

Systematic Shepherding Records

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Jesus gives his undershepherds a clear charge through his

Word: “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight” (1 Peter 5:2). The Apostle Peter motivates us to fulfill this high calling with both a promise and a warning. The promise holds out the hope of “the unfading crown of glory” when our chief Shepherd appears (1 Pet. 5:4). Right afterward, he also warns us that “the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

The Apostle Paul says the same thing to the elders at Ephesus: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). And to this charge, he adds a warning about “fierce wolves” and urges us to “be alert” (Acts 20:29, 31).

If we are indeed called to care for the church for whom the incarnate Son of God spilled his own blood, carelessness is not an option. In ministry, no news is not necessarily good news. Instead, we are called to “know well the condition of [our] flocks” (Prov. 27:23), since conditions can change quickly (Prov. 27:24). The sheep under our care may be healthy for the moment, but Christ expects us to walk closely enough to them that we notice when that health changes.

We all know this. By God’s grace, I have never served with an elder who didn’t truly care about shepherding God’s people as well as possible. But, does our *system* for overseeing Christ’s people provide a help or a hindrance to fulfilling our calling?

Where our systems fail us. All of us in ministry have stories of when our memories failed us. I was once told that one of our deacons was scheduled for surgery, but I forgot to write it down. When that day came and his wife called mid-afternoon to inform me that the surgery was over, I was filled with shame for having forgotten.

Other times, communication doesn’t get as far as it should. I once missed hearing a statement that a member’s mother died when someone else was leading the congregational prayer. I later learned that she was very hurt by the fact that I hadn’t reached out or sent a card. It’s a sad running joke among ministers that the pastor is often the last to know that someone was in the hospital.

When our system relies on our overtaxed memory and haphazard communication, it’s remarkable that we are able to shepherd people at all!

“We already know our people.” This also is true in my experience. The elders I have served with have been deeply invested in the lives of their people in ways that have encouraged and inspired me. Even so, each of us tends to know *some* people better than others, and we often project that level of familiarity with our closest circles onto the others in the church. And even among the people we know well, there are many who are too

modest to ask for help, or drifting from the church and ashamed about it, or unsure how even to broach the sin they have been struggling with. Or, maybe someone on the session *does* know about these things, but he doesn’t have a good way of communicating that to the rest of the session.

A broken system prevents elders from knowing their people as well as they would like to.

A better system for pastoral care. I’m not suggesting anything novel, but only a simple system with three parts to it. First, apply Jethro’s basic insight to divide the people into groups, each with an overseer who had special responsibility for them (Ex. 18). These are called districts or shepherding groups, and they ensure that every member of your church has a primary elder responsible for oversight. Second, rather than waiting for the people to bring you their cases, you set up an easy check-in rhythm (monthly, every other month, or quarterly at minimum), where you simply call to ask how things are going and “How can I pray for you?” Third, you write down when you made that contact and any significant information so that you and your fellow elders can review that information the next time you contact that person.

In the foreword to the republication of David Dickson’s classic 19th-century *The Elder and His Work*, George Kennedy McFarland and Philip Graham Ryken write this:

What is crucial is for elders to exercise spiritual oversight of the people in their congregation, being sensitive to the special needs of the people most directly under their spiritual care. To that end, every session needs to develop and implement a workable plan for shepherding its congregation. In order for people to receive the spiritual care they need, the pastoral burden must be shared in a systematic way.

McFarland and Ryken 2004, 20–21

The *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America puts it simply:

It belongs to those in the office of elder, both severally and jointly, to watch diligently over the flock committed to his charge, that no corruption of doctrine or of morals enter therein.

BCO 8-3

My proposal: a small pilot, not a program. I am not asking your session to adopt a system for the whole congregation in one night. Instead, I am proposing that you try out a 90-day pilot, conducted by the pastor and one or two elders, taking one or two districts and keeping systematic shepherding records for them using Shepherding Tools. Then, after the 90 days, report back. Ninety days is long enough to see whether contacts get logged, whether anything surfaces that would otherwise have been missed, and whether the burden is as light as I believe it is. If it does not serve the flock, we stop, only having risked one or two districts and one quarter.

SUGGESTED MOTION

That the session adopt a 90-day pilot of systematic shepherding records for [one or two districts], conducted by [pastor and participating elders], to be reviewed at the [month] stated meeting.