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Pastor as leader

David A. Davis decides to spend his sabbatical learning about leadership and offers lessons from that immersion in a different world.

by [David A. Davis](#)

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“It’s the hardest work I do.” I had found myself saying it more and more. It was an observation, not really a complaint. I wasn’t referring to weekly preaching, weddings or funerals, pastoral visitation or even discussions about money.

The biggest challenge for me in pastoral ministry relates to working with staff, establishing measurable goals and objectives, communicating vision and strategy among church officers and guiding a congregation through change.

The hardest work I do is being a leader of the organization.

Not surprisingly, it is the role for which I have had the least training. I thrive on preaching. It’s a primary identity. My focus in seminary was preaching, with post-seminary study in homiletics. I teach preaching on a seminary campus occasionally. The proclamation of the gospel in sermon form is a profound aspect of my relationship with God.

For 25 years, the routine of the week has revolved around sermon preparation. But not all that long ago it dawned on me that while I spend 20 minutes or so a week in the pulpit, I am leader of this organization 24/7.

Pastor as leader -- it’s surely not a novel idea. But as I began to plan a four-month sabbatical, it became the driving concept. I decided to spend my time away from the pulpit learning about the other part of my job.

I wanted to learn about leaders who have successfully transformed a corporate culture. I wanted to know how leaders build a team and what qualities they look for in

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others. I wanted to hear how leaders increase their self-awareness and improve skills and adapt themselves to various contexts in their careers. I wanted to talk about the essential characteristics of effective leadership.

I began to see the congregation as an abundant resource on the topic. Among the members of my Presbyterian church in a university town are professionals who offer a striking level of expertise. One elder works at shaping corporate culture change. Yet I had never asked for her help to inspire an ethos of welcome and belonging throughout the church. Another member, a church school teacher, evaluates executive leadership for a private equity company. Why wouldn't I seek his input when discerning growing edges in my development of leadership skills?

Week in and week out in my preaching I had let the congregation know about my work-related reading. Yet it struck me that I had rarely asked them about theirs. So with a bibliography longer than I could ever finish, and with more than a dozen appointments with executive leaders in financial services, the pharmaceutical business and consumer products, my plans for sabbatical were set. Since distance from the congregation is an important part of a sabbatical, an executive coach connected to the church also introduced me to clients far removed.

My reading list was a secular one. My intent was to engage in an interdisciplinary effort as I brought my own theological reflection to bear on the material. The spectrum of literature stretched from biographies to business school articles, from bookstore best-sellers to academic, philosophical stuff. As in the theological/religious world, there was no shortage of schlock and unhelpful material. Not surprisingly, I found myself engaged by the more scholarly work and the challenge of thinking about it theologically.

In the interviews, the earliest comments from business leaders had a striking consistency. It was clear that everyone had thought about leadership a lot more than I had. Each one cited the importance of critical reflection on leadership issues in his or her own career. Most could name a particular mentor or coach. Professional development included growth areas, learning points and self-awareness. Everyone had stories to tell.

The CFO of a retail meat corporation told me he knew little about the industry when he took the job. "Of course I could learn all about it, but it was my ability to form a team and empower others that has allowed me to be successful," he said.

A longtime pharmaceutical executive described how one mentor's wisdom and constructive criticism helped her break through the company's gender barrier.

The CEO of a food and beverage company couldn't hide his passion as he told me of the adrenaline rush that comes when your team launches a product. The energy comes from sharing in collective creativity.

I asked one CEO if she trusted her intuition when identifying key people for her executive team. "After hundreds of hires," she said, "I work very hard not to trust a first impression. I need to learn more about a person and their accomplishments. I am very good at making personnel decisions. But the mistakes are too costly. I will suppress my first impression every time."

In my sabbatical's open space, the plentiful harvest on leadership offered so much to ponder, including the unique role of the pastor. Consider my observation that I am a leader of the organization 24/7 who spends 20 minutes a week in the pulpit: I realized what an opportunity this is. Most leaders would love to have 20 minutes a week with the majority of their team really listening.

Put theologically, the weekly proclamation of the gospel is an opportunity for forming, shaping, moving the body of Christ. The homiletical training for most pastors centers on preaching to the heart of the individual listener: transformation, discipleship, evangelism.

But there is a collective reality to the preaching event as well. As we know ourselves to be the body of Christ through Word and sacrament week in and week out, then the preacher should attend to the corporate identity and witness of the people of God. How can the preacher communicate the congregation's vision, embrace change and further a strategy for mission?

It has often been said that the best measure of good preaching is the individual faithful lives of those in

the pew. Another measure is how the congregation's life together moves and grows in response to the call of God. It is an indication of the preacher as leader.

Over and over I read and heard about how hard it is to lead organizations through change and how organizations that don't change will die. Pastors don't have to try very hard to wrap their heads around this. That reality pretty much sums up the broader ecclesial context of my 25 years of ministry.

Pastors do not have the luxury of ignoring leadership, even if we have spent little time learning about it. I have found an abundance of resources to help me grow and think about specific skills. Yes, I am called to preach, teach, visit, marry and bury. But if congregations are to change, survive and flourish, as congregations are called by God to be faithful, pastors will be expected to lead as well.

It may be the hardest work I do, but for the body of Christ here and now, it is some of the most important work I do.