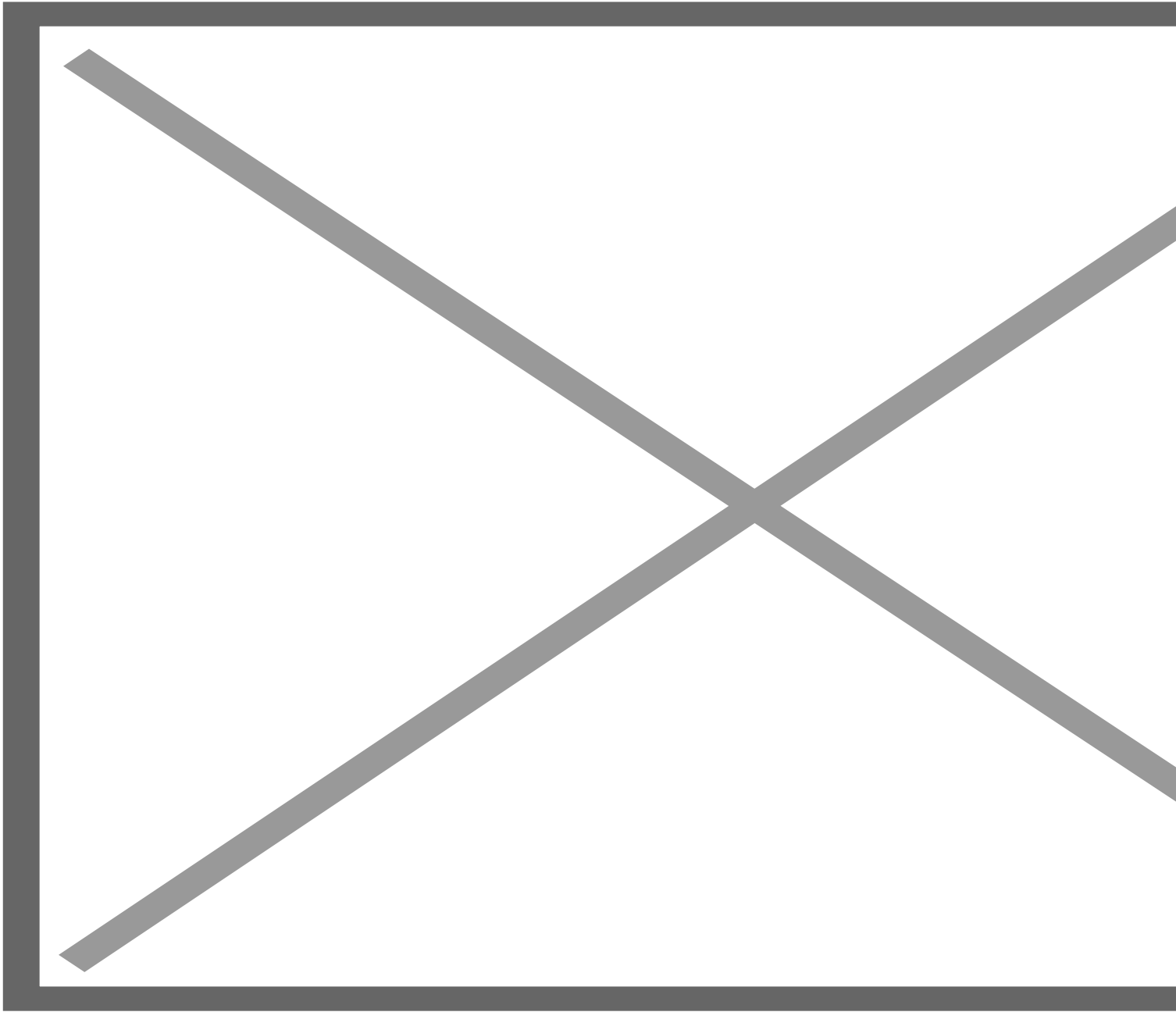


Pastors and professionals

The church doesn't just need leadership development. It needs processes, ongoing assessment, and shared accountability.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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Century illustration

“What would my success look like to you during our first year together?”

That’s the question I think you should ask in a job interview, during that precious last 15-minute chunk of time that is actually more like 4 minutes, tops, when your interviewer asks, “Do you have any questions for us?” I know what you want to ask—“What does this job pay, and what chased the last person out?”—but don’t ask that, not yet. Instead, ask something that reveals how they will evaluate you, so that you spend less time doing work they don’t care about or chasing after goals that aren’t actually measurable or in your grasp.

How do I know this? I’m a pastor, a profession in which most assessments depend upon whether or not other people show up to church, how much money they give, and how they feel about you—that is, things you can’t control. This works, until it doesn’t, but it strikes me that such a demanding profession would demand so little professionalism.

I am not suggesting a move toward corporatizing the church (that’s already happening, for better and for worse). I’m asking on behalf of pastors who are chronically unhealthy because they’ve seen their work primarily as people pleasing, on behalf of pastors who work to fill the room and the coffers but are not only terrible managers of staff but demonstrate “Bless their heart” levels of incompetence, on behalf of church staff that experience little sense of growth or fulfillment because nothing is being asked of them outside the requisite Sunday stuff. Perhaps most alarmingly, I’m asking on behalf of congregations with pastors who operate with little sense of accountability. Many of us have seen how bad that can go.

The corrective, so far, has been leadership development, a kind of thoughtfulness I am grateful for in how it reminds good preachers of their responsibilities beyond the pulpit—responsibilities that 99 percent of pastors don’t have someone else to look after. But the language of developing faith leaders as something more than preachers has been able to thrive without an emphasis on the processes, ongoing assessment, and shared accountability that need to exist for both clergy and communities to feel seen and heard or even safe. For all the talk about authoritarianism these days, it’s strange to me that one of the places this often goes unchecked is congregations. Have we emphasized leadership so much that we missed having processes in place that manage us all better? Is the answer simply more HR?

For a lot of pastors reading this, that might be obvious and patronizing. I bet you show up every day, on time, and count your vacation days, which you don’t take enough of. You are fastidious about keeping a respectful work-life balance; you participate in collaborative annual assessments and goal setting. Good for you. But I think there are a lot of places where this basic, what-it-means-to-be-a-professional stuff isn’t happening. Instead, assessing whether a faith leader is doing a good job is mostly about whether it *feels* like they are. And that’s madness. It is also demeaning to ask so little of a profession that also asks for our entire lives. I’m asking for a different kind of mindfulness, and some processes that reflect that.

I will admit that this is coming in part from my own childhood trauma, so be gracious in your letters to the editor. Growing up, all I cared about was what was expected of me, and I attuned my actions toward meeting others’ expectations, many of them unspoken and culturally ascribed. This has done me some good—I’ve met just about all those expectations—but more harm, as old relationship dynamics begin to crumble and I find myself caring less about what others want and more about what I need, hoping to collaborate more, and wanting everyone involved to name what we are and aren’t doing here. (If you hear the trauma, I hope you also hear the therapy.) In short, I want accountability, and I want to give and receive it in love and without fear.

You might think this is happening more than it is. Many pastors have no clear sense of what the mark is that they’re supposed to meet, and in any case they are given little in the way of resources or support to meet it. When they don’t, a performance improvement plan would be really helpful, but many churches wouldn’t know

where to begin. I think this is at least in part because we see the role of clergy and congregations as taking care of each other—instead of cocreating a dynamic expression of faithfulness together, as Jesus prescribes and Acts demonstrates.

We belittle the work. If it is fair to demand the considerations of pension, continuing education, and fair pay (and it is!), it is also fair to make credible demands of our leaders that add up to something more than, “Make us feel good” or “Go get ’em, champ.” If we want this work of faith leadership to be taken as seriously as law or medicine or finance (and we do!), then we need to train and shape the work to represent more than a demonstration of charisma. As important as public proclamation is, we say too little about Jesus and ourselves if we say that’s all it’s about. Most of us wouldn’t dare say this, but our practice says otherwise.

So how do we assess our work, so that we can hold each other accountable? Our sacred text and tradition demand effective public proclamation, yes, and also effective formation and management of community values; clergy health, and the responsible and moral use of authority; lifting up the voices of others; management of inevitable crises. In other words, the gospel demands we look for more than how one person sounds for 8 to 45 minutes each week. Yet our processes don’t always reflect that.

I’d like to do better. I bet a lot of us would have a hard time saying what “better” even means for church leaders. Is that something we’d tolerate in any other profession?