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Only a preacher

Pastors no longer automatically hold positions of community influence. But they can -- and should -- earn a place in their communities by participating in them, says pastor and author Nelson Granade.

by [Nelson Granade](#)

June 23, 2009

Editor's note: Nelson Granade is the author of "[Lending Your Leadership: How Pastors are Redefining Their Role in Community Life.](#)"

When the chair of my county school board suggested I could help with a bond referendum, a local businesswoman responded: "What can he do? He's only a preacher!"

Unfortunately for pastors, many people share this opinion. The day has passed when pastors stood in the circle of community influence by virtue of their position.

When you combine this decline in status with the stress of leading a congregation, it is tempting for pastors to focus on their congregations and forget community involvement.

If we pull back from community leadership, however, we will have only ourselves to blame for our lack of influence. We like to talk about the importance of community within our congregations; we need to remember we're also part of a larger community.

Despite the difficulties, there is great opportunity in engaging in local leadership.

In the conversation between the school board chair and the business leader, for example, the school board chair knew me. She vouched for me and I was brought on the team. The bond referendum failed, but I contributed to a new plan that resulted in four new middle schools. Today the businesswoman and I are close friends.

The question of how we spend our limited resources demands theological and biblical analysis. The real question is whether or not we, as pastors, are called to community leadership. I believe the answer lies in looking at three particular Old Testament roles: prophet (*nabi*), priest (*kohen*) and king

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GO

(*melek*).

The prophetic role of community leadership flows from our responsibility to bring injustices to light. Prophets are to speak truth to power and trust that God will validate the message. If we do not raise the ethical dimensions of community decisions, who will? To get four schools built in a county that hadn't built a school in 50 years, someone had to speak up. I was glad to join others in doing so.

If one only assumes the role of prophet, however, folks quickly will begin to avoid you. As in our congregations, we often earn the right to speak prophetically by serving well pastorally. On the morning of the 9/11 attacks, I was in a meeting at our Chamber of Commerce. The group immediately turned to me for prayer and comfort. I heard similar stories from pastors across the country. People, especially leaders in need, remember our care.

The early kings of Israel were called to be stewards and protectors of God's people. Pastors, too, are called to protect the integrity of our communities, unite people behind shared vision, calm troubled groups and stretch limited resources.

What happens once we decide to engage in community leadership? First, we need to find a way into the local circles of power. We can't simply show up and announce that we are here to lead; we must earn our influence.

Often local charities are a good place to start. Not only are these groups more open to us "helping types," they desperately need people. Upon arriving in my community 14 years ago, I agreed to sit on a United Way funding panel, thinking it would be a good way to learn how to invest my church's resources. Since that first, two-week foray, I have served in almost every position in our local United Way.

My work on the United Way led to other community connections, including the school bond referendum. Others' pathways into community leadership will be different from mine, but the point is the same: Get involved and doors will open.

Once we have gotten involved, often our most important gift is our pastoral perspective. We look at things differently from anyone else at the table. It's always interesting to me to be at meetings during introductions: "I'm Ted, a banker." "I'm Mary, town planning director." And so forth. Then comes my turn: "I'm Nelson, a pastor." It's interesting to watch the faces of those who have yet to meet me; I sometimes wonder what their experience has been with clergy. Although my contribution might not be immediately obvious to others, I feel that my experience is valuable. I'm likely the only one at the meeting who that week has visited the hospital, attended a deacons meeting, supervised staff, led worship, counseled a couple and more.

Embracing our uniqueness and gifts as pastors helps answer the question: "Will community leadership benefit our congregation, our ministry and God's reign?" I think the answer is yes: Since my increased community involvement, our congregation has gained a number of members through those contacts, been more effective with our resources and improved our reputation within our community. In addition, venturing outside my comfort zone has helped me grow, given me increased confidence and provided a non-church outlet that helps keep me sane.

God will be the ultimate judge, of course, but this feels like God's work to me.

