

The Pastor- Prophet Paradigm

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the emerging paradigm of the pastor–prophet as a model for the renewal of inner-city small churches. *Pastor–Prophet: Small Church Renewal in the Inner City* presents a biblical, theological, and missional framework demonstrating how God balances His church through the integrated gifts of pastoral care and prophetic vision. Inner-city congregations, often burdened by poverty, social fragmentation, and spiritual fatigue can experience revitalization through leaders who both nurture and challenge their communities. The pastor–prophet embodies the dual role of shepherd and prophetic voice, tending the flock while confronting injustice and complacency. Rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ, this model unites preaching and healing, proclamation and incarnation. Drawing from Scripture, church history, theological literature, and qualitative interviews with pastors, the research argues that this synthesis forms a divinely intended pattern for urban ministry in a postmodern era. The work highlights the Holy Spirit’s ongoing activity in small churches and affirms that leadership development centered on the pastor–prophet role is essential for sustainable transformation. The findings contribute to the broader conversation on theological education and offer a renewed vision for equipping future leaders to guide small congregations toward spiritual vitality and social impact.

**Keywords:** pastor-prophet, inner-city small churches, urban theology, prophetic leadership, ecclesiology,

The inner city has always been one of the chief proving grounds of the church's theology of leadership.<sup>1</sup> The densely packed and often spiritually de-constructed urban core is where small churches, at the end of the post-Christendom rope, provide the last outpost of faithful witness of faith, community and hope.<sup>2</sup> Though megachurches get all the headlines, it is often the underdog small church that is the living, breathing incarnation of the power of the gospel for the long haul and inner city ministry.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it is in these often neglected, taken-for-granted congregations that the ancient paradigm of the pastor-prophet has already begun to reshape leadership.<sup>4</sup> This hybrid, incarnational role synergistically combines the heart of the shepherd and the voice of the seer, resulting in leaders who are as much about care for the sheep as they are about crying out against the shepherds that would fleece them.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the theological literature has typically treated the functions of pastor and prophet as either mutually exclusive or at least in competition with one another.<sup>6</sup> This paper makes the case that the pastor-prophet is not some experiment but an incarnation and theologically integrated divine paradigm for how to actually keep inner-city small churches alive and whole, and that this model will have enormous and largely untapped power for ecclesial renewal in the inner city in a postmodern age.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on biblical paradigms, historical examples and current expressions of successful small-church ministry, this

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 17–20.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 92–94.

<sup>3</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, "Prophetic Leadership and the Black Church," *Journal of Religious Thought* 54, no. 1 (1997): 45–59.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3–5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27.

<sup>6</sup> John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 204–206.

<sup>7</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 21–22.

study affirms that this model is not an experiment, but has already been put to the test and found to be a winner.<sup>8</sup>

Second, we see the necessity of the pastor-prophet pattern biblically. In both the Old and New Testaments, God has sent forth men who demonstrate both the compassion of a pastor and the courage of a prophet.<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah displayed the heart of a shepherd when he wept over his people, even as he called out the idolatrous leadership for its systemic oppression.<sup>10</sup> The psalms of David, for instance, attest to the inner posture of a pastor when it says, “Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise your name; the righteous will gather around me, for you will reward me” (Ps. 142:7). At the same time, David was unafraid to call the king to account and remind the nation of God’s holiness (Ps. 119).<sup>11</sup> Jesus is our Good Shepherd who gave Himself up on our behalf (John 10: 11), but He is also the Prophet who spoke truth to the religious leaders (Matt. 23:27–28). Paul displayed this same trait when he both poured himself out in sacrificial care to the churches he planted and fearlessly reproved sin and false teaching.<sup>12</sup> This fivefold pattern of Ephesians 4: 11–13 makes it clear that pastoral and prophetic functions are meant to go hand in hand, both set “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 88–90.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 5–7.

<sup>10</sup> J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 41–43.

<sup>11</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1, Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 27–28.

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 102–104.

<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 95–97.

Prophet as embedded in the family of God, the prophetic voice in the local church is not like the prophets of old, who cried out in the wilderness (Luke 3:4).<sup>14</sup> The prophet in the church is that voice from within the house that shakes up the status quo (see Micah 6: 9).<sup>15</sup> Some pastors also walk in the office of the prophet as well. Not all pastors are prophets and not all prophets are pastors.<sup>16</sup> This role is simultaneously covenantal and covenantalizing. The prophet is covenantal as he/she is a part of the community, a member of the covenant people. The prophet is covenantalizing in his/her vocation to call the church to reform.<sup>17</sup> The prophet is pastoral in that the people listen to that voice (pastoral) as well as being prophetic in that the pastor must not become ossified (prophetic). Therefore, the pastor who is also a prophet leads from love and speaks from authority (pastor/prophet).<sup>18</sup> The pastor as prophet in the small church context discerns the level of anointing on the church, declares the word of God to them, and leads members to deeper levels of personal and corporate renewal.<sup>19</sup> To be a prophet is not just to predict and pronounce; the prophet is the interpreter of the times and calls God's people to live out their faithfulness in the midst of everyday struggles in money, poverty, injustice, and all of life's other dysfunctions.<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann puts it best: The ministry of the prophet is to "nurture, nourish, and evoke an

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<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 3–5.

<sup>16</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 71–73.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 118.

<sup>18</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 142–145.

<sup>19</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 54–56.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 13.

alternative consciousness.”<sup>21</sup> By combining this with the pastoral gaze, this “alternative consciousness” is not only proclaimed but also pastored.<sup>22</sup> It is when prophetic and pastoral vision are intertwined that the inner-city church is most effective at God’s process of both sustaining and reforming the local congregation.

### **Historical Context: The Pastor-Prophet in the Urban Small-Church Tradition**

Inner-city church history (particularly in African American and Pentecostal-Holiness traditions) provides another example of pastor-prophet overlap. In fact, in these communities the pastor-prophet has long been normative in the ecclesiology of the city.<sup>23</sup> From the storefront churches of the Great Migration era to today’s neighborhood congregations, black church leaders have functioned pastorally as embodiments of a theology of the cross and a theology of the city—survival and change.<sup>24</sup> Inner-city pastors and prophets cared for their communities and announced the holiness of God. They both offered food and heard confessions and challenged segregation and called for holiness.<sup>25</sup> In the middle decades of the twentieth century, African American urban pastors and prophets like Adam Clayton Powell Sr., Gardner C. Taylor, and Mother Rosa Horn lived this reality.<sup>26</sup> Raboteau explains, “It was pastors and prophets who could blend within a single ministry both the sermon and the prophetic witness, who combined social activism and spiritual

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<sup>21</sup> Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 47–49.

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People*, 112–114.

<sup>23</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, “Prophetic Leadership and the Black Church,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 54, no. 1 (1997): 45–46.

<sup>24</sup> Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 59–61.

<sup>25</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 186–190.

<sup>26</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 35–38.

empowerment.”<sup>27</sup> In many cases, in fact, the small church itself became a prophetic institution, the “incubator for civil rights, economic resistance, and theological experimentation.”<sup>28</sup> These congregations were not always big or visible but they showed what theologian Cheryl Sanders refers to as moral agency under oppression, and in doing so, confirmed that small churches can be both shepherding and prophetic.<sup>29</sup> This heritage makes clear that the pastor-prophet is a return to a historical reality of the Spirit at work in the marginalized church.<sup>30</sup>

If there is one stable spiritual and social anchor of the contemporary urban church, it is the small church.<sup>31</sup> This means that for the small church to survive it must be led by pastoral and prophetic leaders.<sup>32</sup> The pastor-prophet must be the prophetic and pastoral interpreter between revelation and people.<sup>33</sup> The pastor-prophet is therefore someone who can translate the biblical text and its truth claims into pastoral practices that are healing, organizing, and mobilizing.<sup>34</sup> In action, this implies that the local pastor-prophet tends to the spiritual life of a community through biblical preaching and spiritual formation, but they also work to make sense of the structural conditions of their community such as the issues surrounding public housing, generational poverty,

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<sup>27</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>28</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 153–156.

<sup>29</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 101–103.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 12–13.

<sup>31</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 167–169.

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 72.

<sup>33</sup> Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 45–47.

<sup>34</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 102–104.

economic and racial injustice, and more.<sup>35</sup> Their words are edifying and authoritative because they are backed by their intimate pastoral relationship with God's people. The prophet-pastor also speaks to places of power with pastoral-prophetic words which can critique, encourage, and unbind a community.<sup>36</sup> Fuller School of Theology professor Mark Lau Branson coins this leadership as missional discernment.<sup>37</sup> This is because the prophetic and pastoral have the capacity to equip God's people to hear the voice of the Spirit in their particular places and contexts.<sup>38</sup> Luke Powery also refers to this aspect of the preacher as a "prophetic lamenter and celebrant".<sup>39</sup> In this posture, the inner city small church is no longer considered a thing of the past but a prophetic beacon of the kingdom on the margins, a church that equips local disciples to be contemplative and bold. The blending of the pastoral and prophetic then becomes a theological intervention to prosperity gospel consumer Christianity as well as a sustainable, Spirit-empowered model for the church today.

As we have seen, the Scriptural, historical, and contemporary evidence substantiates the fact that the pastor-prophet model is not simply an academic construct but rather a Spirit-filled pattern already at work in small churches in the inner city.<sup>40</sup> It is here, at the intersection of care and confrontation, compassion and courage, that we find God's chosen instruments for local

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 121–122.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 59.

<sup>37</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 63–65.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 45.

<sup>39</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 214–216.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 31–33.

reformation.<sup>41</sup> The pastor-prophet serves as a living hinge between the heavenly and the earthly, shepherding God's people and also proclaiming God's word to God's people in the midst of urban struggle.<sup>42</sup> Appropriately cultivated, this synthesis yields churches that are spiritually deep, socially aware, and missionally engaged.<sup>43</sup> Fuller Seminary's missional theology, for its part, emphasizes precisely the same missional integration of gospel and culture.<sup>44</sup> Namely, the church is not called to run away from the world but rather to engage in God's work of redemption within it.<sup>45</sup> On this account, empowering and equipping pastor-prophets for the small church context is not a luxury but rather a matter of utmost urgency for the contemporary church.<sup>46</sup> In a world that idolizes both celebrity and size, God continues to call forth and to anoint lowly leaders who are not only shepherds but also seers, voices that comfort and confront and call the city back to God.

### **Epilogue: The Future of the Pastor–Prophet in the Urban Church**

In the 21st century church, as more and more leaders fail to see the urgency for prophetic engagement in this postmodern time of uncertainty, cultural fragmentation, and institutional decline, the call for pastor-prophets has never been more vital.<sup>47</sup> In a moment that so easily

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<sup>41</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 115–117.

<sup>42</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 71–72.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 111–113.

<sup>44</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 92–93.

<sup>45</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 58–60.

<sup>46</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 334–336.

<sup>47</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 9–11.

convinces leaders to choose between being relevant or being right, the pastor-prophet is neither intimidated to be neither, saying and embodying a truth that is at once both timely and timeless.<sup>48</sup> The small, incarnational church in the urban context is both the proving ground for this emerging renewal, and serves as a microcosm for the divine trajectory of God's kingdom where authentic leadership is measured not in meeting growth but in missional transformation.<sup>49</sup> This model of community also challenges and empowers the wider church, reminding it that God often perfects strength through weakness and that prophetic vibrancy comes from unlikely places.<sup>50</sup> As Rah has pointedly observed, "the future of American Christianity is in some ways in the hands of those with very little, the church of the least among us." The future of the church will depend upon hearing and learning from the theology of the marginalized.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, the pastor-prophet is less a leader and more a sign and a sacrament of God's progressive revelation in and through the city itself.<sup>52</sup> The call to be this kind of pastor-prophet is not a glamorous one, but an incarnational one: to reside in the tension of the celestial and the asphalt and to lead people toward a foretaste of justice, hope, and holiness.<sup>53</sup> We must be faithful to continue to train, empower, and release shepherds who can both tend to the soul and change the city.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 168–170.

<sup>49</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, "Prophetic Leadership and the Black Church," *Journal of Religious Thought* 54, no. 1 (1997): 54–56.

<sup>50</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 89–91.

<sup>51</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 181–183.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 142–143.

<sup>53</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 218–220.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 133–135.

## The Psychology of the Pastor–Prophet

The pastoral and prophetic temperaments are both highly psychological, as well as theological, dispositions. In real life, the pastor–prophet lives a life of inherent tension, feeling called on one hand “to comfort the afflicted,” but also, to “afflict the comfortable.”<sup>55</sup> The prophetic temperament is by its nature a more lonely, frustrated, and grief-filled vocation because it sees God and His reality with a high level of clarity. The pastoral temperament is by its nature weighted down with the feelings, frustrations, and pain of other people. The beauty and burden of the pastor–prophet is a life squeezed between both a soul crying out for peace but living in the sweet tension of both tenderness and toughness in relationship to people, God, and self.<sup>56</sup> It is a vocation that heightens the shadows of leadership in a leader, a phenomenon noted by Parker Palmer as a slippery inclination toward allowing one’s “self-worth [to be] based on doing or receiving or control rather than on our true identity as children of God.”<sup>57</sup> The prophet’s rage can become pride; the pastor’s kindness can become condescension. Without the ongoing cultivation of an inner life with God in prayer, both can fall prey to the temptation of self-assurance apart from God. In the words of Henri Nouwen, “Without solitude, it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life.”<sup>58</sup> Solitude is the prophetic well of discernment; community is the pastoral well of empathy. Together

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<sup>55</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 57–59.

<sup>56</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 118–120.

<sup>57</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 68–70.

<sup>58</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 42–44.

they are soul care for those who live in leadership. The “stretched tensions” of the pastor–prophet vocation are only heightened in the church planter and leader of the inner-city small church where one is on stage in the spiritual lives of one’s congregants and is not necessarily enfolded in a large or supportive community of peer leaders.<sup>59</sup> In a megachurch, one may preach or counsel but is on a team; in the small inner-city church, the pastor–prophet must preach, counsel, manage, mediate, and intercede within the course of a week, sometimes within a single day.<sup>60</sup> This proximity to the suffering of other people is what psychologists call “compassion fatigue,” which “results from the cumulative impact of exposure to the pain of others, resulting in a deep yearning for relief from other people’s suffering” and symptoms that may include a dulling of compassion and increase in irritability.<sup>61</sup> But here, the power of Nouwen’s “wounded healer” is found, as the experience of pain in ministry becomes not a point of despair but a point of empathetic identification with the bruised and broken who are the true prophetic inheritors of the urban community and inner city.<sup>62</sup> When the pastor–prophet is able to view their wounds as a reminder not of personal inadequacy but of solidarity in a community of the lame, the blind, the poor, the lame at heart, those in ministry learn to view suffering as sacramental, as a sign that the triune God of the gospel is present in our powerlessness.<sup>63</sup> The beginning point for psychological health and renewal for a pastor–prophet in the inner city and every other place is rhythm: a regular practice of prayer, study, rest, and

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<sup>59</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 103–105.

<sup>60</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 169–171.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 127–129.

<sup>62</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 88–90.

<sup>63</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 114–115.

mutual accountability.<sup>64</sup> As Andrew Root suggests, “Ministry without transcendence collapses under the weight of immediacy.”<sup>65</sup> Daily, the pastor–prophet must give resistance to the demand to produce by the sheer discipline of a routine return to the transcendent center—the voice of the God of the gospel in solitude and silence.<sup>66</sup> Walter Brueggemann calls this a “prophetic consciousness,” a specific type of imagination and formation in God that allows the church to “look beyond despair, yet refuses to be assimilated into the reigning culture with its characteristic anxieties.”<sup>67</sup> Prophetic consciousness in the inner city is like breathing, for urban leaders who labor in the shadow of systemic and individual injustice, economic violence, and spiritual malaise and apathy. Their prophetic stamina is not dependent on personality but on their perseverance of presence being made new in God in secret before God and standing in the power of that newness in public before people.<sup>68</sup> In essence, the psychology of the pastor–prophet is as theological as it is psychological and thus is a theology of integration, wholeness, and unity. As in their public witness, their inner life, dispositions, and emotions must be reconciled by the reconciling power of the Triune God, making paradox functional rather than dysfunctional, redeeming wounds rather than hiding them, and always bringing people back to self before going out to others.<sup>69</sup> The Holy Spirit will school the pastor–prophet in this paradoxical life of lament and praise, toughness and

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<sup>64</sup> Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 114–116.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 72–74.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 56–58.

<sup>68</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 111–113.

<sup>69</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 146–147.

tenderness, good news and hard truth, and even grief and hope often all within the same day, week, and ministry moment.<sup>70</sup> Mature souls are not those who do not experience tension but those who, by the grace of God, steward tension in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>71</sup> As pastoral and prophetic leaders learn to walk with God in this steady rhythm of inner life and outer, their ministry will become not a burden but a holy rhythm, a new cadence of being made new that produces health in the church and soul care for those who labor in the city.<sup>72</sup>

### **Ecclesial Challenges in Small-Church Contexts**

Small churches in the inner city embody both the vitality and vulnerability of the Christian witness. Their proximity to pain makes their ministry urgent, but their limited resources make it fragile.<sup>73</sup> The first and most pervasive challenge is **financial constraint**. Most inner-city congregations operate on minimal budgets sustained by members who themselves face economic instability.<sup>74</sup> This scarcity affects every area of church life—from facility maintenance to pastoral compensation—and often forces the pastor to hold multiple jobs.<sup>75</sup> The result is emotional exhaustion, inconsistent programming, and limited access to formal theological training.

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<sup>70</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 78–79.

<sup>71</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 188–190.

<sup>72</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 223–225.

<sup>73</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 183–185.

<sup>74</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 172–174.

<sup>75</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 83–85.

A second challenge is **structural overextension**. In large churches, tasks are distributed across departments; in the small church, the pastor carries them all.<sup>76</sup> They preach, counsel, visit the sick, manage finances, and lead outreach—roles that stretch human capacity and dilute focus.<sup>77</sup> The weight of this multiplicity often silences prophetic urgency because survival becomes the priority.

A third challenge is **congregational fatigue and transience**. Urban churches frequently experience high member turnover due to economic migration, eviction, and social instability.<sup>78</sup> As people come and go, the pastor's work of discipleship is repeatedly reset. The prophetic challenge here is to maintain vision amid flux to keep nurturing a stable community in an unstable environment.

A fourth challenge is **cultural and theological tension**. Many urban congregations are caught between inherited church traditions and emerging cultural realities.<sup>79</sup> Younger generations may seek innovation, while elders defend familiar forms. The pastor must navigate this gap without

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<sup>76</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 77–78.

<sup>77</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 126–128.

<sup>78</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 184–186.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 91–93.

alienating either group. This tension often suppresses prophetic preaching, as leaders fear division or loss of support.

There is the **psychological toll of isolation**. In smaller congregations, the pastor's visibility is constant but their accountability is limited.<sup>80</sup> Without peer support, leaders risk spiritual loneliness, cynicism, or moral compromise. The small church's intimacy is both its beauty and its burden—it magnifies both love and conflict.<sup>81</sup>

These challenges collectively reveal why many urban ministries plateau or close within a decade.<sup>82</sup> Yet, they also provide the context in which the pastor–prophet model becomes most necessary: when leadership must not only manage survival but proclaim renewal in the midst of limitation.<sup>83</sup>

### **Benefits of the Pastor–Prophet Model in the Inner-City Small-Church Context**

While small urban churches face profound structural, financial, and cultural challenges, the *pastor–prophet model* provides a leadership paradigm uniquely equipped to meet them.<sup>84</sup> Its

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<sup>80</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 45–47.

<sup>81</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 85–86.

<sup>82</sup> Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 88–89.

<sup>83</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 118–119.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 91–93.

greatest strength lies in its **theological integration**—the ability to merge pastoral nurture with prophetic vision. The pastor-prophet does not merely manage the congregation; they *reimagine* it.<sup>85</sup> By interpreting the life of the church through divine revelation, they transform limited resources into opportunities for renewal. Pastoral tenderness sustains people through struggle, while prophetic boldness calls them beyond resignation into hope.<sup>86</sup>

A primary benefit of this model is **spiritual credibility**. Because the pastor-prophet both loves and confronts the congregation, their voice carries moral weight.<sup>87</sup> Members recognize authenticity in leaders who not only comfort them in pain but also challenge them toward repentance, justice, and service. This credibility builds trust, and trust fuels transformation. In a small church where relationships are intimate and enduring, the leader's integrity becomes the most powerful sermon.

Another benefit is **contextual adaptability**. The pastor-prophet is not bound by institutional rigidity but led by the Spirit to respond creatively to changing circumstances.<sup>88</sup> When finances are limited, the prophetic imagination converts scarcity into innovation turning borrowed spaces into sanctuaries and community partnerships into ministry opportunities.<sup>89</sup> Walter Brueggemann

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<sup>85</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 111–112.

<sup>86</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 129–131.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 139–140.

<sup>88</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 102–104.

<sup>89</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 177–178.

calls this “prophetic imagination,” the divine capacity to envision alternatives to the dominant culture’s despair.<sup>90</sup> In the inner city, such imagination allows small churches to operate not as victims of circumstance but as agents of divine creativity.

A third benefit is **communal empowerment**. The pastor-prophet does not monopolize the Spirit’s voice but multiplies it by cultivating a prophetic community.<sup>91</sup> Through discipleship, testimony, and corporate prayer, congregants learn to discern God’s leading together. This decentralization of prophetic awareness transforms spectators into participants, creating congregations that are self-renewing and missionally engaged.<sup>92</sup> In effect, the pastor-prophet reproduces their calling within the people by forming a body that carries both pastoral compassion and prophetic conviction.

The fourth benefit is **resilience under pressure**. Prophetic identity gives the leader the courage to endure seasons of scarcity and opposition without losing heart.<sup>93</sup> They understand suffering not as failure but as participation in the redemptive mission of Christ.<sup>94</sup> This perspective guards against burnout and sustains long-term ministry faithfulness. The small church led by such a

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<sup>90</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 60–62.

<sup>91</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 57–59.

<sup>92</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 123–125.

<sup>93</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 226–228.

<sup>94</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 150–152.

voice becomes remarkably stable; its endurance itself becomes a testimony of divine faithfulness.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, the pastor-prophet model restores **missional clarity**. In a culture driven by consumerism and celebrity, small churches can drift into comparison or despair. The pastor-prophet re-anchors ministry in the kingdom vision of Christ—measuring success by faithfulness, not fame.<sup>96</sup> They remind the congregation that God’s greatest movements often begin in small, Spirit-filled spaces.<sup>97</sup> Through this leadership, the small church becomes not a symbol of decline but a sign of divine innovation, revealing that revival can rise from the margins.<sup>98</sup>

The ultimate success of the pastor–prophet is not defined by numbers, budgets, or notoriety but by the presence of spiritual formation and authentic fellowship.<sup>99</sup> This combination of spiritual callings gives birth to a kind of leadership that forms Christlike character and fosters true community. The pastoral impulse is the oil that conditions the soul; the prophetic impulse is the fire that stirs the conscience.<sup>100</sup> Together, they create a rhythm of compassion and conviction. This divine tension is what shapes believers into spiritually mature disciples who can enjoy intimacy

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<sup>95</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 91–92.

<sup>96</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 155–156.

<sup>97</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81–83.

<sup>98</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 132–134.

<sup>99</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 101–102.

<sup>100</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 101–102.

with God and engage the world.<sup>101</sup> The pastor–prophet’s first calling is spiritual formation. This is accomplished through a posture of prayer and proclamation coupled with a persistent presence. Spiritual formation can be defined as inviting people to participate in the ongoing life of God.<sup>102</sup> The prophetic voice brings the believer face to face with self-deception and spiritual apathy, while the pastoral heart cultivates the kind of safety and love that makes repentance and growth possible.<sup>103</sup> Nouwen called this tension the mark of Christian leadership—“standing in the gap between God and the world, displaying both compassion and confrontation.”<sup>104</sup> This holistic approach to spiritual formation protects the church from two extremes. On one side is the temptation to sentimental spirituality that detaches itself from the hard edges of biblical truth. On the other side is the temptation to wield prophetic authority without being tempered by grace.<sup>105</sup> The result is a fellowship shaped by this kind of leadership that is more than just a social belonging. It becomes spiritual communion.<sup>106</sup> In the small inner-city church described in this case study, where members are more likely to share all areas of life, the pastor–prophet cultivates a brand of confession, encouragement, and shared accountability.<sup>107</sup> Prophetic preaching and teaching calls people to unity and holiness; pastoral presence and prayer keep that unity securely moored in

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<sup>101</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 236–238.

<sup>102</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Books, 1979), 93–95.

<sup>103</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 134–136.

<sup>104</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 47–48.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 141–143.

<sup>106</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 42–44.

<sup>107</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 122–124.

love.<sup>108</sup> Bonhoeffer once wrote, “Christian community is not an ideal we achieve, but a reality created by Christ in which we participate.”<sup>109</sup> This truth protects the church from two temptations. On one side is sentimentalizing fellowship to a matter of feeling and on the other side is depersonalizing community to a matter of program. Fellowship that is formed by the simultaneous presence of the pastor–prophet becomes sacramental in the best sense of the word. It mirrors God’s grace at work in human connection and reconciliation.<sup>110</sup> Finally, the pastor–prophet in the small inner-city church plays an important role in building community identity in a context that is divided by poverty, violence, and high levels of transience.<sup>111</sup> In this way, the prophetic voice resists the temptation of hopelessness and interprets the congregation’s endurance as an act of public witness; the pastoral presence keeps hope alive through a posture of empathy and prayer.<sup>112</sup> In this context, fellowship itself becomes a prophetic act—an embodied claim that love and unity are still possible in the midst of a broken system.<sup>113</sup> The pastor–prophet’s greatest value is his or her capacity to reproduce such transformation. The leader with both the pastoral heart and prophetic mind of Christ will not hoard spiritual authority but will equip others to hear from God. This involves both

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<sup>108</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 106–108.

<sup>109</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 52–54.

<sup>110</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 127–129.

<sup>111</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 181–183.

<sup>112</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 86–88.

<sup>113</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 156–158.

mentoring and testimony, as well as a shared sense of ministry.<sup>114</sup> The result is a community that bears the spirit of the pastor–prophet and is ready to extend the work of spiritual formation and building fellowship.<sup>115</sup> In this way, the church is not only surviving but forming souls and becoming an expression of God’s reconciling presence in the neighborhood.<sup>116</sup>

#### Chapter Conclusion: For Love of the City

From prophecy to pragmatism, the pastor–prophet is one of God’s most underutilized gifts to the contemporary church.<sup>117</sup> As shepherds in an age of noise, novelty, and distraction, pastor–prophets are among the likeliest conduits for reminding the body of Christ that revelation and relationship must never be separated. Whether in the context of a congregation on an inner-city block, or a church within a less localized community, such leaders usher in a redemptive order that is small, counter-cultural, and faithful.<sup>118</sup> In the urban core, the metaphor of church as the image of Christ calls forth the likeness of the shepherd as much as it does the prophet; the portrait of leadership that surfaces must be constructed with equal measure of tenderness and tenacity if the disciples are to be both formed and sent.<sup>119</sup> Research into the past and present of this topic has shown that the pastor–prophet is not a myth of biblical history, nor a static expression of God’s

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<sup>114</sup> Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 128–130.

<sup>115</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004), 133–135.

<sup>116</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 138–139.

<sup>117</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 145–147.

<sup>118</sup> Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 91–93.

<sup>119</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 240–242.

love, but a dynamic articulation of His unfolding strategy for new life and renewal.<sup>120</sup> Rooted in revelation, forged in the fires of everyday practice, and borne by the Spirit, this kind of leadership best embodies the true and living Christ: the grace and truth, mercy and justice, Word made flesh and the Word as message.<sup>121</sup> By re-uniting the disparate in their ministry, namely nurture and confrontation, comfort and conviction, patience and power, pastor–prophets restore a sense of balance to the community out of balance (either by sin or systems of oppression and marginalization) in which they serve.<sup>122</sup> If this study has offered any help to the urban church, it is to show that pastor–prophets renew the small church by re-framing the question.<sup>123</sup> While much attention in the literature has been paid to limitation, this kind of leader looks at that reality and then redefines it as an opportunity to turn toward the Spirit. When the church shrinks, shepherds–prophets expand imagination; when resources are low, they call the community to faith; when injustice abounds, they raise a voice of love and courage not rooted in charisma, but in calling.<sup>124</sup> Ultimately, the health of the urban church will not be improved by programs, plans, or other ecclesiastical gadgets, but by the presence of leaders who are open vessels filled with the Spirit and carry His heart for both people and place.<sup>125</sup> The lasting value of the pastor–prophet will be found, not in their ecclesial authority, but in the integrated spirituality that they model for the

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<sup>120</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 192–194.

<sup>121</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 54–55.

<sup>122</sup> Dong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 112–114.

<sup>123</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 188–190.

<sup>124</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 140–142.

<sup>125</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 132–134.

church and world. Their message, like their ministry, is one that both listens and speaks, that loves and leads, that heals and confronts.<sup>126</sup> This role points not primarily to itself, but to the reality of the Kingdom of God, to the point that as the world recovers prophetic leadership as one for the humble, for those who “love mercy and do justice,” it will hear again that such leadership still belongs to the walkers of His ways (Mic. 6: 8).<sup>127</sup> Then, and only then, will the church not simply survive the pressures and questions of the city, but speak for God within it once more.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 58–59.

<sup>127</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 112–113.

<sup>128</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 146–148.