

PROVIDING PASTORAL CARE



WHAT IS A PASTOR?

The word “pastor” in the bible literally translates as “shepherd.” Throughout the Bible, the image of a shepherd’s caring for his sheep becomes a primary metaphor for a spiritual leader’s care for his people. It is applied to God the Father (Gen. 48:15); to David (2 Sam. 5:2); kings, priests, and other leaders of Israel (Jer. 10:21); Peter (Jn. 21:15-17); elders in the early church (Acts 20:28); and believers who served the early church powerfully with the spiritual gift of pastoring (Eph. 4:11-12). Jesus becomes the chief shepherd in the biblical story, the model to follow and the authority to submit to for every other shepherd in the church. The author of Hebrews calls him “the great shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20-21) and He taught of Himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10). We could summarize the task of pastoring/shepherding with four key words: they *gather*, *guide*, *guard*, and *feed* other believers. Some leaders in the church will find themselves pastoring as their primary role in the church, but all kinds of leaders are gifted and called to help shepherd the flock of God to one degree or another. As community group leaders, you certainly fall into this category.

WHAT IS PASTORAL CARE?

The scope of pastoral ministry is wider than just pastoral care, but pastoral care makes up a huge part of it. Typically, pastoral care is thought of as taking place in an extremely personal context (often one-on-one). The person providing care is attempting to gather/guide/guard/feed the person through whatever the pressing issue is—ultimately pointing them back to Jesus. Common pastoral care scenarios include *spiritual direction* (the person is asking “What should I do in this scenario to honor Christ?” or “How do I grow closer to God?”), *theological questions* (“Will you help me understand this confusing or troubling doctrine?”), or *processing pain and suffering* (“Will you be a crying shoulder or listening ear?” or “What should I do in response to this trauma?” or “Where was God when this happened?”). As a leader, you can expect people to come to you with needs in these (and potentially other) categories.

BASICS OF CARE

If you are a small group leader (or really any leader in the church), you will often be the first person a group member (whom you have spent time investing in) or a peer (who has noticed your faithfulness) will come to with a significant emotional or spiritual need. These problems can come in a number of shapes and sizes, but they will come nonetheless. Having a foundational plan for walking with people through these scenarios is extremely necessary. To continue with the metaphor, Jesus has placed hungry, hurting, and wandering sheep in our care, and we must have a plan for how to tend to them. Here are six foundational ideas to begin equipping you for this task:

1. **Know the Good Shepherd and allow Him to develop you.** This must happen well before we’re sitting down in a pastoral situation, but we must be actively growing in our own discipleship to Jesus. We have to abide (know and obey, see Jn. 15) in Jesus to be of much use to others. The more we look like our Good Shepherd, the more effective we will be.
2. **Prayer.** When trying to help someone, we should depend on prayer. Remember that it will ultimately be the Holy Spirit, working through us and in our friends, that will bring change. We pray before, during (literally, silently while we’re listening to them), and after we meet with them. Pray for them daily. Pray with them strategically and expectantly, asking God to direct the time together. In Luke 11, Jesus told His disciples to pray persistently and relentlessly for what they seek. We should certainly apply this when trying to help others.
3. **Relationship, love, and empathy.** The more relational equity, trust, and love (with wisdom and carefulness) we can build with someone, the more success we will find in helping. We have to get to know them beyond the issue or pain they’re trying to show us. Ask good questions and share from your own personal life. If we want our encouragement or challenges to be received, remember the wider the relational bridge, the heavier the spiritual/emotional truckload that can be sent across. Also, we shouldn’t underestimate the power of empathy. We should try to meet the person where they’re at as best as possible. Try to speak their language, using their phrasings when appropriate. Find the things they’re interested in and try to build meaning using those things as reference points. We could take a page from

Paul's evangelistic handbook in 1 Cor. 9:19-23, particularly when he said, "I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some."

4. **Meet the felt need.** Oftentimes, there is a single pressing need that drives a pastoral care meeting. It may be something as practical as, "I'm stressed because I won't be able to make rent this month and don't know what to do." Of course, prayer, spiritual encouragement, and empathy should be a part of this conversation, but it will probably be necessary to help find a practical solution (help them find a job, mobilize the community group to collect money for the person, reach out to Door of Hope for a benevolence request, etc.). Not every need has a clear solution, but we should be looking for one.
5. **Be a conduit for the grace of God.** We all need to be reminded regularly of the grace, mercy, and forgiveness that Jesus accomplished for us. The confession of sin and the presence of guilt and shame are often present, and we have the honor of communicating God's loving grace in those moments. Speak love. Remind them the Gospel says they are loved despite their worst mistakes.
6. **Be a conduit for the call of God.** Remember that the grace of God isn't meant to leave us content in sin, but is meant to lead us into obedience as our grateful response. Speak truth. Remind them the Gospel says they are called to change. We can't be afraid to call the people we love to specific acts of repentance for their good and God's glory.

REFERRAL PROCESS

At Door of Hope, we believe our volunteer leaders should feel equipped and empowered to join in the work of shepherding our people. That said, sometimes the pastoral care situation you find yourself in will feel beyond what you're comfortable addressing. Remember that you are always welcomed and encouraged to reach out to Door of Hope's pastoral staff for support or to refer the person to another's care. Ideally, you will still be maintaining relationship with that person even if they begin meeting with a staff pastor, counselor, etc.

There are a handful of situations where you should definitely reach out to the pastoral staff. These include: chronic, destructive habits (like addictions); safety/abuse concerns; significant mental health issues; and suicidal ideation (*if they have a plan and means to take their own lives, a 911 call must be made and they are not to be left alone*).

The first step in the referral process is to the Door of Hope pastoral staff. From there, the pastoral staff will be able to recommend referrals to more specialized recovery ministries like Genesis Groups, etc. They will also be able to refer to trained counselors and other helping professionals. Sometimes individuals or families are concerned about the potential cost of counseling or other ministries. Remember that Door of Hope maintains a benevolence fund that can be used to supplement the costs of counseling if necessary.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Pastoral Care: In Crisis and When It's Chronic article by Dave McDonald – This is a helpful article talking through some basic tips for helping people in crisis. It is part four of a four part series on pastoral care. You may want to check out the others, as well. (<https://australia.thegospelcoalition.org/article/pastoring>)

Helping the Hurting article by Christina Fox – Fox gives a few simple, practical pointers for what to do when encountering someone who has experienced a recent, significant pain in their lives. (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/helping-hurting>)

The Wounded Healer book by Henri Nouwen - In typical Nouwen fashion, this simple and short book leaves a profound impact on those who desire to minister to others. He explores the importance of individuals getting in touch with their own woundedness as a way to image Christ and bring healing to themselves and others.

Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership book by Ruth Haley Barton - Using the life of Moses as a backdrop, Barton considers many topics that leaders in churches will experience and encourages spiritual disciplines that will leave them feeling equipped and refreshed.

Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands book by Paul David Tripp – A great, thorough (370 pages!) look at how God utilizes people in the body of Christ to bring about change in people.