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A letter to ruling elders: Let's help our pastors lead well

*Every pastor deserves someone who loves them and their church equally,
someone who can help them navigate the challenges of ministry and avoid aimless drifting.*

By Matthew Skolnik, Executive Presbyter,
Presbytery of the Muskingum Valley

*A note from the author: A special thank you to pastors,
elders, Committee on Ministry members, and synod
colleagues who helped shape my thoughts and this letter.*

Elders, your pastors are some of the best people around. By and large, they have great hearts, work diligently for God's kingdom, and exhaust themselves serving in ministry. However, as the church, we have failed them because we have not trained pastors to:

- Align the work of the church to God's mission of redemption, deliverance and salvation.
- Equip Christians for the work of ministry.
- Build faith-based communities in and outside our congregations.



Skolnik.

While pastors and elders share ministry, pastoral leadership comes with more responsibilities, including caring for the whole congregation and helping the community plan. Yet, as the church, we have not communicated that this type of forward-moving leadership is expected among our pastors. Because we have witnessed pastors who ran churches with iron fists, we actively trained toxic leadership out of our system. Unfortunately, we have also trained healthy leadership out of our system as well. This is no single person's fault. But as we practice naming the staunch reality around us in love, it is high time that we encourage, empower and expect our pastors to lead.

As a presbytery executive who works with dozens of churches and pastors, I highlight this important conversation with love and grace. My thoughts are not comprehensive nor perfect, but my intent is to help us find simple changes that make a big difference in our shared life. *continued*



Patrick will be away June 26-30.

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Signs that your pastor is not leading the church forward

- Session meetings focus on committee reports and structural procedures instead of relationships and vision.
- A pastor doesn't manage their time, and the church's time, in a way that equips others to practice their faith and builds the local, faith-based community.
- During times of discernment and visioning, the pastor does not introduce new communities to the congregation by taking key church leaders on field trips or bringing in guest speakers.
- Pastors say something like, "I will help the congregation do what they want to do, but I am not going to be a driving force."
- There is an aversion to setting specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-oriented, and meaningful goals.

Elders, please do not take this list and beat your pastors up with it. This is not the point. Instead, we want to encourage and empower our pastors to expand their leadership.

Why pastors do not try to move the church forward

Pastors bear the responsibility of guiding our congregations toward what is faithful now and in the future. But pastors do not always embrace this charge because:

- We have trained leadership out of the pastorate as an overreaction to toxic leadership.
- We have not taught pastors simple and effective leadership tools such as: providing elders with healthy options, reframing conversations around God's mission, and engaging their local cities and towns.
- Pastors have tried to lead but have little sense of progress.
- Some congregations harm pastors who try to make progress.
- Pastors spend all their energy sustaining traditional ministry cycles.
- Some pastors are just trying to make it to retirement.
- We have not highlighted, celebrated and promoted bold leaders in the scriptures.
- We send individuals and not collaborative pastoral teams to lead our churches. In doing so, we put the weight of pastoral leadership on the shoulders of one person and require them to have more skills than any one person reasonably can have.
- We actively train new and young pastors not to change anything for 2 or 3 years.

How to encourage, empower and expect leadership who moves the church forward

Provide an invitation and expectation to lead. Elders can encourage their pastors to lead by communicating the importance of strong pastoral leadership. These invitations to lead can be conveyed through various channels over an extended period. It may be necessary to involve presbytery leaders in the discussions or seek external help. *continued*

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Ultimately, the session can set clear expectations and requirements for pastoral leadership and emphasize their importance. At the same time, elders can vow to learn with and support their pastoral leadership. If you need help on how to have difficult conversations, there are many resources out there. Conversations Worth Having is an excellent one.

Worship for June 18

Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19

Genesis 18:1-15

Sermon: *The Divine sense of humor.*

Tell pastors what is missing. It's vital for pastors to embrace simple tools that have not been taught or offered to them. Often, pastors express their desire to “get the church beyond its walls,” with well-thought-out lessons on the theological importance of engaging the world. However, preaching and teaching alone will not move the church forward. There are other leadership tools that can help. For example:

- Invite outside speakers who can help the church grow its unique mission.
- Take church members to environments and communities that challenge us and expand our comfort zones. Then debrief and prayerfully consider what God is doing.
- Help church members identify their spiritual gifts, their mission passions and the community needs. Then, support them in finding ways to serve at the intersection of all three in ways that align with the church's unique mission.
- When it comes to making decisions, start the conversation by providing healthy options. From there, the church can experiment and discern God's will.

Provide leadership growth opportunities. Every pastor deserves someone who loves them and their church equally, someone who can help them navigate the challenges of ministry and avoid aimless drifting. As elders, there are several options to help your pastors become better leaders. Such options include:

- Find local leaders who are friendly to the mission of the church and understand volunteer organizations. Vet them carefully and invite them to meet and work with individual pastors. Recent retirees may be especially interested in investing their skills and time.
- Encourage pastors to attend continuing education and mission experiences that have a direct tie to advancing the mission of the church. Emphasize workshops, seminars and advanced degrees that have a clear connection to building the church of tomorrow.
- Encourage pastors to form strong relationships with other pastors who share a passion for ministering in a new and discontinuous era, regardless of denomination or location. Emphasize the importance of taking action, not just discussing ideas.
- Consider hiring a coach to work with the pastor and session to identify solutions to a challenge, navigate roadblocks, identify resources, and make meaningful action plans. However, it is important that this coaching has established boundaries. Starting each session meeting with open-ended questions can lead to discussions that do not advance the unique mission of the local church.
- Don't hesitate to work with pastors to plan ways to split their time wisely. In my experience, this can allow pastors to learn leadership skills elsewhere and provide emotional and financial space from the church.

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Create pastoral teams with members from different churches that focus on specific ministry skills. In Muskingum Valley, we have organizational, pastoral and missional leadership teams that work to align church efforts with their mission, equip God's people for ministry, and engage in local mission.

In conclusion, we are living in a moment of significant division and decline in the American church. What got us here is not what will help us develop a new and vibrant Christian community for tomorrow. All levels of leadership are required to move the church forward. However, one of the most important types of leadership we need is strong, bold, loving, open, and attentive pastoral leadership. Elders, let's work together on helping our pastors lead well.



Music Notes for June 11.

The closing hymn for the last Sunday of June will be the *Hymn to Joy*, adapted from the fourth movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770-1827) Symphony no. 9. Beethoven completed his final symphony in 1824, when he was all but completely deaf. As chronicled by many an historian, the work premiered in May of 1824, with the composer conducting. At the conclusion of the performance, a member of the ensemble turned Beethoven around to face the ecstatic audience, which showered the composer with accolades.

The final movement of the symphony features a chorus, the first time a vocal ensemble was added to a symphony. Beethoven paired his music with the *Ode to Joy* by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). That text was later adapted by Henry van Dyke, Jr. (1852-1933), a Presbyterian minister, author, educator and diplomat. Among his many accomplishments was chairing the committee that wrote the first printed liturgy for the Presbyterian Church. While serving as guest preacher at Williams College in 1907, Van Dyke said he was inspired by the Berkshire Mountains to pen a poem intended to be sung to Beethoven's music. He called it a "hymn of trust and joy and hope."



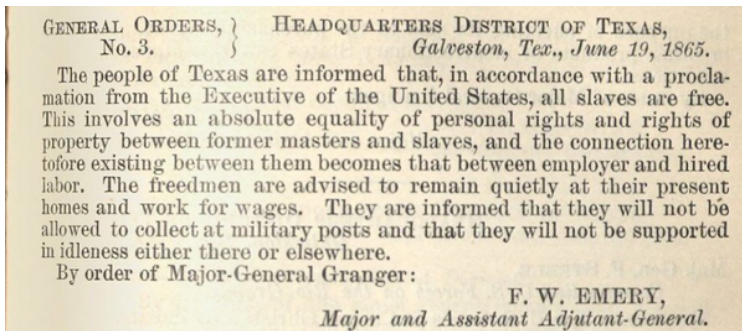
Van Dyke.

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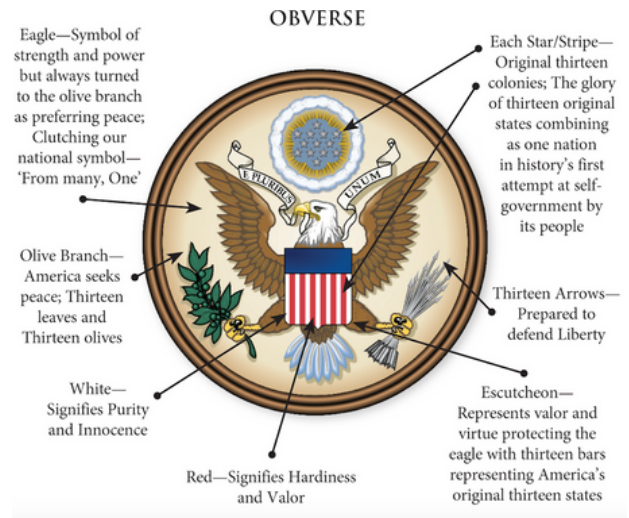


This Week in History.



In Galveston, Texas, Union Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger issues General Order No. 3: *The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves...* The day is now celebrated as the **Juneteenth National Holiday** to commemorate Emancipation and to recognize the struggle for freedom and equality of African Americans.

June 19, 1895



The U.S. Congress officially adopts the **Great Seal** of the United States of America.

June 20, 1782



Prince William Arthur Philip Louis is born in London, England, June 21, 1982.

June 21, 1982



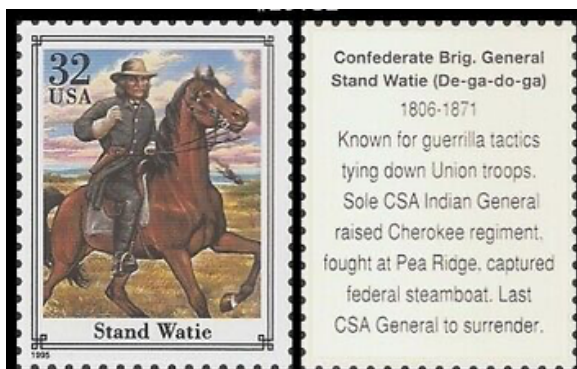
Eighty-six people are killed and another 127 injured when the engineer of a Michigan Central train fell asleep and ran his troop train into the rear of a **Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus** train near Hammond, Indiana. Of the 400 performers and roustabouts, some fifty-three were killed, while most the animals were killed or destroyed. because of injury. The performers, of whom only three could be identified, were buried in a mass grave.

June 22, 1918



Boxer **Jack Dempsey** is born in Manassa, CO. Dubbed "The Manassa Mauler," he reigned as world heavyweight champion from 1919 to 1926. Following his boxing career, he became a successful New York restaurateur.

June 24, 1895



The First Indian Brigade of the Trans-Mississippi, under Cherokee leader and Confederate **General Stand Watie**, agrees to a cease-fire at Doaksville in the Choctaw Nation (now Oklahoma). He was the last Confederate general in the field to surrender.

June 23, 1865



Eric Arthur Blair is born at Montihari, Bengal, India. (as Eric Arthur Blair). under the nom de plume **George Orwell**, he became famous for his satirical novels *Animal Farm* (1944), and 1984 (1949).

June 25, 1903