



# A Faithful Role

Pastoral leadership in congregations and communities

By Tabitha Barbour

*I feel like I am skating on a razor blade at all times.*

This is how Pastor John Russell responded with both a sigh and a surprising chuckle when asked how he balances his pastoral and community leadership roles. Pastor Russell is the Senior Pastor at University United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, IN, serves as a Chaplain of the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD), and is a member of the Black Church Coalition (BCC). Pastor Russell shared that his role as a community leader gives him a voice for others, the opportunity to be a source of comfort for those in need, and the responsibility to share what is happening in the city with his congregation, but it can still be difficult to manage so many roles.

Many pastors can sympathize with Pastor Russell's sentiment as they often find themselves in a delicate balance of leading their internal spiritual community and holding roles of influence outside of their church. Due to their various affiliations and roles, it can be complicated to clearly define a pastor's call to leadership and the broader community in which they serve.

For some faith leaders, they define their roles as set by the geographic area surrounding their church's location. They not only serve within the walls of the church but in its immediate vicinity to reach those in their neighborhood. Others see their leadership roles more in terms of affinity and shared identity—whether racial, socioeconomic, denominational, or political. Their beliefs lead them to address sociopolitical issues on behalf of and in partnership with their congregations to assist or advocate for certain populations. In both cases, pastors seek to improve the lives of others and to advance the gospel.

## Representing a Congregation Outside the Church

Like Pastor Russell, Pastor Darrell Brooks holds many leadership roles in Indianapolis. He is the Senior Pastor at

New Liberty Missionary Baptist Church, a member of the IMPD General Orders Board, and the Clergy Co-Chair of the BCC, an active community of faith leaders, congregations, and community members in Indiana committed to “Building power with everyday people for a more just world.” Pastor Russell's commitment to community involvement is rooted in wanting to see the Black Church engaged in solving issues facing Black communities.

Although all faith leaders represent their congregations to a certain extent, Brooks argues that the Black pastor carries an additional responsibility (or burden) to represent their congregation outside of the church that white pastors can opt out of due to privilege and choosing not to address social-political issues, particularly if they serve in a church that is predominantly white and affluent. He said, “We both speak to our congregations on Sunday mornings and inspire them. The difference is I speak for my people Monday through Saturday.”

The responsibility to speak out grows for Black Pastors who engage in community leadership and organizing. Through the Black Church Coalition, Pastor Russell and Pastor Brooks, along with their congregations, are working alongside other faith and community leaders to advocate for a variety of issues to improve conditions for certain groups of people in Indiana, including expansion of the clinician-led mental health crisis response team in Indianapolis, universal Pre-K, and lowering property taxes for seniors.

Russell and Brooks' congregations are supportive of their participation in the BCC with some of their members also serving as leaders. This takes some of the pressure off the pastor to be the sole connection point to the BCC and brings others from the church into the broader mission.

Conversations with Pastor Brooks and Pastor Russell led to the history of the Black Church and the connection to slavery, segregation, and the fight for racial justice. Pastor

Russell reflected, “Social justice is inseparable from the Black Church. If you go back to meetings on plantations, those worship experiences led into discussions of the question: How do we survive tomorrow?” These pastors’ engagement with community organizing builds on a tradition birthed out of the necessity to find strength and courage in the struggle.

## Teaching Others to Engage the Community

Sometimes pastors take a more teaching and persuasive approach in leading their congregations to be involved in the community. Pastor Scott Jester, Missional Engagement Director at Grace Gathering Church in Fort Wayne, shared that his church’s leaders intentionally teach congregants about community engagement. This work is embedded in Grace Gathering’s mission. Pastor Jester said that his work is “[helping congregants] feel a greater sense of responsibility to advancing God’s Kingdom within the city” and that “every person in the church has a responsibility” in sharing the gospel with their community.

Grace Gathering has also historically served as an incubator for mission-driven organizations. These organizations started as ministries of the church, and some of them have grown to become their own 501(c)3 organizations. When asked if he thinks there is an appropriate “lane” for pastors to play a faithful role in addressing sociopolitical issues, Pastor Jester said, “The responsibility lies in loving people well—caring for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor—the key things that we see in scripture.”

When thinking about his role in congregational and community leadership, Pastor Jester said, “The way I think about ministry is to pursue something then raise people up to lead.” He is passionate about mentoring leaders to realize

their unique gifts so they can make an impact through the work they are called to do. He does this through his role as the Founder and Board Chairman of Empowered International. Empowered International is a faith-based, entrepreneurial program for young adults to start, develop, and grow a business. There are three locations for the program: two in Haiti and one in Fort Wayne. Jester explained that Empowered International will be launching “The Refuge,” an 18,000 square foot complex with eight short-term lease apartments and a hub for internationally focused non-profit organizations. The apartments will provide housing for program participants and those from immigrant populations who need housing. The shared common space for non-profit organizations will promote sharing resources and support between organizations.

## An Extension of the Church

Many pastors feel compelled to address a variety of injustices facing their community through sermon themes, prayers, and direct engagement. Faith leaders who are called to serve congregations and broader communities want to see their congregations engaged, they want their congregations informed on what is happening in the community, and they want to make a positive impact. They balance both the expectations of their congregants and the work they feel called to do in the community.

A common thread amongst the pastors interviewed is that they all lead their congregations to participate in a greater way in their respective communities. They see the community as an extension of the church and the church as an avenue to activate the broader community. Without the bounds of their respective churches, faith leaders expand their reach and leadership and extend their prophetic hope for a better tomorrow.



Tabitha Barbour is a research associate for the Congregations and Polarization Project. Barbour is also an independent project and event manager supporting entrepreneurs in building capacity for their business and nonprofit organizations with their mission-driven fund development strategy. She is a graduate of Butler University, where she earned a degree in English Literature with minors in Political Science and Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies. She is a creative, essayist, and researcher and has been published in the *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research* and in *Apex* and *PATTERN* magazines.