
Pastoral Care and the Feeding of Sheep

Session Starter Number 2

Prayer:

Almighty God, we have set aside this time to meet together as a session. We have come to pray, to seek your will, and to serve the church of Jesus Christ. Lead us, guide us, and bless us so that we may have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Enable us to reach out to each other, our congregation, and the world beyond with hope, peace, love, joy and faith. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction:

Chapter 3 of the Book of Forms deals with matters relating directly to the ministry of sessions within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Within chapter 3, section 110 states, in part,

**"The session is responsible for ...
the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation."**

This is the second "Session Starter" to focus on the role of the elder and the responsibility of pastoral care. As noted in the first devotional, pastoral care is an essential element within the body of Christ and is one of the most powerful ways we can demonstrate the love of God to one another. It must not be left to the minister alone. It is something everyone within the congregation must strive to share. As spiritual leaders within the congregation, however, elders have a special responsibility to see that members and adherents receive the care they need. In this devotional we ponder the connection between pastoral care and the feeding of sheep.

Scripture:

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

**When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter,
"Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"
"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."
Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."
Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"
He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."
Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."
The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"
Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?"
He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."
Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." John 21:15-18a**

A Brief Commentary: (Invite another elder to read the following background to the scripture)

The risen Jesus appeared to his disciples on the coast of the Sea of Tiberias. After a breakfast of bread and fish roasted over a small cooking fire, Jesus spoke with Peter. Peter the fisherman, still dripping wet after wading ashore from his boat, was to become Peter the shepherd. A man, who had dipped nets into the sea all his life, was about to be asked to take care of lambs.

Three times Jesus questioned the depth and extent of Peter's love. Three times Peter replied with faith and devotion. Three times Jesus responded to the profession of faith by saying, "Feed my sheep." This seaside moment brings to mind another time and place - the night Jesus was arrested. As Peter lurked in the shadows of the high priest's courtyard, three times he was asked, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" Three times Peter answered emphatically, "I am not!" Moments later, he wept bitter tears of shame.

As waves lapped at his feet and birds cried in the air, the three-fold denial was pardoned through a three-fold profession of faith. Restored, Peter was given a nurturing ministry.

Reflection:

How many of us when we look inside ourselves, discover Peter gazing back at us? Though we generally long to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we also find ourselves, from time to time, denying his existence. We deny him with our words and actions. The good news of God's grace is that, like Peter, we are forgiven and given nurturing ministries to fulfill. We show our love for Jesus through pastoral care; by feeding the flock of God's kingdom.

The word "pastor" is derived from the word for shepherd. When elders provide pastoral care, they care for others the way a shepherd cares for sheep. Part of that care involves seeing that the sheep are led to lush pastures and are well nourished. We provide pastoral care when we ensure God's sheep are well fed. In *Searching for Shalom*, one of her moving books of poetry, Ann Weems points to the vital nature of pastoral care.



Feeding Sheep

He said, "Feed my sheep."

There were no conditions:

Least of all, Feed my sheep if they deserve it.

Feed my sheep if you feel like it.

Feed my sheep if you have leftovers.

Feed my sheep if the mood strikes you.

if the economy's OK...if you're not too busy ...

No conditions...just, "Feed my sheep."

Could it be that God's Kingdom will come
when each lamb is fed?

We who have agreed to keep covenant are called to feed sheep
even when it means the grazing will be done on our own front lawns.

Note: Books by Ann Weems are available in The Book Room at Church Offices
1-800-619-7301 or 416-441-1111

Questions:

(Together or in small groups, invite the elders to discuss the following questions.)

1. How many ways can we, as elders, provide pastoral care by feeding sheep?
2. How can we ensure the young, middle aged and senior sheep of our congregation are being fed?
3. How can we feed hungry sheep in our community or other parts of the world?

Follow-up study/reading for

Pastoral Care and the Sanctuary

(Use for retreats, study or personal reflection)

By Dorothy Henderson

I have just completed a large survey of 240 young adults who grew up in a mainline (mainly Presbyterian) church. Most of these young adults are still active. Here's a portion of what they have to say to elders.

1. The young adults said, " 'Church' is a habit...a good habit."

Like all other practices in life, attending to one's religious life can be a meaningful habit. There seems to be a direct link between regularity of attendance as children and continuance of attendance as young adults. Further, most of the respondents to the survey expressed appreciation for the values associated with regular worship. As Carol Wehrheim points out, "...gathering with other church members to worship and pray is one way that you say by your actions that the life of your congregation is important to you and your family. You allot your family time to be a part of it and to support others through your presence."¹ The young adults say it this way:

Combined with my upbringing, going to church led me to a great interest in spirituality. (Male, age 22)

Sometimes going to church was a chore, but in hindsight, it was an important part of my life. I'm glad it happened. (Male, age 22)

The things I learned, I held on to later. (Male, age 24)

Discuss this:

- What can you do as elders and ministers to encourage regular church attendance?
- In his book *Make Room for the Boom...or Bust*, author Gary McIntosh² maintains that young parents come or return to the church for many reasons:
 - They want to provide values and programs for their children.
 - They have a desire for stability and nostalgia.
 - As they grow older, they become more accepting of institutional life of all kinds, including the church.
 - They have a desire to belong, be accepted and have an identity.
 - They are disillusioned with aspects of culture and want enduring and lasting values.
 - They are interested in spiritual things, especially new expressions of spirituality.
 - They are insecure about the future, frightened and confused.

If these reasons are true, what do they tell you about making your church more inviting to young families?

¹*Giving Together: A Stewardship Guide for Families*, p. 30

²Fleming Revell, 1997, p. 35

2. The young adults said, "Please...do something with worship."

Of particular interest in this survey is the impatience that young adults expressed around worship. They didn't much care for their worship experiences as children and, even though some of them express comfort in currently participating in the familiar patterns of worship, they long for variety and flexibility. In fact, they indicated that they would "vote with their feet," and simply go to other churches to have this need satisfied.

The solution seems simple. An alternative worship needs to happen. Often children, youth and young adults are eager to be part of the planning and leading of alternative worship services. If a congregation does not have sufficient resources to do this for your own congregation, it is a great opportunity for congregations to do it ecumenically. It has been my experience as a leader in the *Young Children and Worship* program that children love and appreciate worship and can participate fully when adjustments are made to make worship more accessible. In regular corporate worship, worship bags, children's bulletins, explanations and stories can all help to make worship more accessible to children.³

Discuss this:

- Why have churches been so reluctant to involve children in worship? (Only 24 per cent of the 240 respondents remembered being in church for the whole service between ages 4 and 12.)
- In the mid-'70s, William Abernethy produced a creative book entitled *A New Look at Sunday Morning*. In that book Abernethy argues that *all people*, regardless of age or stage need learning opportunities, worship and community opportunities on Sunday morning. He advocated a 1 hour, 45-minute Sunday morning with 10 minutes to gather and hear the theme of the day, 35 minutes in age-appropriate learning environments, 15 minutes to break for refreshments and community, and 45 minutes to gather for worship. In the final 45 minutes people bring aspects of their learning to present as their offering. It is a wonderful and creative vision. Why did this vision for an integrated Sunday morning never seemed to "catch on"?
- If young adults (and probably children and youth) are crying out for more contemporary styles of worship, why is it not being provided? Is this something that the young people themselves can have a major role in designing and leading?

³ An excellent resource are the three volumes of *Forbid them not*, Years A, B, C, Abingdon Press, 1991, 1994 by Carolyn Brown. Brown uses the lectionary passages to give an exegesis of the scriptures from the child's point of view, suggests sermon resources, appropriate hymns, offers a children's bulletin and suggests simple movement that is appropriate for the day.

Follow-up Study/Reading for *Pastoral Care and the Feeding of Sheep*

(Use for retreats, study or personal reflection)

I've just completed a large survey of 240 young adults who grew up in a mainline (mainly Presbyterian) church. Most of these young adults are still active. Here's a portion of what they have to say to elders.

1. The young adults said, "The minister, the minister's spouse and adults in the church are important to children."

It was a surprise to me that ministers and their spouse were so important to children. Of the 240 respondents, 94 or 39 per cent named the minister or minister's spouse as an important person to them as children. Do ministers know they are this important to children?

What does this say to us? Ministers should take special care to include in sermons and prayers examples and messages that are relevant for children. Ministers should preach from a position of vulnerability rather than from a position of doctrine when children are present. Story is vitally important and dramatic readings of the scriptures are helpful. Ministers should also be an advocate for children, especially with older adults, some of whom persist in believing that children today are "just plain spoiled." Ministers can work to integrate children in most phases of the church life. The minister and the elders of the congregation should be the first, or among the first to ask for each event: Can we involve children in a meaningful way? If so, how and who will do it?

When the young adults were children, 82 per cent of the important people they remembered from the church were **adults**. Do adults know that they are this important to children? If they know this, how does it change the relationship between adults and children in church? Six per cent of the young adults specifically remembered elders as being influential in their faith development. **What does this say to us? It's important to think "intergenerational."** If children are to be an important part of the congregation, they must come to feel like an adopted child or grandchild. Is it possible to include children in a meaningful way in just about every aspect of church life?

Recently, I did a workshop on how to encourage intergenerational activities in the congregation. In other words, how can we include people of all ages in most of our activities. As an exercise, we decided to design an congregational annual meeting which included people of all ages. The group dug into this task with enthusiasm. In the end it was an annual meeting transformed by imagination and it included *everyone*.

Discuss this:

- As a minister or elder, what portion of your time is spent with children, teens and young adults?
- What percentage of your church programming is adapted or adaptable to having young people actively participating? What changes would you have to make to increase this percentage?

2. The young adults said, "I want the church to be part of important times in my life."

Ah! Here's how elders can really shine. As you do your regular pastoral care, remember that milestones are important. These include baptism, birthdays, starting to school, starting high school, getting a driver's license, confirmation, graduating from high school, beginning college or university or starting a first job, turning 18, 19 or 21 or whatever symbolizes "becoming an adult," graduating from college or university,

buying a first car or house, getting the first "real" job. If, in the course of one person's life, the elder is able to connect in a meaningful way to these 12 times, amazing things can happen. The young person would, undoubtedly, continue to feel connected to his/her faith community.

Sometimes elders and ministers feel that the pastoral care of their people is a heavy task and "just one more thing to do" in a busy life. But pastoral care need not be heavy or "extra." When our son, Dan, was a teenager, it was often challenging to get him out of bed on Sunday morning to attend worship with us. We persisted, though, often using creative bribes—Dan loved going to a coffee shop with us after church and that worked well. We all enjoyed it. At the coffee shop we talked about things that normally never came up. Invariably, we talked about what had happened at church. I was amazed that Dan often brought up the topic of what Grant (the minister) had said to him as he greeted him at the door. It was usually nothing much, in my or my husband's opinion, but was a light-hearted teasing. "If you get any taller, we'll have to cut a hole in the top of the door frame," or "Were you wide awake today, or did you fall asleep in my sermon?" The thing that amazed me was how important those little interactions were to Dan and how important he felt to be noticed and included by his minister. Children and youth are connected to their minister and church by what seems like a tenuous thread, but it is, nevertheless, a very strong thread.

Staying connected intentionally is such an important pastoral task that I developed a pastoral care check list. (See next page.)

Discuss this:

- As an elder or minister, what are your regular practices that remind your "sheep" that you are thinking of them at important times? List ways that these practices might be increased to include some of the items listed above.