

The Good Shepherd
MVAC - Kitimat

1 John 4:7-21
June 26, 2011

It's hard to believe that nine months have gone by since I was first with you at the end of September of last year. What started out as a kind of blind date has turned into a remarkable relationship even though we knew from the beginning it wouldn't lead to a marriage! Because of your warm reception and response it's been tempting to transition from transitional pastoral ministry into something more permanent... But the nature of transitional pastoral work is to focus on *transition* for the church not on permanent employment.

Transitional work by its very nature is temporary. It is not so much about bridging a gap as it is about helping a church re-align itself for the best possible ministry in the future. It's not only about Sunday services and pastoral care, but also about working with the church to prepare it for a more effective ministry in the future. It entails trying to refine the church's sense of identity and mission with a view to finding a pastor that can fit with its unique characteristics.

As I reflect on the time that I've had with you, I'm grateful to the Lord for His special grace in helping us work through some delicate and sensitive matters. You have a good Elders Board. Even though its members are *very* different from one another, it's been wonderful to see how they've been willing to work together as a team. For each of them, the work in this transition has involved some long hours and sometimes very stressful kinds of work. But by God's work, they've risen to the occasion and come through well. It's not easy to be what we call *a lay elder* in the church. Obviously they don't do it for the money. Elders who serve well do it for the sheer joy of serving Christ in a very practical way. So I just want to take this moment to recognize their work and also of their spouses who work hard behind the scenes to support them in their work.

I also want to say a big thank you for your support of my work with you in this time. Thanks for the party we enjoyed the other night and for your generous expressions of love and appreciation to me for this work – the cards, the gifts, the large gift of money, and your kind words.

On Wednesday night I suggested that your new pastor is in for a real treat in serving you. Of course, you need to be prepared for the fact that his role and work will be different than mine. And he will need your support... So that's what I decided to talk to you about today, even though I had various other ideas.

Sometime ago, I gave some thought to what a job description for a pastor looks like. And based on what the Bible says about this and my own observations, I've come to the conclusion that a pastor's job consists largely of being a shepherd to the sheep. I think this is a great image of what it means to be a good leader in general and a good one among God's people in particular. This is what characterized David's leadership and made him such a favourite among God's people in his day. *He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skilful hands he led them.* Psalm 78:70 - 72. And it's true: David had his faults, but in his heart, he was tuned to loving and serving the Lord. It's one reason we Christians like him so much...

One reason God gave us David was that his life and leadership prophetically pointed the way to what Jesus' leadership would be like. Isaiah prophesied of Jesus: *He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young* (40:11). So when Jesus comes on the scene, this is exactly what he did. He led his people like a shepherd. In fact John remembers one of Jesus' talks in which he said: *I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep.* READ John 10:1-17. As I read these verses, think of how they apply to the work of a pastor.

So using this shepherd image of leadership we can come to some basic conclusions about what a pastor's leadership should entail. There are four elements:

1. He is committed to their individual care. The sheep learn to know the voice of the shepherd and to respond to that voice because he takes a special individual interest in each of them, calling them each by name. What a wonderful image this is of what it means to be a shepherd of God's people. I know you know that this is a critical aspect of doing pastoral work – knowing the names of people, taking a special interest in each of their lives, understanding their particular personalities and needs. Pastoral care is very much an individualized kind of ministry that will entail hospitality, visitation, listening, and counseling of one kind or another. It is custom work in that sense. The pastor should know the individual characteristics of each person in his flock and how each can be properly nourished and cared for when they are wounded or get into trouble.

2. He goes before and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. A shepherd is a leader. He knows where he is going and he leads the sheep in a direction and to a place in which they will grow and mature. And the sheep follow because they know his voice. I believe that a pastor is called to lead the church by *casting vision* through preaching and teaching, and by exercising some degree of governance. His leadership is based on trust and integrity, on his example of genuine faith and love, as well as his words of wisdom from God.
3. By the shepherd's leadership the sheep are able to find green pastures and quiet waters. (And of course as I mention that, you can't help but think of Psalm 23, the Shepherd Psalm. (*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul, He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*) And just as a shepherd will work hard to lead his sheep to good food and water, so a pastor will work hard at providing food from the Word of God and life from the Spirit. He will seek to guide God's people in the way of righteousness. He wants them to be able to reproduce – to have little lambs of their own -- because the shepherd *has other sheep that are not of this sheep pen*. And so the shepherd is an evangelist and teaches his people how to share the Good News and to produce fruit as well. He has a ministry of discipleship in which he sometimes provides discipline with his rod and staff. He wants the sheep to make steady progress in their growth and development. Shepherding in this way is a long and arduous task but over time it is tremendously rewarding.
4. Last but not least, the shepherd is willing to lay down his own life for the sake of the sheep. Jesus said: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*. His is the heart of a true servant whose leadership is sometimes described as servant-leadership because that's how Jesus described leadership to his disciples. The whole concept of servant leadership that Jesus spoke about to his own disciples is the art of being willing to sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of those you lead. I think this happens through empowering others to lead in various capacities, of delegating privilege and responsibility to others, and working in a team relationship.

Several years ago, a man named Jim Collins wrote a book called, *Good to Great*, in which he provided a summary of what companies that succeeded had in common. And one of the things he concluded is that the most successful companies, the ones that went from just being good to being great, were led by the kind of leaders whom he called, *level five* leaders: These were people who were not

necessarily charismatic types of people; instead they were people that exuded a sense of personal humility, almost self-effacing kinds of people. They were people who were willing to work hard, but their ambition was for the company, not for themselves. In other words, their work and leadership was not about themselves. You would think those who serve as pastors would understand this – because that’s the way Jesus led. But it’s not always so. Pastors sometimes forget that leading a church is about serving....

Successful pastoral ministry, I believe, involves learning to lead like the Good Shepherd – caring, leading, feeding, and serving with a huge sense of self-sacrifice. When properly done, this work is not easy. Sometimes it involves fighting off the wolves or even suffering various kinds of persecution for the sake of the well-being of the sheep.

Yet the degree to which a shepherd is able to do his work well, is partially dependent upon the willingness of the sheep to listen to the shepherd and to follow him. The problem in shepherding is that sheep tend to go off on their own, and it’s the same with us. God wasn’t kidding when he said: *We all like sheep, have gone astray, we all have turned to our own way.* And so it is with pastoring – the degree to which a pastor is able to do well is partially dependent upon the co-operative encouragement and support that the congregation gives to him.

What then can a church do to encourage pastoral longevity? Drawing upon some of my own experience and knowledge, let me suggest some important actions that encourage pastoral longevity:

1. **The sheep need to listen for the Shepherd’s voice.** This means that they need to have an attitude of faith and trust toward the shepherd and they need to become familiar with his voice. As this is true for sheep it is also true for the people of God. We become familiar with the voice of the Good Shepherd as we tune our hearts to listen to His Word. And we become trusting toward the pastor of the church as it is evident that his language is that of the Word of the Lord. This is the starting point of a long and healthy relationship between the church and its pastor. The people have to have a significant degree of confidence that they are being led by the one whom God has called for this task.

It helps a lot if the congregation believes in what the Bible has to say about church and church leadership. One of the main reasons that Paul wrote the book of 2 Corinthians was to establish the credibility of his ministry. It is true that there may be people who serve that turn out to be less than sincere but this was not true of

Paul. “*Unlike so many,*” he writes, “*we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ, we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.*” There will always be those who will tend toward skepticism. I want to encourage you to be a person *who believes*. This will lead to regular prayer for your pastor which also is a vital aspect of encouraging pastoral longevity. Give thanks often for your pastor and pray for God’s help and blessing on his life and ministry.

- 2. The sheep need to distinguish between the voice of their shepherd and that of the stranger.** It’s important to realize that the world is a mix of good and bad of holiness and wickedness, of the true and the false. And we constantly need to make a distinction between the two. It is a large part of what life is all about. And so it is in the matter of church life and ministry. One way to encourage pastoral longevity is for God’s people to learn how to make this distinction. And so it is that the writer of Hebrews chides his readers to be mature in these things. He writes: *Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish between good and evil* (Hebrews 4:13, 14). Christians need to make the kinds of distinctions in teachings that enable them to recognize the voice of their true shepherd as opposed to other false shepherds and voices. One of the very challenging things about being a pastor today is the reality of so many competing voices. One way you can be a support and blessing to your pastor is to demonstrate your appreciation for this distinction as you closely follow the teaching he brings. Listen carefully to his preaching and teaching. Seek the counsel and guidance that the pastor is trained to provide. Let the pastor be a means of divine direction in your life. “*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you*” (Hebrews 13:17).
- 3.** And this leads into a third way to encourage the pastor in his work – and that is to accept his leadership as he tries to direct. It’s important for you to be committed to his leadership even if it isn’t always comfortable. It is not surprising that people in pastoral leadership are often maligned or attacked in some way. And it’s not surprising that many of them quit. Satan doesn’t want pastors to do the work that God has called them to do. At various times in our experience, my wife and I have been *very* aware of the Devil’s work. Sometimes the very ones whom the pastor is seeking to serve are unwittingly used by Satan to accomplish his purposes. So it is very important to guard

against your own attitude and especially your words. God's people need to work hard at resisting the temptation to speak disparagingly of the pastor's ministry. Many times you may hear negative and critical comments about something the pastor has done or said. How you respond to that kind of thing is critical to the pastor's long term ministry.

Of course the matter of support extends to your personal words of encouragement, your expressions of appreciation, and your material support. In 1 Corinthians 9:14, Paul writes that "*the Lord has commanded that those how preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*" In other words, God's call is for God's people to be very practical about their support for the pastor. So many times the attitude is, "Lord, if you keep him humble, we'll keep him poor" – as though a poor pastor will be a better pastor. Be generous in supporting the ministry of your pastor through your tithes and offerings, through giving him space and time away, as well as educational opportunity and God will bless you – and your church.

4. And the final way to encourage your pastor is to gently keep him accountable. Someone may well ask what to do if you have a situation in which it appears that the pastor isn't doing his job or isn't doing something well. Should Christian people be expected to support someone who appears ingenuous or incompetent? Isn't there a time to say, in the words of Hans Christian Anderson's story, "that the emperor has no clothes!"

Yes, there is! It is very important that leaders, and especially Christian leaders, be held accountable. First and foremost they stand before the Lord. In Acts 17:11 Luke comments on the contrast between the believers in Berea and those in Thessalonica. He commends the Bereans because they searched the Scriptures daily to see if they were being told the truth. Sometimes we can be too believing. Human pastors are sinners too. And sometimes they make mistakes and go astray. So there is a sense in which pastors too need to be held accountable. And this is also true for me. How is this done? Well, largely through your elected elders. One of their jobs is to ensure a proper sense of accountability for the pastor. They need to work with the pastor as a team, but they also need to prepare to assess his work regularly.

And where this is done well, such a process can serve to greatly enhance a pastor's ministry for a long period of time. This is something I have given a lot of thought and prayer to in the last number of years and I am convinced that a *good* process of ministry assessment can go a long ways to improved and lengthened ministry. Personal assessment is something that all of us should invite in our lives from

people who love us and whom we can trust. Paul writes, “But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment” (1 Corinthians 11:31). And this applies to pastors, too. Sometimes this is done clumsily and haphazardly and then it produces a crisis. But if it is done regularly and in love, both the pastor and church can benefit a lot. Too often something may bother us, but we don’t know how to approach the matter until it becomes a big problem. It’s all part of open speaking the truth in love with one another which is essential to progress in family and business as well as the church.

As I thought and prayed about what to share with you today, I came to the conclusion that this was an important message at this juncture. Originally, I was going to speak to you about preserving the spirit of unity in the bond of peace by your love for one another. But maybe I can share that message some other time if I have the opportunity.

For now, let me just encourage you to believe God for a good ministry of the church in the days ahead. It’s been great to see the progress that the Lord has brought in these days. My prayers will be with you...