

Chairs and prayers: Like setting a perfect table for a grand banquet

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I've been setting up chairs at our church since 1991. When I began, we were meeting in temporary places—a school, a fire station, and even a bar for a time. Setting up chairs and taking them down after worship is routine business for migrant churches.

I have handled many chairs over the years. There were the fancy wooden chairs at the Duck Blind Lounge. I used to set them up in three rows around three sides of the dance floor, facing the bar. If you got bored during my sermon, you could check out the variety of beers available on tap or look at the sign that told you when happy hour began.

You don't see that in church very often.

Then we met in an elementary school cafeteria/auditorium and sat on plastic stacking chairs in primary colors with shiny metal legs. The room was so huge and awful, with its florescent lighting and checkerboard tiles, that I could never work up the energy to do anything fancy with the chairs. Four rows forming half-circles facing the stage. No aisles.

After we left the school we met in a church on Saturday nights. Heavy, wooden chairs with fabric seats were connected to each other on the sides, so that you could make perfectly straight rows that looked almost like pews. They were my least favorite chairs. I was forever fussing with them, tugging them loose from each other and turning most of them around backward to keep members of our 40-something congregation from sitting in the back row.

When we moved into our own building in December of 1999, I had been setting up chairs for almost a decade. Like many first church buildings, ours is a multipurpose one with—you guessed it—stackable chairs. Seven years have gone by. Seven more

years of setting up chairs. Didn't Jacob receive his due reward after seven years of additional labor? I don't want a second wife, but in a modern twist to the story, I do fantasize about a second chair dolly.

With 16 years of experience behind me, I feel I've earned the right to speak with some authority on the subject of setting up chairs for worship. Here are the stages you go through when you set up chairs for many years:

Excitement—the shortest stage. It only lasts about halfway through your first Sunday.

Resignation—the “Whatever, someone's gotta do it” stage.

Irritable boredom—setting up chairs is too mindless a task to get angry about, but the boredom can wear on you.

Acceptance—at some point you stop thinking about the chairs. Setting up chairs is a part of your routine, and you go through it without much thought. Occasionally you forget if you've done it and have to go back and look to make sure.

Pride—no one can set up chairs like you. Not faster. Not better. Your lines are always straight, and you know exactly how many chairs you can carry without straining your back. You know where every chair goes, and you are starting to feel a little proud of that. You can scoop up a chair in each hand without slowing down and even spin them around without banging your kneecaps. You have several arrangement styles and perhaps you've even named a couple of them, though you wouldn't admit it.

Love—this last stage comes after carrying out any menial task for your faith community over many years. You begin to see small things as big things and vice versa. Setting up chairs is like offering a cup of cold water in the name of Christ. It's a small part of the kingdom, but it is your part. It's been so long since anyone else in the church set up chairs that some people don't even know how it gets done. You're like a secret elf working in the darkness and slipping away before anyone sees you.

Occasionally someone will say, “Don't you have people who could do that for you?” as if the job of setting up chairs is somehow beneath the pastor. Setting up chairs would be a worthy task for me if only to dispel that notion, but the truth is, I want to set up the chairs.

I am the chair master!

It's common knowledge among old-timers at Covenant Baptist Church that I take care of the chairs. If someone new seems uncomfortable with this or suggests coming early to help me, they will say, "No, leave him alone. He likes to set up the chairs. He's funny that way."

I think the magic and the meaning come in this: setting up chairs is a task for which I receive no compensation. It's not in my job description. And everyone needs a task like this at church, even the pastor. No, especially the pastor.

I've been in stage six, the love stage, for about five years now. Setting up chairs is like setting a perfect table for a grand banquet. It's like watching someone read something you wrote. It's like peeking around the corner and watching a child play with a toy that you made for her.

Setting up chairs has become a prayer. It is speaking in tongues. It is my own secret prayer language, offered to the heavens in those wonderful moments when no one is at the church but me.