

The church that doesn't need you

By [David Williams](#)

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It was quite the week at my little congregation. One recent Monday morning, a multigenerational group of teens, young adults, and adults took off in two rental vans, headed for a youth service mission trip to West Virginia, something that's been a regular staple of the life of the church for years.

There, my congregation helped rebuild and repair homes during the day, and spent time in worship and fellowship at night. It was a wonderful blend of direct, hands-on, and material care for others with Christian faith-expression.

In preparation for this trip, I spent the last few months in a flurry of doing . . . nothing.

Not a thing. I didn't organize it. I didn't schedule it. I didn't go pick up the vans or carefully plan the evening worship and prayer events. I didn't gather the materials, or ensure that we had enough participation. I didn't coordinate with the parachurch organization that sponsors it, or send planny e-mails back and forth with the pastors of the two other congregations that will be participating.

It is not even the expectation that I go, and so I didn't.

Because in my little church, that's not been the pastor's job, not during the time I've been there. Nor was it the expectation of the pastor before me.

And no, I haven't handed this off to an associate, or a youth pastor. We're a little church, meaning I'm a half-time pastor in a community that has been served by part-timers since 1847. So church members do their own thing. It's gotten woven into the congregational DNA.

The mission trip is a fine example, something that is entirely the work of some passionate, committed souls in the congregation. They and the youth organize and prepare for it, handling the whole thing from incept to implementation, complete with the worship experience that celebrates and reports back on the event.

Why? Because it's good, and a joy to do in the way that hard work to a good end is a joy.

It's tempting to get all Robespierre-leadershipy on such a thing. You know the semi-apocryphal classic "leadership" story, right? What? You don't? Well, gosh, I guess it's share time.

As the tale goes, Robespierre, the psychotically self-absorbed and self-righteous Jacobin who helped turn the French Revolution into the bloody Reign of Terror, is sitting in a restaurant. A mob comes storming by, shouting and waving banners. "Look! There go my people," shouts Robespierre, leaping up and rushing to get to the head of the mob. "I must lead them!"

The absurdity, of course, is that all that mattered to Robby was that he be up in front, that he take the energy of the group and use it for his own glory. It's leadership as ego-fodder, and that's a real danger for pastors—and anyone in leadership, frankly.

Because when pastors must be in charge of everything, must guide everything, must control everything? They create dependent and spiritually stunted communities.

That's not to say there's no role for a pastor. You should add life and health, sure. Your presence there should deepen and strengthen the life and gifts of others, and your teaching should manifest the best calling of the congregation. An essentially healthy church lets you know you're fulfilling that role, and encourages you on the Way. I've been blessed with that encouragement from my little fellowship over the last few years, and it's been profoundly affirming.

But when our need to be needed gets in the way of the gifts and graces that others have to offer, we have become an active impediment to the movement of the Spirit in a fellowship.

Gatherings of mature Christians should not function that way. In a healthy congregation, there are folks whose energies, vision, and creativity will operate in parallel with those of a pastor. It's the role of the formal leader to support, sustain, pray for, and celebrate those gifts. It's my role to teach and preach and model the Way in my own existence, and to support every soul I see helping others towards that gracious path.

Because that's the Spirit at work, right there, and we get in the way of the Spirit to the peril of our communities. Oh, sure, there'll be times when you do have to step in. If a church is completely lost, consumed by conflict, or frittering away its energy on anxiety, you need to be there. If a community exists only for itself and its own needs, you need to be there to guide them back to the path.

But those moments are fewer and farther between than our egos want us to believe.

So for one week, I watched my little fellowship do great things that they didn't need me there to help them accomplish, and it was awesome.

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