

# **The Executive Pastor**

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## ***Introduction***

The proliferation of “mega churches” has been described as one of the most significant social developments of the decade of the eighties. That trend shows no sign of subsiding; indeed it seems to be accelerating. Lyle Schaller in his book, *The Multiple Staff and the Larger Church*, and elsewhere, has made the point that large churches and mega churches are different than small churches in all ways. Not the least of those differences is found in the style or form of management. Someone told me recently that Peter Drucker had said that the management style and structure of any institution, including the church, undergoes significant change every time there is a forty-five to fifty percent increase in size.

## ***The Adjustment Route***

Small or middle-sized churches which are becoming large churches soon discover the truth. Usually the first attempts at finding a management style more suited to the new size of the church are by the *adjustment* route. Eventually however, large churches discover that a more revolutionary or reformational approach is required. It simply doesn't work to add on to what was effective in the small or middle sized church, *a little more* or *a little harder* or *a little more effective*.

When a church moves from having one staff member to two or three there are obviously significant changes in the way the church is administered. However, such changes are usually not the changes in kind which are required at the point where a church has a staff of seven or eight or more full time program

people and several part time staff members as well. At this point the coordination, supervision, and management of the staff so that all are contributing toward the larger goal, pulling in the same direction, doing their share of the work, having access to their share of the resources, experiencing a sense of being cared for and important and given the opportunity to use their gifts in the most fitted slot, becomes a very large and very necessary task.

### ***The Administrative Senior Minister***

Some Senior Ministers like that kind work. It's almost a first love for them. Even for such persons, the load continues to get heavier as the church grows in membership and programs. Those who are most gifted for such administrative work may well be able to continue to carry this load along with the other expanding roles of the Senior Pastor of a large and growing congregation. Even they may risk burnout or damage to family relationships. Those who are not so gifted will find it close to impossible.

What has also become clear to many observers of the current ecclesiastical scene is that the gift package and temperament which suited the pastor to be a church planter is quite different from the gift package and temperament required for leadership of a large church. Again, the qualities which enabled the pastor to plant a church or lead it to large church status may not be suitable for the leadership which is required to bring it to or maintain it at the mega church level.

For a growing number of such churches, and such Senior Pastors, the best alternative has seemed to be the establishment of the role of the Executive Pastor. The position doesn't always have that title but the job descriptions, the

responsibilities, the objectives, the place in the organizational structure, have enough similarity to justify treating them as being the same kind of job.

### ***Scope of the Research***

Within the past couple of years three eventualities came together which led me to pursue a study of this emerging role in large and mega churches:

- I was assigned to an Executive Pastor role in the church I serve
- Through Leadership Network I met a number of other persons in similar jobs
- I was offered the opportunity by my church to take a 3 month sabbatical study leave

During the sabbatical I traveled approximately eleven thousand miles by car with some additional air travel. I visited churches and interviewed pastors in fifteen states. Before, during and after the trip, I interviewed in person or by phone or corresponded with pastors in over sixty churches. I met with Executive Pastors singly and in groups. In some cases I was able to interview the Senior Minister and several other members of the staff as well as the Executive Pastor. I talked with laypersons about the Executive Pastor role individually, in committees and in board meetings and retreats. I was able to talk not only to persons who were satisfied and enthusiastic about the role and function of the Executive Pastor but also with some that had had a negative experience with it. I also visited some large and growing churches that had selected or devised different administrative responses to the organizational and program demands of the mega church. In addition, I conferred with a number of denominational executives and church consultants. It was an exciting and rewarding study. I learned a great deal.

I am very thankful to those of you who were willing and able to participate in the study with me. I was the recipient of extraordinary hospitality along the way and great ecumenical fellowship. Congregations of several denominations and many independent churches were a part of the itinerary. The ecumenical nature of the experience was one of the richest and most treasured elements for my wife as well as me. I hope that the sharing of some of my findings will be an effective way to express my appreciation for the opportunity which was afforded me and the hospitality and cooperation that was shown.

### ***The Executive Pastor: When?***

“I don’t think I like the idea of being an Executive Pastor,” one Executive Pastor said to me. “It sounds too professional, too administrative, too much like a business model.” It wasn’t his title but it was his job.

### ***Job Descriptions***

In some churches the Executive Pastor is called the Assistant Pastor, in another place, the Executive Assistant, elsewhere, Ministry Director, or Administrative Pastor and even Business Manager. With all these titles and others, how shall we decide who is filling the position of Executive Pastor? The working definition under which I operated contained the following elements:

1. Has primary responsibility for coordination and supervision of the staff
2. Is seen as being “second in command” behind the Senior Pastor
3. Has some program responsibility of his/her own. Although I tried to locate church with female Executive Pastors, I was unable to do so. I met a female Executive Pastor before the idea of the sabbatical study was even born but before the study got underway, that relationship was terminated.

This is obviously a very sketchy “job description,” and even at that I suggested that if the persons role fitted two out three of the items they should consider themselves included. What I found among the Executive Pastors I interviewed was a clear sense of identity with each other within that description.

Another Executive Pastor listed four broad responsibilities in his job description:

1. Planning
2. Staffing
3. Prioritizing
4. Evaluating

That, too, would fit most of the Executive Pastors I interviewed.

The answers to three questions will be most helpful in getting a more complete picture of who an Executive Pastor is and what s/he does:

1. How did the church come to the point of establishing the position?
2. How did the Executive Pastor come to hold this position?  
What previous experience of ministry or administration has s/he had?
3. What model or image best describes the role of the Executive Pastor and his/her relationship to the Senior Pastor?

The office of the Executive Pastor has been around for a good long time. It is only its widespread application which has come on the scene more recently.

### ***Size of Staff***

The office is quite obviously liked to the large church and large churches have existed for a good long time, just not in such abundance as they do today. My research would indicate that, as a general rule, the churches who have implemented this position in the last ten to fifteen years have done so when the staff of the church has reached six to ten full time positions or the equivalent in

part time and full time staff persons. It is therefore the size of the staff and the program more than the size of the congregation which most directly leads to the establishment of the role or the hiring of the person to fill it.

The growing tendency to expand staff by adding part time people, often from within the congregation, argues for the position of an Executive Pastor since more people require more supervision and administration. In some cases the decision to employ an Executive Pastor has come at the suggestion or even the insistence of the governing board. If the resistance of the Senior Pastor to this change has been deep rooted, then the early experience may well be unfavorable or at least uncomfortable.

### ***Reasons for Creating the Position***

One Senior Pastor gave as one of his reasons for *eliminating* the position of Executive Pastor the fact that the former Senior Pastor had the position forced on him by his board, resulting in an unhappy experience. Often the board has pushed such a proposition to save the Senior Pastor from burnout. Sometimes they have done it to save the church.

The reason most frequently given by lay persons for encouraging the employment of a Executive Pastor is the lack of time or giftedness for administration on the part of the Senior Pastor. Another reason given was the conviction that the Senior Pastor did not have sufficient time and energy to do all the staff management and be able to give adequate attention to his/her primary task—preaching and teaching the Word.



Some saw the addition of an Executive Pastor as a way to address the plateau in growth which had been experienced by the church. In one way or another, the question needing to be addressed was: *What is the Senior Pastor's greatest value to the church and how can we assure that value is realized?*

### ***When the Senior Pastor Is Ready***

To the question: *At what point in a church's life does it become advisable to add an Executive Pastor?* One Executive Pastor answered succinctly: "When the Senior Pastor is ready for it." That's probably the best summary of the process. Whether the Senior Pastor has been made *ready for it* by her/his own sense of being overwhelmed and needing help or by the advice or insistence of the governing board is not crucial. The Senior Pastor's *readiness* is crucial. I did not find much evidence of deliberate undermining by reluctant Senior Pastors but I did find some evidence of failure because the Senior Pastor did not know how to utilize or relate to an Executive Pastor. I am convinced that it would be very profitable for Senior Pastors who are anticipating the hiring of an Executive Pastor, or even those who already have one and would like to make it a better or more effective relationship, to consult with a church where the position is well established or to attend a seminar or forum addressing this management issue.

Largely, Senior Pastors whose support for the change was reluctant or half-hearted because they were unfamiliar with the concept or didn't know what to expect were pleasantly surprised when they began to get a feel for working with an executive. "Pleasantly surprised" is a significant understatement for the

response of some Senior Pastors. They use terms like *life saving* and *tremendous relief*.

Senior pastors who have had large denominational responsibility or who have a national reputation and a sizeable ministry through writing, conferences, retreats or outside speaking engagements, have often come to recognize more quickly their need for an Executive Pastor, because they see the necessity of having someone to be *in charge* during their frequent absences from their local office. The spread of this administrative arrangement has been promoted by contacts between Senior Pastors in formal and informal networks. Several of the Senior Pastors I interviewed cite such contacts as the primary stimulation of their interest in and support for the concept in their own churches.

### ***Who Becomes an Executive Pastor?***

The majority of Executive Pastors are ordained clergy. Some of them have served in a variety of functions away from the normal parish, as wide ranging as military chaplaincy, counseling ministry, urban planning and the national political arena. However, the majority of the Executive Pastors who are ordained clergy have had most of their previous experience in one or more local congregations.

### ***Exceptions to the Standard Path***

Before we look at the configuration of the more normative profile of an Executive Pastor, I want to briefly describe some of the exceptions. The most frequent route, according to my research, by which a non-ordained person becomes an Executive Pastor, is through the role of Business Administrator.

There are some examples of good working relationships between the Senior Pastor and the Executive Pastor which began in this way. However, this route is also the most frequent example of an Executive Pastor relationship which didn't work out well. One such person was described to me, "a very fine person but he just didn't have good people skills and the management and morale of the staff suffered".

### ***Business Manager or Executive Pastor***

One Senior Pastor who has an excellent working relationship with both a Business Manager and an Executive Minister, and who had at first attempted to promote the Business Manager to Executive Pastor, said:

"If I had it to do over again, I would look for a Ministry Manager (Executive Pastor) right after the Music Director and Youth/Education Director. I would ask that person to do the business administration or I would arrange for that area to be taken care of by a volunteer or a part-time employee."

His wisdom was affirmed by an Executive Pastor in another church who cited as one of his major problems, dealing with the Business Manager who had preceded him at the church by a number of years and was *a bean counter* whose major concern was to keep a tight grip on the purse strings.

I believe that the gifts that make a person a good Business Manager are quite different than, even opposite from the gifts which make a good Executive Pastor. The Business Manager needs to be the kind of person who naturally keeps close control of everything under his/her jurisdiction while the Ministry Manager should encourage people *to go for it*. Good Business Managers have an eye for details while good Executive Pastors need to be able to see *the big picture*. One

Executive Pastor who had successfully moved from the position of church Business Manager said that he had to learn to shift from *tight control to light control*. This is not to say that it is impossible for a Business Manager to become an Executive Pastor. Some have made that move very successfully.

Some persons who have had previous management experience in an organization other than a local congregation have been utilized effectively in this role. Most of them however, have served in other *voluntary* organizations and some have been ordained clergy persons. As management experts have told us, the church, and other voluntary not for profit organizations, presents a totally different set of management dynamics and challenges than the usual business. The cross over from management of a *for profit* company to a church is possible but not easy. It would probably work best with someone gifted in management who had also been a lay leader in the church for a number of years and was familiar with the differences.

### ***Paths to become an Executive Pastor***

There are two major paths for the Executive Pastor who is coming out of the more usual parish or local congregation experience:

1. The experienced generalist who has spent ten to twenty-five or more years as a solo or Senior Pastor her/himself;
2. The young pastor who came to the church directly out of seminary, usually served in another staff capacity first, and now has been promoted to Executive Pastor.

### ***Promoted to Executive Pastor***

This second category, which I'll address first, has two sub-groups:

1. Those who believe they will some day become the Senior Pastor of a large church themselves, and

2. Those who feel called to be the Executive Pastors, at least for the foreseeable future and perhaps for the rest of their ministry in the church.

Those in the first sub-group find a great deal of their job satisfaction in working under and learning from a successful Senior Pastor.

There exists in these cases a very intentional mentoring relationship. In some cases the church and the Senior Pastor have recruited the young associate with the understanding that mentoring was to be a part of the package. One of the potential advantages for such an approach is that the Senior Pastor has the opportunity to shape the Executive Pastor in his/her own image, so to speak. Of course, this might well turn out to be less an advantage than anticipated.

The second sub-group of young pastors who have grown into the role in the church in which they serve as Executive Pastors, is made up of persons who have come to the conclusion, at least for the present, that they are not suited for and/or do not wish to become Senior Pastors. At the same time they have discovered that they have administrative and relational gifts which suit them for staff and program management in a large church.

### ***Former Senior Pastors***

The other path to the position of Executive Pastor is through a couple of decades of service as a Senior Pastor or the sole pastor in one or more churches. I refer to such persons as generalists because they have experienced most if not all of the roles that a pastor is called upon to play, while those who have grown into the role through a staff position or positions in the church have served more as specialists. Their experience tends to qualify them to handle all of the demands of

the Executive Pastor role since that role can be thought of as one half of the Senior Pastor's task.

### ***Crucial Qualities***

I would be hard pressed to say that one of these paths is superior to the other, although the direction of my own bias would not be hard to discern. As one Executive Pastor said in answer to my question:

“What are the crucial qualities of an Executive Pastor?”—“It all depends on the Senior Pastor.”

It does *all depend*, not just on the Senior Pastor but on a number of variables. Probably the selection will depend on who is known to the church and available at the time the decision is made to hire someone. If there is a likely candidate already on staff in some other capacity, his/her familiarity with the church and ready availability would tend to make her/him the logical candidate. If not, then the experienced generalist or the experienced Executive Pastor who will not need a lot of on the job training or supervision will probably be the better choice.

### ***Age***

The age of the Senior Pastor does seem to be somewhat critical. The younger Senior Pastor may well benefit from a partnership with an experienced generalist. I saw a number of such teams which seemed to be working very effectively and providing good job satisfaction to both the participants. By the same token, a younger Executive Pastor candidate may receive more ready acceptance if working with an older Senior Pastor and may be drawn to that association.

Again, there were some instances where the Senior and Executive Pastors both seemed to be appreciative of the fact that they were of the same generation. This was true particularly of those who were in the fifty to sixty year age range. It was as though they spoke the same language and were naturally comfortable when together.

### ***Models for the Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor Relationship***

While the three functions described earlier—staffing responsibilities, second in command, specific program responsibilities—do provide a framework into which all the Executive Pastor I interviewed can fit, job descriptions and role descriptions do not tell the whole story. Images, models and analogies will often communicate more effectively than definitions and descriptions. From the people interviewed, from reading, and from reflection on the relationship of the Senior and Executive Pastors, a number of such comparisons emerged.

### ***Challenges of Being a Pastor***

E. Mansell Pattison in his excellent little book, *Pastor and parish—A Systems Approach*, says that one of the most frustrating experiences for the pastor in this age is the expectation of being competent in many areas, traditionally pastoral roles, where the pastor is now expected to compete with secular specialists—counseling, social work, education, community organization, etc. Pattison (page 50) suggests that rather than compete by becoming a narrow specialist oneself or trying to meet the expectation by being all things to all people, the pastor needs to see him or herself as, *a shepherd of systems*.

The pastor functions to nurture and guide the subsystems of the church. The pastoral role is determined by the pastor's systemic

identity. For pastors, doing and being go together. And pastoral care of the *church* as a living system.

He goes on to describe shepherding as substantially leadership, and lists seven qualities of leadership necessary to system shepherding. I like the concept for pastors in general and am convinced that it is even more applicable to the Executive Pastor role. The Executive Pastor is, to a significant degree, the *shepherd of the systems* of the church. It is a role that is shared with the Senior Pastor, especially since *symbolizing* is one of those seven qualities.

### ***Co-Senior Pastor***

In order for the above image to be meaningful, it is necessary to think in terms of another image: the Executive Pastor role as a result of splitting the Senior Pastor role in half. One job description for an Executive Pastor begins by describing the role as: Part of the office of the Senior Minister, reporting to the Preaching Minister. This church thought in terms of a co-Senior Pastor, one designated as the preaching pastor and the other called the Executive Pastor.

### ***Parentis in Locis***

One Executive Pastor suggested that his role in the congregation was a kind of ecclesiastical extension of the doctrine of *parentis in locis*. He was to function as the Senior Pastor whenever the Senior Pastor was not on campus. Every staff position is a result of splitting off a piece of what has traditionally been the task of the sole pastor. The further development and encouragement of this way of seeing staff positions could go a long way toward maintaining a pastoral identity for all staff members and combating the tendency to see them as functionaries or technocrats. As each task area is split off and assigned to a staff



member, a little more supervisory or administrative work is added to the Senior (formerly sole) Pastor's role. There comes a point for many churches when it is advisable for them to consider splitting what is not the *traditional* tasks of the Senior Pastor. The result of this splitting is most usually the establishment of the position of the Executive Pastor.

I believe this is an essential image for the effective functioning of the Senior/Executive Pastor amalgam. If this image is not at least implicitly in place, the office will be more of an Executive Assistant than an Executive Pastor, even if it is called "Executive Pastor." In at least two instances where there was no Executive Pastor—where the Senior Pastor role was not split—the Senior Pastor did have a theologically trained assistant or assistants.

### ***CEO or COO***

Another model for the relationship of the Executive Pastor to the Senior Pastor is: Chief Executive Officer to Chairman of the Board, or Chief Operating Officer to Chief Executive Officer. In each pairing, I am given to understand that in business organizations the Chief Executive Officer may in some instances be equivalent to the Chairman of the Board and in other instances be comparable to the Chief Operating Officer, the office equivalent to Senior Minister deals with external affairs, long range planning, boards of directors, major policy decisions; while the office equivalent to Executive Pastor deals with internal affairs, annual goals, middle management, day to day decisions. In general, these distinctions are applicable to the division of responsibility between the Senior and the Executive Pastors.

### ***Captain of the Ship***

The link between the captain of a ship and the first mate is an analogy which has application to this subject. The first mate not only sees to it that the captain's orders are carried out, but also occupies the bridge whenever the captain is absent from it.

### ***Owner and Coach***

One Executive Pastor suggested that the relationship between the owner of a National Football League team and the coach of that team is comparable to a Senior Pastor-Executive Pastor model. He was concerned that the Executive Pastor be somehow protected from the power and whim of the Senior Pastor. One way to offer that protection would be through guaranteed, multi-year contracts. "Then," said this Pastor, "the Senior could fire his Exec but it would cost him."

### ***College President and Dean***

A final model suggested to me was that of the college president/dean. In a time when many colleges have a number of deans, *provost* might be a more appropriate part of that analogy. The college president has concern for the health and welfare of the institution as a whole but the concerns for academics, recruiting, student life, to some degree, finances, are usually the primary responsibility of a dean or deans, or cumulatively, the provost.

### ***Job Descriptions***

Another way of finding the common threads which can be woven into a consensual definition of the Executive Pastor is by examining job descriptions. There is a great deal of variety to be found here, even in the format. Some are long and detailed, up to five pages; others are brief and general. There are

however, recurring phrases and recurring themes which show a remarkable similarity when you know that many of these instruments were developed from scratch and without consultation with each other. Some of the phrases which are found in several, and in some cases almost all, of the job descriptions are:

“Represents the Senior Pastor”  
“As requested by the Senior Pastor”  
“Work with the Senior Minister”  
“Assist—advise—inform—relieve the Senior Minister”  
“Coordinate—supervise—administer the staff”

The priorities to be inferred from the consistency and frequency with which various items are mentioned are:

1. Serve the Senior Pastor
2. Supervise the staff/program

The first item on one job description is as straightforward as this: “To help assure that the Senior Minister is allowed to fulfill his call efficiently and effectively.”

The first item on another refers to the Executive Pastor as: “A personal assistant to the Senior Minister.” Still another directs that certain ministries be carried out: “As a delegate of the Senior Pastor and the board.”

Staffing responsibilities are easily the second most frequent category after serving the Senior Pastor. In some job descriptions, the hiring and firing of staff is obviously the joint responsibility of the Senior Pastor and the Executive Pastor, but in others there is the implication that the Executive Pastor is empowered and directed to act much more autonomously, within the requirements of the particular policy in that congregation.

The relative autonomy of the Executive Pastor is much more evident and wide spread in regard to other staff matters, i.e., evaluating programs and

personnel, setting and implementing goals and objectives, regular supervision of staff, including remuneration and discipline. One set of job descriptions declares it the responsibility of the Senior Pastor to “cast the vision,” while the Executive Pastor is to “translate the vision into goals and objectives.” An Executive Pastor shared a different—and informal—image reflecting the same division of responsibilities; describing the Senior Pastor as the “dreamer” and the Executive Pastor as the “schemer.” Another job description at one point describes the Executive Pastor as the “ministry overseer.”

### ***Churches without an Executive Pastor***

One other way of getting at a clear understanding of the role of the Executive Pastor is to look at the management structure in large growing churches which have not resorted to the establishment of an Executive Pastor position. As I have already indicated, the Senior Pastors in some of these churches do have “personal” or “executive” or “research” assistants. In such cases, it appears to me that the decision has been made to delegate some portions of Senior Pastor’s office but not to “split” the office into two parts. This is a slightly different response to the same stimulus, namely, the need to relieve the Senior Pastor of some of the pressure created by growth of a congregation and its programs, and at the same time to make the church’s ministry more effective. Two kinds of Senior Pastors seem to prefer this approach: Those with competence in and love for administration, especially staff administration; and these who are resistant to giving up or fragmenting the power, prerogatives and perquisites of the office of the Senior Minister. This last description is not intended to be a pejorative

assessment, at least, not an unqualified one. There may be excellent reasons for such a decision which has little or nothing to do with ego needs.

Another factor which seems to be operative in churches which have chosen another management approach is strong departmentalization. Such strength is evident in structure and resourcing, the degree of autonomy given to the departments, and in the competence of the department heads and the recognition accorded to them. Such departmentalization appears to make a specialized administrative office like “Executive Pastor” less necessary. However, some churches with the Executive Pastor position in place also departmentalize to good advantage.

Traditional churches, strongly denominational churches and churches with a longer history often function without such administrative change during their transition into the mega church category. They are able to do this, I believe, because of congregational loyalty, significant lay participation in volunteerism, and long established structures which can absorb the growth. Even such churches must eventually adapt or pay the price for not doing so.

### ***Qualities of an Executive Pastor***

Without ever having contact with a working Executive Pastor or a church which employs one, it would be possible to list the qualities that such a person would need, in much the same way one would describe the appropriate qualities for any leader or any pastor. Without question I will do some of that kind of generalization myself. The superlative person such descriptions would picture

probably doesn't exist, wouldn't be in this kind of position if s/he did, and would probably fail if s/he was.

I hope to add to such generally desirable characteristics some more specific descriptive material which comes out of my research and from Executive Pastors and those who work with them and know them. I asked the question, "What are the crucial qualities of an Executive Pastor?" of all the executive and Senior Pastors I interviewed and some other staff members and lay persons as well.

### ***Loyalty***

The first set of qualities which need to be looked at are those attendant to the Executive Pastor's relationship to the Senior Pastor. This set is first because it is these qualities more than any others which will determine whether or not the association between the two will have a chance to work. Leading this pack is: *loyalty*. This quality is clearly the most important to Senior Pastors but it is also cited frequently by Executive Pastors. The leadership of the Senior Pastor must be recognized, supported and implemented. One way of picturing this quality is to say that the Executive Pastor needs a John the Baptist attitude. His posture toward the Senior Pastor should be: "He must increase, I must decrease".

The second part, "I must decrease," is primarily applicable to public leadership. Several Executive Pastors used phrases such as: "behind the scenes" and "low profile." Sometimes this loyalty takes on an almost paternalistic flavor as when Executive Pastors speak of "directing the heat toward me" or "saving the Senior Pastor from himself." The John the Baptist allusion may have the sound of

subservience or even obsequiousness. It is not that. I tried it out on several Executive Pastors who gave every evidence of being strong, independent persons. They endorsed the analogy in that mega churches tend to come together around the personality and leadership of one person, the Senior Pastor, and function best when that leadership is recognized and supported. There are dangers in that kind of thinking and acting which require strength of integrity in both Senior and Executive Pastors if the dangers are to be avoided. In spite of the dangers however, the very nature of the Executive Pastor's role as a part of the office of the Senior Pastor requires loyalty if it is to be effectively carried out. At the heart of a good working relationship is trust, and trust is generated by loyalty and destroyed by disloyalty.

The need for trust goes both ways. To the question, "Under what circumstances would you feel it necessary to leave?" more than one Executive Pastor replied: "The loss of the Senior Pastor's trust."

### ***Confidentiality***

*Confidentiality* about the Senior Pastor is a vital expression of this quality of loyalty. Like all public figures, all persons, Senior Pastors have their weaknesses, or their "feet of clay." No one knows that more thoroughly than the Executive Pastor. It is imperative that the executive that the Executive Pastor deal with that knowledge in strictest confidence. It is a courtesy which should be reciprocated toward the Executive Pastor by the Senior Pastor. This principle is necessarily suspended when dealing with immoral or unethical behavior.

One of the tasks of the Executive Pastor is interpreting the Senior Pastor to the rest of the staff. That interpretation ought to be done in ways which enhance the standing and stature of the Senior Pastor to the degree which honesty and integrity permit. It is all too easy to “damn with faint praise,” especially when one is irritated or frustrated.

### ***Surprises and Shared Philosophy***

Another important aspect of loyalty according to several of the Senior Pastors I interviewed, and some of the Executive Pastors as well, was summarized in these words: “No surprises.” As months and years of shared experience accumulate, this becomes a non-issue since they come to know each other well and trust each other. In the early days, however, it is important to make sure that Senior is thoroughly informed as to what the Executive is doing.

A second quality in this first set is *shared philosophy* with the Senior Minister. This quality also helps eliminate or minimize “surprises.” Some would put theological agreement before shared philosophy or include it in philosophy, but others declare that it is possible to work together having some theological differences, but not if there are differences in the way ministry should be approached. When this shared philosophy has had some time to be tested and known, Executive Pastors describe this quality as “compatibility” or “knowing his mind” or “the ability to say, ‘this is what the Senior Pastor wants,’ without talking to him.” Without a shared philosophy, such identification will surely create a crisis of conscience or integrity.



Some teams cite friendship and frequent social contact as an important quality in their relationship, but others say that it is not present and its absence is not detrimental, or even that a close friendship might hinder their working relationship. It is my conclusion, based on the observations I made, that where social interaction was totally absent, the working relationship suffered as well. It is surely not necessary for them to be “best friends” but some intentional social contact seems to help build the kind of team consciousness that serves their ministry well.

### ***Administration***

A second set of qualities addresses the Executive Pastor’s competence and suitability for the tasks attendant to her/his role. It is clear that the quality of skill most favored and wanted here is *administration*. Some Senior Ministers mentioned no other crucial quality. In such cases time constraints limited further probing or exploration by me. I’m sure there were other crucial qualities they could have me. Administration however, does not mean business administration as much as it means ministry administration. Those Executive Pastors who have finances as a primary part of their portfolio are in a distinct minority. It is the management of staff and program, of ministry, that is intended here.

The styles of management vary widely. I envision a continuum with “Pastor” on one end and “CEO” on the other. While all Executive Pastors must be concerned with both, the “Pastors” seem to put a priority on relationship and the “CEOs” on performance; “Pastors” on compatibility and “CEOs” on efficiency. One Executive Pastor put his attempt to find a balance this way:

“You have to be tough skinned enough to be able to fire people and tender hearted enough to find them another place to go.”

Another said:

“I need to be assertive and persistent but careful not to trample people.”

Many Executive Pastors have had some specialized management training before they came into their jobs and others have sought it out after taking the job. All who have done so expressed appreciation for that training and the way it helped enable them to carry out their responsibilities. A church consultant said to me in this regard:

“Everyone who comes into this role needs training; those who have a theological background need management training and those who have a management background need theological training.”

### ***Enabling***

*Enabling* is one of the major responsibilities of the Executive Pastor. One of the best measurements of his/her effectiveness is the success of those whom s/he supervises. S/he needs a mindset, and a gift package suitable to that responsibility. A plaque I saw on the wall of a pastor's study expresses that mindset well: “There is no end to the good a man can do if he doesn't care who gets the credit.”

The Executive Pastor who is hardly noticed may be the most effective. If s/he upstages the Senior Pastor or gets in the way of the recognition other staff members should be receiving and need, s/he will not be effective. An Executive Pastor who is also a basketball fan and player, said:

“I play point guard. My value is measured more by the number of assists I get than by how much I score.”

Perhaps it is the fact that the job allows for and calls for such a ministry that makes it so satisfying to some of us. If we are right to see the “equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” as the primary role of the pastor (Ephesians 4:11-12) then a place where we can focus on that and be evaluated against it is bound to be attractive to and right for us. I am convinced that this is the most important quality for most Executive Pastor jobs. It includes:

- The skills to help others do their jobs and use and develop their gifts
- The temperament to get one’s strokes, one’s sense of fulfillment, from so doing.

### ***Leadership***

*Leadership* is another crucial quality for the Executive Pastor; Senior Pastor-kind of leadership. One Executive Pastor put it this way:

“I need to be able to act as though I’m a Senior Pastor, while knowing what I am is an Executive Pastor.”

Several Executive Pastors emphasized the need for leadership but also emphasized the need for a careful sensitivity to the “when” and “how much” of leadership. One Executive Pastor said to me:

“S/he will be freer to exercise leadership if it is very clear that s/he doesn’t covet the Senior’s job or any of her/his turf.”

There is a wide range of styles of leadership among Executive Pastors, but if there is a preference, I believe it is for a pastoral kind of leadership, “a leader’s head and a servant’s heart.” It is that kind of leadership which will serve Christ and the Church best.

The Executive Pastor is well served by the same kind of broad interest and vision which would normally be a mark of a Senior Pastor. He needs to be, as one person I interviewed put it:

“A visionary with the ability and willingness to implement the vision of another.”

An Executive Pastor supported this image when he described his job in this way:

“I am an implementer.”

### ***Entrepreneur***

Another quality of leadership which the Executive Pastor shares with a typical mega church Senior Pastor is the spirit of an *entrepreneur*. S/he needs to be an enterpriser, an undertaker, an initiator. S/he must be able to recognize needs and opportunities and respond to them. S/he must be ready to make decisions and take risks.

A Senior Pastor who recognized the leadership qualities in his Executive Pastor, said: “We could exchange jobs if necessary.” I know of at least a couple of churches which are examining the possibility of asking their present Senior Minister to become their first Executive Minister. In each case, the present Senior Minister was the founding pastor who had led the church to its present size. However the churches had reached a plateau and the pastors and boards of these two churches shared a suspicion that he was not the person to lead them beyond it. One of them said that he had reached an age where he needed another set of goals and a different kind of ministry.

## ***Personal Qualities***

A final set of qualities which emerged from my interviews might best be categorized as personal qualities. Let me simply share a number of quotations, mostly from Executive Pastors:

1. "If s/he's not *teachable*, he won't make it"
2. "S/he needs a *strong ego*, but with maturity"
3. "A good Executive Pastor must be able to maintain his/her own *conscience, integrity, and identity*."
4. "S/he must have a good measure of *self-confidence* and a secure identity." This was the personal quality most frequently mentioned by the Executive Pastors themselves.
5. "S/he needs a willingness to be misunderstood."
6. "S/he must be a real person; a phony won't last long."

One of the questions I added to my interviews after I was already in the midst of the process was: "Do you feel yourself called to be an Executive Pastor?"

The responses confirmed my own growing hunch that there were a number of people in these positions who felt that they had "come to the Kingdom for such a time and job as this." There was a time when I felt called to be the sole or Senior Pastor of a church; there came a time when I felt called to specialize in counseling and pastoral care; and now I feel called to the role of an Executive Pastor. I believe *calling* is a quality which will contribute to a person's ability to do the job well. There are undoubtedly people who are doing or will do the job well on an interim basis without such a call; and, it is a quality which may be hard to quantify or describe, but it is something to look for nonetheless. I believe that the time may be ripe for the development of the specialty of Executive Pastor, comparable to other specialties such as education or counseling.

Finally, when attempting to list the crucial qualities of an Executive Pastor, we need to remember that "it all depends" on the nature and needs of the

church and the Senior Pastor. There is no unanimity among Senior Pastors on the subject of the profile of an ideal executive. The fit, the complementary, of the Executive with the Senior is *most crucial*. One Senior is most concerned that the Executive be a detail person; another that s/he be a visionary. One Senior Pastor wants to do almost no pastoral calling; another wants pastoral calling; another wants pastoral calling to be a major part of her/his ministry.

This was to be a study of the Executive Pastor but I also included the following question on my interview form, although I didn't ask it every time: "What are the crucial qualities of a Senior Pastor who is working with an Executive Pastor?"

I'll simply share some of the responses in the order of their frequency without explaining, criticizing or defending any of them:

- "A visionary, who can effectively articulate the vision"
- "A strong preacher"
- "A good delegator"
- "A people attractor"
- "He needs to have a good sized ego"
- "The one who sets the tone for the church"
- "Not necessarily a good pastor"
- "Transparent, vulnerable, approachable"

### ***Making It Work: Roadblocks, Hazards and How to Avoid Them***

Many Senior/Executive Pastor relationships end; some fail. They just don't work out, don't function effectively. Sometimes the failure may be charged to a bad fit, "irreconcilable differences"; but even then specific areas of difficulty can always be identified. What are the problems which cause such arrangements

to founder? The reasons given for such failures by Executive Pastors had a great deal in common, as did those given by Senior Pastors.

### ***Competence and Compatibility***

The reasons given by Senior Pastors tended to cluster around *competence* and *compatibility*. The lack of competence was often attributed to the Peter Principle—promotion one step beyond ability—and was most frequently cited where the Executive Pastor had been recruited from another position on the same staff. In some cases, it was like changing a very effective teacher into a mediocre school principal. A person who had been very effective in a particular staff position seemed a logical person to promote to Executive Pastor. However, the gift and interest package which fitted them for the staff position was often inappropriate for directing a staff. One Senior Pastor who had promoted a pastoral counselor to Executive Pastor, said,

“He was too much of a counselor. He was so oriented to individual ministry that he couldn’t get into running the staff and program of the church.”

As indicated earlier, the arrangement which seemed to fail most frequently was that in which a Business Manager was moved into an Executive Pastor position. The skills and temperament which had made them effective and happy in the management of the business affairs of the church did not achieve the same ends when applied to its ministry affairs. Competence has more to do with ‘fittedness’ for the tasks than it does with general ability. It was heartening to encounter a couple of instances where the person had been successfully and happily returned to their previous position or one very similar to it.

Compatibility as the reason for failure was mentioned more often when the Executive Pastor was recruited from outside the church. If competence has to do with the fit between gift and task, then compatibility has to do with the fit between persons, specifically the person of the Senior Pastor and the person of the Executive Pastor. In these cases I suspect that often they had not taken the time to get to know each other well enough. Perhaps the eagerness on the one hand to have the position filled and on the other to have a job, rushed the process.

### ***Failure***

A couple of Senior Pastors gave as a reason for the failure of a relationship the perception that their Executive Pastors had isolated them from the rest of the staff. I suspect that any first Executive Pastor ought to carefully test the process with the Senior Pastor, every move that is likely to take away from the Senior Pastor that which s/he has valued; *even if s/he has been told to make that move*. I believe it is true that *all* change is experienced as loss and accompanied by grief, even consciously chosen change. We may not always recognize the grief or the reason for it. Grief takes time and talk. We all need help with it, even Senior Pastors.

It has occurred to me that there is a pattern indicating that some churches may need one failure in establishing this position in order to clarify the roles, clear up the misconceptions and make the expectations more realistic. At least that seems to have been the effect. Some of the most satisfactory relationships have been preceded by one which didn't work well at all. There is some wisdom in one Executive Pastor's only slightly facetious advice:



“If you’re going to a church as the Executive Pastor, make sure you’re the second one.”

Better preparation such as the use of a church consultant, observation of a working relationship similar to the one envisioned, or at least more thorough research and study might well have prevented a substantial waste of time and resources and the attendant pain and disruption.

Executive Pastors have a different set of reasons for the failures they have been part of or have observed. They mention competence and compatibility too, with the finger pointed in the opposite direction of course, but only in passing. The big reasons they cite for failure orbit around two related issues, *authority* and *delegation*:

If only he had let me do the job he insisted he wanted me to do and which I had been called to do we would have worked well together; but he had a tendency to delegate with strings attached, and then frequently tug on the strings. Let me paraphrase Job ‘The Senior Pastor gives and the Senior Pastor takes away,’ sometimes in the same day. He had a ‘holler and jerk’ management style. He would ‘holler’ for me to do more, and then jerk on the reins and say, ‘whoa, too far.’

The above “quote” is a paraphrased composite which accurately expresses what some Executive Pastors told me about Senior Pastors with whom they’d had a failed working relationship. This concern was also expressed by Executive Pastors in team relationships which *were* currently working well. Even there, one of the primary causes of dissatisfaction was *responsibility without authority*. Senior Pastors, almost by definition would be assumed to be people with a fairly strong need or inclination to control. They also know themselves to be in the office where “the buck stops.” It should therefore not be surprising that the issue

of authority, control, is conflict producing. Indeed, it is also frequently a matter of contention between the Executive Pastor and the other staff members whom s/he supervises. It is important to note that the autocratic or even despotic Senior Pastor is a rare creature today, but does exist. My observation would suggest a ratio of one in fifteen or one in twenty. The kind of Executive Pastor I'm describing would not be happy working with such a person and would probably not last long. Outnumbering the autocrats, at least in my sampling, are those who don't like the term *Senior Pastor* because it may be associated with the autocrat or with the misuse of authority. Some have even chosen a different term such as *Preaching Minister* or *Directional Leader*. I suppose the term may be somewhat misleading today since many who have the title are younger than some or even most of the other staff members. However, *Senior Pastor* is probably still the most widely accepted term for the office it describes.

To be assigned responsibility but not given authority is surely one of the most frustrating conditions under which one can work. It creates a feeling of powerlessness which in turn leads to anger. If there is no place to effectively address those feelings, they will surely lead to a breakdown of the relationship or of the person harboring the feelings. A skill which the Senior Pastor and the Executive Pastor must both diligently practice is the skill of delegating; delegating with authority to match the responsibility. In addition, there must be an openness in the relationship which allows for such issues to be raised and for the attendant feelings to be addressed. The Senior Pastor needs to be able to hear how his failure to give authority to match the assigned responsibility, affects

his/her Executive. The Executive needs to understand the difficulty of giving up or giving away control, the grief process which will inevitably take place, *and* s/he needs to remember, “You aren’t given the Executive Pastor role; you have to earn it,” as one Executive Pastor reminded me. The development of trust takes time and work and shared experience, as well as patience and understanding.

### ***Authority: Sharing and Giving Up***

The Executive Pastor must be assertive enough to work at shaping the job description to reflect her/his own gifts and interests and according to his/her own vision of what the job can be. S/he must not presume to do this autonomously however, and must surely not seek to do it in a surreptitious or manipulative way, but in cooperation and consultation, and sometimes in conflict, with the Senior Pastor and others in authority.

The Senior Pastor must be willing to *give up* some things, including some authority if s/he expects to find the potential benefits in working with an Executive Pastor. S/he needs to be in touch enough to recognize his/her own reluctance to do so and open enough to acknowledge that reluctance to other, particularly the Executive Pastor.

Included under the issue of *authority* is the Executive Pastor’s relationship with the rest of the staff. Some Executive Pastors who were promoted from within the staff experienced resistance to their leadership by their former peers who are now their subordinates. This was especially true for those serving as the first Executive Pastor. Where a pattern of reporting to and being supervised by an Executive Pastor had been established, there was a good deal less of a problem.

Both those promoted from within and those recruited from outside the church reported experiences with attempted “end runs” and not just at the beginning of their tenure. I suppose that it is a natural reaction to think of going to a higher authority when you don’t get what you want, or even as a way of defending your turf or currying favor. However, rewarding such behavior will thoroughly undermine the Executive Pastor’s authority with the staff. The Senior and Executive Pastors in concert with each other should anticipate such attempts and develop a way of responding to them.

One Executive Pastor reported that in his first month on the job, he had come from the outside, a long time department head went directly to the Senior Pastor with a request, and justified doing so with a complaint against the new Executive. The Senior Pastor showed great wisdom at this point by referring the department head back to the executive and then followed up by sending this memo to the Executive Pastor, and a copy of it to the veteran staff member:

“John came to me with the following problem today. ... I referred him to you and told him that all such concerns should be addressed to you in the future.”

This pastor reported he had to deal with no further “end run” attempts by this staff person and added that he had a hunch the word had circulated to others as well.

Several Executive Pastors identified the staff meeting as a place where their authority was established. The Senior Pastor “gave up” the staff meeting to them. While the Senior Pastor would attend, regularly or at his own discretion, it was the Executive who set the agenda and presided. In some cases the Senior

Pastor has a regular part in the meeting; devotions, vision sharing, Senior Pastor's report, etc. But, the meeting "belongs to" the Executive Pastor.

Other deliberate means of reinforcing the Executive Pastor's role and authority were reported to me as well. The details and particulars are not as important as the intent. It *will* be helpful to the Executive Pastor's functioning to have the Senior Pastor make it a point to confer authority on her/him.

Since much of their work is behind the scenes, and since the nature of their work causes them to sometimes be seen as intruders or even usurpers, it is not surprising to find Executive Pastors deeply appreciative of the public support receive from their Senior Pastors. When I heard of that kind of support from the Senior Pastor, I had little doubt that loyalty was flowing in *both* directions.

### ***Expectations***

*Uncertain or unclear expectations* were mentioned by several Executives as another roadblock to effective functioning. Where both the Senior and Executive Pastor lacked previous experience with the arrangement, this problem was more prevalent. It is well to have a clear and shared understanding of the Executive Pastor's "job description." One Executive Pastor spoke of constantly revisiting, with the Senior Pastor, "the question of where his energies are focused and where my energies are focused".

It is clearly in the best interest of the church and the persons directly involved for such dialogue about expectations to take place regularly. In some cases, namely where a church hires as its first Executive Pastor a person who has

had successful experience in that role elsewhere, it is the Executive Pastor rather than the Senior Pastor who takes the lead in establishing those expectations.

### ***Benefits***

The reporting of my findings would be misleadingly incomplete were I to omit the results of my questions about the advantages, the “payoffs,” of establishing the Executive Pastor position in a church. I am convinced that no one approach is right for everybody, for every church. But, those churches where the Executive Pastor approach to administration has been effectively put in place clearly and unanimously believe that it is right for them. One church which had been on my proposed itinerary withdrew when “hard times” caused the governing board to eliminate the position. The almost palpable disappointment and regret in the voice of the Senior Pastor as he told me about it was eloquent testimony to the value he perceived the arrangement to have had for him and his church.

For the church, the congregation, the payoff comes in form of better *management* of their programs and a Senior Pastor who is better able to do for them what he does best. One lay leader said:

“Things seem more tied together now that we have an Executive Pastor. I have the sense that fewer things fall through the cracks.”

A Senior Pastor identified the addition of an Executive Pastor as the primary factor enabling their church to move beyond a growth plateau where they had been stuck for a couple of years.

An Executive Pastor took satisfaction from the Senior Pastor’s greater *productivity* because of the Executive’s presence:

“He’s worth more to the church at 45 or 50 hours than he is at 65 or 70. I believe my coming has enabled him to come closer to the lower figures.”

Many staff members at many churches expressed appreciation for the Executive Pastor. The sentiments expressed by one were echoed by many others:

“It’s a lot easier and quicker to get an answer or go ahead than it used to be, and it’s nice to get the extra attention as well.”

Others spoke of a better balance between vision and implementation because of the presence of an Executive Pastor.

I sensed and several staff members confirmed that the presence of an Executive Pastor contributes substantially to good or improved *morale* among the staff members. When they are better attended to and supervised, they have a better feeling about themselves and about their work. One Executive Pastor saw himself functioning as a “union agent” on behalf of the staff.

As I reported earlier, a payoff for Senior Pastors was *relief* from what had become for many of them an almost intolerable load of responsibilities. Right along side of relief was *freedom*, freedom from and freedom to:

- Freedom to read, study and write
- Freedom from guilt at being unprepared, or neglecting family
- Freedom to immerse oneself in preaching
- Freedom to start new things. Many had labored under the tyranny of accumulated expectations to the point where ministry wasn’t a lot of fun anymore, where the creative urges had been stifled to accommodate the necessities of managing what had been previously created

One Senior Pastor expressed what I’m sure I observed in several others; the addition of an Executive Pastor had restored the “fun” to ministry.

Several Senior Pastors reported that one of the payoffs had been a better of different *relationship* with the rest of the *staff*. They liked functioning as a pastor to, rather than a supervisor of the staff.

In the very best relationships, my value judgment, one of the payoffs for the Senior Pastor was *mutual accountability*. One of the great dangers for the Senior Pastor of a mega church is that he has no one to hold him to account. We can all list some of the tragedies to which this danger has led; damaged churches, shortened careers, injured people, the public image of the Christian Church marred. Where the character of the Senior Pastor, ego strength especially, and the integrity and strength of the Executive Pastor come together, this may be one of the greatest benefits, to *all* concerned. The Executive Pastor is, by the nature of his/her role, accountable to the Senior Pastor. When that accountability is by mutual consent, and even by formal statement, understood to be reciprocal, it is a beautiful thing to see. But it only happens in the very best of relationships.

For many Executive Pastors the payoff was being a part of a large and growing and exciting church. One Executive Pastor confessed with admirable humility:

“I get to manage and be a part of a much larger and more dynamic church than my own preaching gift would enable me to attract.”

Another described a major payoff for him in these terms:

“I love building people, especially those who are smarter than I am.”



Executive pastors who have come out of long experience as sole or Senior Pastors find an appropriate application for their gifts and experience without having the burden of the ultimate responsibility.

For me, and I'm in this category, a major payoff has come in Eriksonian terms. Erik H. Erikson's psychoanalytic theory of development postulates 8 stages of development, each of them a continuum between two opposites. The last two are:

- Generativity versus stagnation
- Ego integrity versus despair

I believe that the Executive Pastor role is a place where generativity (in this application, the production of value, of things and ideas through work) is more fully encouraged to continue than in some other pastoral roles where maintenance and potentially stagnation are ore the norm. Integrity, the integration of the self, as a person and professional is promoted by the opportunity to take all that one has learned and become and have it accepted appreciatively and applied profitably.

The vary nature of the people who are attracted to an Executive Pastor role causes them to prefer team ministry over lone wolf ministry and the opportunity to work in a team context is one of the payoffs of the job. One Executive Pastor expressed uniquely what may be characteristic of many such churches:

“At (our church) you're better than you really are; as some who have left here have found out.”

There is the satisfaction of being on the cutting edge of the church. Most Executive Pastors are very aware that the large growing church is a rapidly

expanding phenomenon and they like the idea of being involved with what is often identified as the future of the church.

For those younger Executive Pastors who are open to or committed to becoming Senior Pastors themselves one day, the payoffs are obvious. One said:

“There’s no place I could better learn the things I’ll need to know when I am a Senior Pastor of a large congregation.”

Another cited the opportunity to learn church management and preaching from a pastor he admired and respected. Still another, who was not quite so sure that he would ever be a Senior Pastor, said:

“Eventually I may want to be a Senior Minister, but for now everything I want to do is available to me here. It’s a safe place to learn and experience everything.”

## ***Conclusion***

The position of Executive Pastor is a highly workable response to the challenges and problems presented by rapid growth and expansion of programs in the church. It gives evidence of being a natural concomitant to the mega church phenomenon. There is room for development and refinement of job descriptions and operational flow charts. There are problems to be dealt with, but there also exciting possibilities to be realized. Leadership Network is in position to be on the leading edge of this movement. *The Forum for Executive Pastors* is a timely event.