

Lonely in the Second Chair?
The Surprising Reality for High Capacity Leaders
By Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson

Have you ever thought that being a “second chair leader” is a unique, challenging, and lonely assignment in the church? Greg Hawkins, Executive Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, has known this reality all too well. In the foreword to our new book, *Leading from the Second Chair*, Greg writes:

[This book] offers hope, because, you see, the second chair role can be very lonely and there are many days you wish someone would just tell you that you’re not crazy. After reading Mike and Roger’s story, along with the stories of other second chair leaders, I don’t feel quite so alone. I feel understood, and I have more hope.

If such a prominent, successful, high capacity leader can feel alone, what about all the rest of us?

When we began researching and writing *Leading from the Second Chair*, we thought we had a clear idea of the unique challenges facing our audience. We called our framework for describing these challenges the “three paradoxes of second chair leadership.” (See the previous article, “Three Paradoxes for Every Second Chair Leader.”) In our interactions with a variety of second chair leaders, we have found repeated verification of these paradoxes. But we also discovered something that we did not expect – that many second chair leaders feel isolated and alone. One person described it this way: “I’m a second chair leader and have felt lost, frustrated, and alone out here in this world of second chair.” Another said “I’ve known that I lead from the second chair, but have never heard it validated or talked about.” When we posted a blog on loneliness (www.secondchair.blogspot.com), the responses were immediate and heartfelt. One person simply said, “This [loneliness] has been one of – if not the biggest challenge I have had.”

Why So Lonely?

Do you, as a second chair leader, experience this loneliness? If so, why? Isn’t a church supposed to be a place of relational vibrancy, where everyone can feel loved and accepted and connected?

The organization chart of your church may offer one answer to the “why” question. If you serve in an official “number two” role – such as executive or associate pastor – you are without true peers in the church. Your senior pastor is your boss, and the other staff members are your subordinates. When you are frustrated, who can you share this with? It is usually inappropriate, and often damaging to the body, if you vent to those who work for you. Sometimes you can talk to your first chair leader, but you are probably hesitant to do so. You don’t want to add to his or her burden or don’t want to be seen as unable to handle the demands of your role. Or maybe it is your first chair leader that is the source of your frustrations!

If you can’t talk to others on the church staff, you certainly can’t (or shouldn’t) talk to lay leaders within the church. The minute that you voice a concern – whether it is about something your senior pastor has done or about an underperforming staff member or about a difficult situation – you are sowing the seeds of discord and division. One high capacity leader described it this way:

“Leadership can be very lonely at times because, although I have some great friends, people who really care deeply for me, I don’t want to give ANY opportunity for them to know frustrations with the church, my boss, etc.” A second chair leader truly has to guard his or her mouth and recognize the power of the tongue. Proverbs 12:18 states, “*Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing*” (NIV).

The environment outside of the church doesn’t offer much more help as you try to deal with loneliness. Denominational entities offer many more resources and connectional opportunities for senior pastors and for the directors of specific ministries (children, youth, music) than for those in the second chair. And if you are not in a large metropolitan area, it may be difficult to even find peers in your area who have similar roles.

The nature of the second chair is another contributor to this feeling of loneliness. Ask executive pastors what their job entails, and they may have to think for a moment before answering. As a second chair leader, you are often responsible for everything and nothing in the church – everything because of your oversight role and nothing because someone else has the direct responsibility. As such, the fulfillment that comes from seeing progress in ministry or of a job well done may be hard to grasp. One leader asked us, “How do I measure success in the second chair?” All you know is that you are running 90 miles an hour in a dozen different directions, feeling the weight of the ministry on your shoulders. Another leader said, “It’s like the starving baker, who makes so much for other people but never feeds himself and then starves.” There may be few affirmations for a job well done, but there will be plenty of criticisms if things are not going well. Feeling unfocused, overwhelmed, or unappreciated can quickly lead to a sense of isolation.

What’s the Solution?

If this picture seems bleak, don’t lose hope. If you serve in the second chair – whether for a short season or for an entire ministry career – you are not doomed to wander in a desert. But you do need to be proactive if you are going to overcome loneliness.

The source of the problem for many second chairs – and the beginning of the solution – can be found in the relationship with your first chair. There is no substitute for a strong, healthy relationship between you and your senior pastor. If that is lacking, look for opportunities to develop and strengthen this relationship. As this happens, you will find that you have less frustrations and that you have an outlet for addressing the frustrations that do occur.

Even in the best situations, however, you need to be able to share with others who are “in the same boat.” “*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice*” (Proverbs 12:15, NIV). No matter how busy you are, make the time to develop and maintain a small network of peers. These should be people outside of your congregation who will listen to your struggles, help you process issues, offer godly counsel, point out ways that you may be contributing to a problem, and hold you accountable for your actions. Ideally, this can be a local group that meets together on a regular basis (at least monthly). If this is not possible, then think about others you have known over the years and develop an ad hoc network of people you can call periodically. Be explicit about your hopes for these relationships and make at least one call a

week with one of these friends. Time and urgency are your greatest enemies in this effort. If you say, “I’m fighting fires today; I’ll work on the peer network next week,” you’ll find that months may pass and you are no further down the road. Make it a priority for your long-term ministry effectiveness.

Another source of community is the previously mentioned blog. While it lacks the relational intimacy of being in person, it offers an immediate and confidential place of connection. One recent post on the blog stated, “We need this group and this place to vent. Just knowing that there are others out there who feel the same frustrations, the same loneliness, the same deep pull towards something greater makes a huge difference.”

Beyond these “solutions,” the best way to combat loneliness is to stay grounded in Scripture and in your identity in Christ. One second chair leader said, “Loneliness comes to me on a weekly basis, and I’ve got to fight it back with the Word of God.” Don’t deny the feelings of loneliness in your second chair role, but don’t let them overcome you either. Be proactive and spend time out of your chair and on your knees. This will keep your heart tender and keep God’s Kingdom-building purpose for your life ever present in your mind. Proverbs 4:23 says it best: “*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life*” (NIV).