

TALKING POINT #9

LIVING IN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY #2: IS PASTORAL CARE THE PASTOR'S JOB?

WHAT IS PASTORAL CARE?

Wikipedia tells us that Pastoral Care is “the ministry of care and counseling provided by pastors, chaplains and other religious leaders to members of their church, congregation or persons within a faith-based institution” or “where people offer help and caring to others in their church or wider community.” We get these ideas from the term “pastoral” – if it’s pastoral, that must mean the pastor does it, right?

But, is that what the Bible promotes as pastoral care? Is that the job of the pastor? Let’s look further.

HOW IS IT USUALLY DONE?

In most Churches, pastoral care is primarily the job of the pastor or a member of the pastoral team. If someone has any sort of problem, such as health issues, financial problems, spiritual concerns, they go to the pastor who provides the necessary care. While the actual care that is given might be done by a delegated person, at the end of the day, pastoral care is administered by the pastoral team. This puts a lot of emphasis on the pastor as the carer to the congregation.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

But, as we ask in each of these Talking Point papers, “Is it Biblical?”

Interestingly, the term “pastoral care” is never used in the Bible. Where leaders are told to “take care” of the Church, the Greek word means to “lead well, administer well.” (1 Tim 3:5) So, the first thing we can see is that the concept of Pastoral Care is not exclusively the pastor’s role.

So, whose job is it to care for the people of the Church? Let’s look at some verses:

1 Corinthians 12:24b-26 “But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.”

James 1:27 “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

Acts 2:44-45 “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”

In answer to our question “whose job is it to care for God’s people?” the answer is simply – God’s people. We all have a responsibility to care for one another, serve one another, build one another up, correct one another, help one another and, ultimately, love one another.

Paul Borden argues that many in the modern Church have misunderstood the metaphor of the Church leader as a shepherd.¹ He argues that, because very few of us now live in a Middle Eastern rural society, we don’t understand the role of a shepherd and therefore we don’t understand the role

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of a pastor. He argues that the role of the shepherd was to move the flock from one place to another. In that case, the pastor's role is to lead the Church in mission and not necessarily do the pastoral care.

However, it is also clear from Jesus' parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15) that the shepherd was also to care and nurture the sheep. Indeed, if leaders of Christ's Church are to be faithful under-shepherds of Christ, we need to reflect Him to our Churches, and that involves demonstrating His love to people.

So, the Bible presents care operating at 2 levels:

1. Care by all members of the Church – everyone has a role to play;
2. Care particularly offered by the pastors in extreme cases.

It's important to hold these two levels together. Care should be provided by pastors – God has given us the role of leading His Church and part of Christ-like shepherding is putting the lost or hurt sheep on our shoulders for a time. However, we should all see that we have a role of caring for one another. Indeed, one of the roles for a pastor is to “prepare God's people for works of service” (Eph 4:12) and what a great work of service it is to help others!

HOW IS IT DONE AT FOREST LAKE BAPTIST CHURCH?

At Forest Lake Baptist Church (FLBC), we encourage everyone to care for one another. If you see a need and you can help, just do it! If we hear of someone doing it tough, don't leave it to the pastor to help, make the call or pay the visit yourself. If someone is in hospital, make the trip to see them!

However, pastors have been trained in areas of care and counselling for a reason. I am here, as your pastor, to care for you! There will be extreme cases or emergencies where the spiritual and practical care of your pastor is needed and it is a privilege for me to provide that to you!

As Churches grow it becomes important to systematise our care to ensure that if someone has a need, we can help. And, that's where I value the extraordinary care provided by our Pastoral Care Point Person, Mavis Hillis! If you need care of any kind, you can call Mavis or me.

HOW CAN YOU BE INVOLVED?

The best way to receive care and to give care is to be in a Life Group. These groups provide a more personal setting so that we can help each other and walk the journey of life together. I'd encourage you to join one today!

CONCLUSION

God wants His Church to reflect Him to the World and one of the ways we do this is caring for each other. Jesus made this clear in Matt 25:42-43. He wants us to show His love to the World in the way we love each other (John 13:34-35). So, pastoral care is done by all of us – let's look for ways to love one another in practical ways!

ⁱ Paul D. Borden "Hit the Bullseye" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).