

## BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT USING “PASTOR” FOR LAITY

By Michael B. Thompson, General Counsel

Increasingly, it seems that everyone who has any kind of a role in a church is known as a pastor. In addition to the senior pastor, associate pastor, youth pastor, and other traditional pastors, church bulletins now identify a number of pastoral roles that were unheard of just a few years ago. No longer is the title reserved for those who have been ordained or who are seeking ordination. While this points to diversity, creativity, and enthusiasm within the priesthood of believers, a church should not be too hasty in assigning a pastoral title.

The title of “pastor” carries with it some legal and social expectations that should be considered:

- *Manual* 513 states that a pastor is an ordained elder or licensed minister (elder track) who, under the call of God and His people, has oversight of a local church.
- The church, and society, in general, has an expectation that someone who is a pastor has met certain requirements to have that position. Among those requirements is theological education and pastoral training. There is also the expectation that the pastor operates within an established system of accountability.
- Pastors have certain privileges and responsibilities that do not necessarily apply to laity, such as the ability to hold certain matters in utter confidence and not have to disclose them to anyone; the ability to solemnize marriage; the ability to speak on behalf of a religious nonprofit entity; among others.

When these expectations confront real-world complications, the pastoral title begins to work to the disadvantage of all involved. Consider, for example, a layperson who is entrusted with the title of “Youth Pastor”:

- Parents who otherwise might ask a lot of questions before entrusting their children to the care of a volunteer lay youth leader, may not think twice about someone whom they assume is credentialed clergy.
- Children and youth place a higher degree of trust in someone whom they assume to be a “real” pastor.
- The church board may assume that full liability insurance coverage extends to all youth activities, unaware that the insurance policy excludes coverage for anyone who does not meet the requirements to be recognized as a minister by the denomination.
- A parishioner confides to the “youth pastor” in a pastoral counseling session and admits to someone that he or she thought could never come to light. This expectation falls apart when the “youth pastor” is subpoenaed to testify in a divorce, custody, or criminal hearing and is forced to disclose the conversation.

If, in this situation, an incident occurs where a child is hurt – either by sexual misconduct or inadequate supervision, the assignment of a ministerial title to this youth leader will be one of the central issues in the inevitable lawsuit. Essentially, it will come down to accusations of

misrepresentation of someone as clergy, or it will be claims that the church's clergy are grossly untrained. Either way, it is bad news for a church that is trying to avoid costly distractions from its mission.

There are other ways to encourage full lay participation in the mission of the church. There are many reasons why the process of moving from laity to clergy is lengthy and complex. Casual use of ministerial titles is just one way that the distinction is dangerously blurred.