

Where Do You Fit? Gift of Shepherding

We are now into the fourth week of our series on the APEST roles in the church, as outlined by Paul in Ephesians 4:11, and along the way, we've been asking ourselves the question "Where do I fit?" The first three weeks we've talked about the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic gifts, which tend to be mostly focused outside of the church. This morning, we are going to look at the gift of Shepherding, which is all about taking care of God's flock, or his people, and goes to fulfill Paul's words in Ephesians 4:12, that this gift is "for building up the body of Christ."

So, in order for us to answer the question "Where do I fit?" related to shepherding, we need to better understand the role the shepherd plays in the church. We are going to do that by answering four essential questions: What is a shepherd? What does a shepherd do? Why is the shepherd important in the church? and What are the shepherding ministries at Oak Grove?

1) What is a Shepherd?

The most important thing that we can do to answer this question is look to the example of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. He says in **John 10:11**-

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, was concerned for the safety and welfare of His sheep, His followers. His concern was so great that He was willing to lay down his life

So a shepherd is somebody concerned with the lives of the flock, the church. Neil Cole writes that "Shepherds are those followers of Jesus who have an overwhelming concern for the continuing care of a specific community and are mature enough to equip others to carry the same concern."

Transition: So if the shepherd is someone who has a passion for building up the church body, what exactly does he or she do?

2) What does a Shepherd do?

To find out what the different roles and responsibilities of the shepherd are, let's take a closer look at those beloved words from Psalm 23 and see what God's roles and responsibilities are as the shepherd.

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Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; ³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

God the shepherd is aware of his people's needs; he knows their need for rest, for rejuvenation, for spiritual growth, for peace with enemies and safety from harm. Shepherding then begins with an awareness of the needs of the people around us.

But it doesn't stop with this awareness. Just like a sheepherder has to lead their sheep to food, water, and rest, and keep them safe from wild animals, and how God leads his sheep to where he knows they need to go, shepherds in the church acts on their awareness of people's needs by leading them to the places where those needs can be met.

So according to Psalm 23, the shepherd:

-Leads toward provision: The shepherd might ask the question, who in our church is in need physically? Our, how can we as a church grow by learning to eat together?

-Leads toward rest: The shepherd might ask the question, who in the church is overburdened by life? How can we lighten their load or offer encouragement or come alongside of them and bear some of the weight?

-Leads into righteousness: The shepherd might ask, how are we as a church growing deeper in our relationships with God? How can I help to disciple others, or teach others to disciple? Where might there be space for mentoring younger generations into a long-lasting and life-saving relationship with Jesus?

-Leads through trials: The shepherd might ask, who in the church is really struggling with sin, or going through an intense life situation? How can I come alongside of them and help them to see God in the midst of the trial and to turn to God for help in navigating the trial?

-Leads toward restoration: The shepherd might ask, who hasn't been coming to church lately and why? Who has stopped showing up to Sunday School, stopped volunteering, stopped giving? And if the reason is because that person has had a falling away from faith or from the body, how could they come back into right relationship with God or the church? For this role, I think about the Parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15: 4-6 ⁴ *"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is*

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lost until he finds it? ⁵ *When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.* ⁶ *And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'* Whereas others in the church might not notice the lost sheep, or might be frustrated that the sheep went and got itself lost, or might think that going after the lost sheep is a waste of valuable time and efforts, the shepherd sees the lost sheep as God sees him or her, as a beloved child.

-Leads towards peacemaking: The shepherd might look at the conflicts between members of the church or within the church as a whole and ask, what lies beneath? What are the root causes that need to be uncovered? And even though it might be awkward or uncomfortable or difficult, the Shepherd chooses to lead through those conflicts rather than to avoid them or deal with them passive-aggressively.

Those are some of the roles of the shepherd; I don't believe that each shepherd is meant to do every one of them, however, I think that because of their love for people and the church community, they are often lead to ask and respond to these questions. Alan Hirsch calls these responsibilities the "task" and "focus" of the shepherd, and sums them up like this: the role of the shepherd is "Cultivating a loving and spiritually mature network of relationships and community" and "Making disciples."

3) Why is the Shepherd important in the church?

The Shepherd is one of the most crucial persons to maintaining the order and care of the people within the church; Hirsch writes that they "provide the organizational glue by caring for the individuals inside it." Without the shepherd, the church may go out into the community to be the hands and feet of Christ, but the body that those hands and feet are attached to runs the risk of dissolving.

Peter writes about the importance of the Shepherd in the church in 1 Peter 5:1-3; he uses the term elder, but writes using the imagery of a shepherd, so in this case I think that the terms are more or less interchangeable.

1 Peter 5:1-3

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ² to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. ³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

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In this passage, Peter lays out a few qualifications of a Godly shepherd: willing and eager to serve, and leading by example rather than by the power that comes with position.

One of the challenges that comes with identifying shepherds in the church community and empowering them to lead is that there at times seems to be a sense that their tasks are meant only for elders or pastors to perform; in fact, in the Peter passage today, Peter uses the term “elder,” which can alternately be translated as “bishop,” “presbyter,” and even “pastor.” All of these terms might seem especially intimidating, especially for a person who might have the shepherding gift but doesn’t want to be the forefront of attention. Additionally, when the role of clergy became professionalized, and the church moved away from the “priesthood of all believers” that Peter described in 1 Peter 2:5, the expectation became that the professional clergy were the only ones supposed to perform the tasks of a shepherd, even if he or she isn’t gifted as a shepherd.

But for the church body to grow spiritually, the flourish relationally, and for individuals to be cared for as Christ demonstrated as the Good Shepherd, Shepherds in the church need to be identified and released to do their work for the good of the family. And if we limit the gifts of the shepherd to only people serving as pastor or even elder, then we limit the health of the body. Neil Cole writes about the importance of having a multiplicity of shepherd’s in the church saying:

“The very nature of a shepherd’s ministry limits his or her scope of influence. The role requires strong personal connections with people and true relationships. On average, a shepherd can adequately care for 70 to 100 people. An exceptional shepherd might serve 120 to 150, but that’s about it. There’s a reason why most churches in America have fewer than 150 people. Each one has a single shepherd at work.”

What might happen if we were able to identify, empower, and release more shepherds to exercise their gifts in the Oak Grove community? How could we grow strong, together and individually as disciples seeking to follow Jesus?

Transition: Finally, as we consider what it might look like to increase the amount of shepherds working in the church, let’s look at the Shepherding ministries that Oak Grove already has.

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4) What are the Shepherding ministries at Oak Grove?

When I think of Shepherding ministries at Oak Grove, I think of the Kitchen Committee and the way that they faithfully and tirelessly plan funeral meals. They work behind the scenes to make sure that the fellowship hall is set up beautifully, that there is enough food for the family, and that funeral guests can spend time sharing rather than worried about the details. This takes an awareness of the needs of people during a time of grief and a dedication to helping, in some part, to lead people “through the valley of the shadow of death.”

I also think about what has been the work of the family Life” committee, that is, planning fellowship events for the life of the church “family,” such as the Sunday Sundaes, Camp Cotubic Retreat, Souper Bowl, and Harvest party. Although we are reworking what this committee might do, we still very much value these events and need people willing to plan intentional fellowship times for our congregation.

Of course, I also think about the Nurture and Care Commission that Roxanne has been faithfully leading; and Roxanne, who faithfully sends out e-cards on members birthdays and anniversaries. And we can’t talk about the work of the commission without talking about Shawn Neer, whose used her shepherding heart and gifts to develop programs of the Nurture and Care commission, devoting herself to the building up of the church body. Shawn guided the “family life” committee into planning regular events for church members to get to know one another. She also wanted to honor important people and events in their lives by starting the Christmas Poinsettia gifts for our senior members at Christmas as well as the graduation potluck for our high schoolers.

Other shepherding ministries include worship planning, meals for families who’ve just had children, discipleship groups, and even the fellowship and mutual care found in Sunday Schools.

Oak Grove unquestionably has individuals who’ve dedicated themselves over the years to shepherding the flock, and we have a lot of successful ministries as well as meaningful one-on-one relationships to show for it. But we can always be growing and doing better, and adapting as time moves on, and changing as the flock changes.

What are the needs of the flock today, and how might they be met? Who are the shepherds among us, and who have yet to be released as shepherds? And ultimately, are we all turning to look to our God as shepherd as our example for how to care for one another?