

SAFE & SOUND

FOUNDATIONS · A SAFE & SOUND GUIDE

Reading a Person

*The Assess movement — and the
instrument that makes it repeatable.*

A SAFE & SOUND GUIDE

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THE MOVEMENT CHURCHES SKIP

Assess

Most churches can See — they notice the person. Most churches can Form — they run groups, classes, rhythms. Almost none can Assess, and it shows: care gets offered confidently, quickly, and to the wrong problem.

Assess is the movement between noticing someone and doing something about them. Skip it and formation becomes a guess dressed as a plan — you offer what you have rather than what they need, and when it does not work you conclude the person was not ready.

This guide is the method. The instrument on page 7 is where it becomes repeatable — the difference between one perceptive leader and a church that can do this.

COMMON MISTAKE

Treating assessment as diagnosis. You are not naming a condition. You are reading a person accurately enough to be useful — and staying willing to be wrong about it.

People hermeneutics

Exegete the person

We train leaders for years to read a text carefully — context, genre, authorial intent, the danger of importing our own assumptions. We train almost no one to read a *person* that way. Then we put those same untrained readers in rooms where people finally say the hardest thing in their lives.

Just as we exegete Scripture, we must also exegete people. Faithful caregiving requires not only a right handling of the text, but a right understanding of the person.

Paul Miller · A Pastoral Theology of Integration, 2026

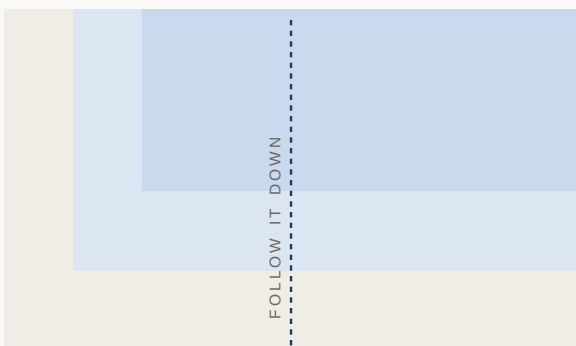
The claim is not that people are texts. It is that reading them is an interpretive act, and interpretive acts can be done well or badly. Everything a careful reader does with a passage transfers: slow down before concluding, notice what is not being said, ask what this meant before it meant anything to you, and hold your reading loosely enough to revise it.

People do not simply have problems. They live inside stories — shaped by culture, trauma, theology, and personal history. Assessment is listening for the story that is governing a person's life.

THE ARCHITECTURE

Three layers, one problem

The interpretive move that does the most work is separating what a person came in saying from what is actually operating. Almost always there are three layers, and almost always the church responds to the first.



LAYER 1

Presenting

What they came in saying. Usually real, usually not the problem.

LAYER 2

Deeper

What the presenting problem reactivated. Older, and rarely mentioned.

LAYER 3

Core

The verdict they are living under. Almost never said out loud.

The presenting problem is usually real. That is what makes it such an effective decoy — you can spend a year solving it faithfully and change nothing. The pastoral task is not to fix the surface. It is to follow it down.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The core layer is a verdict, not an event. It sounds like a sentence about the self: “I am the problem.” “I only matter when I am useful.” “If they knew, they would leave.” People rarely say it out loud, because saying it out loud is what makes it arguable.

The signal

Watch for disproportion

You cannot see the core layer directly. What you can see is disproportion — a modest cause producing an outsized response. That gap is the single most reliable diagnostic signal available to a pastor, and it is free.

Someone resigns over a scheduling change. Someone cannot sleep for a week after a mild piece of feedback. Someone goes silent for a month over a comment nobody else remembers. The instinct is to treat the reaction as the problem — an overreaction to be managed. It is not a symptom to eliminate. It is a text to understand.

The disproportion between the modest cause and the intense response is not a symptom to eliminate but a text to understand.

Paul Miller · Case study in pastoral counselling, 2026

The logic is simple once named: if the response does not fit the cause, the response is not about the cause. Something older has been reactivated. The present event is the door, not the room.

MINISTRY PRACTICE

When a reaction seems out of proportion, ask one question — silently, of yourself, not of them: *what would have to be true for this response to make sense?*

Whatever answer comes is a hypothesis about the deeper layer. Hold it loosely. Do not say it yet.

Both registers, at once

Assessment draws on two sets of categories and refuses to choose between them. This is the whole discipline in one paragraph: theological categories — sin, suffering, identity, calling — alongside psychological ones — trauma, attachment, cognition, regulation. Neither set alone reads a person accurately.

WHAT PEOPLE HEAR	WHAT IS ACTUALLY CLAIMED
Only theological categories	Every struggle becomes a sin problem or a faith problem. You will misread a trauma response as rebellion, and prescribe repentance for something that needs safety.
Only psychological categories	Every struggle becomes a mechanism with no telos. You will explain a person accurately and have nothing to offer them — competence without a destination.
Both, ordered	Psychology tells you what they are carrying. Theology tells you what they are for. Psychology serves theology — it clarifies the person to whom the gospel is being spoken.

REMEMBER THIS

The disciplines are ordered, not balanced. If your assessment can name the mechanism but not the telos, it is not pastoral assessment. It is amateur diagnosis.

APPLYING IT

A worked reading

The following case is a composite — constructed from patterns common across many churches, not drawn from any one person. It is built to teach. No one in it is real.

Tessa has served in children's ministry for eleven years. She is dependable to the point of invisibility — the person who is simply always there. In March the team moved her from the service she had always covered to the one before it, a change that affected six volunteers and was announced in a group message. Within a week she had resigned. She told the pastor she was “just tired” and that it was “no big deal.” She has not been back since.

Layer one — presenting

A scheduling change and a tired volunteer. Real, and the church responded to it: they offered her the old slot back. She declined. The offer solved a problem she did not have.

The signal

Eleven years, ended by a group message about a service time. That is the disproportion, and it is enormous. Ask the silent question: what would have to be true for this response to make sense? Something like — *the message told her something she already suspected*.

Layer two — deeper

Tessa was not consulted. Six people were moved and nobody called her. Eleven years of showing up had earned her a group message. What was reactivated is not the schedule — it is a long history of being counted on and not counted, of being valued for reliability rather than known.

Layer three — core

The verdict underneath: *I only matter when I am useful*. She has organised a life around it — which is precisely why she was so dependable, and why the church never noticed anything was wrong. Her wound looked like faithfulness. It got her promoted.

Both registers

Psychologically: a lifetime of contingent worth, and an accurate read of a system that rewarded her for it. Theologically: her worth is not contingent — she bears the image of God and was known before she was ever useful. The second is the truer word. It cannot be heard until the first is named, because a person told they are loved unconditionally by an institution that has only ever asked them for labour will not believe the sentence.

COMMON MISTAKE

The church's instinct was to fix the schedule. The schedule was never the problem — and offering it back confirmed the verdict, because it treated her as a slot to be filled. Responding to layer one does not merely fail. It frequently deepens layer three.

THE INSTRUMENT

The Formation Inventory

One perceptive pastor is not a system. This is the reading above, made repeatable — so the quality of care a person receives does not depend on which leader happened to be in the room.

Completed by a leader, about a person, and — wherever possible — **with** them. A reading made about someone in their absence is a rumour with a form around it. Never file this without their knowledge.

Person — and the name they would like used

Who is doing this reading

Date

Layer one — what they came in saying

In their words, not yours

Layer two — where is the disproportion?

What response outsizes its cause? What would have to be true for it to make sense?

Layer three — the verdict, held as a hypothesis

What sentence about themselves might they be living under? Write it as a guess. You may be wrong, and you should expect to revise this.

Both registers

What they are carrying (psychological)

What they are for (theological)

The conditions

Safety precedes honesty; honesty precedes transformation. If the first is missing, nothing downstream is available yet — and the work is to build it, not to push past it.

Where can this person tell the truth?

Who actually knows them?

What formation actually needs

Not what you have available. What they need. If those differ, say so — that gap is a finding about your church, not a failure of the person.

DISCUSS WITH YOUR TEAM

What did we offer this person that answered layer one?

What in our structure made the deeper layers invisible for as long as they were?

GUARDRAILS

How this goes wrong

You say layer three out loud too early. A verdict named before a person is ready lands as one more thing done to them. The reading is for your orientation, not for their instruction. Wait for them to arrive at it — and if they never do, that is allowed.

You mistake a hypothesis for a finding. Write it in pencil. The single most common failure is a leader who read someone accurately once and never revised it — the person changed and the file did not.

You diagnose. You are not qualified and it is not the task. “Presents as trauma-related self-blame” is a clinician’s sentence. Yours is: “something older seems to be operating here, and this may need more than us.”

You assess and never refer. A better reading of someone you cannot help is not care. If the reading says clinical, refer — and stay present as a pastor alongside. Referral is not dismissal.

You read from one culture. Shame, authority, family obligation, and keeping the peace are scripted very differently across cultures. Your reading of a person’s silence is one available reading, not the only one. Ask before concluding.

REMEMBER THIS

You are not the expert on another person’s life. You are a guide, a witness, and a participant in what God is already doing. Hold the reading with the same humility you would want held for yours.

NEXT

The path from here

- 01 **Understand the why**
The Foundations guides — including this one.
- 02 **Train your leaders**
The Safe & Sound manuals, by role.
- 03 **Build the system**
The Playbook — the church-wide operating manual.
- 04 **Sustain it**
SafeOS — the platform that runs it.

KEY TAKEAWAY

A church that can Assess stops offering what it has and starts offering what people need. That single change is the difference between a church that cares and a church that forms.

The safest place to tell the truth should be the church. We exist to help it become one.

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