

The matrix: The pastoral staff

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

Jason Byassee's [Team players](#) is an important article for those of us who do ministry in the unique matrix called a "church staff." When I am not behind my desk at the Christian Century, I continue to serve as pastor of what Lyle Schaller calls a "multiple-staff church." His book *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church* sits in the crowded management section of my library. Schaller is among the best and his books reward rereading, especially after years of living in the matrix. I picked up Byassee's essay with some trepidation, not only because I am one of "them," a senior minister, but also because I have vivid memories of my friends, early in my ministry, getting together to talk about how terrible life was for them as associate pastors. I listened as they swapped horror stories and, when I had none to contribute, I felt as if I'd missed something important. I was on my own, a 26-year-old pastor who knew essentially nothing about what he was doing as a solo pastor. I envied my peers who had a structure to work in, colleagues to talk to, a boss to complain about.

That the congregation I served survived my inexperience is surely evidence that we can trust Jesus' promise about the gates of hell not prevailing against the church. As Will Willimon says, we learn to be ministers by apprenticing ourselves. Now I know that this is what I was doing: watching how others were doing it, reading sermons and listening to my friends complain.

Byassee reminds us that personal relationships with colleagues, volunteers, church members and peers are at the heart of our ministries. He points out that while secular leadership and management literature provides basic suggestions—about humility, public deference and team building—the best thing seniors and associates can do may be to sit down and talk.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work in close relationships with colleagues. Each of us has different gifts, as St. Paul observed, and it is enormously gratifying to be part of a staff that discusses a particular pastoral need in the congregation and then assigns one of us—the one most gifted to minister in the situation—to respond. Working together is also fun. We laugh together, and share

meals and deeply pastoral moments. I am grateful for friendship, for convictions strongly expressed and for the willingness of each to invest time in meetings, retreats and one-on-one conversations. At its best and most healthy, ministry with colleagues has been an experience of community. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of community at an underground seminary at Finkenwald in 1935, "The more we received, the more we were able to give, the more meager our brotherly love, the less we were living by God's mercy and love. Thus God Himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ."