" look like? The following diagram was composed from the themes and findings from my interviews with the twenty-five associate pastors. While other authors have already written about the roles associate pastors have with other organizational stakeholders,[61] this study describes how associate pastors see the interconnections in their congregational relationships. These interconnections are visualized in Figure I-1 below.

Notice some important features of this figure. First, associate pastors saw themselves as clearly at the center of all of the relationships in their churches. Second, while associate pastors have one-on-one relationships with the other participants described in the chart, these relationships are not purely linear; the constituents are networked in a web of relationships. The relationship with key volunteers, as we will see, turned out to be just as challenging and formative to the associate pastor's role as that of the senior pastor. Third, the associate pastors are triangled, or "pinched," between different groups. This set of relationships presents both challenges and opportunities for associate pastors in their unique roles.

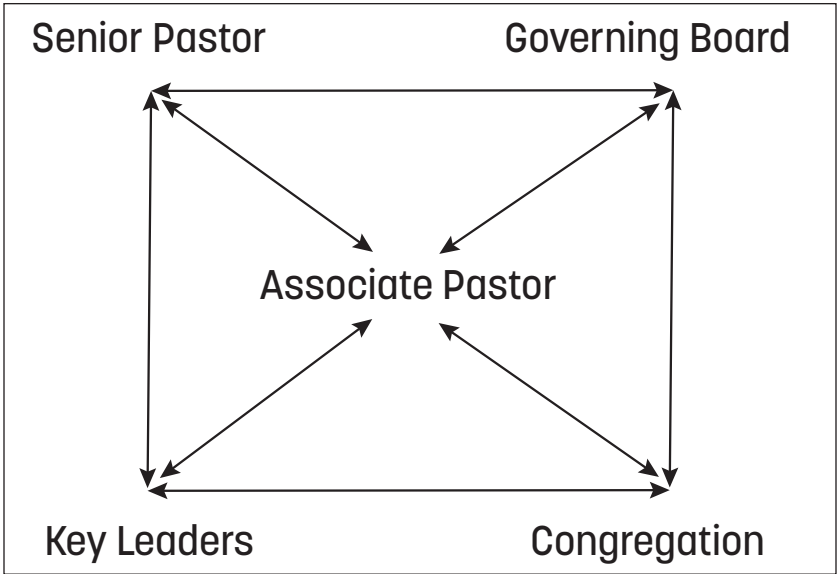61   Radcliffe, *The Effective Ministry of an Associate Pastor*.

Figure I-1: The Pinched Associate Pastor

It is important to keep in mind that these diagrams are not organizational charts, but rather a description of how associate pastors perceive that they relate to other constituents in their churches. They demonstrate that describing associate pastor relationships as purely linear command-and-control relationships does not account for the complexity of how an associate pastor experiences the day-to-day relationships of his or her congregation.

The diagram presented above is not the only way associate pastors described their congregations. Depending on the church's governing structure, associate pastors could find themselves in a differing set of pinched relationships, depending on the polity of the church (cf. Figure 5-5 or 7-2).

What were the implications of the study? If associate pastors are inherently in the middle of their congregations, what is it imperative that they know and understand about their congregations? Here are the five major takeaways that I will discuss in subsequent chapters:

1. *Navigating Anxious Relational Triangles:* Psychologist Michael Bowen described anxiety as the crucial emotion that human beings experience and must take into account when interacting with others in their families, communities, and organizations. Much has already been written about the Bowen triangle; I will take that research and apply it to this study in chapters 2 and 8.

2. *Negotiating Political Interests:* Many new pastors are shocked to discover that congregations are political communities, with different constituents attempting to act on their concerns and interests. Yet associate pastors need not be afraid of political organizations; humans are political beings and church members can engage in sanctified politics to the glory of God. Associate pastors play a crucial role in the political activities of their congregations; they must learn to negotiate their interests and the interests of others in a godly way.

3. *Stewarding Agency*: The task of ministry does not fall to pastors alone, but to the entire congregation. Associate pastors realize the power and gifting that those above and below them have to accomplish the work of their congregations. Associate pastors must therefore be prepared to help others succeed by stewarding the agency of all the congregational participants in their churches.

4. *Directing Learning*: Associate pastors are often the educational workhorses of their churches who organize their own learning and the learning of the entire congregation, often attempting to align it with the goals or mission of the congregation. Associate pastors direct knowledge throughout the organization and train others to do the work of ministry, while keeping leaders aligned to followers.

5. *Practicing Followership*: As noted previously, the associate pastor's relationship with the senior pastor is very important. Followership is the study and practice of following leaders well. Associate pastors sometimes face particularly challenging problems in followership that they must mitigate from the middle.

Management is clearly as pastoral a practice as preaching, administering the Lord's Supper or baptism, providing pastoral counsel, or visiting the sick, among others. Yet in many pastors' minds, it's the ugly stepsister of those other pastoral practices. Associate pastors must rescue this practice in their own minds and step into the role of managing. Shepherding, a biblical metaphor for pastoring, provides a superb image for managing and the pastoral task.

In suggesting these implications, I want to be clear then that managing in a congregation is not primarily about preparing budgets, tracking calendars, publishing newsletters or bulletins or reports, posting social media items, or ordering curriculum and other supplies. I am suggesting that managing in a congregation is primarily about shepherding relationships in a Christ-honoring manner so that ministry moves through the entire congregational structure. My central claim is that the most important skill associate pastors require is the ability to navigate complicated relationships and to understand the navigation of these relationships as a pastoral practice. By mastering the ability to navigate complicated relationships, associate pastors can become stewards of ambiguity in their congregations.

Some Thoughts for Other Readers

While I am primarily writing for associate pastors, it is my hope that senior pastors might read this book—especially if they are thinking of hiring their church's first associate pastor, if they have never had an associate pastor of any kind report to them before, or if they are finding themselves struggling to understand the tensions faced by their associate pastoral staff. If you are a senior pastor, let me please say a few words to you.

I understand that ministry and staff relationships for senior pastors are complicated as well. While my research didn't examine how senior pastors experience middleness, I am sure that you experience a kind of pinching all your own, though I think it is a safe assumption to think that the form of middleness you experience may take on different dimensions and have different implications than it does for the associates you currently or will oversee on your pastoral staff.

Nonetheless, I hope that this book casts light on some of the pressures and tensions that associate pastors face. Please pay attention to the various relational dynamics that associate pastors have with their senior pastors, and the complicated relationships they have with other constituents that make their ministries troubling or energizing. By knowing these things, I hope it will become more possible for you to facilitate the agency of your own staff.

It is also my hope that theological educators in seminaries and other Christian higher education organizations will read this book. If you are a ministry professor or trainer, I hope you will see that the pivotal skill of navigating complex relationships is underdeveloped in many future associate pastors by the time they graduate from theological education. I know that seminary cannot possibly train and equip a future pastor for every necessary skill, but I think back to what my professor said on the first day of class in seminary: "You need to be prepared for your first job." Surely there is a better way of helping associate pastors master this skill than leaving it to "on-the-job-training." It is my hope that this book provides a critical glimpse into the heart of associate ministry and that it gives you some grist for thinking through the curriculum of the seminary. I will offer some suggestions in the Afterword.

If you are an unpaid or paid ministry director—whether part-time, full-time, or part-time bivocational associate pastor, I hope you will read this book too. I think you will find many of the descriptions and implications are transferable to your situation, even if you've never been to seminary or haven't gone through the process of being ordained.

Lastly, if you are in seminary, earning a theological degree, or preparing for ministry, I hope you will read this book as well. It is my hope that this book will expose you to the blessings and challenges of being an associate pastor, and that it will help you channel your passion for biblical and theological knowledge in the direction such knowledge is always meant to travel: toward loving God by loving his people well.