



## **Antagonist or Protagonist: The Role of the Associate Clergy**

**By Stacy D. Dandridge**

Stacy D. Dandridge is pursuing a Master of Divinity degree at Memphis Theological Seminary. She currently serves as an associate minister at Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

It's Sunday morning! The sanctuary begins to fill with parishioners. The praise team is preparing to lead the congregation in praise and worship. The minister of music strikes the organ. The church leaders enter the sanctuary. Bright-eyed parishioners assume the posture of worship and the service commences. The service is filled with rigorous and expressive gestures of worship directed towards God, and parishioners anxiously wait to hear a Word from the Lord. The preacher stands and moves towards the sacred desk to deliver the Word of God, but that preacher is not you! That preacher is rarely you! You are an associate elder, pastor, minister, associate clergy, or whatever title you may carry, but you are not the senior pastor; therefore, your opportunities to preach may be scarce. If you're like me, you may serve on a staff of associates that is well endowed with capable women who have a wide variety of gifts to offer to the Body of Christ but whose preaching opportunities may be even less.

So what do we do when God has called us to the ministry, but our capacity as an associate clergy person does not seem to provide us with adequate opportunities to exercise our preaching gift or other gifts? Do we force our gifts on our senior pastor by giving hints that he or

she should let us preach or do other ministry in the church? Do we envy our senior pastor because of what God is doing in his or her ministry that hasn't seemed to manifest in our own? Do we create our own preaching opportunities outside the church where we serve as an associate clergy? Do we use moments of congregational prayer and the benediction as opportunities to take a text give it three points and a close? In my opinion, the answer to all of these questions should be a resounding NO!

Being an associate at your local church comes with its challenges and even frustrations. As an associate your desire or expectations may be to have numerous preaching opportunities. Therefore, having rare opportunities to preach can be disheartening and even cause a person to raise questions concerning the validity of his or her call. While the role of an associate, in my opinion, is to help the senior pastor by providing unparalleled support for the ministry in areas such as pastoral care, administration, and preaching (when needed), there is a reality that exists which captures the tension that is present between associate clergy and the senior pastor. This tension may exist because of the associate's desire to have more preaching opportunities. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the disposition of an antagonistic minister and a protagonist one in dealing with the absence of preaching opportunities as an associate minister in a church. If your main gifts or interests in ministry are not in the area of preaching, the article applies just the same.

Antagonism carries negative connotations, and no one wants to be identified with or found in the company of antagonistic people, systems, or organizations. An antagonist by definition seeks to oppose a cause that may be set in motion. Whether knowledgeable of their actions or not, antagonists have a way of infecting and affecting systems and have the potential to hurt, harm, or damage the system in which they are working. A protagonist, however, operates

in a different fashion. A protagonist is often the leader or supporter of a cause. Protagonists support the causes of which they are a part; whether that cause will directly or indirectly benefit them or not, protagonists are willing to be team players. They are willing to do whatever it takes to make sure the vision, the goal, the victory comes to pass.

It is no secret that both antagonists and protagonists attend our local churches. They are present in meetings, church fellowships, and Sunday services. They give their resources and requests and their concerns and complaints. However, antagonists and protagonists are not just a part of the lay membership; they are present in the leadership of the Church. They are even found among God's anointed preachers. Antagonistic and protagonistic people not only affect the congregation, but they affect their own growth. Let us now turn our attention towards the characteristics of an antagonistic associate clergy.

First, associates who are antagonists operate with different motives. They want to preach, they want to be heard, and they want a prominent role in the congregation. They can be gifted preachers, but they misunderstand their role as associate pastors, ministers, etc.

Misunderstanding their role in the congregation can be detrimental to the ministry and strain their relationship with their pastor. Misconstruing their role as a supporter to the senior pastor can cause associates to only focus on getting an opportunity to preach or be in the spotlight.

Therefore, antagonist associates may sit angry Sunday after Sunday because they are not preaching. As a result of operating from an antagonistic spirit, associate ministers waste time being mad at the senior pastor when the senior pastor is simply fulfilling his or her duties as the shepherd of the flock.

Second, in an effort to preach more from the pulpit, an antagonist minister misses the opportunity to do other things in ministry. The antagonist preacher says, "If Pastor won't let me

preach, then I won't do anything else because God has called me to PREACH!" This could be potentially debilitating to a minister's growth. What antagonist preachers fail to see is that those moments of listening to and learning from the senior pastor prepares them for their future. They take for granted those seasons of anonymity. The seasons of anonymity are not designed to harm associate clergy but to protect and prepare them. Alicia Britt Chole in her book Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours says, "In these early anonymous seasons, God graciously grants us the opportunity to wrestle with our appetites before other lives are at stake, to struggle with our passions privately before moral collapse affects the innocent publicly."<sup>1</sup> It is possible that as an associate you are not ready for the responsibilities that come with being a senior pastor. You may not be ready to preach as often as you would like. With more preaching opportunities comes more spiritual responsibility—not just for yourself, but for all who will be subject to the Word that goes forth from your mouth.

Third, being an antagonistic associate can also hurt the relationship between the associate and the senior pastor. Often the senior pastor is watching to see how the associate handles his or her lack of preaching opportunities. In my opinion, this is not done to manipulate or anger the associate. Rather, the senior pastor is looking to see if the associate can do ministry without being in the spotlight. Instead of being angry about not preaching, antagonistic ministers should begin to get involved in other areas of ministry. Is there a need for Sunday school teachers? Can you help with the children's ministry? Is there a place for you in the outreach ministry? If there is a place for you in these ministries then go and do God's work with gladness. The more you learn the better equipped you are as a future employee in any capacity.

The protagonist associate takes a different approach to ministry. First, the protagonist associate understands that preaching is not his or her assignment! I know that this may sound

strange to some, but let me explain. As an associate minister you may have many gifts. You may have the gift of administration, the gift of prophecy, the gift of laying on of hands, the gift of teaching, and a great gift for preaching. However, even with these great gifts the person guiding those gifts is the senior pastor. As an associate minister, preaching is not your assignment. Yes, I know God has called and gifted associates for the preaching ministry. However, a protagonist minister understands that with his or her great giftedness God opens great doors. In other words, if God has placed you there under that pastor, then God will provide sufficient opportunities for your voice to be heard. It is the responsibility of the associate to just remain faithful.

My pastor is often generous enough to allow some of the associates at my church to preach on a Sunday morning or at other special services. In my opinion, she does this for various reasons. First, she allows us to preach because she listens to the voice of God when God instructs her to permit the associates to deliver the Word. Second, I believe that she allows us to preach out of the kindness of her heart. Finally, I believe that she wants to reward those associates who are doing the work of ministry with an opportunity to preach.

The work of ministry is more than just preaching. The work of ministry is visiting the sick, caring for the poor, extending ministry to the marginalized, and taking the Gospel outside of the pulpit. Protagonist ministers are not irate because of the lack of preaching opportunities. Instead, they support the ministry and the senior pastor in whatever way possible. Does this mean that everyone who is busy doing work gets the opportunity to preach? No! The preaching moment is often a matter of life or death for those who are listening; therefore, it must be guarded with care. Preaching to parishioners is such a life-changing task that it must be protected. Rev. K. Edward Copeland says it best in his book Riding in the Second Chariot: A Guide for Associate Ministers, “A pastor is showing a great amount of trust and confidence in

you by allowing you to minister the Word to his [or her] congregation.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this task must not be handled haphazardly or without regard to its importance. With every opportunity given, the associate minister must approach the task of preaching with an attitude of gratitude and prepare God’s Word for God’s people to the best of his or her ability. Not everyone who wants to preach is ready to preach.

Second, the protagonist minister knows that he or she is to fulfill minor obligations before major ones are assigned. Often, the senior pastor will require associates to be faithful in attending worship, Bible study, and other prominent services. The protagonist minister attends Sunday worship on a regular basis and shows up on time and ready to fulfill their liturgical obligations. They also attend Bible study regularly and make themselves available for other special services. In being faithful to these obligations, protagonist associates may be rewarded with major obligations such as preaching on Sunday, preaching revivals, or teaching congregational Bible study.

As a preacher, I understand the desire within associates to want to preach. Nonetheless, I am a firm believer that a man or woman’s gifts do and will continue to make room for him or her. I believe that faithful service to God will provide a person with opportunities to preach, but if those opportunities don’t come as often as one would like, associates still have the responsibility of being faithful to God, the senior pastor, and their local congregation. An absence of preaching opportunities is not a pass to sit idle and wait on your turn to preach. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few! If you have been guilty of displaying an antagonistic disposition towards the ministry that God has placed you in, it’s not too late to change. Don’t be distracted by the lack of preaching opportunities, but trust that while you are

waiting on your turn God is equipping you for your future. Get busy doing any ministry that you can do and God will reward you for your faithfulness. Your gift will make room for you!

### **Notes**

1. Chole, Alicia Britt. Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours. Franklin, TN: Integrity, 2006.

2. Copeland, K. Edward. Riding in the Second Chariot: A Guide for Associate Ministers. Rockford: PrayerCloset Publishing, 2004.