

Stop Training Leaders on Paper, Start Handing Them the Work: Hadley Baker on Leadership Development in the Church

A Rowlett, Texas pastor, serving the Dallas area, argues that responsibility, not curriculum, is what actually forms a leader.



Rowlett, Texas Sep 10, 2026 (Issuewire.com) - Most churches develop leaders the same way. A candidate is given reading, a series of meetings, and a period of shadowing an experienced person, after which the candidate is considered prepared.

The result is a person who has watched a job closely and has never done it. Baker sees the pattern often enough in Rowlett and Dallas area church work to treat it as a structural problem rather than an individual one. [Hadley Baker](#), lead pastor of City On A Hill Community Church in Rowlett, Texas, northeast of Dallas, considers that outcome predictable and avoidable.

"A person can complete every study a church offers and still be unable to lead anything," Baker says. "Reading about a decision is not the same activity as making one."

His alternative is less tidy and, he acknowledges, less comfortable to administer.

The Problem With Leadership on Paper

Curriculum-based development produces a measurable outcome, which is part of its appeal. Attendance can be tracked. Completion can be recorded. A church can report progress.

What it cannot produce, in Baker's account, is judgment. Judgment forms when a person owns a result, and no amount of preparatory material substitutes for that.

"The first time somebody owns an outcome is the first time they learn anything that lasts," Baker says. "Everything before that is rehearsal, and rehearsal has its limits."

The gap tends to surface at the worst moment. A leader who has only observed encounters a situation the material never covered and discovers there is no procedure to follow.

Baker is careful not to dismiss study itself. Reading, teaching, and structured instruction all have a place in his church, and he uses them.

The objection is to treating preparation as a substitute for practice. Material can inform a decision; it cannot manufacture the experience of having made one.

Responsibility Is the Curriculum

Baker hands over decisions that carry consequences. The transfer has to be genuine to work, because a decision that can be quietly reversed was never transferred at all.

In Rowlett, that means living with outcomes he would have reached differently. He describes this as the actual cost of developing anyone, and treats reluctance to pay it as the reason most pipelines stall.

"If a pastor takes the decision back every time he disagrees, the person leading knows it," Baker says. "They stop deciding and start guessing what he wants."

The limit he draws is about harm rather than quality. A rough first attempt at running a ministry is training. A pastoral situation with a family in crisis is not a training exercise, and Baker sets that boundary before anything is handed over.

Drawing that line is most of the skill, in his description, and it has to be drawn in advance. A boundary established after something has gone wrong reads as a reprimand rather than a structure.

Where the Conviction Came From

Baker's own path ran through teaching, discipleship, pastoral care, and marriage and family ministry before arriving at the lead pastor role at City On A Hill Community Church. Each stage taught him something the previous stage could not.

He describes the sequence as formation by responsibility rather than by instruction. The lessons that stuck arrived when something was his to carry.

"Nobody explained how to sit with a family after a death," Baker says. "That was learned by being in the room, unprepared, more than once."

The experience produced a preference for handing responsibility over early. It also produced patience with the results.

Baker acknowledges that the payoff arrives late and usually belongs to someone else. The visible credit goes to whoever is doing the job now, not to whoever prepared them for it.

A pastor who requires that credit, he suggests, will not sustain the practice long enough for it to matter.

Why Service Has to Come First

Underneath the method sits a conviction Baker states without qualification. Leadership begins with service, and it stops being leadership at the point it becomes position.

The test he applies is not a stated commitment but an unwatched action. Whether a person follows through on a small obligation nobody is tracking reveals more than any conversation about integrity does.

"Character shows up in administrative moments, not in speeches about character," Baker says. "A leader eventually ends up somewhere nobody is looking, and what happens there was visible earlier in something small."

Church work drifts toward rewarding visibility. Baker regards that drift as constant and worth resisting deliberately.

He applies the same measure to himself first. His counseling with individuals and couples is pastoral and biblical rather than licensed clinical care, and stating that limit plainly is, in his framing, another instance of service preceding position.

The Role of Trust When Someone Fails

Correcting a person before they have failed teaches them a supervisor's preferences. Correcting them

afterward teaches them the work. Baker prefers the second, which requires watching something go worse than it needed to.

The response to failure determines whether the method functions. If a first mistake produces withdrawal of responsibility, nobody attempts anything again.

“People repair things faster when they are not busy defending themselves,” Baker says. “Take the shame out of it and the fix takes an afternoon.”

Baker also keeps the correction private. A failure discussed publicly teaches everyone watching to avoid risk, which is the opposite of the intended result.

The pattern compounds quietly. A congregation where mistakes are handled without spectacle produces volunteers willing to try things, and a congregation where they are not produces a small, cautious circle holding the same three roles for years.

Small Consistent Actions

The formation Baker describes happens in unremarkable increments. A commitment kept. A follow-up call made. A room set up by someone who could have delegated it.

None of these register as leadership development. Cumulatively, in his account, they are most of it.

The same logic governs how he teaches. [Baker preaches](#) in plain language and builds each sermon around what a person can act on before the week is out, which he considers a service decision rather than a stylistic one.

“Leadership begins with service, and service is mostly boring,” Baker says. “The part people want to skip is the part that forms them.”

He pairs the same standard with his own habits away from the church. Woodworking, guitar, and half marathons in national parks supply forms of effort no one else is measuring, which he regards as reasonable practice for a profession where much of the work is unobserved.

A Call for Change in Church Leadership

Baker argues that congregations built around a small group of indispensable people are fragile in a way that resembles strength. Such a church runs efficiently until one person is sick, traveling, or simply worn down.

Distributed responsibility, in his view, is not merely a development strategy. It is what allows a Rowlett congregation to continue functioning through an ordinary bad month.

Baker develops leaders at City On A Hill Community Church on that basis, and the leaders he has formed are now forming others. He is the author of *No Longer A Slave*, available on Amazon in print and audiobook, and a contributor to faith-based podcasts on leadership, marriage, and discipleship, where the same argument recurs.

“Leadership begins with service,” [Baker](#) says. “A church that cannot say that about the people it has raised up has trained them for something else.”

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