

The Informal Voice

Recognizing the Person Who Tries to Lead Without a Role and Responding in a Way That Serves Everyone Well

Most church leaders can name the person. No formal role. But their opinion shapes decisions before those decisions reach the room where they are supposed to be made. This piece names that pattern, identifies where it comes from, and gives leadership a framework for responding well.

The Pattern and Where It Comes From

It is rarely malicious. It is almost always recognizable. And it will not resolve itself on its own.

The informal voice is a pattern, not a personality type. It shows up in congregations of every size and tradition: the person who holds no formal role but whose opinion shapes pastoral decisions before they reach the room where they are supposed to be made. Whose concerns, when raised, create a kind of urgency in leadership that named board members rarely produce. Whose presence in a conversation quietly adjusts what gets proposed and what gets set aside.

The pattern develops through a small number of recognizable sources. Some informal voices have been present through everything the church has been they carry institutional memory, deep relational networks, and a genuine sense of ownership that current leaders did not inherit. Some have contributed financially in ways that, consciously or not, began to function as a form of standing. Some carry professional expertise the church genuinely needs and never formalized. And some, a pattern worth naming specifically, come from another church where they held significant leadership authority and arrive expecting that standing to transfer.

That pattern deserves its own attention. A person who led at another congregation as a founding elder, a major donor, or a longtime board chair may bring genuine experience and real gifts. They may also carry assumptions about what access they are entitled to and what weight their perspective should carry, shaped by a governance structure that does not exist in your church. The influence they seek is not imagined. It is mislocated, imported from a context where it was legitimately held and applied to one where it was never established. The person often does not recognize this in themselves. Which means the naming belongs to leadership, and it needs to happen early rather than after the pattern has calcified into conflict.

The informal voice fills a space the governance structure left open. The response is not to exclude the person. It is to name the pattern directly and decide together what appropriate engagement actually looks like.

What They Bring and Why It Cannot Be Ignored

Leadership's first responsibility is to assess the contribution honestly before deciding how to address the structure around it.

The governance concern is real. So is the contribution. A person operating through informal channels often brings something the church genuinely needs: organizational wisdom, financial acumen, community relationships, pastoral experience, or institutional memory that formal leadership cannot replicate by asserting authority over it. The honest question is not how to reduce the person's influence. It is how to give what they bring a structure worthy of it. That begins with a direct assessment of what this person contributes and what would be lost if they stepped back. A church that skips this step and moves directly to structural management signals that the contribution is a problem to be contained rather than a resource to be honored.

A Question Leadership Must Ask Itself First

If the proper governance structure is in place and functioning, how did this voice accumulate the influence it has? That question belongs to leadership before it belongs to anyone else.

There is a harder dimension most churches avoid. When a person without formal authority has shaped decisions and accessed leadership channels, the first question is not what to do about them. It is how this was allowed to happen. A functioning elder board holds the boundaries of its deliberative process. A lead pastor clear about their own accountability does not route consequential conversations through unofficial channels. Informal influence accumulates because formal leadership, at some level, permitted it: through conflict avoidance, unclear role definitions, or a board not exercising the oversight it existed to provide. Naming that honestly within the leadership team is the precondition for addressing the pattern effectively.

The informal voice is a symptom. The question it raises about formal leadership is the diagnosis. Both deserve honest attention.

What Kind of Influence and Does It Belong

The nature of what is being offered determines where it belongs. The person's background, experience, or confidence does not.

When an informal voice is present, the first governance question is not what to do with the person. It is what kind of influence they are exercising and whether there is a legitimate place for it in the church's formal structure. That assessment should be honest, deliberate, and driven by the church's governance framework, not by the person's credentials or the relational weight they carry.

One principle applies regardless of which path leadership chooses: the congregation should know who is speaking into leadership. Transparency about who holds formal governance roles and who provides formal input to those roles is not optional. A congregation that cannot answer that question is being governed in ways it cannot see or evaluate. Whatever structure is chosen, it should be visible to the people it affects.

Experience Is Not Authority

Many informal voices arrive with genuine credentials: professional expertise, financial acumen, organizational experience, or leadership history from another church. That background may be valuable. It does not confer standing in this church's governance structure. A person who led as a founding elder, a major donor, or a

longtime board chair at a previous congregation brings experience shaped by a governance structure that does not exist here. The authority they held there was formally granted. It does not transfer simply because they are now present.

Leadership is not obligated to accommodate influence simply because someone arrives with knowledge or experience the church could use. Accommodating that influence without a formal process quietly signals to the congregation that standing can be earned through credentials or persistence rather than through the church's defined governance pathway. That signal erodes the authority of the structure the church has built. If the person's contribution does not fit any of the categories below, the right response is to say so directly, with respect for what they bring and clarity about what the governance structure requires.

Spiritual and Ministry Influence: Consider for Elder

If the person's contribution is spiritual and ministry-oriented, touching matters of pastoral care, theological direction, congregational health, or governance oversight, the right formal home is the elder board. The qualification standard established in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is the threshold, not the person's gifts or relational standing alone. If they meet that standard and the church has a genuine governance need, the qualification process should be initiated. If they do not meet the standard, the advisory channel is not a substitute for the office they do not qualify for.

This assessment should be consistent with Before You Present an Elder in this series. The elder office carries specific biblical qualifications, a defined governance function, and an accountability relationship to the full board. Someone brought into elder office based on informal influence rather than a rigorous qualification process has not been properly brought into the structure. They have been given a title without the process that gives that title meaning.

Organizational or Fiduciary Influence: Consider for Trustee

If the person's contribution is organizational, financial, legal, or operational in nature, the right formal home may be the trustee board. Fiduciary capacity and organizational acumen belong in the trustee function, not the elder board, and not in an undefined advisory relationship. This distinction matters because it places the contribution in the right governance lane with the right accountability structure around it.

This assessment should be consistent with The Trustee Role in this series. A trustee who understands the boundary between fiduciary oversight and governance authority is a genuine asset. A person placed in a trustee role because it was the nearest available channel for their informal influence, without honest assessment of whether they are prepared for the role, creates a different problem than the one it was meant to resolve.

Mixed or Unclear: Advisory or Consultative, With Caution

If the person's contribution does not fit clearly within the elder or trustee function, a formally defined advisory or consultative role may be appropriate. This is the most cautious of the paths and should be approached as such. An advisory role created primarily to manage a relationship rather than to meet a genuine institutional need will eventually surface the conflict it was designed to prevent.

Where an advisory role is the right answer, it must be built with defined scope, a defined term, a clear reporting relationship, and an honest conversation up front about the boundary between counsel and authority. The advisor provides input. They do not hold a vote, they do not set direction, and they do not speak on behalf of the leadership structure. That boundary should be documented and understood before the role begins, and communicated to the congregation so the advisory relationship is visible rather than informal by another name.

The single most reliable indicator of whether an advisory role will serve the church well is the person's relationship to being overruled. An advisor who can offer their best thinking, see it carefully considered, and watch leadership reach a different conclusion and remain constructive afterward is someone the structure can support. An advisor

whose engagement depends on their counsel being followed will put the advisory role in conflict with the governance it was meant to serve.

Responding Well: A Diagnostic and a Path Forward

The pattern will not resolve through structural decisions alone. It requires direct engagement with the person, and within the leadership team.

Before any structural decision is made, leadership should work through these questions together:

- ▶ Who in our congregation exercises meaningful influence over pastoral or governance decisions without holding any formal role and can we name them specifically?
- ▶ What do they actually bring that we genuinely value? What would we lose if they stepped back entirely?
- ▶ Is their influence currently helping the church's health, complicating governance, or both?
- ▶ In the case of someone who led elsewhere, are they applying experience appropriately, or importing expectations from a governance structure that does not exist here?
- ▶ If we are considering an advisory role, is it because there is a genuine institutional need or because it is easier than a direct conversation?
- ▶ Has anyone spoken to this person directly, with honesty and care, about what their contribution is and what appropriate engagement looks like going forward?
- ▶ What in our own leadership allowed this pattern to develop and persist, and what would we need to change to ensure the same dynamic does not develop with someone else?

Informal influence patterns persist primarily because the direct conversation that would address them keeps getting deferred. Most people, when spoken to with genuine respect for what they bring and genuine clarity about what the governance structure requires, respond better than leadership fears. The avoidance of that conversation is itself a governance failure. The resolution begins with leadership having the courage to name what has been quietly operating in the background and the integrity to address it directly with the person involved.

The person who has been influencing informally for years deserves to be spoken to directly, not managed around. That conversation, done well, is the most constructive thing leadership can offer.

Stewardship Advisors Can Help

Stewardship Advisors works with church and nonprofit leadership teams to identify informal influence patterns, design formal participation pathways, and facilitate the direct conversations these situations require. We also help churches develop the constitutional language and advisory role frameworks that give informal contributors a legitimate, bounded, and accountable place in the church's governance life.

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