

Struggling to Lead

Thomas had been the solo pastor for three years, and even though he came out of a previous church internship and then seminary with all the tools to do ministry—preaching, pastoral care, leading small groups—he was struggling to lead.

One day, as he was pulling up to the office, he said to himself, “I don’t know what they want. I work all the time. I have tons of pastoral meetings. Maybe I should start a vision campaign?”, he thought. He didn’t know what the vision was going to be, but it seemed like it had worked for other churches. Plus, his more business minded elders would appreciate the effort.

As he mused on a potential vision a text notification pinged on his phone. “Can we meet up today plz?”, it read. Although Thomas had had no intention of meeting up today with the congregant who sent that text, he felt bad telling him no. What did it matter if he didn’t do some of the meta-thinking that leadership book he had read had advised? It felt nice to be wanted. When they sat down, this person seemed eager to learn about the Bible and theology, and he was active in various parts of the city and well-liked in the church. This guy would be perfect leading some key aspect of the ministry, Thomas knew.

“But what if he turns me down when I ask him to lead?”, Thomas wondered.

Later, his stomach sank when he sat down to check his email. A small clique of high-performing elders sent him a message describing “informal conversations with other leaders” who all had “points of considerable frustration” with his leadership. Their solution was to send out a survey to the rest of the leadership to sound out their experience under Thomas. They would then present their findings to Thomas so that they could have an “honest and frank conversation together”. Although Thomas asked them not to send it out, they had already done so by the time he had made his request. When he expressed frustration and worry about this, these leaders told him that they felt hurt and surprised that he would question their motives.

Next came his weekly meeting with his children’s director. She was loud, outgoing, lived on an emotional roller-coaster, and often questioned or subverted Thomas’ authority in front of him and the church secretary. Thomas knew that he should stop it, but he feared confronting her. To be honest, he was a little intimidated of her personality, and he feared the power she had started to wield around the office. The thought of pushing back on her made him wilt.

“Maybe I can just wait her out”, he thought. “She got married two years ago. Surely, she’ll go on maternity soon, or leave entirely.”

As he thought about his ministry, Thomas couldn’t help but feel a mix of bewilderment and disappointment. Congregants who wanted to be led were frustrated that there was no plan for how to reach the city or equip them. His children’s director was undermining his authority. People told him he was a decent preacher, and he enjoyed pastoral visits with people. Shouldn’t that be enough?

Name the issues, internal and external, that Thomas is facing.

Why do you think that Thomas’ formal ministry training is inadequate for him to be a good leader?

How would you advise Thomas going forward?