

LEAD PASTORS: YOUR TITLE INCLUDES YOUR CALL

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As a guy who dabbles in writing, I've spilled more ink on eldership than any other topic. A few years ago, I wrote *The Plurality Principle* to capture a leadership reality behind flourishing churches: **The quality of your plurality determines the health of your church.** Elders are the qualified men called to govern the church. Plurality is the culture that emerges as elders share leadership. As a team, elders form a microcosm. What they are, the church will become (cf. 1 Pet. 5:3).

I still hold to this conviction.

But the steel of this truth is bolted to a second beam: **For a plurality to be healthy, it must be led.** And that brings us to the most debated — and often diminished — role on the eldership team: *the lead pastor*.

For years, the role of lead pastor has been quietly losing weight. Granted, it's hard to breathe postmodern air and not grow suspicious of anyone who sees himself as "first" among other "equals." The very phrase sounds self-congratulatory — like one is saying, "I'm the best among my fellow great people!"

In a climate of skepticism, the instinct makes sense. Shared leadership sounds safe. Mutuality sounds mature. Flatness sounds virtuous. The moment one person is distinguished in function — even if not elevated in worth — alarm bells go off.

Then came Covid.

Covid put institutions on Ozempic — instant, visible weight loss. As trust in institutions shed pounds more rapidly, churches felt the same slimming effect. But not every structure lost mass. Eldership held its shape. With its tone of shared leadership and collaborative strength, it still felt lean, healthy, and credible.

What came under scrutiny was *the lead pastor*. Across North America, certain elderships wrestled with unanticipated questions:

- Should leadership be spread more evenly across the eldership?
- Is a lead pastor role unhelpful — or even unnecessary?
- Does a “first among equals” undermine humility, interdependence, or unity?

Those questions created an opportunity. Church leaders were being pressed to think more carefully about what Scripture assumes about leadership — and how plural leadership truly functions in real life. Today, there are five truths I find myself repeating in a post-Covid climate.

1. The Populist Mood Prefers Leaderless Movements

Part of the reason flattening leadership feels so natural is because it reflects a powerful idea that grips the modern imagination — the belief that progress comes only from “the people.” This romantic idea traces back to the Enlightenment and was embodied in movements like the French Revolution. When authority is spread across the collective, a kind of organic intelligence emerges. The people unite, everyone contributes, and progress happens because leadership is diffused rather than directed. “Democracy, with its alluring vision of equality,” wrote David Koyzis, “may encourage people to believe that every citizen is equally capable of governing and that no special skills are needed for this purpose.”

There are benefits, both magnificent and naive, tucked within the folds of this blanket. Wisdom and unity often gain altitude when congregations have a voice and a place to speak. God wants members to be heard on decisions that impact their future. But stories of the masses self-organizing for change are more sexy than sensible. Scratch beneath mob progress and you will find specific leaders — declared or undeclared — driving vision and galvanizing direction. Mapping and authorizing the real power is far more sustainable than nurturing an ideal that the true influencers should remain unidentified and unaccountable.

Leaderless movements generate energy — but struggle to sustain clarity. Remember Occupy Wall Street? As attention and enthusiasm swelled, they were called upon to answer questions of direction and destination. They were unable to organize and offer a sustainable answer. Another movement with emotional heat, but no durable light.

Scripture warns us about this drift. *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”* (Judg. 21:25). The book of Judges reads like a case study on the cost of leaderless living. Imagine chaos on steroids.

Like movements, pluralities need leadership too. Someone must:

- Galvanize conviction
- Steward unity
- Organize gifts
- Orchestrate alignment

That is why a plurality needs a lead pastor.

2. Scripture Reveals a Pattern of Ordered Leadership

There is no single verse that mandates a “lead pastor.” But there is a pattern that shows up everywhere: **Shared authority organized under clear leadership.**

We see this displayed in the *economic* Trinity. The Father, Son, and Spirit are equal in glory. Yet their roles reveal ordered relationships. The Father sends the Son (John 6:38; Gal. 4:4). The Son accomplishes redemption. The Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14). Recognizing these so-called “economic distinctions” in the Trinity does not deny the doctrine of inseparable operations, nor does it imply some strange social hierarchy within the Godhead. Co-equality and ordered relationships coexist for greater glory.

The pattern continues in Israel’s leadership. In Numbers 11:16–17, God distributes leadership by giving Moses seventy elders. But Moses remains the organizing leader. Shared leadership relieves burdens and multiplies impact without erasing the original role. When Moses died, God didn’t leave Israel to self-govern. He appointed a leader (Deut. 31:1–8; Josh. 1:1–9).

The pattern remains consistent: **Shared strength, organized under leadership.**

Even the synagogue system reflected this. There were councils, but also recognized rulers (Mark 5:22; Acts 13:15). The New Testament carried forward the idea of plurality alongside prominent voices.

- Peter, though embedded among the apostles, stands and speaks at Pentecost (Acts 2:14)
- James leads the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13–21)
- Paul identifies James, Cephas, and John as “pillars” in the church (Gal. 2:9)

These men were not superior in worth — but they were distinct in function.

Marriage, too, reflects this pattern. *“The head of a wife is her husband... and the head of Christ is God”* (1 Cor. 11:3; cf. Eph. 5:22–28). Order does not imply inferiority. It reflects the design of authority and equality layered together.

In fact, while it may sound grandiose, most of the history of human progress illustrates this point. C.S. Lewis spoke of the Tao — shared moral instincts across cultures and religions. I’d argue leadership belongs in the Tao. Across civilizations, the progress of many has been tied to the leadership of a few.

This is not a case for tyranny nor celebrity. But well-ordered and clearly authorized leadership is not foreign to the path of human progress — it’s the repeated pattern catalyzing it since the world began. The church is no exception.

The point is not that these examples create a direct blueprint for a senior pastor. Rather, they reveal a truth and reflect a pattern: Shared authority does not eliminate leadership. On the contrary, shared authority requires distinct leadership to flourish.

3. The Lead Pastor Does Not Possess Extra Authority

Let’s be clear: The lead pastor does not possess an inherent authority above the other elders. That is not to deny a certain functional authority derived from the trust and confidence of those to whom he preaches.

He has a different role — not a higher rank. Eldership is a one-elder, one-vote reality.

Scripture, in my belief, places authority for the church in the elders collectively (cf. Acts 15:22, 28; Acts 20:28). Perhaps, like some of my dear friends, you hail from a tradition that believes God invests authority in the church to approve pastors. Regardless, I think we can agree that elders are authorized to shepherd the flock, guard doctrine, and oversee the

church (1 Pet 5:1–2; Tit 1:9; Heb 13:17). The lead pastor does not replace that authority. He operates within it.

That’s why “first among equals” still works.

- First in function; not first in worth
- First in responsibility; not first in dignity

Jesus made this clear: “*Whoever would be great among you must be your servant*” (Mark 10:42–45; cf. Phil. 2:3–4). To be effective as a leader, the lead pastor must honor the earthly authority he lives under — namely, the plurality of elders.

One illustration I’ve used in the past comes from Bethlehem Baptist Church during John Piper’s ministry. When the elders debated divorce and remarriage, Piper landed on a minority position. The elders disagreed. The church adopted the elders’ view. Piper led the church to embrace it.

He did not leverage influence to override plurality. He honored it. And he remained the lead pastor. That’s what healthy plurality looks like.

4. Elders Must Expect the Lead Pastor to Lead

This is where things often begin to break down. Most elders step onto a team already staffed with a lead pastor, a reality weighted with significance. You are not joining a blank slate or playing on a functionally flat field. You are entering a leadership structure where one role has been explicitly recognized and authorized to lead.

The title itself makes the point. *Lead pastor*. His role is not inferred — it is named. If you are considering eldership but lack confidence in that man’s call or capacity to lead, it is better not to proceed. By stepping into the role, you are not only joining a team; you are affirming a structure. And that structure has authorized his leadership.

Of course, there are nuances. The shape of leadership changes based on church size, team maturity, and polity. As a church grows, the lead pastor’s role may narrow in scope. But it never disappears. He remains responsible to bring clarity, make hard decisions, and articulate direction. He leads not by force nor manipulation, but through conviction, courage, and a willingness to risk disapproval for gospel progress (Luke 6:36). He will make

a keep commitments, even if it means “swearing to his own hurt” (Matt. 5: 37; Ps. 15: 4). Whether he is guiding a meeting or participating under a board chairman, his leadership should be evident, consistent, and trusted.

This does not diminish the role of other elders. All elders rule, and some are especially recognized for their labor in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). These distinctions are not about value, but function. The title *lead pastor* exists to acknowledge a functional reality, not to elevate the worth of one man above the others.

The danger emerges when elderships, in an effort to model humility and shared leadership, unintentionally constrain the very leadership they have affirmed (or desperately need!). The tone shifts subtly. Instead of “lead faithfully,” the message becomes “stop until we say go.” While it may be well-intended, this posture blurs authority and slows initiative. Over time, clarity erodes and leadership hesitates.

Churches often drift through two stages on this path toward paralysis. In the first, confusion and siloed leadership are quietly spiritualized. Delays are framed as discernment, and hesitation as wisdom. Yet perceptive leaders feel the strain because they recognize the cost of indecision. In the second stage, ambiguity becomes normalized. It is no longer a problem to solve, but a culture to accept. Direction fades, execution weakens, and frustration settles in. As someone once said, culture eats strategy for breakfast. But when leadership itself is unclear, no one gets fed.

Healthy elderships move in a different direction. They work to remove unnecessary constraints so that the lead pastor experiences a clear and responsible freedom to lead. The posture becomes, in effect, “go until we say stop.” This reflects both trust in God and trust in those He has appointed (1 Thess. 5:12–13). Oversight remains real, but it is steady rather than reactive (Heb. 13:17). The lead pastor is neither autonomous nor uncertain; he leads within a framework that is both defined and supported.

This kind of culture rests on confidence — confidence that God is at work (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:13), that Christ is committed to His church (Eph. 5:25–27), and that leaders can be trusted to serve faithfully under His authority. Accountability is not removed; it is clarified. The goal is not independence or restriction, but alignment: *necessary accountability with maximum empowerment* (1 Pet. 5:2–3).

That balance is not automatic. It requires wisdom, humility, and continual adjustment. Pray for the lead pastor who is entrusted with this kind of clarity, that he would lead without pride and serve as a true brother among equals. And pray for elderships, that they would resist confusing caution with wisdom or constraint with unity. Good intentions alone cannot prevent drift.

If this feels nuanced, that's because it is. Healthy leadership cultures are both structured and relational, requiring discernment as much as conviction. God, in His kindness, has provided networks, denominations, and seasoned leaders to help churches navigate these tensions. Because when leadership is clear, the church moves forward with strength.

5. The Lead Pastor Helps the Plurality Flourish

Here's why the role matters: **Leadership must be organized** (1 Cor. 14:33, 40).

Churches are filled with gifted people. Elderships often include strong personalities. Without organizing leadership, those gifts can pull in different directions (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10–12). Conversations continue, but clarity never emerges. Vision becomes foggy; direction gets lost.

Lead pastors align an eldership through their listening and advocacy. A good one helps move the group from conversation to conviction; from ideas to direction; from alignment to action.

Andy Crouch offers a helpful metaphor: the symphony conductor. An orchestra is full of gifted musicians — often more skilled than the conductor. But without a conductor, the music falls apart. Why? Because someone must:

- Set the tempo
- Prioritize the chairs
- Coordinate the parts
- Bring unity to sound

Without leadership, talent doesn't harmonize. It competes. The conductor doesn't diminish the musicians. He enables them.

The same is true of the lead pastor. He doesn't replace the elders. He helps them function together. This is the logic of Ephesians 4: Christ gave the church leaders *"to equip the saints... for building up the body of Christ"* (Eph. 4:11-12). Healthy plurality needs *directed collaboration*:

- Elders bring wisdom, authority, and accountability
- The lead pastor helps prioritize and focus

When this works, the church avoids two dangers: Authoritarian leadership (3 John 9-10) and leaderless confusion (Judges 21:25).

A final word to lay elders. Wise is the lay elder from the marketplace who understands that there is an important place for his voice. He grows still wiser by understanding the church does not flourish by simply adopting the business principles common to his world. He must first comprehend what it means to lead volunteers united by Scripture and inspired by a theological vision, without the leverage of compensation, promotion, career, or contracts. From there he will discover that the means and ends for local church success can be intrinsically different than marketplace models and metrics.

Keep the Title – and the Call

When these truths are held together, something beautiful emerges. Not hierarchy, but *harmony*.

A lead pastor functioning within a healthy plurality helps a church move forward with clarity instead of confusion; courage in place of hesitation; unity rather than fragmentation.

Elders share authority. They exchange wisdom. They steward direction. And the lead pastor helps focus that shared leadership toward mission.

Paul captures the goal: *"Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Eph. 4:3; cf. Phil. 1:27). That kind of unity doesn't happen by accident. It requires:

- Gospel
- Structure
- Intentionality
- Leadership

The lead pastor, rightly understood, is not a threat to that unity. He is God's primary instrument to establish it.

So yes, keep the title. But more importantly — **embrace the call.**

Because when a lead pastor leads with humility, clarity, and conviction — and when a plurality supports, strengthens, and sharpens that leadership — the church doesn't just function. It makes the kind of music that reflects the wisdom and order of God himself.

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Additional Resources

This article originally appeared on RevDaveHarvey.com. For additional study on eldership, check out these resources from Dave:

- [The Five Elder Commitment Course](#)
- [The Elder Chairman Handbook \(free!\)](#)
- [The Elder Training Kit](#)