

## **I'm Following ... But No One is Leading!**

by Mike Bonem

It is essential for second chair leaders to know how to follow. That's no surprise, and it is why the first paradox in *Leading from the Second Chair* is named "subordinate-leader." But one thing has been a surprise. In several surveys since the book's release, the biggest frustration of those in the second chair is a lack of leadership from their lead leader.

Perhaps this should have been expected. Almost a decade ago, George Barna stated that only 5% of senior pastors identified leadership as one of their spiritual gifts (*The Second Coming of the Church*, p. 36). This may overstate the issue, but Barna is not alone in noting the problem. It is only in the relatively recent past that many seminaries began putting more emphasis on leadership training in their curriculum. Certainly the challenge of effectively leading a church, particularly a multi-staff church, has grown much more complex as well. So what should a frustrated second chair leader do when he or she encounters the dilemma of a non-leading first chair?

### **Consider the Reasons**

When confronted with a difficult problem, I always prefer to start with questions. It's dangerous to jump to conclusions, assuming that you fully understand the situation. So let's begin with a basic question: why is your first chair not leading? We should only conclude that a senior pastor is unable to lead after examining all the other possibilities.

What might some of those possibilities be? You might start by examining the history of the congregation before and during your first chair's tenure. Perhaps you will find a history of conflict or a small powerful group of lay leaders who call all the shots. This may not prevent senior pastors from leading, but it will certainly affect the way that they lead. In the same way, a positive or negative experience in a prior congregation may have far-reaching effects on your first chair's approach to exercising leadership.

Why have you concluded that your first chair is not leading effectively? Are you keeping the big picture in mind when you draw this conclusion? Perhaps significant leadership is being exercised, but not in the ministries in which you are directly involved or in the areas that you feel should receive priority.

While you are asking questions, consider your own model of effective leadership. How narrow is your definition? For example, if you only think that someone is leading when they forcefully take charge and give strong direction to the troops, then a quieter, consensus-oriented person may not seem like a leader to you. If you are an "action and results now" person, then someone who is more deliberate or patient may drive you crazy. Is it possible that your first chair is leading, but just not in the way that you prefer? Furthermore, is it possible that you and your first chair need each other's different leadership styles to achieve the best results in your congregation?

The best way to answer these questions is in dialogue with your senior pastor. Is your relationship strong enough that you can say, “You seem to be reluctant to make this hard decision – what is causing you to hesitate?” Or to express, “I think the congregation is looking for you to give some clear direction – what you’ve done so far has been too vague.” This kind of exchange requires a deep level of trust between first and second chair, but it’s also the only way to really answer your question of why he or she is not leading.

Be prepared for the response you may get the first time that you ask a question like this. You may be greeted with anger or with excuses. Be sure to couch your comments in a spirit of love, genuine concern, and loyalty. And be prepared to revisit the topic another time – you probably won’t get to the bottom the first time.

### **Lift Their Leadership to the Next Level**

After engaging in healthy dialogue with first chairs, as described above, the next step is to explore how they can grow as leaders. In this vein, one of the most important things is sharing the leadership burden. This does not mean dividing the first chair’s job in half and taking the things that sound fun!

How can you help your first chair lead more effectively? What have you learned about his or her personality and leadership style? What energizes him and what drains him? What are the things that she does well and where does she struggle? If you want to share your first chair’s leadership burden, look for the ways that you can complement him or her. This will lift their leadership to the next level.

You may need to protect them from critics or controversy. This may mean dealing with an angry church member or taking the hit for an unpopular decision. Or you may be a sounding board for your senior pastor, someone who can listen attentively to an idea and assess the strengths and weaknesses of a proposed course of action. Because of your relationship and knowledge (of the organization and the first chair), this is a frequent role for second chairs.

Another way to help your first chair lead more effectively is to give the gift of time. No, I’m not talking about the sun standing still (Joshua 10:13) to add more hours to the day. But if you can take some of the non-essential, non-strategic tasks off your first chair’s plate, then he or she will have more time for the important ones. Two vital activities for senior pastors are visioning and teaching/preaching. Both of these require blocks of uninterrupted time for studying Scripture, listening to God, and reflecting on how to move forward. What keeps pastors from doing this? Committee meetings, administrative chores, staff issues, pastoral care. None of these are unimportant, but when they are handled by a trusted, capable second chair, the first chair is released to lead.

### **Some May Never Truly Lead**

You may have carefully tried to understand your first chair and creatively offered different ways to share his or her leadership. So what should you do if leadership is still lacking? How should you respond if you believe that the congregation is falling short of its potential because it lacks

sufficient leadership? I recognize that some who serve as senior pastors are simply not effective leaders. They bring many gifts and abilities to the role, but real leadership is a missing component. It can be frustrating if you see this but are unable to affect the change that is needed, either in your first chair or in the congregation. So what should you do?

Three simple reminders are in order. First, recognize that anything that circumvents your first chair is unlikely to work, and will probably do more harm than good. When second chairs attempt to step into a leadership void (created by a non-leading senior pastor), it usually causes division in the congregation, confusion over who is “calling the shots,” and tension in your relationship with the first chair. At its best, this is a misguided effort and at its worst, it is insubordination. Either way, it is likely to cost you your job. This only works when the second chair is leading with the permission of the first chair and when first and second chairs are on the same page, speaking in a unified voice.

Second, remember that God is at work even (especially) in difficult circumstances. In *Leading from the Second Chair*, we emphasize that finding contentment during challenging seasons involves a choice to stay and grow and excel. The season of frustration that you are experiencing may be exactly what God wants to use to prepare you for a future role. So continue to ask, “God, what do you want me to learn in this period of my life?” and do your best to excel in whatever you are called to do.

Third, be open to God’s call to move. I believe that many leaders give up too quickly and leave for a “better” position, but I also recognize the difficulty of serving effectively and faithfully in the midst of constant frustration. If you consistently feel limited in using your gifts because of the context in which you serve, seek God. He may be using this to point you to a different place of ministry. If He is, then leave well from your current congregation and lead well in your new one. And if He is not, then follow well by serving in ways that honor the One who gave you the gift of leadership and called you to this place of ministry.