

The Ingredients of a Successful Elder Oversight Program

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It would cause me more chagrin than surprise were I to learn that, for many of our church members, the primary activity associated with the office of elder is merely that of “going to Session meetings.” There would, of course, be at least some reason for this. Session meetings are regularly mentioned in our church bulletins, Sessional action taken within those meetings is frequently reported to the congregation, and many parts of the life of the church are directly affected by what goes on in the meetings of the Session. Certainly involvement in such meetings is a vital part of the work of the elder, and, in some sense, it is the glory of Presbyterianism on the local level: a plurality of wise and godly men, governing the affairs of the church through prayerful deliberation and decision-making. In my judgment, however, involvement in Session meetings is among the least demanding of the responsibilities of an elder, and, measured in terms of actual investment of time and energy, constitutes a relatively minor part of the fulfillment of an elder’s calling to office. It really does not come hard for most of us men to be called upon to voice our opinions to one another in Sessional deliberations, and despite the late nights and occasional stress that accompanies it, there is a certain natural gratification that is felt at being involved in making authoritative decisions on behalf of the congregation. On the other hand, it comes far less easily for us as elders to engage ourselves fully in what should be the primary activity which our members associate with the role of elder: personal and pastoral involvement in the lives of the people. Because this direct shepherding labor is easily the most demanding aspect of being an elder, it is also the most neglected, perhaps contributing more than we know to the notion among our members that being an elder involves simply “going to Session meetings.” It is this vital work of pastoral oversight that I would like to address in this article.

It is not my intention here to defend biblically the work of pastoral oversight through home visitation and other means. The biblical description of the elder’s role as “keeping watch over souls” (Acts 20:28, Heb. 13:17) is self-evidently something which cannot take place merely by attending Session meetings. Others have written about the broader biblical mandate for elders to take pains to be acquainted with the members of the church, and to provide personalized instruction and accountability, and indeed, our whole Reformed tradition provides rich historical precedent for this aspect of an elder’s ministry. Indeed, this whole realm of duty is, in my experience, *instinctively* recognized by those with truly pastoral hearts. My intention, therefore, is to offer several practical observations regarding what I believe to be the essential “ingredients” to a successful ministry of pastoral oversight in the church.

1. The division of the congregation into “shepherding groups.”

In all but the very smallest churches, the minister alone will be unable to meet the congregation’s need for oversight, and in light of this, it is wise to assign individual elders to families to function as their primary overseer. By limiting the field of their responsibility, each elder is enabled to direct his pastoral efforts to a more manageable number of people, and to make the significant investment of time and energy in them which would be otherwise impossible. Likewise, the members are afforded access to a member of the Session other than the ever-busy minister: an elder who has specifically made himself available to them. When a congregation is properly schooled in this shepherding structure, they will begin to look not only to the minister but also to their “shepherding elder” for counsel and assistance. This will in turn free up the minister to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5) in the visitation and follow-up of visitors to the church, as well as to devote his pastoral work and

counseling to those more urgent cases that arise within the congregation. In our congregation, new members are assigned to shepherding elders at the time of their initial interview, and we have found that 10 households per elder represent the upper limit of what is manageable in light of our shepherding goals.

When an elder fully embraces the opportunities afforded him by this division of labor, he will begin to carry about with him a pastoral concern particularly for the welfare of *his own flock* within the flock, for which he is primarily responsible. As is habitual with all true shepherds, his concern will manifest itself in a frequent and habitual “counting of sheep” in a variety of ways. When the members of the church gather on the Lord’s Day for worship and spiritual nourishment, the conscientious shepherding elder will look for each member of his shepherding group, and take note when any are missing from the opportunity to be fed. Likewise, he will regularly name each member of his shepherding group in intercessory prayer, ensuring that not even the youngest of the lambs are left out of his labors in prayer on their behalf. Further, he will diligently plan various avenues by which to check on the health of each of the households within his flock at various points throughout the year, so that even those seemingly least in need are still given the attention of the shepherd. Especially in a growing congregation it will be vitally important for every member of the fold to have at least one elder conscientiously keeping up with his coming and going.

2. Formal Pastoral Visits

The backbone of successful pastoral oversight is regular pastoral visitation in the home: a subject that has been addressed in this publication before. The primary point which I would make here is that great care should be taken to prevent such elder visits from devolving into mere social visits. It should be understood by the entire household that it is the elder’s focused objective to assess the spiritual condition of each of its members, and to provide personalized instruction and encouragement as appropriate. The elder himself should come to the meeting with a plan and focus that will enable him to meet this objective. I have found that a particularly helpful device for bringing the congregations’ expectations into alignment with that of the elders is a “family visitation guide,” which can be distributed periodically to the congregation. This guide outlines the purpose and biblical basis for family visitation, the planned structure of the meeting itself, and the way families can ready themselves for it. The material which our Session uses has been almost entirely borrowed with permission from the Session of Second Parish OPC in Portland, Maine, and is appended here as an illustration. It is distributed to all the members of our congregation at the beginning of each year, and serves to initiate new members to the practice as well as to remind the rest of the congregation once again to expect a contact from their shepherding elder for the purpose of arranging another shepherding visit.

It is extremely important that the shepherding elder prepare himself to effectively *lead* the shepherding visit. The elder should come prepared to follow a simple line of questioning at each visit. These questions should be aimed at the various aspects of a Christian’s life which are indicators of his spiritual well-being, including personal Bible reading and prayer, the marriage relationship, parenting endeavors, and vocational pursuits. In addition to this, it is important to question church members regarding the fulfillment of their membership responsibilities, especially their church attendance and involvement in ministry to others within the body. The purpose of such questioning is to enable the elder to address areas of need with words of admonition and encouragement. When an elder has gotten to know those in his shepherding group well, he will sometimes go on a visit with certain pastoral concerns already in mind, and he will wisely direct the conversation accordingly. One of the primary benefits of regular visitation is that patterns of sin can be dealt with in their early development. When

more extended counseling is needed, the minister's assistance can then be enlisted in the form of specialized counseling.

When there are children in the home, they should receive the elder's attention as well, and it will often be most convenient to do this early in the visit in order to be able to dismiss them later for more extended discussion with their parents. The children's progress in learning the catechism should receive the elder's attention in particular, and their readiness to make public profession of faith should be a regular point of discussion and counsel with their parents.

A wise elder will allow for *flexibility* but will seek to retain a *focus* in the course of his visit. He will allow for unplanned emphases on issues of obvious importance which arise in the meeting, but he will remain resistant to even innocent digressions that can sidetrack the meeting. For example, when an elder encounters evidence of marital conflict in the home, it may well be prudent to dwell upon this area for the majority of the visit, to the exclusion of other important concerns. It is unlikely, however, that discussions of a new job or a new home purchase in themselves, on the other hand, should be allowed to consume a whole visit, at the expense of broader indicators of spiritual health in the members of the household. This spiritually diagnostic focus of the elders' visit is a delicate and sometimes even uncomfortable experience for members. Consequently, there is the natural tendency on the part of both elders and member to shy away from the most pointed of spiritual conversations. To the degree that this happens, however, the visit has forfeited its primary potential for good, and can very easily become little more than a waste of valuable time, both that of the family and the elder.

3. Ongoing Informal Fellowship.

As fundamental to the shepherding role as these formal visits are, it is utterly essential that such encounters not take place in a vacuum of broader, informal interaction. In fact, their profitableness will be determined in large part by the relationship that is built through many other informal times of fellowship by which an elder comes to know and be known by his flock. If the only meaningful contact between an elder and those under his care takes place in an annual shepherding visit, he cannot reasonably expect the members of his shepherding group to be genuinely open and responsive to his probing questions, or for himself to have the insight necessary to profitably minister to them. For this reason, in addition to formal and structured oversight visits, the conscientious elder will embrace the responsibility to develop in informal ways bona fide relationships with those under his care.

There are countless ways in which this fellowship can be fostered, including the occasional lunch appointment with the men of the church or the periodic phone call to the single mother. The avenue with greatest potential, however, is that of elders regularly opening their own homes to the members of their shepherding groups for times of unstructured fellowship. This will, of course, place demands upon the elder's entire family, and will even necessitate at times the sacrificing of other legitimate social pursuits in favor of this vital ministry. That this is an essential part of the fulfillment of an elder's calling, however, is made clear by the prominent and repeated place given to "hospitality" as a qualification in Scripture for office (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). Showing hospitality is the general responsibility of all the members of the church (1 Peter 4: 9), but is one that in our day seems to go largely undeveloped in many otherwise solid Christian families, contributing largely, in my judgement, to the ineffectiveness of our ministry in the local church. For the elders of the church, this is a critical aspect of their shepherding responsibilities, and their practice in this area should consequently be a model for the rest of the congregation.

4. A Sessional System of Accountability

Elders who take seriously the foregoing responsibilities will quickly find that they are too substantial to be fulfilled by anything less than a determined, systematic approach. Times for both formal visitation and informal hospitality will need to be planned and scheduled in advance, or they will likely not happen at all. In light of this, there is great wisdom in the Session devising a system of accountability to encourage the individual initiative of overseeing elders. The old adage, that it is not so much what is *expected* but that is *inspected* that gets done, applies to the earnest but ever-busy elders of the church as well. Once the necessity of pastoral oversight has been embraced by the Session, then specific goals should be agreed upon. How many formal pastoral visits will each elder seek to make in a year's time? How many occasions for informal hospitality? When the Session as a whole has agreed upon what is good and reasonable to aim for, in light of the local situation, then each elder can pursue these shepherding objectives with his own shepherding group in light of his own schedule. At Matthews OPC, at the end of each calendar year I ask the elders to submit their visitation schedules for the following year: a list of household names with a corresponding month of the year in which a shepherding visit is intended. I then compile these lists, and during the course of the coming year I include in the docket of our monthly Session meetings reports from each of the elders on the visits planned in the previous month. These reports may be very brief, but they may also serve to inform the elders of pastoral concerns, as well as benefit them with input from the members of the church. Of course, many changes have to be made during the course of a year, and sometimes wholly revised schedules must be submitted. However, at every Session meeting there is included in the docket the shepherding visits that are due (or past due!), according to each elder's own schedule, and those visits remain on the monthly dockets until a report is made on them. While it is to be expected that from time to time elders will get behind in their visitation during the course of the year, the benefit of this system of accountability is that any falling behind in visitation responsibilities is a matter which receives the attention of the whole Session.

5. Honest Identification of the Elder's Greatest Need.

Recently I heard another minister refer to a startling assessment which the leadership of his church had made concerning the reasons for the inadequacies of their congregation's ministry to one another. "Why are people not better cared for at our congregation?" was the question asked, and, after ruling out various merely administrative possibilities, the answer was finally given: "*People are not adequately cared for because we just don't care.*" I, of course, recognized the measure of hyperbole in this assessment, for I knew that the congregation involved was a spiritually mature one in many ways. I was, however, immediately struck with the penetrating insight of this assessment which, in my judgment, gets to the very heart of why needy people often "slip through the cracks" of the ministry of our churches. Even after we have recognized our pastoral responsibilities as elders, agreed upon our oversight objectives, and submitted ourselves to a system of accountability, the determining factor of whether or not we actually fulfil our duties to God's people is the measure to which we retain in ourselves the caring heart of a shepherd toward them. Likewise, effective oversight in the local church requires not so much elders with expansive amounts of time, but rather, a constant attentiveness and loving responsiveness in even small ways to the needs of our people.

When I began my pastoral ministry, I was early impressed with the need for *wisdom* in the fulfillment of my shepherding responsibilities, and I remain so. I have since then, however, come to see that I have another, more ever-present spiritual need in the fulfillment of my duties as shepherd, and that is *love*. In the day-to-day work of the ministry, it is not so much wisdom which I find myself in need of, but sacrificial devotion to the well-being of God's people. I need to be enabled by the Spirit to *care*, deeply and passionately, about the well-being of the sheep: all of them, and all of their needs. I submit

that we as elders need to be honest enough to recognize that the primary reason for unfulfilled shepherding responsibilities is our own failure simply to care sufficiently about the sheep. To be sure, we may be readily moved to compassion by sudden, crisis-level needs, and galvanized to sacrificial action on the behalf of sheep who are in dire distress. But a far greater test of a shepherd's heart is in the every day, ordinary care of sheep, when their souls' needs are occasioned not by severe providences of God, but perhaps by patterns of sin which are irksome and even exasperating. Compassionate care is especially tested when they themselves are unconscious of their need and therefore unresponsive to our assistance. I have learned from experience that there is a profound difference between a natural affection for people with which many of us are gifted, and sacrificial Christian love which "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13:7). When God imparts this grace to us elders, the work of pastoral oversight *will get done*, despite all providential hindrances and personal inadequacies. When this most essential work of an elder is not being done, we need to look first to the absence of this grace as the most likely cause. This is the most fundamental ingredient to the establishment of a successful pastoral oversight program, and can be gained only by the rekindling of a shepherd's heart in us by the Great Shepherd himself. Brothers, let us seek this grace earnestly and incessantly in prayer, for surely he is willing to give it!