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HOW KIRK SESSIONS IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
IRELAND APPROACH AND PROVIDE PASTORAL CARE
FOR THEIR CONGREGATIONS

By

IVAN NEISH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the way in which Kirk Sessions of growing, suburban congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland approached and provided pastoral care for their members. The shepherding care of God's flock that is entrusted to elders is one of the most important aspects of church life, and at the time of this research it is under major review in this denomination.

This study utilized a qualitative design using structured interviews with six elders of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The review of literature and analysis of the six interviews focused on four key aspects of pastoral care. These four areas of focus were: strategies used by Sessions in their approach to pastoral care, the personal involvement of elders in the process, the elements affecting the elders' individual engagement, and the assessment by elders of the pastoral care provided.

In the area of the approaches used by Sessions, the findings of this study revealed a general movement away from the traditional model of district home visitation by elders towards a more corporate strategy using a group format, and the use of pastoral teams. Whilst some elders were still involved in home visitation, this was not widely practiced with any measure of effectiveness or satisfaction.

In the area of personal involvement by elders in the process, this study found that some were active in leadership of a small group ministry whilst others had more of an overseeing role within the overall strategy, or a combination of both.

Regarding what affected the elders personal involvement in the shepherding process, either positively or negatively, the findings of this study indicated a number of issues. The inward sense of calling to the eldership was a significant factor for the vast

majority, and was an ongoing motivation in their service. Other important areas that emerged were: the encouragement of the minister, a personal sense of weakness and limitation, and the individual's experience in the regular ongoing meetings of the Kirk Session.

In the area of assessment of the pastoral care provided, this study found that a personal sense of being able to support and encourage others was an important element. Also included were the gifts of Session members, the willingness or otherwise of members to receive pastoral care within a small group structure, and the overall strategy used by the Session.

This study concluded that it is possible, and generally was considered desirable, to gradually make the transition from a district visitation strategy to one that includes a more corporate approach, and allows for the use of the gifts of others in the fellowship.

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Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Children are precious, and a parent would only trust them to someone whom they know will take good care of them. When a parent hands them over, they do so with the conviction that their child is in safe hands and will be well looked after. This scenario is effectively what God does with the church when he places his people into the care of those who are called to help ensure their spiritual well-being and safety. This provision of care is something of great importance in the life of the church and it is vital that this task be taken seriously and fulfilled as effectively as possible. John Stott puts it this way: “If the three persons of the Trinity are thus committed to the welfare of the people, should we not be also?”¹ Biblically, this task is given to those who are referred to as “elders” or “overseers” in the church, and the work to which they are called is termed “shepherding,” which refers to the idea of one who cares for a flock of sheep. From this agricultural practice, the task is often referred to as “pastoral care.”

Whilst some have considered pastoral care to be the sole responsibility of the minister or teaching elder, biblically it is something to be shared amongst all the elders of the church. This shared responsibility is made clear when Peter writes: “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder... Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care...”² Paul states the same principle when he urges the Ephesian elders: “Be shepherds

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 329.

² 1 Peter 5:1-2.

of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”³ This corporate pattern of caring is God’s prescribed way of providing for the church those who will watch out for the spiritual welfare of his people, who belong to him by faith in Jesus Christ, and the task is vital. James Boice, for many years the senior pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, stresses the crucial nature of this responsibility when he states that the term used for the role of the elder “refers to one who is a guard over other persons. An elder has a responsibility for oversight. Elders are to be concerned for others’ welfare.”⁴

It is one thing to state the principle of elders caring for the church, but quite another to put it into practice, and it is a task that is undertaken more effectively by some Kirk sessions than others. Concerning oversight by elders, Lawrence Eyres, who served in ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church for over fifty-five years, writes, “But this is not being regularly done in a great many of our churches. And the failure has contributed to an attitude on the part of church members that personal oversight is only given in unusual cases.”⁵ In conversations with colleagues in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), it is clear that there are sessions who strive diligently to shepherd the flock with a good measure of effectiveness, whilst others are less engaged. This neglect has major implications for the spiritual welfare of God’s people who need to be cared for in the church, and if this situation is not addressed, some may receive little or no genuine or meaningful pastoral care. The researcher suspects that the words of Timothy Witmer,

³ Acts 20:28.

⁴ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 637.

⁵ Lawrence R. Eyres, *The Elders of the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1975), 22.

professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, could easily apply to the PCI when he states, “There is a crisis in the church;...it is a shepherding crisis, or should I say a failure to shepherd.”⁶ It may be that some of these shepherds are not clear about what they are called to do, whilst others know what their responsibility is, but struggle to put it into practice. Perhaps there are those who find it hard to be motivated, or have become discouraged as they have tried faithfully to exercise pastoral care in their congregation, but with little sense of purpose. It is also possible that some Kirk Sessions have either a very vague policy regarding the shepherding of the flock, or alternatively no particular strategy at all. These issues are highlighted by Daniel Hyde, church planter and pastor in the United Reformed Church, when he states,

One of the blessings of being an elder is the experience of visiting the people under your care, whether they are sick, hospitalised or in mourning. We have a glorious history as Reformed Churches in visiting our people, whether in Geneva with Calvin, or Scotland with Knox. It is amazing to me that in so many evangelical churches that I was a part of in the past, the pastors and elders did not visit with their members. But let us be faithful shepherds, knowing who is in need, and comforting them. Remember, you too will one day need a visit just as someone today may.⁷

One colleague described his efforts to encourage the session to engage in pastoral visiting by assigning to individual elders at a session meeting a particular family to contact during the following weeks and requesting a report at the next meeting. Whilst some were motivated by this practice, others absented themselves from the next meeting,

⁶ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 1.

⁷ Daniel R. Hyde, “The Duties of Elders,” *Ordained Servant: A Journal for Church Officers* 13, no.1 (January 2004): 4-7. This periodical is available online at <http://opc.org/OS/pdf/OSV13N1.pdf>.

thereby avoiding the embarrassment of having to publicly admit failure and missing out on being assigned another family to visit. Another minister in PCI stated,

One concern that I have is if pastoral care is to be provided only by Kirk Session, it can place elders in the difficult position of doing a task for which they are not gifted. This can be a particular problem if the pastoral care envisaged is the traditional method of door to door visitation in an elder's district.

In his experience with his own Kirk Session, and in discussion with other ministers, he believed that “[t]here will be elders who will be very fine pastors, but I do not think it is true for them all.” Each local church in PCI has a particular group of individuals appointed to do the work of the eldership, some of whom were ordained many years ago, and therefore the session must seek within that context to shepherd the flock.

There is much literature available that deals with the various responsibilities of the elder, explaining what it means to “shepherd the flock.” Gene Getz sums up the task in these words:

As shepherds, elders are ultimately responsible to make sure their sheep are sheltered, fed and protected from wolves, and when injured, to be cared for. And if a wayward or naive “lamb” or “sheep” wanders off into dangerous territory and gets lost or caught in a thicket, good shepherds at least make sure that someone takes the responsibility to minister to that one lost lamb.⁸

This explanation sounds like a reasonable description of pastoral care, but it also prompts questions such as: How can these needs be pursued meaningfully in practice? Can all of these areas be addressed by the same person for any individual member of the congregation? What does it mean to “shelter” and “protect” the sheep? What would be

⁸ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 266.

the motivation to persist faithfully in this work, and what would be discouraging? These elements of shepherding would seem to involve, at least potentially, a significant amount of time on the part of elders, many of whom are busy people with other life and family commitments. It might seem that the regular giving up of personal time is an unrealistic expectation in modern culture, and ultimately bound to produce a sense of failure and frustration on the part of some. Winslow and Followwill, both former business executives who have been called to become pastors, in dealing with some common pitfalls for elders state, “In this day of frenetic activity, sometimes an elder or even a group of elders may simply be too busy to elder effectively. If an elder is too busy to faithfully shepherd a ministry to which he has been assigned, then he is too busy to elder.”⁹ They highlight a further potential difficulty which may arise within an elder himself when they assert, “An elder may be tripped up by a crippling sense of personal inadequacy, focusing too much on himself rather than the Lord eldering through him.”¹⁰

Expectations are considerable in some literature, implying that elders will need to invest a significant amount of time in the fulfilment of their responsibilities. In his small volume on the subject, Charlie Shedd, a Presbyterian pastor, devotes four of the nine chapters to the work of calling on people in their own homes. He sees many of these calls as a critical part of the work. He states, for example, when dealing with church transfers that “the sooner the officer (elder) arrives after the prospect moves into his new home, the

⁹ Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill, *The Lord and the Elders* (Hong Kong: New Life Literature 1999), 185.

¹⁰ Ibid.

better the impression he makes for his church. Every day he dallies is time lost.”¹¹ Along with these, he lists calls to be made with the sick, bereaved, those in crisis, alcoholics, those with mental illness, patients in hospital, shut-ins, complainers, radicals, and children, amongst others. Granted, he acknowledges that pastoral care might be restricted to around ten homes for each elder, yet this could still involve considerable responsibility, and in itself may present the temptation to elect elders simply to “cover” all families in the congregation.

These are some of the issues that need to be explored in the practical outworking of the shepherding role of elders in the PCI. If the task is perceived as vital, realistic, achievable, and potentially fruitful, then these may be incentives for Kirk Sessions to pursue it meaningfully. If not, then it might be the reason why for some, shepherding seems to, at best, have a low priority, and, at worst, have been essentially abandoned.

Statement of the Problem

Pastoral care in a congregation plays a significant role in the spiritual health of the people of God in that fellowship. Even though believers have the Holy Spirit to empower them and the scriptures to teach them, they also need the shepherding involvement of others to help them travel the path set before them. God has made it clear in his word that the exercise of such pastoral support is his way for his church as they strive to live for him in the face of the opposition that they are sure to encounter. This opposition comes in many forms, including the influence of an unbelieving society that lives by very different

¹¹ Charlie W. Shedd, *The Pastoral Ministry of Church Officers* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1965), 40.

principles and with contrasting ambitions. Further threats to spiritual health originate from the ongoing struggle against the sinful nature, as well as personal attacks from Satan, who is described as one “who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”¹² Thus, church members are in real spiritual danger from this trinity of enemies that oppose their growth in Christlikeness and their effectiveness in witness. This spiritual danger makes the presence and function of elders of paramount importance.

In light of this danger, it is vital that pastoral care be taken seriously and implemented effectively by those who are entrusted with this responsibility, as the spiritual health and welfare of the church is at stake. Some of the literature would suggest that shepherding the flock is best undertaken by routine home visitation, whilst others advocate the use of more informal contact, or by involving the wider body of Christ in team ministry. In this researcher’s experience, and in conversation with colleagues in the PCI, it seems that the concept of regular, ongoing, pastoral home visitation by the session as a whole may be struggling to survive. Yet, the charge to “shepherd the flock” still stands as God’s timeless principle for the care of his sheep, and must be applied in as meaningful a way as possible.

Statement of the Purpose

It will be for the glory of God and the good of his people if those who are members of the church receive effective pastoral care in the fellowship to which they belong. Examining how this task is approached by different congregations and individuals, can help to identify the elements that have led to effectiveness or frustration,

¹² 1 Peter 5:8.

discouragement, or motivation in local churches. Further, an understanding of these elements would serve to guide sessions when they consider how they might best ensure the provision of pastoral care to their own members. It might also prompt those sessions who have given little thought to this responsibility, to take more seriously the task entrusted to them. The purpose of this study is to explore how pastoral care is approached and delivered by sessions of healthy, growing fellowships in the PCI.

Research Questions

This study focused on the way that sessions in PCI approach the task of “shepherding the flock.” This research involved enquiring into the strategy that is used by the session as a whole, and how individual elders personally implement this amongst the members. To explore this issue the following research questions were used to guide this study:

RQ 1: How do sessions approach the task of exercising pastoral care to the flock?

RQ 2: How do elders personally exercise their pastoral care responsibility towards individual members?

RQ 3: What affects the way in which elders engage in pastoral care?

RQ 4: How do elders assess the provision of pastoral care in their congregation?

Significance of the Study

There seems to be little written on the subject of how a session might develop the provision of pastoral care from a very traditional model in an increasingly changing society that is very different in lifestyle and expectations from that of previous

generations. This study has significance for those who seek to do so, not least the researcher's own congregation in the face of the ongoing challenge of shepherding his flock. In addition, this study could also be the basis for discussion in other congregations that either struggle to deliver pastoral care or have not addressed the issue in any meaningful way. The strength of this study is not to discover how shepherding should be implemented, but to prompt Kirk Sessions to consider the issues that it raises. This research may also help congregational leadership in PCI and other Reformed denominations to explore ways in which they might develop the current provision of pastoral care to their members. In addition, elders who have become discouraged in shepherding their flock may experience renewed enthusiasm for their God-given calling. In considering how elders assess their pastoral work in some local situations, church members may receive help in the process of electing new elders as they seek to assess those who might be suitably equipped for this task. This practice could be vital for the future, as in many congregations of the PCI there has been a tradition of appointing those who are prominent in the fellowship, rather than those who are biblically qualified.

There is a wider importance of this study for the church, in that good pastoral care and oversight ought to facilitate the spiritual growth and maturity of church members, enabling them increasingly to demonstrate godliness in living. Effective shepherding would enable elders to know who needs help and when it is needed, making appropriate pastoral care possible when most required.

Additionally, effective shepherding could also assist believers to engage actively in the warfare that living for God inevitably brings as they meet the opposition already referred to. This support would strengthen them to resist the temptations they face by

coming alongside when they are in particularly difficult situations, seeking to bring them support and encouragement. It could also assist in promoting the development of good relationships within the fellowship of God's people, thereby improving the health of the whole body, and enhancing the quality of mutual care, love and support that are to mark the people of God. The development of such relationships could only be good for the church.

The overall effect for the church of this potential improvement in body life, could be to promote authenticity, integrity, and righteousness in the lives of those who profess faith in Christ, thus giving them credibility before a watching world. This public credibility could greatly help in the fulfilment of the mandate that was given to the church by Christ when he stated to his disciples before ascending to the Father, "[Y]ou will be by witnesses...to the ends of the earth."¹³ The lives of healthy believers would be a compelling demonstration of the reality of the gospel message to those who are not yet persuaded. Such authentic godly living would be a powerful evangelistic tool in the hands of God, who often uses human instruments in the extension of his kingdom. Christians who are well-cared for would be more likely to demonstrate, not only love for God, but also love for neighbour, which in turn would be both a blessing to the surrounding community and a manifestation of the love of Christ.

Therefore, this study could have significance for the eldership, the spiritual welfare of congregations, the effectiveness of the witness and evangelistic enterprise of the church, the good of society, and supremely the glory of God.

¹³ Acts 1:8.

Definition of Terms

Elder: Someone in a congregation who has the role of giving leadership, and the responsibility of striving to ensure the spiritual welfare of the members.

Kirk Session: The collective name for a group of elders who serve God in any particular congregation. This term is often abbreviated to the shorter term session.

Shepherding: A word taken from the agricultural world which describes the watchful and caring role of the elders towards members of the church. Their task is compared to the shepherd who takes care of the flock of sheep.

Pastoral care: This term is another way of referring to the shepherding activities which the elders engage in towards the members. We could say that in shepherding they are exercising pastoral care.

Denomination: An association of churches within Christianity identified as a religious body under a common name, doctrine, or form of government.

Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI): This term refers to the denomination geographically located on the island of Ireland that is cared for, led, and governed by elders (the term “Presbyterian” is derived from the Greek word “presbuteros” which means elder).

Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC): A denomination of the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

Evangelical: Emphasising the authority of the Bible, personal conversion, and the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

General Assembly: The most senior governing body of the PCI made up of ministers and elders that normally meets annually.

Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF): A document that was produced by a gathering of churchmen who met at Westminster, London in 1647. This document contains a statement of what the Reformed Church believed the Bible to teach on matters of faith and practice and is the accepted doctrine of the PCI.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastoral care is approached and provided by sessions of healthy, growing fellowships in the PCI. The goal of understanding how this is achieved in local PCI churches is to enable the gleaning of principles that could be helpful to other congregations in their efforts to address the task of shepherding the flock that is entrusted to their care. Examining how sessions have approached this responsibility could help to identify elements that can contribute to the success or failure of the task of pastoring the church. An understanding of these elements could help to guide sessions in the future as they seek to provide the best care possible for their members.

The difficulty some face in this regard is highlighted by the minister of one local PCI fellowship, who acknowledged that he has struggled over many years to find a way that pastoral care could be provided effectively through the session. Another admitted that some of his elders did not seem to have the gifts, motivation, or capacity to engage meaningfully in this process. The fact that these are not isolated situations has been demonstrated in the attention that has been paid to this issue recently by the PCI through the General Assembly. In 2009, a report on pastoral care was commissioned by the Assembly and was presented in 2010. It recognised that the provision of such care in the denomination was in need of serious attention when it stated, “Pastoral care in most

congregations will require a major overhaul.”¹⁴ The same report also acknowledged that the traditional, historical pattern of shepherding the flock through regular home visitation by elders was not necessarily the most practical, desirable, or effective way to approach the task. In this regard, the report concedes, “This care has been traditionally provided by the district elder, and whilst elders will continue to have a major role in its provision, in many places the traditional model of elders districts alone is no longer as effective as it once was.”¹⁵ This report resulted in 2011 in the publication of a booklet entitled “Developing Pastoral Care in our Congregations” (referred to later), a copy of which was provided for every elder in the PCI in the following terms: “with the exhortation to all Kirk Sessions to take an honest look at how comprehensive is the care offered to all the individual members of a family unit, and to examine their current provision in the light of the several suggestions in the booklet.”¹⁶

There is a significant body of literature that addresses the role of elders, and the exercise of pastoral care, both of which are able to shed light on the purpose of this study. It is worthwhile to take a moment to consider what exactly defines pastoral care. The understanding of those involved in this study will emerge in the answers given to the questions asked. There could be many responses to this question which may depend on the kind of care in which a person is involved, such as in schools, in hospitals, in the

¹⁴ *Presbyterian Church in Ireland General Assembly Annual Reports 2010* (Belfast, UK: W&G Baird, 2010), 254. This document is available online at http://www.presbyterianireland.org/getmedia/c3d21dd1-514a-4efb-ae50-b028f88328c8/PCI_Annual_Reports_2010.pdf.aspx.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁶ *Presbyterian Church in Ireland General Assembly Annual Reports 2012* (Belfast, UK: W&G Baird, 2012), 188. This document is available online at http://www.presbyterianireland.org/getmedia/04f659a4-7f13-4bd7-bde6-4acb1136cd08/PCI_Annual_Reports_2012.pdf.aspx.

office or the factory. Roger Hurding, lecturer in Pastoral Studies at Trinity College

Bristol has an interesting statement when answering this question. He writes,

From ancient times pastoral care has simply been what Christians do as part of their neighbourly love towards fellow human beings. Although great stretches of the history of pastoral care have invested the shepherding role in that of the ordained minister, the thread of “the priesthood of all believers,” however tenuous at times, has also run throughout the centuries - to free women as well as men, laity as well as clergy, to respond to the call to care for others in the name of Christ.¹⁷

This reference to “the call to care for others in the name of Christ,” is perhaps a description wide enough to embrace all the elements of what might take place in the church among God’s people. It is also significant that Hurding alludes to the involvement of others in shepherding, apart from those who have been formally called and commissioned to full-time pastoral ministry, an issue this study will address later. This review will examine the biblical material on the concept of shepherding the flock, literature dealing with the role of elders, and that addressing pastoral care, concluding with denominational sources relating to this study.

Biblical Material on Shepherding the Flock

It is important first to establish the biblical mandate for the shepherding work that this researcher is encouraging sessions to undertake. The shepherd motif is a rich vein running through scripture and part of the fabric of the life of God’s people in both Old and New Testaments. God himself is both revealed as, and perceived to be, a shepherd to his people as early as Genesis. As Jacob blesses his sons on his deathbed he refers to the

¹⁷ Roger Hurding, *Pathways to Wholeness: Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1998), 158.

Lord as “the God who has been my shepherd all my life.”¹⁸ During this incident he describes Joseph as a fruitful vine, and attributes his steadfastness in life to “the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel.”¹⁹ This reference to God as Shepherd speaks volumes, coming from the lips of a man who knew what it meant to be a shepherd himself. David, likewise in his youth familiar with caring for sheep, penned some of the best known words in scripture and declared that “[t]he Lord is my shepherd.”²⁰ It was because of this truth that he was able to write with confidence, in the verses that follow, of God’s provision, protection, and blessing. Likewise, Asaph, a writer of Psalms, addresses God as “Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.”²¹ The tenderness of the shepherd God is captured by Isaiah when he states, “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.”²²

With this in mind, it should not be surprising that God uses the term “shepherd” when describing those who were entrusted with the leadership of his people. Moses, called by God whilst minding his father-in-law Jethro’s sheep, is described as “the shepherd of his flock;”²³ and David is reminded by the people that God had instructed

¹⁸ Genesis 48:15.

¹⁹ Genesis 48:24.

²⁰ Psalm 23:1.

²¹ Psalm 80:1.

²² Isaiah 40:11.

²³ Isaiah 63:11.

him, “You will shepherd my people Israel and you will become their ruler.”²⁴ Asaph wrote of David in the same terms when he stated that God “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.”²⁵

The principle of the responsibility of shepherding being a shared one emerges when Moses was overwhelmed with the responsibility of resolving the difficulties of the people. Jethro recognized that the work was too much for him and advised Moses to share it with “men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain - and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.”²⁶ The need for, and benefit of, collective care is established, although he referred to these men as officials, or judges, yet elders have already been mentioned in Exodus 3. Indeed, as the Old Testament unfolds, it seems that those termed “elders” are initially only one group of men given the responsibility of leadership, but begin to emerge as the primary one. This transition is reflected in the incident when David was about to be formally installed as king, where the record states, “When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.”²⁷ It is clear from these previous references that, whilst God is the ultimate

²⁴ 2 Samuel 5:2.

²⁵ Psalm 78:70-71.

²⁶ Exodus 18:21.

²⁷ 2 Samuel 5:3.

and supreme shepherd of his people, he delegates this responsibility to those to whom he entrusts them in an earthly sense. God is “The Shepherd,” yet he calls certain individuals to carry out the work of the shepherd in relation to the people of Israel. Despite their human weaknesses, God refers collectively to those who were given leadership of his people as “their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel.”²⁸

It is in this context that God denounces, through Ezekiel, the leaders and elders of the nation who should have been caring for his people, but instead were more concerned about their own welfare. He accuses them in the strongest possible terms when he states that they cared for themselves, and asks, “Should not the shepherds take care of the flock?”²⁹ A description of what caring for the flock ought to have consisted of is revealed when God states, “You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.”³⁰ Summarizing this accusation, Timothy Witmer, Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary states that “they failed to fulfill the most basic functions of shepherds: to feed, lead, and protect the sheep. Instead, the sheep were starved, lost and the prey of wild animals.”³¹ It is Ezekiel who sounds a note of hope when he states the promise of God, with a clear reference to the person and work of Jesus

²⁸ 2 Samuel 7:7.

²⁹ Ezekiel 34:2.

³⁰ Ezekiel 34:4.

³¹ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 21.

Christ, that he “will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd.”³²

It is against this background that the New Testament describes the coming of Christ as the fulfillment of those words spoken by Micah centuries before. It is in the records of Matthew and Luke that we learn of the answer given to Herod when he enquired about the location of the birth of the Messiah. The chief priests and teachers of the law reply to his question by stating, “In Bethlehem in Judea...for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel’.”³³ It is no surprise then, when Christ openly applies this truth to himself, whilst also elaborating on what it will mean for him to fulfill this role. He declared, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”³⁴ In the same passage he states that he will lay down his life for the sheep, that he will give them eternal life, that they will never perish, and that through him they will find pasture. The writer to the Hebrews describes Jesus as “that great Shepherd of the sheep.”³⁵

The gospel record describes the compassion Jesus had for the crowd who had searched for him and outlines what evokes those feelings in pastoral terms when it states, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them because they

³² Ezekiel 34:23.

³³ Matthew 2:5-6.

³⁴ John 10:14.

³⁵ Hebrews 13:20.

were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”³⁶ The Apostle Peter, having instructed the elders in terms of their responsibility to those under their care, refers to Jesus’s return when he states, “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”³⁷ Here is the Shepherd “par excellence,” who demonstrates what it means to truly pastor the flock. In the New Testament church, which is established through the death and resurrection of Christ, it is God’s purpose that the shepherding continues and is to be undertaken initially by the apostles. This intention is made clear by Jesus when he assures Peter that he is forgiven following his threefold denial of the Saviour, and then commissions him in pastoral terms with the words, “Feed my lambs...take care of my sheep...feed my sheep.”³⁸ Peter is thereby entrusted with the responsibility of caring for those who belong to Christ, who are described by Christ using the flock motif.

It becomes clear in scripture that the pastoral baton is then to be passed to those who are appointed to be elders in the church. As the New Testament church develops following the ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the care of the church is entrusted to the apostles and elders. They are frequently referred to together, as when the church council met in Jerusalem and it is said of them, “The apostles and elders met to consider this question.”³⁹ The pastoral responsibility given to elders is clearly and

³⁶ Mark 6:34.

³⁷ 1 Peter 5:4.

³⁸ John 21:15-17.

³⁹ Acts 15:6.

explicitly stated by the two leading figures in the New Testament record, Peter and Paul. The former does so with the words, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder... Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”⁴⁰ In stating this instruction, as indicated in the book of Acts, despite being a disciple and an Apostle of Christ, Peter includes himself along with the elders of the church, exhorting them to fulfil what he sees as his own responsibility, also, namely that of caring for the flock as shepherds. It is interesting to note that although the elders are charged with being “shepherds of God’s flock” by Peter, the biblical qualifications for suitability are in terms of godly character rather than any particular ability to pastor. Paul writes to Timothy, “Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.”⁴¹ Thus, scripture sees holiness of life as bound up with the suitability to be a shepherd.

Alexander Strauch, lecturer in philosophy and New Testament literature at Colorado Christian University, sums up the place of the elder with these words, “Thus when Paul and Peter directly exhorted the elders to do their duty, they both employed shepherding imagery. It should be observed that these two giant apostles assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group or single person but the elders.”⁴²

⁴⁰ 1 Peter 5:1-3.

⁴¹ 1 Timothy 3:2-3.

⁴² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 16.

Paul, in bidding his final farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus, urges them in the same terms, exhorting them to “[k]eep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”⁴³ The words used in both passages refer to those who are to be cared for as *poimnion*, or sheep, and the task at hand as *poimnate*, or shepherding, making it clear that the responsibility of this pastoral work is given to the elders of the church. Howard Marshall summarises in these terms:

What does the picture convey? As developed in the various biblical passages, it brings out the desperate need of sheep for a shepherd: to keep them from wandering away in their stupidity; to protect them from dangers from the wild animals and thieves; to feed them; to find them, even at personal risk, when they are lost... Many of these applications were made exclusively with reference to Jesus but they apply by extension also to those who are his undershepherds in the church.⁴⁴

In the passage quoted above, Peter describes the manner in which the work is to be undertaken, highlights the pitfalls to avoid, and outlines both temporal and eternal incentives for being faithful, all of which put flesh on the bones of the call to engage in the pastoral oversight of God’s people. In this context, he emphasises that the responsibility is to be fulfilled, not using a demanding, overbearing authority such as they had undoubtedly witnessed in the Jewish religious leaders, but with a servant spirit reflected in the life of Christ. The emphasis on the importance of such a humble demeanour provides clear insight into the nature of the task which God places into the hands of the elders of the church, whilst also referring to the reward that those who faithfully shepherd God’s flock will receive. In the context of serving, Jesus outlined that

⁴³ Acts 20:28.

⁴⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on First Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 162.

genuine humility is the path to true greatness in the eyes of God when he stated, “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”⁴⁵ Because the work of shepherding the flock is biblically considered serving, then an aspiration to genuine godly greatness on the part of the elder could be a powerful incentive to faithfully persevere in the long term.

The Role of Elders

In the post-apostolic era there is evidence that the care of the people of God was considered to be a corporate responsibility shared by those who were appointed to be elders in the church. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna during the first and second centuries, writing to the Philippian church asserts, “Let the elders be tender and merciful, compassionate towards all, reclaiming of those which have fallen into errors, visiting all that are weak, not neglectful of the widow and the orphan, and of him that is poor.”⁴⁶ Origen, another of the early church fathers who ministered within two hundred years of Christ, is quoted by Samuel Miller in the following passage:

“There are some rulers appointed whose duty it is to inquire concerning the manners and conversation of those who are admitted, that they may debar from the congregation such as commit filthiness.” This passage is replete with important and conclusive testimony. It not only proves that in the time of Origen there were rulers in the Christian Church, but that the chief and peculiar business of these rulers was precisely that which we assign to ruling elders, viz. inspecting the members of the church, watching over all its spiritual interests, admitting to its communion those who, on inquiry were found worthy, and debarring those who were in any way immoral.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Matthew 20:26-27.

⁴⁶ Polycarp, “Letter to the Philippians,” quoted in Samuel Miller, *The Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow, Scotland: John Reid & Co., 1842), 64.

⁴⁷ Origen, “Contra Celsum,” quoted in Samuel Miller, *The Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Glasgow, Scotland: John Reid & Co., 1842), 64.

It seems that, with the passage of time, the work and ministry of ruling elders became somewhat lost in the mists of a more clerical authoritarian structure. Alexander Strauch describes it in these terms: “Under Christ’s name an elaborately structured institution emerged that corrupted the simple, family structure of the apostolic churches, robbed God’s people of their lofty position and ministry in Christ, and exchanged Christ’s supremacy over his people for the supremacy of the institutional church.”⁴⁸

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Reformation brought sweeping changes to both the theology and practice of the Reformed church established through the ministries and work of the Reformers Huss, Luther, Calvin and others. Yet it seems that the care of the church by elders was an area that was somewhat slower to receive attention than others. This neglect is illustrated in “The Reformed Pastor,” the classic work of Richard Baxter, minister of Kidderminster, England in the seventeenth century, when he states: “It is here implied that every flock should have their own pastor (or more than one), and that every pastor should have his own flock... Though a minister is an officer in the church of Christ, yet he is in a special manner the overseer of that particular church which is committed to his charge.”⁴⁹ It is clear from these words that he places the overwhelming responsibility for shepherding the flock in the hands of the teaching elder whom he sees as “the pastor.” In some situations in the PCI, colleagues have observed that this view, that ministry and pastoral care is the sole responsibility of the “minister,” is still held by a considerable number of members. Where this view continues to prevail,

⁴⁸ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 101.

⁴⁹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, reprint of 1656 ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 88.

it would almost certainly have a detrimental effect on any attempts to establish or develop the involvement of the elders in this ministry. It is hard to imagine that a meaningful pastoral role could be exercised by elders where there is, either within the congregation or the session, an unbiblical view of the status and role of the teaching elder or minister. In this regard, Strauch highlights the stifling effect that a clerical view of ministry can have on the role of the eldership. He asserts, “Biblical eldership cannot exist in an environment of clericalism. Paul’s employment of the elder structure of government for the local church is clear, practical evidence against clericalism because the eldership is nonclerical in nature.”⁵⁰ In the experience of Robert Fourney, minister of Glenview Presbyterian Church, Toronto, this view is still alive and well today:

It has been this minister’s experience that elders view their pastoral role as secondary to the pastoral role of the minister. The elder can visit his/her district but the real visit or significant visit of the church takes place when the minister comes to the home. This idea is also ingrained in the thinking of the members of the congregation. One elderly member was sharing her disappointment with her elder that “no one comes to visit her from the church.” The absence of the minister’s visit meant to her that she was being neglected even though her elder faithfully visited her.⁵¹

There is, however, general agreement in more recent literature regarding the role of elders that the pastoral care of God’s people is to be undertaken by the whole session of the church. Whilst the minister or pastor is rightly expected to engage in this responsibility in a greater and fuller way due to his calling, there is also an understanding that elders share that shepherding role. In this regard, John Elliott states, “The Christian

⁵⁰ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 113.

⁵¹ Robert Fourney, “Equipping the Elders for Pastoral Care at Glenview Presbyterian Church” (D.Min. diss., Ashland Theological Seminary, 1998), 32.

community is referred to as “the flock of God,” and the elders are urged to “shepherd” (*poimnate*) this flock (to *poimnion*) “by exercising oversight” (*episkopountes*).”⁵²

Timothy Witmer endorses this idea when, having acknowledged that not all elders have the gift of teaching, he writes that “all who are called to be elders are called to the sheep-intensive work of shepherding. They are called to exercise their leadership together for the benefit of the flock.”⁵³ He acknowledges that many see the teaching elder as the one whose responsibility it is to shepherd the flock, and dismisses this when he asks, “How is the teaching elder supposed to have the time to give careful attention to the preaching and teaching ministry of the Word if he is charged with shepherding the entire flock as well? No, the biblical picture is of a shared responsibility among all the elders for shepherding the flock.”

Yet in practice, historically there has been a tendency for both members and elders to assume that all the pastoral care will be delivered by the minister as “that is his job,” and many in a previous generation in the PCI perceive it in those terms. In this researcher’s experience, there would appear to be those who still see it that way.

T. Witmer captures this perception when he states, “If the Biblical material is clear that elders are to be shepherds and that the office of elder has been established by the Lord to care for the flock in a partnership of plurality and parity, why is there so much confusion about this in the church today?”⁵⁴ It is his view that this concept was lost over the

⁵² John Elliott, “Elders as Leaders in 1 Peter and the Early Church,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 64 (December 2008): 553.

⁵³ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

centuries and whilst having been somewhat recovered during the Reformation, in some places it is being lost again. Yet the principle was established and practised in the PCI's mother church, the Church of Scotland, as far back as the mid- nineteenth century. In summarising the corporate nature of pastoral care from *The Elder and his Work* by David Dickson, an elder for thirty years in Edinburgh during that period, the editors of his book assert, "Spiritual work is not left to the minister alone, but ruling elders are ordained to serve with him as shepherds of God's flock."⁵⁵

In the volume itself, Dickson writes, "What a noble army for the Prince of Peace, in Scotland alone! If all these elders used their office well, what a network of Christian influence would be woven around all our families!"⁵⁶ Perhaps this principle is still in the process of recovery in the denomination. In his classic work 'The Elders of the Church', Lawrence Eyres, a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church of America, underscores this role assigned to the session when he suggests "The elders of the church are co-pastors, and every use of the office should reflect this fact."⁵⁷ In light of the assertion by some that there is, in fact, no normative pattern of church government in the apostolic age, Alexander Strauch strenuously argues to the contrary when he states, "I conclude, therefore, that the instructions given to elders and about elders, as well as the

⁵⁵ David Dickson, *The Elder and his Work*, ed. George McFarland and Philip Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 15.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁷ Lawrence R. Eyres, *The Elders of the Church* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1975), 3.

eldership structure itself, are to be regarded as apostolic directives (Titus 1:5) that are normative for churches today.”⁵⁸

The literature generally agrees that the shepherding role includes giving leadership through corporate decision-making to determine policy and give direction to the congregation. Refuting error and promoting truth is also considered to be included in the remit of those who are “able to teach,”⁵⁹ as is exercising discipline towards members when required. A significant emphasis is also placed on the ongoing personal pastoral involvement of the session with members of the congregation, yet in the recognition that, as with the minister, there is a limit to the extent to which one man can meaningfully achieve this. It is in light of this limitation that many see the best practical way of pursuing pastoral care as dividing the church members among the elders in some way, so that each has a “little flock” to shepherd. In this regard, T. Witmer states, “...[P]articular elders were appointed to exercise their shepherding authority over particular believers in a particular location. This is where real shepherding happens. Every member should have a personal connection with at least one elder.”⁶⁰

Eyres likewise states, “An excellent system for this purpose (and one with a long history among Presbyterians) is to assign a proportionate share of the church’s families to each ruling elder, to whom and for whom he is responsible to minister.”⁶¹ Edmund

⁵⁸ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 116.

⁵⁹ 1 Timothy 3:2.

⁶⁰ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 122.

⁶¹ Eyres, *The Elders of the Church*, 19.

Clowney, associate pastor and emeritus professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary, implies this when he comments on 1 Peter 5: “The shepherding elder lives among those he serves (God’s flock that is - literally - ‘with you,’ 5:2). They are his ‘lot,’ those whom the Lord has committed to his care (‘the charge allotted to you,’ 5:3 ASV).”⁶² Although the practice of pastoral care by elders seems to vary widely, in the Presbyterian tradition, the principle is referred to as long ago as 1648 when the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland “resolved that every elder should have a district, a number of families ‘to watch over.’”⁶³

This practice is both a biblical and practical way for sessions to shepherd the flock. When it comes to working out the practice of pastoral care in this context, some literature assumes that elders will engage in the regular practice of home visitation, calling on those families entrusted to them to promote the welfare of those concerned. It appears that there are those who are convinced it is the only way to shepherd the flock. Stewart Matthew and Kenneth Scott set out a “contract” that each elder would agree to, and the final expectation is put in the following terms: “[T]o care for his/her district: a. by regular visits to each home; b. by praying regularly for the members of the district by name; c. by sharing any difficulties with the minister; d. by sharing with the minister in cases of extra need, eg.,

⁶² E.P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 202.

⁶³ Quoted by Stewart Matthew and Ken Lawson, *Caring for God’s People* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1989), 22.

bereavement, illness or a baptism.”⁶⁴ The implication is that visiting people in their homes will be the normal method employed by elders in the exercise of their duties.

Stewart Matthew and Ken Lawson begin the first chapter of their handbook with the words, “As an elder, you have knocked on the door of the home of a member of your congregation.”⁶⁵ Gerard Berghoef, an elder in the Christian Reformed Church, and Lester De Koster, Professor of Speech for Calvin College and Seminary, seem convinced that this action is the fundamental way in which care towards the congregation is to be exercised by the elders. In their *Elders Handbook*, they state: “A new and appreciative look must be taken at an old practice: elders’ visits to parishioners’ homes: house-visiting. Experience has long shown that family visits build strong churches. Such visiting should be done on schedule, covering the congregation each year, if possible.”⁶⁶ The Book of Church Order of the OPC, in a similar vein, includes in its description of the work of the elder these words, “They should visit the people, especially the sick, instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourning and nourish and guard the children of the Covenant. They should pray with and for the people.”⁶⁷ This instruction seems to imply that the practice of the elder regularly spending time in the homes of some members of the church is assumed to be normative in the oversight of the flock. Peter de Jong, pastor in the

⁶⁴ Stewart Matthew & Kenneth Scott, *Leading God’s People* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1995), 59.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁶ Gerard Berghoef and Lester De Koster, *The Elders Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Library Press, 1979), 91.

⁶⁷ Committee on Christian Education for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2011), chapter X, paragraph 3, 13, http://opc.org/BCO/BCO_2011.pdf.

Christian Reformed Church, and former Professor at Calvin Seminary, is quite adamant in this regard when he states, “To this day one of the salient features of the Reformed Church life is the type of spiritual care and supervision which the officers exercise over the lives of its members. We have come to regard annual family visitation as part of our religious heritage.”⁶⁸

Thus, from the outset, in some of the literature the assumption of regular home visitation is made an expectation which might be a discouragement for some elders who have very busy and demanding schedules. In contrast to the foregoing emphasis, T. Witmer suggests that a commitment to regular home visitation is not necessarily the most realistic way to shepherd the flock. He states, “In my experience and interaction with scores of churches, the examples of such a visitation being completed are few and far between... [A]s time passes, the motivation and schedules of those involved leads to a sense of defeat and guilt.”⁶⁹ If this is true, then it would surely be more encouraging and productive to use a system that is both realistic and achievable. Witmer goes on to suggest that if regular home visitation is not likely to succeed, then consideration should be given to using a telephone contact with the family instead. He underlines the impact this can have by referring to calls that he often received from his dentist following treatment. He writes, “Needless to say, I am always very impressed when he makes that

⁶⁸ Peter Y. de Jong, “Taking Heed to the Flock,” *Ordained Servant: A Journal for Church Officers* 1, no.1 (January 1992): 8-13.

⁶⁹ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 127.

phone call. It never ceases to amaze me that he would take the time *personally* to check up on me. Do not underestimate the impact of a personal phone call.”⁷⁰

David Watson, having briefly outlined the responsibilities of the elder, suggests that “not every elder would be expected equally to fulfill all these functions, although a group of elders together would approximate more to this ideal.”⁷¹ This suggestion opens up the possibility of a session taking different pastoral responsibilities according to their gifts and time availability, so that as a unit they could seek to shepherd the flock. This method could enable elders to “play to their strength,” rather than make each feel that they must engage in exactly the same kind of ministry to the flock. It is noteworthy that in the qualifications outlined in scripture regarding an individual’s suitability for the eldership, the vast majority refer to that person’s character and personal qualities.⁷²

Although many of the qualities would be important for someone who is in a caring role, the only reference to specific gifts is in terms of their aptness to teach, not regarding their ability to care. Could this mean that not all elders would necessarily have the same role in this regard, thus opening up the possibility of a team with varying responsibilities? However, it may be that the ability to teach, which assumes an adequate understanding of scripture, is indicative of the place of truth in the work of shepherding the flock. Neil Summerton, an elder in a Brethren Assembly in Highgate, North London, and a council member of the Evangelical Alliance, alludes to this element when he writes, “And the pastor (referring to elders) will need above all the talent to teach, often

⁷⁰ Ibid., 128.

⁷¹ David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Kent, Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), 272.

⁷² 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1.

unobtrusively and always sensitively, in pastoral conversation, from a position which is alongside the pastored, not above him or her.”⁷³ If this assertion is true, and elders are gifted with the biblical qualification of being apt to teach, then each would possess in some measure the ability referred to by Summerton. It raises the question of course, regarding the implications for those who find themselves on session, and have a desire to care for the sheep, but feel that they have a very limited ability to teach, something which is not uncommon in PCI. Would this limitation mean that they would be greatly restricted in carrying out their function?

Berghoef and De Koster consider the elder to be in the role of the counsellor as he carries out his pastoral work, which might be a daunting prospect to some. They state, “You, as an elder, are inevitably a counsellor. Your efforts to encourage godly living will encounter many Christians bogged down in family and marriage problems, or beset by anxieties, insecurity, wrong priorities, self-centredness, etc. Cure must be preceded by counsel.”⁷⁴ Yet, in elaborating on this assertion they refer to qualities that would facilitate such counselling in the following terms: “The love, concern, and practical experience as a Christian which the elder brings to counselling are themselves the highest, and indispensable, qualifications for constructive advice. These qualifications are yours.”⁷⁵ If this description is true, these may also be found in members who are not elders, and would therefore give some of those outside session the ability to exercise a pastoral role.

⁷³ Neil Summerton, *A Noble Task: Eldership and Ministry in the Local Church* (Carlisle, UK: Partnership & Paternoster Press, 1967), 53.

⁷⁴ Berghoef and De Koster, *The Elders Handbook*, 124.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

When it comes to the motivation that can enable elders to persist in the work of shepherding the flock, Jesus, having washed the feet of the disciples, encourages them to follow his example of service. He concludes this exhortation with the words “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”⁷⁶ Whilst this would certainly apply to any service rendered in the name of Christ, could it be that if blessing comes through service, then the greater the opportunity to serve, the greater the possibility for blessing, something which might in turn spur elders on to faithfulness in pastoral work? In this regard, Dr. D. Edmond Hiebert, lecturer at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Langley, Canada focuses on the conclusion of Peter’s counsel to the elders in 1 Peter 5 regarding their encouragement to faithfulness in the task and states:

The leaders’ faithful fulfilling of the negative and positive injunctions set forth in verses 2b-3 will be followed by God’s bestowal of a reward. The prospect of the future must have its impact on their performance in the present. The difficulties of their work, as well as their awareness of their own inadequacies and failures, will often discourage the most prudent; but “to prevent the faithful servant of Christ from being cast down, there is this one and only remedy, to turn his eyes to the coming of Christ.”⁷⁷

Thus, for Hiebert, one of the motivating factors for the elder in shepherding the flock is to look beyond this scene of time to future events. Whilst this incentive would certainly be the ultimate hope of those who serve in this way, it might be that more immediate issues would be greater incentives to persevere in the long term. It would be instructive to discover what are perceived to be some of the sources of motivation by those who are engaged in care in an ongoing way. It would also be interesting to hear

⁷⁶ John 13:17.

⁷⁷ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ’s Under-Shepherds,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 556 (October - December 1982): 338.

what role the return of Christ has to play in encouraging them, as opposed to the present blessings that may come through involvement in the lives of church members.

Strauch seems to suggest, however, that motivation comes from an inward calling given to those who are chosen and equipped by God for this ministry, rather than in the work itself or any future events or reward. He states, “The Spirit called them to shepherd the church and moved them to care for the flock. The Spirit planted the pastoral desire in their hearts. He gave them the compulsion and strength to do the work and the wisdom and appropriate gifts to care for the flock.”⁷⁸ If this assertion is true, then the elder who is genuinely called by God to the office would sense an ongoing urge to faithfully persevere simply because of the inward longing to care for God’s people, given by God himself.

When Jesus was reinstating Peter after his denial, it is evident that love for Christ comes before, and is the foundation for pastoral work. John writes, “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.’”⁷⁹ Jesus is commissioning Peter to the work of shepherding the flock that belongs to him and wants Peter to undertake that role because he loves the Saviour to whom the sheep belong. This motivation resulting from love for Christ could be a powerful force enabling the elder to persevere in the long term.

Clowney comments on this incident: “Only as he confessed his love for Christ, was Peter charged to shepherd the flock of Christ. Love for Christ will kindle compassion for Christ’s scattered sheep, the little ones for whom he died.”⁸⁰ Thabiti Anyabwile, senior

⁷⁸ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 27.

⁷⁹ John 21:16.

⁸⁰ Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, 200.

pastor of First Baptist Church, Grand Cayman suggests that this inclination should be evident even before anyone would be appointed to the office of elder. He writes,

Take note of the men who already appear to be shepherding members of the church even though they don't have the official title "elder" or "pastor." Specifically, who are the men that care for others by visiting or offering hospitality... [Y]ou want to find the men who are eager to watch over their fellow brethren and are happy to do so without recognition.⁸¹

It would be revealing to discover if this sense of inward call, and the compulsion to care pastorally for others, has a significant part to play for some of those who serve in this way.

Pastoral Care

The material on pastoral care appears to be broadly divided into three in emphasis. Some seems to focus greatly on the role played by those who are appointed to a full-time ministry that includes shepherding the flock. Others acknowledge that the task is a corporate one, in which ruling elders are to be significantly involved along with the minister or pastor. There is a further body of literature that recognises the involvement of members of the congregation in caring for one another, using the networks and relationships that exist in the fellowship of God's people. In the first group, the role of elders is minimised as the "professional" takes the responsibility of pastoral care. The second places the pastoral care in the hands of the elders along with the minister, and in the third there is scope for the wider pastoral work of the session to include the "one another" ministry that members are to exercise in the body of Christ, as typified in the

⁸¹ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 53.

statement, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.”⁸²

David Wiersbe, pastor and author, illustrates the emphasis on those who are formally called and commissioned to pastoral work when he states: “The word pastor means ‘shepherd.’ Pastors are to shepherd the flock in their care and to represent the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2-4). How does a pastor care for the flock in a biblical way?”⁸³ In this statement, and generally throughout the volume, the author makes no reference to the role of elders or church members, but assumes that all pastoral care will be exercised by the pastor. What he includes in exercising this care certainly would be impossible for one individual. Similarly, in her introduction, Kate Litchfield, a laywoman in full-time ministry in the Church of England writes: “*Tend My Flock* is a companion and guide for ordained and lay ministers who are seeking to be faithful to their calling...”⁸⁴ Although this volume is directed to those “ordained,” the author states elsewhere that “...all God’s people have a gift of ministry from the ascended Christ to be offered for the good of the whole body of Christ.”⁸⁵ This idea, however, is given little consideration in the rest of the book.

Steward Matthew and Kenneth Scott, quoting from Stephen Mayor’s *Being an Elder in the United Reformed Church*, seem to envisage the care of the church as entrusted to those who are formally identified and set apart when they write, “If we are to

⁸² Galatians 6:2.

⁸³ David W. Wiersbe, *The Dynamics of Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 15.

⁸⁴ Kate Litchfield, *Tend My Flock* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2006), 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 13.

follow the Biblical pattern, it is right that a local congregation should have a body of dedicated men and women, carefully chosen and properly commissioned, to look after the welfare of the church and its members in every way possible.”⁸⁶ In an appendix entitled “A Care-Visiting Scheme,” which perhaps makes provision for the “body” referred to above, they state, “The role of the lay visitor could be described as providing ‘a ministry of supportive friendship’ to people who are isolated and unable to take part in church services and other activities. The caring presence of the church goes out to them where they are through the lay visitor.”⁸⁷ Whilst this provision has in mind specifically those who are absent from the church, the possibility of people other than the elders providing the “caring presence of the church” is recognised, but essentially through the “lay visitor.”

John Patton, Emeritus Professor of Pastoral Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, also generally limits the exercise of pastoral care to those who are formally entrusted with the responsibility when, in that context, he states, “That person may be the pastor in charge of a particular faith community or a member of a congregation who has been recognised by that community as a lay minister of pastoral care.”⁸⁸ Perhaps those who are termed elders in the PCI could be considered, in Patton’s terms, those who have been recognised by the congregation as ministers of pastoral care, but they would not generally be perceived as “a lay minister of pastoral care.” This position would normally be a formal, part-time role involving payment of some kind. The

⁸⁶ Stewart Matthew and Kenneth Scott, *Leading God’s People* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1995), 11.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸⁸ John Patton, *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 2.

researcher's congregation has such a person who would be known as a "pastoral assistant."

In contrast, Wendy Billington, co-ordinator of pastoral care at St. Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, United Kingdom, for example, is convinced that when it comes to the care of members in the church, many in the body of Christ have a part to play. Referring to this wider pastoral support she writes, "As Christians, we are in a relationship of mutual care for one another, and that love and care will involve us in helping one another, both spiritually and practically."⁸⁹ If this sentiment is true, then it would suggest that there are people in the church who are not elders, and who have not been formally commissioned to pastoral care, but who nevertheless could have a shepherding involvement in the lives of others. This practice might then open up a network of pastoral care that could be an integral part of the overall shepherding responsibility of the session, supplementing the care which they themselves provide. This idea is endorsed by Peter Hicks, lecturer in Philosophy and Pastoral Care at London Bible College, when he refers, albeit estimating from his experience, that in any given difficulty only 10 percent of people need a trained counsellor. He then goes on to conclude, "That is, 90% of the time they need the kind of love and support and listening ear and so on that any Christian should be able to give."⁹⁰ It may be that someone who has gone through a particular experience would be better qualified to come alongside another person in a similar situation than one who is an elder, but unfamiliar with the path being walked. It is tempting to think that to extend pastoral care to another, a person needs to have some

⁸⁹ Wendy Billington, *Growing a Healthy Church* (Abingdon, UK: BRF, 2010), 8.

⁹⁰ Peter Hicks, *What Could I Say?* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 2000), 9-10.

particular qualification or expertise, and if not, then they ought to leave it someone else who does. Alastair Campbell, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology, University of Edinburgh suggests otherwise when he states,

Pastoral care is founded on the integrity of the individual. Such a relationship does not depend primarily on the acquisition of knowledge or the development of skill. Rather it depends upon a caring attitude towards others which comes from our own experience of pain, fear and loss, and our own release from their deadening grip.⁹¹

Thus, Campbell takes the matter of pastoral care out of the exclusive domain of the “expert” and opens up the arena to others whose life journey may give them an insight that can never come from study or the possession of knowledge. This perspective could then draw members of the church into the wider pastoral care process towards one another.

Paul Tripp, executive director of the Center for Pastoral Life and Care in Fort Worth, Texas, seems to suggest a similar dynamic when he states, “We forget that God’s primary goal is not changing our situations and relationships so that we can be happy, but changing us through our situations and relationships so that we can be holy. We need people who love God and us enough to come alongside and help us deal with our spiritual myopia.”⁹² Elsewhere he outlines his conviction that to be involved in this kind of relationship, we really need to be getting to know others in a personal way. He writes, “Knowing has to do with really getting acquainted with the people God sends our way... We tend to think we know people because we know facts about them...but we really don’t

⁹¹ Alistair V. Campbell, *Rediscovering Pastoral Care* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1981), 37.

⁹² Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 241.

know *them*... Knowing a person means knowing the heart.”⁹³ This kind of knowledge inevitably would require a closer and more intimate fellowship than can take place in the normal course of large Sunday gatherings. Witmer asserts, “The foundation of any shepherding plan must be the establishment of a relationship of trust and caring. A crucial measure to take in order to prevent member inactivity is to establish a system of regular, dedicated contact with members.”⁹⁴

Gene Getz, author and senior pastor of Fellowship Bible Church, North Plano, Texas, although focusing almost exclusively on the pastoral responsibility of those called to be elders in the church, alludes to the possibility of others in the congregation being involved when he states:

Again, this does not mean that they (elders) are to do all the work. As the church grows numerically and spiritually, elders need multiple, godly assistants, whom Paul called “deacons” - men and women who can help these men in any way to carry out their overarching responsibilities to effectively manage and shepherd the church.⁹⁵

The benefit of literature on pastoral care is that, regardless of whose hands it envisages this care being placed in, it describes the various ingredients involved. In this literature there are elements beneficial to leaders entrusted with shepherding the flock, whether they are used personally or by others in the fellowship. This researcher was interested to discover how some of these ideas might be perceived and possibly incorporated into a strategy by those in oversight of God’s people in a congregation.

⁹³ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁴ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 124.

⁹⁵ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 265.

The inclusion of these ideas could assist those who seek to oversee its provision, enabling them to discern when someone else in the body of Christ might be more effective. For example, although Wiersbe has the pastor in mind, he states, “In our busy world, many of the people we shepherd have no one who truly listens. Good listening habits will allow us to understand how people view and interpret their world.”⁹⁶ This would be good advice, not just for pastors, but for elders and anyone else who might wish to be a pastoral influence in someone’s life. In this regard, Patton states, “The pastor’s calling is to be present with a person in whatever lostness is a part of his or her life and to strengthen the relationship of that person to the faith community that the pastor represents.”⁹⁷ Although the author has in mind a person appointed to a pastoral care role, this idea would be equally applicable to any Christian who wanted to demonstrate God’s care and that of the church to a fellow believer.

If this emphasis on “the pastor” can be set aside, and the principles applied to those who “shepherd the flock,” then there is much that is thought-provoking in some of the literature. Wiersbe gives an interesting perspective on visiting when he writes:

I use the word *visiting* simply to describe getting out of the office and having face-to-face conversations with human beings. I like visiting with people, whether in the hospital or at a high school wrestling meet. When I’m with church family members outside of the church building, I learn what they’re really like, and they see me in a different light.⁹⁸

This understanding of visiting would suggest that it might happen in many different places other than a person’s home, thus opening up the possibility for creative

⁹⁶ Wiersbe, *The Dynamics of Pastoral Care*, 65.

⁹⁷ Patton, *Pastoral Care: An Essential Guide*, 32.

⁹⁸ Wiersbe, *The Dynamics of Pastoral Care*, 84.

ways in which pastoral care could take place. This concept may be revolutionary for some elders who tend to resist what can be perceived as the more tedious and relentless task of calling on people in their own homes. It would also enable elders to develop contact with members in a way that may be more suited to the elder's personality. What Wiersbe says of himself concerning listening pastorally to others could equally be applied to any elder:

The church foyer or hallways during weekday programs are other places to hear what people are experiencing... For a family in sorrow, listening is probably the most important activity a pastor can pursue. I have learned more about a family's history, beliefs, and current state of relationships by sitting in the room as they talked about funeral plans than if I had asked them to fill out a five-page questionnaire.

In this regard, Wiersbe makes the general point about encouraging others by one's presence when he states, "Attending band concerts, Lions Club meetings, athletic events, and graduation open houses are acts of affirmation. Being there says we are interested in individuals and believe their activities are worth the investment of our time."⁹⁹ Peter Hicks highlights the significance and value of simply giving one's attention to another person as they share their concerns in a personal conversation. He states, "Listening is loving. It is giving ourselves and all our attention to those who are talking to us. We are saying, 'I value you. I'm concerned about what concerns you. I'm giving you all my attention. You matter to me.'"¹⁰⁰ If listening is an important ingredient of pastoral care, then it could easily open up this ministry to others in the church, apart from those who are ordained to the eldership. Tripp alludes to this when he asserts, "Embedded in the larger

⁹⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰⁰ Hicks, *What Could I Say?*, 23.

story of redemption is a principle we must not miss: God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things in the lives of others.”¹⁰¹ Ordinary people would certainly include elders, but also those who are not formally set apart to a ministry of caring, but who nevertheless could be instruments in the Redeemer’s hands to help encourage and support others.

Keith Roberts, pastor and author, alludes to this when writing about the role of small groups in the life of the church. He suggests, “The church is built up and relationships are strengthened when there is a context in which lives can be shared, and ministry of various appropriate kinds given and received.”¹⁰² Those who oversee the local church would undoubtedly consider the building up of the church and the strengthening of relationships as a desirable aspect of pastoral care. If sessions who struggle with the traditional elder and district model accepted the idea that those outside the eldership can have a significant part to play in the provision of pastoral care, it might introduce a completely new dynamic to the fellowship. Some secular literature on the subject of the role of groups in society stresses the central part which they play in life. Rupert Brown, Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Kent states, “Groups are an inescapable part of human existence. Like it or not, they are simply not going to go away. People grow up in groups called families. They work in groups as engine crews, design teams, or hunting parties. They learn in groups; they play in groups... In short, human beings are group beings.”¹⁰³ Thus for Brown, group relationships are part of the fabric of

¹⁰¹ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, 18.

¹⁰² Keith Roberts, *Small Groups in the Church* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1990), 34.

¹⁰³ Rupert Brown, *Group Processes* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1988), XV.

life, and would equally apply to the fellowship of the church, which is not so much an organisation but a living organism.

Strauch, who writes extensively on the need for a restoration of biblical eldership, nevertheless acknowledges this element when he states,

We must, however, balance what we have been saying about the elders' ministry with the parallel truth of every-member ministry. Although the elders lead and are officially responsible for the spiritual oversight of the *whole* church, they are not the total ministry of the church. They are not *the* ministers. Ministry is the work of the whole church. Ministry is not the work of one person or even one group of people. Thus, the care of the local body is not the sole responsibility of the elders, but of all the members. Each member of Christ's body is equipped by the Spirit to minister to the needs of others. The elders are dependent upon the gifts and skills of others (some of whom may be more gifted than any of the elders in certain areas of ministry) for the overall care of the local church.¹⁰⁴

This admission is a significant one coming from someone whose theme is that the shepherding role of the elders is crucial to the life and health of the flock under their care.

Bill Donahue, executive director of small group ministries for the Willow Creek Association, emphatically commends the use of groups in the life of the church. He writes, "You cannot pursue a life of transformation - sanctification in Bible terms - on your own... Spiritual growth cannot take place apart from community, and the fruit of such growth can only be expressed in community. Christlikeness is relational to the core."¹⁰⁵ If this assertion is the true, then the care that believers need to give and receive in order to grow will be most likely to take place in the community of the small group fellowship. This study helped to discover if a transition that embraces this principle in a

¹⁰⁴ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2001), 59.

significant way could be desirable and achievable in the provision of pastoral care in a local situation in PCI.

Denominational Sources

The subordinate standards of the PCI are the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms, documents to which elders must subscribe as being agreeable to scripture and, as such, a statement of their faith. Interestingly, none of these refer to the role, responsibility, or function of the elder. This omission from one of the defining documents of the Reformed Church is attributed by Robert Fourney to the tensions between the Scottish and English Churches. He explains,

By the time of the formulation of the Westminster document, the place of the elder was so much a part of the Scottish Church, it would have been unthinkable to have changed this significant role. However, the idea of elders assisting the clergy in discipline or government or works of charity was also unthinkable to the English... This resulted in the fact that the Westminster Assemblies did not determine that the elder had a function beyond ruling in the court. Thus the idea of the elder being an overseer was completely avoided in the Westminster document.¹⁰⁶

For any reference to the role of elders in these historic documents, one must turn to “The Form of Presbyterian Church Government and of the Ordination of Ministers,” agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster and approved by an act of the General Assembly in 1645, and even here the reference is quite oblique. The section entitled “Of the Officers of a Particular Congregation” states that “[i]t is requisite that there should be others to join in government. Those officers are to meet together at convenient and set times, for the well ordering of

¹⁰⁶ Robert Fourney, “Equipping the Elders for Pastoral Care at Glenview Presbyterian Church,” (D.Min. diss., Ashland Theological Seminary, 1998) 24.

the affairs of that congregation, each according to his office.”¹⁰⁷ In the footnote to this section, reference is made to 1 Timothy 5 verse 17 where mention is made of elders that rule well. Some recognition is given to the corporate nature of oversight in the church, but little else is said on the matter. The Code of the PCI expands on the role of the elder in the following terms:

The duty of ruling elders as members of Kirk Session is to work together with the minister in the oversight and government of the congregation... In discharge of his duties each elder should be assigned a district or special responsibilities within the congregation in which he may more particularly represent the Kirk Session by visitation, private counsel and report.¹⁰⁸

Here one sees the principle of the Kirk Session working together, and the recommendation that each elder be given a particular pastoral role for some section of the congregation, or at least some special responsibilities.

In the training manual for elders produced by the PCI, those to be ordained are asked to consider if they are “willing to be involved with others in their needs and fears, sharing the compassion of Christ,”¹⁰⁹ which is a clear reference to the pastoral care envisaged in the future. This document also states and explains the vows that are taken at ordination. Question six uses these words: “Do you pledge yourself as a member of Kirk Session to work together with the minister in the oversight and government of this congregation, for the upbuilding of God’s people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom among men?”¹¹⁰ Thus, the

¹⁰⁷ Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Inverness, UK: John G.Eccles Printers, 1976), 404.

¹⁰⁸ *The Code: The Book of the Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 1980 reprint with amendments (Belfast, UK: Church House, 1992), Section 30 (1), (2).

¹⁰⁹ Board of Evangelism and Christian Training of PCI, *The Eldership: A Training Manual*, n.d., 20.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

commitment is required by those who will proceed to ordination to engage in pastoral work among God's people. When it comes to the outworking of this responsibility, the training manual assumes that this will be carried out by home visitation and states that:

Visits will take place on a regular basis but will also be made in recognition of special occurrences, for example birth, sickness, marriage, death. The elder may visit alone, or may have the Church visitor for the area accompany him on occasions. It is helpful if the elder is to be accompanied, that this is by the same person thus forming a team.¹¹¹

In this section, while home visitation is the anticipated norm for the delivery of pastoral care, the possibility of working in a team is introduced, something which some other literature would commend in the matter of shepherding the flock, even though here the "Church visitor" is not identified. Perhaps this leaves scope for enlisting others in the congregation to be involved in pastoral work. If so, this could greatly assist the session in their work of overseeing the congregation, whilst also giving the opportunity for those who were not elders, but who had pastoral gifts, to use those gifts in the fellowship. This inclusion of others outside session might also provide an opportunity for the training of those who may be called to the work of the eldership in the future.

The PCI did address these issues in a brief way through the Board of Evangelism and Christian training when the Committee on Pastoral Care reported to the General Assembly in 1986. The denomination had previously appointed an Ad Hoc Committee on Special Fellowships whose final report, quoted in the 1986 Annual Reports, stated, "We

¹¹¹ Ibid., 44.

need to learn how best to foster fellowship, to make pastoral oversight more effective.”¹¹²

Later in the report of the Pastoral Care Committee, reference was made to the issues facing some congregations in the following words: “Kirk Sessions are often small in numbers and need to consider whether their resources should be increased by forming pastoral care teams engaging those with gifts, expertise and sensitivity apt to serve varied needs, age groups, etc.”¹¹³ This inclusion seemed to recognise that the provision of pastoral care might not always necessarily be within the capacity of the elders alone, and that others outside the Kirk Session could be involved. Perhaps a moot point at that stage was also that this responsibility ought not to be seen as the sole responsibility of the session in the traditional and historic sense.

It was not until the General Assembly of 2011, however, that this issue was addressed again when a report by the Board of Christian Training entitled “Developing Pastoral Care in Our Congregations,” was received. It was passed unanimously and the Assembly agreed that a copy should be placed in the hands of every serving elder in the denomination. This action has served to bring the issue of pastoral care to the attention of every Kirk Session as well as providing an opportunity for them to review their approach and practice in this area. For some, this may be the first occasion that such a discussion will have taken place, whilst for others it might enable them to revisit a responsibility which has drifted to the periphery of their vision.

¹¹² *Presbyterian Church in Ireland General Assembly Annual Reports 1986, Report of Committee on Pastoral Care* (Belfast, UK: Northern Whig Ltd., 1986), 179.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

The report outlines three possible approaches to this matter, and recognises in the introduction that alternatives to the traditional model of elder-overseen districts are worthy of consideration in situations where that model is no longer appropriate. It states:

In recent years, however, geographical mobility, changing dynamics of family life and even the geographical location of some congregations, in addition to other social factors, have revealed the inadequacy in many congregations of the district system as the main structured model of pastoral care. While affirming that the traditional model of Elder-overseen districts may still be appropriate for some congregations, the Panel wish to present two other possible models of pastoral care, along with suggestions for an enhanced traditional model.¹¹⁴

Significantly, in its conclusion, the report commends the principle of extending the ministry of pastoral care to others who are not in formal positions of leadership, but who have gifts that would make them suited to this role. It does so in the following words:

The Panel on Pastoral Care believe that according to Scripture, there is a pastoral role for all church members and in particular for those with suitable gifts. Minister and Elders, in addition to the exercise of their own pastoral ministry, have a responsibility to enable the whole body to function by identifying, releasing and governing the exercise of various pastoral ministries which will edify the church. Pastoral work is the privilege and duty of us all.¹¹⁵

The second model outlined in the report is considered to be particularly applicable to congregations of medium size, and although no numerical guidance is given, many would probably think of themselves in this category. They envisage that the overseeing of pastoral care would be the responsibility of a Pastoral Care

¹¹⁴ Board of Evangelism and Christian Training of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, *Developing Pastoral Care in Our Congregations* (Belfast, Ireland: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 2011), 5, https://www.presbyterianireland.org/getmedia/6dccccd2-a6b5-4395-8f67-bbd65fae574c/CT_Developing_Pastoral_Care.pdf.aspx (access June 25, 2014).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

Co-ordinator (PCC), who would be under the oversight of the Kirk Session. They suggest a working model in the following terms:

The PCC would be supported by a team of trained caregivers who would work alongside the PCC, providing a link with the pastoral work going on in the congregation. This team would be made up of trained people, Elders and others, who have a heart for and are gifted in this ministry. Elders not in the pastoral care team would be expected to be involved in the life and witness of the congregation in ways appropriate to their gifting.¹¹⁶

This model could overcome the difficulties that some Kirk Sessions experience of having elders who seem to be unsuited to the role of providing pastoral care, yet who may have gifts of leadership that are helpful in giving direction to the congregation. It might also enable the provision of pastoral care to be developed and more effectively provided, without any elders either feeling that they are, or are being perceived by others to be, failing in their responsibility as members of the session. This particular model then would envisage that pastoral care would be provided in the following way:

Pastoral care would be primarily delivered through small groups, whether study groups, prayer meetings or various organisations within the congregation. If a congregation has home groups, these could be a very effective means of delivering pastoral care. A member of the pastoral care team would be involved with each of these groups and have responsibility to see that needs are communicated to the PCC and are met within the group. Small group leaders would also be expected to create opportunities for pastoral care to take place by encouraging appropriate openness, along with love and support for each other. Pastoral care would often be spontaneous as situations arise, varying from prayer and spiritual support to practical input such as providing food or transport.¹¹⁷

This system could reduce significantly the need for the home visit that has been for many years the traditional way of exercising a pastoral role towards members of a

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

congregation. The comments of some colleagues, and this researcher's own experience, have indicated that it is often the more formal practice of visiting people in their homes on a regular basis that seems to be such a daunting aspect of the fulfillment of pastoral responsibility by elders. This model might also provide the opportunity for others to be informally involved in supporting and caring for members of their own group, even though they may not have been officially appointed to any pastoral care team. Wendy Billington commends this group ministry when she states, "Within a home group setting, we can learn to move away from an individualistic approach to pastoral care and offer care to one another as a community of believers."¹¹⁸ Thus, she sees a significant and specific opportunity that a home group setting could create, which might enable the most effective and practical provision of pastoral care. She continues,

Home group leaders may be the first line of pastoral care, but ideally they should be able to call on the resources of the group. Practical issues may come to the fore, and home groups can meet these needs or involve others who are able to do so. A ministry of supporting and helping people in crisis is worth considering together as a group.¹¹⁹

This plan could also provide a context in which the caring nature some possess, would be expressed and recognised by others, thus identifying them as potential members of a care team. The fact that this has been suggested by the PCI denomination as a possibility for the exercise of pastoral care could go a long way to commend it to the more traditionally- minded congregations as a new and acceptable way of carrying out an old task. However, when it comes to pastoral care, for some this would involve a change

¹¹⁸ Billington, *Growing a Healthy Church*, 8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

of mindset that has been part of the psyche of their congregation for generations. In the PCI the presence of small groups is a relatively recent innovation, and for some they are viewed with suspicion and seen as a possible catalyst for the development of cliques. This study also enabled research on the desirability, possibility, and achievability of a small group structure in a denomination that historically shares a common acceptance of and at least a nominal commitment to a pattern of providing pastoral care that is now under major review.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter looked at the biblical material on shepherding the flock of God by the people of God, tracing the shepherd and flock motif from the Old Testament through the New Testament. It also addressed some of the literature dealing with the role and responsibilities of elders in the life of a congregation, with particular emphasis on the provision of pastoral care. Consideration was then given to some material that outlined how such care could be delivered. The chapter concluded with reference to denominational documents addressing the eldership, pastoral care, and the most recent recommendations from the General Assembly.

It is one thing to consider literature relating to this issue, but the question is how does the practice compare with the theory. Are elders able to fulfill the role that some material expects them to? What works and what doesn't work when sessions take pastoral care seriously and genuinely seek to shepherd the flock? In particular, how are sessions in the PCI responding to this challenge, specifically in light of the denomination's admission that in some places the traditional and historic strategy may no longer be appropriate? In order to have a fuller picture of how this denomination is

handling this vital aspect of congregational life, it is important that how some Kirk Sessions approach and provide pastoral care for their members be examined and evaluated.

Chapter Three

Project Methodology

The provision of pastoral care in the PCI is currently under review by the denomination and, in the researcher's experience, is an issue over which it is not unusual for sessions to struggle in an ongoing way. It is a vital subject as, whatever the practice, it is the assumption in the structure and government of the PCI that pastoral care is entrusted to the eldership in every congregation. Some would see this as a task that is to be undertaken exclusively by elders themselves, whilst others consider that the whole body of the church has a role to play. The purpose of this study was to examine how Kirk Sessions of healthy, growing congregations in the PCI approach and provide pastoral care for their members.

In this chapter the researcher will explain his approach to the study, and outline the kind of research that was used. The researcher will provide details of the selection process of those who were interviewed, and the way in which those interviews were conducted. This chapter will also include information regarding the collection of data, and how that data was analyzed. In conclusion, the researcher will refer to his personal position and outline what he considers to be intrinsic limitations within the study.

Design of the Study

This study was conducted through the method of qualitative research. In her book *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, Sharan B. Merriam,

author and professor of adult and continuing education at the University of Georgia states,

The key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.¹²⁰

Merriam identifies the essential characteristics of qualitative research in the following words: “[T]he focus is on interpretation and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis; research activities include fieldwork; the process is primarily inductive; and rich description characterizes the end product.”¹²¹ The researcher did not have a theory in view or a hypothesis in focus, but rather wanted to inquire into the experience of those involved in the provision of pastoral care in order to see if themes or patterns emerged. Further, he had no preconceived ideas as to what the experience of those involved might be, thus qualitative research was the best way to study this issue.

Specifically, this research involved a qualitative case study approach in that it was limited to a particular group of people who took part, and who were selected on the basis of certain criteria. Merriam understands a case study as one where “[t]he interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy,

¹²⁰ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 6.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

practice, and future research.”¹²² The researcher chose this method due to his interest in discovering some of the dynamics seen to be at work when elders in specific contexts described their experience of shepherding the flock.

The following questions guided the research:

RQ 1: How do sessions approach the task of exercising pastoral care to the flock?

RQ 2: How do elders personally exercise their pastoral care responsibility towards individual members?

RQ 3: What affects the way in which elders engage in pastoral care?

RQ 4: How do elders assess the provision of pastoral care in their congregation?

These questions were chosen to direct the study as the researcher was interested in the personal experience of individual elders, yet in the recognition that it would inevitably in some sense be affected by the context in which pastoral care was provided in the congregation. It was assumed that the overall strategy would have a bearing on the level of direct personal involvement an elder would have in shepherding the flock. On an individual basis, the researcher was interested to study how an elder would personally play their part in caring for the members of the fellowship. In addition, the researcher wanted to know what would affect how they engaged in this activity, and how they assessed the shepherding process in their own congregation.

Participant Sample Selection

For this study, using purposeful sampling, the researcher interviewed six active ruling elders who had been ordained for at least five years, each belonging to a different,

¹²² Ibid., 19.

evangelical, suburban congregation of the PCI that, in the researcher's perception, was healthy and thriving. The reason the researcher chose congregations that were growing was with the assumption that in such a context, some form of meaningful, effective pastoral care was either in place, or was in the process of being developed. This is not to suggest that pastoral care cannot be effectively delivered in a fellowship that is either static or declining, but that growing churches provide the best possibility of obtaining significant, relevant data.

In the relatively small denomination of the PCI, and in particular when it comes to congregations in Northern Ireland, those that are clearly healthy and growing would be generally recognized as such by reputation. However, the researcher also looked for the addition of a significant number of new communicants to the fellowship over the previous ten years, figures that are available in the annually published directory of the PCI. Whilst these figures could merely have reflected very fruitful evangelistic strategies, the assumption was that they also indicated a fellowship that was able to provide care for its members. Congregations were selected that, according to the researcher's knowledge, had an evangelical emphasis and ethos, with the conviction that whilst any church could be caring towards its members, only in a gospel context can that caring truly be considered shepherding the flock of God "which he bought with his own blood."¹²³ Each congregation contacted, that was perceived in these terms, was able to provide one elder who matched the criteria, and was also willing to participate in this research.

¹²³ Acts 20:28.

Each elder was recommended to the researcher by the minister of the congregation as someone who was actively and effectively engaged in the work of pastoral oversight. It was important to speak to elders seen as effective by the person who was best placed to assess them, whom the researcher considered to be the minister, in order to minimize the possibility of interviewing someone who was only nominally or minimally involved. The manner of their engagement was not specified, thus leaving scope to interview elders who potentially may have adopted a variety of approaches to the task they undertook. The age of the elders were not taken into account and the focus of the research was on the elders' approach to and experience of shepherding the flock under their care. Although the researcher is not supportive of the ordination of women to the eldership, as it is an accepted practice of PCI, gender was not specified to the ministers of the congregations from which the elders were selected. This resulted in the interviewing of five male elders and one female elder.

Therefore, all the participants shared the same institutional structure and culture as elders within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, with at least five years of experience of engaging in corporate pastoral care. Each congregation represented was from a suburban context, thus minimizing the possible variations that might result from the contrast between rural or urban, and suburban church culture. Each elder was considered by the minister of the particular congregation to be meaningfully and effectively engaged in shepherding the flock, thus enabling the study to focus on the elements of these examples of such engagement.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted highly structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of the most comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives. As this study used participant criteria, variables for this in-depth research were kept to a minimum.

Although this study used highly structured interviews, the freedom to ask follow-up questions as required built in a less structured element, and facilitated the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues, so as to explore them more thoroughly. As Merriam puts it, “For the most part, however, interviewing in qualitative investigations is more open-ended and less structured. Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways.”¹²⁴

Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but were open to evolve around the explanations and descriptions emerging from doing constant comparative work during the interviewing process. As Merriam states, “Basically, the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences... The overall object of this analysis is to seek patterns in the data.”¹²⁵ Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing would also allow for the emergence of new sources of data.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 74.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 18.

Prior to the interview, each elder was asked by their minister about their willingness to participate in the research, after which their details were forwarded to the researcher for contact and further clarification. Those who had indicated a willingness to be involved, received an email explaining the purpose of the research, and providing a copy of the protocol questions that would be asked during the interview. The reason the researcher provided the questions in advance was due to the nature of the information that was being sought. Whilst some of the questions might have been answered without prior notice, it was assumed that others would require at least some time for reflection, as in some cases they were asking the participants to think about their experiences in the past.

The process of interviewing the six elders took place over a period of four months and in each case the interview was conducted personally in a face-to-face context, taking anywhere from forty-five minutes to one hour to complete. Each interview occurred at a time and place of their choosing, resulting in three of the elders being interviewed in their own homes, one in the researcher's home, one on the premises of the church to which they belong, and the other at their place of work. In each case, the researcher attempted to put the participant at ease with some informal conversation, as well as answering any questions they had about the process. The researcher had previously obtained the interviewee's permission to record the conversation with the proviso outlined in the consent form which they had signed, so that when they were ready, the interview proceeded using the following pre-prepared questions:

1. How does your session seek to fulfill the responsibility to "shepherd the flock"?
2. What do you see as your priorities in your pastoral work as an elder?

3. How have you come to your understanding of the nature of your shepherding role?
4. What gifts do you think are important in providing pastoral care?
5. Tell me how you practically go about pastoral care to church members.
6. What motivates you in carrying out the task of shepherding?
7. Can you describe for me any situations where you have sensed your effectiveness?
8. What adversely affects your ability to provide pastoral care?
9. Are there ways the minister could help you in your work as a shepherd of the flock?
10. What else would assist you in fulfilling this responsibility?

The researcher did not field test this protocol as the issues addressed had been discussed on numerous occasions with the elders in his own congregation and thus it was assumed that the questions would elicit the data required. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed and informal manner with follow-up questions being used to clarify or seek elaboration on any particular issue as required. They were recorded using a digital voice recorder and later transcribed by the researcher on a laptop, with each transcription being printed out for data analysis.

Data Analysis

In data analysis, using the constant comparative method, the researcher examined the transcript of each of the interviews, noting and coding key terms of interest in relation to the research questions, whilst ignoring data that did not help to answer these. Data was grouped by color code in order to more easily identify terms that could potentially be

connected. The researcher looked for patterns and themes to emerge, noting similarities, differences and extremes, and writing codes, themes, notes and summaries in the margin of the printed transcripts. In this regard, among other things, the researcher wanted to determine if a participant stated the existence of a pattern, or if a particular response appeared several times in the data. The researcher was also interested in whether some data was missing that might have been expected to be present. He then looked for groups of codes that seemed to fit together under a broader category, whilst constantly relating these to the purpose of the study. This process continued until there appeared to be no more possibility of identifying any further relevant data.

Researcher Position

There were a number of areas or biases that affected the research stance. One is that the researcher himself was a teaching elder/minister in the same denomination as that being studied. Therefore, the study was conducted from the perspective of one who had a minister's view on pastoral care within the PCI, and not that of a ruling elder in a congregation. Another area of bias was that the researcher had a particular understanding of pastoral care and how it could be delivered in the context of the denomination. The researcher would therefore run the risk of looking for, or expecting data that would endorse his view regarding the delivery of pastoral care. Further, the researcher had a view of shepherding the flock influenced by his experience in his present congregation. The researcher may therefore have focused on data that could be applied in his own context to enable shepherding to be undertaken more effectively. Finally, as the researcher is not supportive of the ordination of women to the eldership, it is possible that subconsciously less emphasis might have been placed on responses that were received

from the one female elder taking part in the research. However, it is the researcher's conviction that this was not the case.

Limitations of the Study

Due to limited time and resources, only six elders were interviewed for this study, and participants were restricted to those serving in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. As most were male, this study presents the limitation of the absence of an equal number of female participants. As each elder was considered by the minister of the congregation to be someone who was effectively engaged in shepherding the flock, this resulted in the limitation of not providing an opportunity to consider the responses of those who might be less engaged. All elders were from a suburban context thus presenting the limitation resulting from the absence of those who might have been equally effective in a more rural or urban context. This study did not include any interviews with those from the particular congregations who would be on the receiving end of pastoral care, something which would not have been possible within the scope of the research. However, this exemption was slightly compensated for by the fact that, although the elders had a role in the shepherding process, in another sense they were still themselves part of the flock to be shepherded. No elder was interviewed from any of the growing congregations situated in the Republic of Ireland due to distance. Thus, no data was obtained from those who oversee pastoral care within what is a predominantly Roman Catholic culture and often involves significant numbers from this background.

Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar suburban settings and to other denominations. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of the conclusions on the provision of pastoral care should test those

aspects in their particular context. Merriam highlights the caution required in this regard when she states, “In qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely *because* the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many.”¹²⁶ Lincoln and Guba also address the concept of transferability in which “the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought.”¹²⁷ Thus, as with all qualitative studies, the readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

Conclusion

The methodology outlined in this chapter facilitated the purpose of this study, which was to examine how sessions in the PCI approach and provide pastoral care for their congregations. The study used a qualitative case study, a highly structured interview design, and the selection of elders according to specific criteria. Despite the presence of biases and limitations inherent within the study, sufficient suitable data was gathered to address the research questions and accomplish the study’s purpose. The findings resulting from the use of the methodology outlined above will now be discussed.

¹²⁶ Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, 208.

¹²⁷ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 298.

Chapter Four

Data Report and Analysis

This study was designed to explore how Kirk Sessions of healthy, growing congregations of the PCI approach and provide pastoral care for their members. Four research questions were framed to guide the study. The research questions were:

RQ 1: How do Sessions approach the task of exercising pastoral care to the flock?

RQ 2: How do elders personally exercise their pastoral care responsibility towards individual members?

RQ 3: What affects the way in which elders engage in pastoral care?

RQ 4: How do elders assess the provision of pastoral care in their congregation?

In this chapter the participants of the study will be introduced and their insights concerning the study questions will be presented. No actual names of congregations or individuals are used to ensure anonymity.

The six participants ranged in ages from early thirties up to early seventies, and all were active in their congregations at the time of interview. Some had decades of experience as an elder, whilst others were more recent additions to the session, and some had been long-term members of their church, whilst others had joined within the previous ten years. The congregations represented ranged in size from around two hundred and fifty communicant members to almost six hundred, but each church had been experiencing ongoing, steady, significant growth over the preceding five years

How Did the Sessions Approach the Provision of Pastoral Care

The first study question asks how sessions approach the task of exercising pastoral care to the congregation. The responses included two main elements, that of districts being assigned to elders, and the provision of some form of small group structure within the life of the fellowship. Five congregations used a district system to varying degrees, whilst Uptown Presbyterian had abandoned this practice for some time. Uptown's elder, Mark, explained why this decision had been taken in the following words:

For years we had tried to divide the congregation up into people for elders to visit, and we have failed repeatedly in every model we have used. We had a model of visiting peripheral people, then we had a new way of thinking and we said, "Let's look at our core and see how they are cared for"...and again we failed.

This decision involved an honest admission of their failure to deliver within the structure they had sought to use. Mark explained, "After doing several things in which we were just kidding ourselves, we decided to stop pretending that we were visiting everybody when we were not, and that relieved the elders of that horrible burden of constant failure that never went away."

Of the five other congregations that do use a district system of some kind, Northside Presbyterian, which had been aging and in decline until it experienced steady growth through the addition of younger families, utilised a blend of districts and groups to shepherd their flock. Peter explained, "Over the years it had been the traditional pattern of elders visiting in their districts, which were geographical." However, this church experienced a significant influx of younger members and when some were appointed to the eldership, the use of groups was introduced as another way of exercising pastoral

care. At this point, a choice was offered to session members: “The elders who had been on session for some time were given the option of not doing this (using groups), and this is what they did, carrying on visiting in the normal way.” Of the remaining congregations using districts, two attempted to encourage regular visitation by the elders. In Eastside Presbyterian, the smallest of the congregations in the study, members of the session were expected to visit each of the homes in their district, ranging from twenty to thirty in number, at least twice in the year, and at particular times. Their elder, Matthew stated, “We have a couple of weeks before Easter when all the elders would be required to be out visiting the homes in their district, and the same happens in September.” He explained that these visits were linked with the distribution of literature to the homes as a point of contact with families. “We have a little Easter booklet and we would be required to visit every home with that booklet. In September we have a church programme and again the elders would deliver those to the homes.”

In contrast, Downtown Presbyterian, whilst maintaining a major emphasis on district visitation by elders, had come to view the delivery of literature by session as an undesirable element. Luke said, “Visitation had been very haphazard, very disconnected and very much a postman role, which was unfulfilling for me and of no benefit to the people.” He found this personally to be a very discouraging aspect of his endeavours to have contact with his district and stated, “I really wasn’t getting any benefit, so you think well, why bother, and I was just delivering magazines and tokens and stuff, and they had to be done for a date, so you are a postman.” This practice has now ceased in Downtown, thus removing the sense of being in a delivery ministry, whilst contact with districts was still encouraged, although no longer in that context. This change demonstrated a

significant development from the historic pattern that had existed in most PCI churches for many years. Luke's father had been an elder and whilst growing up, his understanding of the role of the elder had been that "an elder goes to session meetings, visits a district and delivers stuff, but that has probably changed quite a bit over the years." That change was reflected in all six congregations involved in the study.

In Southside Presbyterian, where groups had a peculiar emphasis which will be considered later, there seemed to be an age-related aspect to the approach to pastoral care.

Paul outlined this in the following terms:

Elders would have their own understanding of pastoral care, depending on where they are coming from. The older generation probably see it as visitation of people's homes twice a year. The younger elders would probably be more involved with the young people, as they are involved in youth activities, whereas the older members of session wouldn't have any other responsibilities.

It would appear from this comment that it was likely that some homes were not visited by any elder even though, in terms of the strategy Paul stated initially, "Each elder is allocated a number of families and we as elders would visit them twice a year." It also seemed possible that some families would have received pastoral care from both the older member of session who visited, and the younger member who was involved in some way in the youth programme.

Westside Presbyterian, the largest congregation in this study, used a rather unique structure in that it assigned each member of the session to a district, selected geographically, yet there was no expectation that pastoral care would be provided exclusively by the elder for that district. In this context, the role of the elder had a supervisory aspect, as John explained, "My responsibility is to pastor the people that have been delegated to me (district), and I might delegate some of that to someone else but it is

still my responsibility, so in a sense it is my little church.” John also stated that whilst he had a specific pastoral role in a small group setting, he was also responsible for overseeing the shepherding of those entrusted to him. He explained, “Being responsible doesn’t necessarily mean doing it, it means making sure that it is done. It means knowing your people, knowing their needs and making sure that somebody is meeting those needs.” This statement may beg the question of how needs could have been known without meaningful contact, but it outlined the responsibility of each elder. In Westside, this practice was more realistic and achievable than in other congregations due to the existence of other paid staff and volunteers. Some of the elders had been provided with an assistant, selected by the session based on their gifts, which enabled them easily to delegate pastoral care. Not all elders had opted to have an assistant as outlined by John: “Retired people who took early retirement and have time during the day haven’t taken an assistant so out of the thirty elders fourteen have taken an assistant.” There was another resource available to the elders at Westside when it came to caring for their members. John added, “Within the district I have some elderly people who come onto a visiting roll, and we have a visiting team, not elders, but trained and separate from the assistants.” This resource provided another option for Westside elders when overseeing the provision of pastoral care in their own districts, something which was not available to all sessions involved in the study due to their more limited resources.

When it came to the role of groups within the various strategies outlined, three of the six congregations considered them to be of primary importance in the matter of shepherding the flock. This perspective was demonstrated in a variety of ways. Mark from Uptown Presbyterian, the largest congregation in the study, asserted categorically,

“The second thing is to encourage membership of house groups, which we call fellowship groups. We feel very much, in a congregation of our size, that unless people are connected in some meaningful way into a small group, they will never grow, and they will never really have anyone doing life with them.” This assertion illustrates the essential place that groups were seen to have in the life of the congregation and in the pastoral care of its members. The evidence of this was demonstrated in practice by Mark, who was also the fellowship group co-ordinator, when he explained, “I would go along to the communicants’ classes on the last evening and explain who I am and my role, and within six months of people becoming a communicant member I would follow them up and ask them to consider joining a fellowship group” He stressed this conviction when he said, “Our fellowship groups are excellent at providing the pastoral care; they are our primary pastoral care but the tragedy is that it is the core of the church that are in the groups.”

Likewise in Westside, another congregation that viewed small groups as having an integral part in pastoral care, John stated about membership of a group, “It is recommended, and the benefits are often spoken about from the front, and are proclaimed elsewhere, but it is not a condition of membership. It would be my wish that everyone who can engage would engage at small group level.” John’s desire that nobody would be outside the group structure clearly indicated that he felt they should have a central role for everyone in the church. With this comment he seemed to hint that, if possible, he would have preferred that involvement in a group be a condition of communicant membership of the congregation.

Luke from Downtown, a fellowship that placed significant emphasis on district visitation by elders, also reflected on the importance of groups when he stated, “Along with that (district visitation), we also have home Bible study groups, and they are about teaching, but there is a pastoral element to them, thus creating in a very large congregation various nuclei of people who can bond together, get to know each other, and be supportive.” Luke exemplified the importance placed on groups in that, as well as having responsibility for a district, he led a group in his own home, about which he said, “The group which meets in our house is drawn from the greater area around where we live. This has been a great way for people who have joined the church to get to know ten or twelve other people a little bit better in a larger congregation.” This situation gave Luke the opportunity to have a pastoral contact with those in his group on a monthly basis. He considered that the relationship facilitated by these meetings played a key role in his ability to pastor others. He said, “To me pastoring is primarily about relationships, and how can you expect someone to open up to you or listen to what you say unless you have built a relationship and they can trust you.” At Westside, John was persuaded that real and meaningful shepherding took place more readily in small groups than in any other context. He said, “That’s where the pastoring is done, in small groups, probably more than the elder could ever hope to do with those people, members of the group pastoring each other, both in the group and informally afterwards.”

It is noteworthy that Southside Presbyterian only had small groups for ladies, but none of a similar nature that were available for either men or a mixed grouping. Paul commented, “I think that in most churches it is easier to organise groups for ladies than for men. I think it is better to keep men and women separate,

and you need to be careful starting up any groups in the church as they can be a source of division.” These comments may have reflected the generation to which Paul belonged, but interestingly, he also recognised the benefit of small group fellowship when he stated, “House groups for women have been very successful in our church. We have a number of house groups, with about eight in a group, who work very closely together, and are very supportive of each other, and this has been a blessing to many in the church in difficulties and under stress.” He also expressed a conviction that pastoring the church was not uniquely the role of the elders, but that others had a part to play. He said, “Pastoral care is not only the responsibility of the elders, it is a church responsibility. We all look after each other, we all pastor our neighbours and friends, that’s what it should all be about.” He might have envisaged this happening in an informal manner, but he did not outline any strategy for how this might be facilitated outside natural family relationships, friendships, and amongst geographical neighbours.

Regarding developing relationships with others, with a view to exercising pastoral care, some of the elders expressed an ability to do so through routine district visitation. In this regard, Matthew from Eastside Presbyterian, who was not involved in a small group, although they are available in the congregation, stated, “Visitation is a priority for me because it gives you the opportunity to meet people where they are and to really get to know them, to get alongside them, pray with them, maybe read a passage of scripture with them. You get to know them better than you do on a Sunday when it is a brief hello or a passing conversation.” He was responsible for twenty-five homes and planned to visit them twice a year, which would have involved an average of one visit per week, yet as

previously explained, this was carried out at two particular times of the year, thus concentrating the visits into a relatively short period. It would have been interesting to know what investment of time might be required to get alongside people, to get to know them and genuinely to build a relationship with them. John, who was responsible for the leadership of a small group in Westside referred to the need for more personal knowledge when he stated, “As shepherds the priority is to get to know people. We need to know their needs, their spiritual needs, and to listen and talk and pray with them, and be with them in situations, even modelling Jesus to them. Also trying to build a relationship with them, but that is difficult if you are not with them often enough.” Thus, as far as he was concerned, an investment of time in an ongoing way was a vital element in the process of becoming familiar with people so as to have a shepherding involvement in their lives.

In Downtown, where elders were encouraged to visit in their districts and where there were also a number of small groups meeting, a specific timescale was referred to regarding these visits. Luke, who had a smaller number of homes in his district due to other responsibilities, and who also led a small group said, “Yes, short visits, about fifteen to twenty minutes, but if there is a problem you would go back, or we could pass that on, with the people’s permission, if other support could be given.” It is a moot point whether a visit of such brief duration would have created a genuine opportunity for pastoral care, or allowed time for the existence of any possible problem to surface. However, he did state elsewhere that one of the purposes of these visits was to “make them feel like valued members of the congregation, to know that the church does care about them as people;...saying the church is here for you, and you are part of the church.” If such visits were essentially about demonstrating an interest in the family concerned,

then perhaps a brief contact would have sufficed, and it would appear that some of these families may have had a peripheral connection with the church.

In some situations the definition of a small group was loose enough to include those who had contact with a number of the same people on a regular basis. For example, Mark from Uptown Presbyterian, who had no district visitation policy, and who energetically promoted membership of a home group, said,

I would give the broadest interpretation of small groups, so if you are a member of the bowls (indoor bowling club), then someone is going to know your name and they will notice if you are not there on a Monday night. It doesn't mean you have to be going to a Bible study group to be a member of a small group, so long as you are connected in some way to the church.

Mark was very convinced about the importance of small groups in the life of Uptown, yet regarding those who were unwilling or unable to be involved in that way, he wanted them to be part of some smaller, regular gathering. In terms of pastoral care, this interaction would have been at a very superficial level, but at least it would mean that if someone was out of circulation for a time it would not have gone unnoticed. Perhaps this is the bottom rung of the shepherding ladder. All elders indicated that there was provision within their congregations for wider practical support to be offered to those who would benefit from it. This support was facilitated by members of the congregations either individually or in teams, making themselves available to visit in particular circumstances, make meals, carry out minor practical work, provide transport and cut grass, to name a few. This system created opportunities to show love and concern in a tangible manner, and to include the wider church in the caring process.

How Were Individual Elders Involved in Pastoral Care

This section, will outline how elders, within the strategy of their session, were individually involved in pastoral care, and how they fulfilled their role. It was essentially in the context of either districts or groups, or a combination of both, that elders sought to engage personally in shepherding the sheep. It was in this context that each elder conveyed what they considered to be the fundamental elements of pastoral care. The researcher discovered that whilst some saw pastoral care in a very general sense as having an interest in members and a desire to promote their welfare, others considered it to be more personal and to include a deeper involvement in their lives. At Northside, where the younger elders tended to prefer the pastoral care of a small group to district visitation, there was considerable engagement among the members. Peter, whose group met every two weeks, stated that it involved the following:

...encouraging them to attend, sending regular texts and emails, putting something on that they will want to come along to. We find that now we focus less on the Bible study and the main issue is the prayer time. Maybe there are ten people there and we spend about half an hour going 'round and people tell us a few things that are going on in their lives at the time. Then we pray for each other, then we have a short bible study, and then something to eat.

This practice demonstrated a significant level of openness among the group, as well as a willingness to have pastoral involvement in each other's lives. This group setting provided Peter, as the leader, with an insight into the deeper concerns and needs of the members, and potentially gave those in the group an opportunity to be prayerfully and pastorally supportive to each other. Clearly, in this particular case there was considerable friendship and fellowship among group members. Peter said, "Sometimes we might go for a walk together on a Saturday afternoon, or have a barbecue, things

which are more inclusive, and we have also been away together on a weekend.” In this comment Peter demonstrated that he took seriously the pastoral and discipleship aspect of the care which he sought to give to those for whom he was responsible. He expressed it as “trying to create a small, open, accountable community very much with Northside at the centre, but us being a microcosm of it. It is about supporting and encouraging people, having an opportunity to pray for them, and a bit about different ways of sharing community and sharing our lives.” This community obviously involved a considerable commitment of time and energy for Peter and the group members, whilst also demonstrating their desire to be together in a meaningful way in their journey through life.

In a similar way, the elder of Westside expressed a real desire to pastor others in his small group at a deeper level. John stated, “Half the time is prayer, and when you meet with people every two weeks, and you know their pain, hurts and troubles, there is no artificial situation saying, ‘I must pastor this person.’ When you meet with them, and cry with them you know what is going on in their lives and that’s pastoral care.” This statement demonstrated from John a pastoral engagement which clearly went beyond merely a general interest in the welfare of group members, and reached to the very heart of their lives. For him, at times there was also an ongoing involvement with those he was seeking to pastor which went beyond the time when the group would be together. He explained, “We might finish (the group) early and my wife and I would spend some time with her [a group member] and pray with her, rather than the whole group. We will shorten our group time and people will go and leave us to do that.” He illustrated this deeper involvement with others when he said, “Another member’s sister is seriously ill,

so I send regular text messages and invite her for coffee and we pray with her. I have got to know her mum a bit through the situation and I have been out to the house and prayed with them. Situations arise all the time and are ongoing.” John was clearly willing to take opportunities that came to him to care pastorally for those in his group and beyond, and saw this as part of the shepherding role to which he was called as an elder. John was retired and referred to others on the session who were no longer working, which gave them more time to use in this way, while others were more limited due to various commitments.

Likewise at Uptown, Mark, who also co-ordinated the small group ministry said, “That’s why it is so important for them to get into a group, so that people will know if their dad is in hospital, or if their child is sick, or if they are having a stressful time in work, or if they are lonely. In church on Sunday morning all those things are going on and no one will know.”

Clearly, Mark was convinced that effective shepherding involved an awareness on the part of the leader as well as group members concerning what burdens others were carrying, with a view to caring for them as the opportunity arose.

Matthew from Eastside, whilst not being involved in a group and therefore concentrating mostly on district visitation, also felt that he wanted to engage with people at a more personal level. He said, “We should be people who are supporters and encouragers, who are good listeners and are interested in people. I try to do this in district visitation, praying for them and remembering those little things that they tell you so that when you meet them you can make reference to them.” The question remains as to whether this infrequent form of contact with members afforded the same opportunity to

know them at a deeper level as might be possible in regular small group meetings, but within that context Matthew did want to engage in a more intimate way. He illustrated that this had been possible on occasions when he stated, “I have been surprised that when you are alongside people, they open up to you and you discover what their problems really are.” Yet, on the other hand he also recognised the limitations of this form of contact when he said, “Many times I have felt ineffective, that you were going and talking to people and you were getting nowhere.”

Only one of those involved in this study referred to the discipline aspect of their role, in dealing with those who might have required some form of correction or admonition. Luke from Downtown referred to this responsibility in both an individual and corporate sense. He said, “You have the authority to draw people’s attention to some things that they may need to consider. There is also the corporate responsibility of kirk session, and it should never be easy saying we are going to remove them from the communion roll, but if you don’t, you are failing in your duty of exercising that responsibility.” This aspect was a minor element of pastoral care as far as Luke was concerned, and the overwhelming focus of his involvement with others was to encourage, support, get alongside, and demonstrate his concern for them. He saw himself as being called to serve those entrusted to him, but in that context stated, “Sometimes that serving may need to be reminding people that some things are not as they should be, but I think you need to earn people’s respect to be able to do that.” This comment indicated that Luke saw this issue as something that may need to be faced, not with a feeling of superiority, but rather with an awareness of his own weaknesses.

Four of the elders in this study also indicated that they felt they had an important pastoral opportunity on Sundays when the church met together for worship, even though at times this was on a more superficial and informal level. Matthew from Eastside said, “The session would actively be seeking to get alongside people, to encourage them, to get to know them, being very alert to new people coming into the congregation, visitors or potential new members.” This action appeared to be viewed as a low key first step along the road of shepherding the flock, which could lead others into a closer connection with the fellowship.

At Westside, John was particularly emphatic about the significance of the Sunday gathering as he sought to fulfill his role as a pastor to the flock. He said, “I work hard on Sundays. If I have any member of my twenty five families out on Sunday I see them and they see me. We have double services and we have forty-five minutes between, and I would see people who attend either service, and I make a big effort to do that, to meet them face to face.” He illustrated the pastoral benefits that can come from using Sundays in this way when he stated,

My wife and I would do that together, looking out for people. Generally it is saying hello to people and listening, but sometimes you know that it won't matter if you see nobody else because it is important that you take time with that person. Maybe you ask them to call round later that evening, or ask if they are free to meet for coffee during the week.

It was very apparent that John, together with his wife, considered Sunday to be a time, not only for worshipping with the church, but also for making connections with others in order to exercise care towards them if required. He added, “I fish on Sunday mornings. I look at the congregation, and maybe it is beyond my own district, but I might say, ‘I will just speak to Walter this morning,’ asking God to show me people.” For John

this was often a fruitful and effective means of shepherding the flock. He said, “It is amazing the number of times that people say, ‘Yes, I was waiting for someone to speak to me’.” Paul from Southside also viewed Sunday as an occasion to get alongside those who attend, but perhaps more from a welcoming, or even an evangelistic perspective. He explained,

First of all, trying to get to know people, and their names. If I see someone new, I would go and talk to them and ask where they are from, so if I see them again the next Sunday, I can recognise them and call them by name. It is about trying to build a friendship with people. After the service we have tea and coffee in the hall, and if I see someone on their own, I try and go to speak to them, trying to get a friendship going so that people don’t feel left out of it.

Again, this effort might have been more a case of simple friendliness at a very basic level, but Paul saw it as his responsibility to make the most of any opportunities which Sunday presented him to engage with others. Peter referred to his use of Sundays in a similar way at Northside when he stated, “People know that I am their elder and I try to make regular contact with them on Sundays, and they know that if they have any concerns...they can talk to me about those things.” Three of the elders interviewed in this study were of the opinion that they also had a pastoral role with the various programmes that were part of the ongoing life of the congregation. They felt that through some measure of involvement with the organisations, they were able to encourage and support those who were serving the Lord in this specific leadership capacity. Matthew from Eastside was undoubtedly very enthusiastic in this regard. He said, “We also seek to do it (getting alongside people) through our active involvement in the various organisations. We have elders assigned to each organisation, so you would be regularly visiting, getting to know the members, but especially to encourage those in leadership.” With personal

experience of youth work in his younger days, he was convinced that this was a vital part of his ministry as an elder. He explained, “Having been a youth leader in the past, I know how tough it is and how lonely it can be, and I think there is a big job for our elders supporting the leaders in our church.” He went even further, suggesting that some session members might have leadership responsibility themselves in some aspect of the ongoing programme within the fellowship. He explained, “I think it is good for elders to be involved in the organisations. I am involved with the Sunday School on a rotation basis, and it gives me the chance of being in there at the grass roots, not losing touch, where much of the real work is done in the congregation.” In Downtown Presbyterian there was a similar view of the relationship between the session and the various activities that were part of the ongoing work of the congregation. Luke commented, “Many of the elders are attached to an organisation and bring a report once a year on a rolling basis regarding what has been happening, how things are going, and issues that may be arising. This is another side of shepherding the flock, ensuring that church life is organised in a way that is working.” This pattern may have been as much about attempting to oversee the smooth running of the various programmes, yet it nevertheless demonstrated an expectation regarding the role of many members of the session outside either districts or groups. Likewise Paul from Southside stated,

We (elders) are also allocated an organisation and we would go there and ask how things are going, and then report back to the session and if there were some prayer requests that we felt should be brought to session then we would do so and pray for that particular topic. We would visit at least once a year, possibly twice or three times, to encourage the organisations in their work which can be difficult at times.

Whilst this probably was not a pastoral involvement at the level that occurred in other settings, perhaps for those engaged in this kind of leadership, it demonstrated a

supportive, prayerful interest which communicated to them that the session cared about them and what they did.

Two elders in this study considered their own personal example in living the Christian life to be a very significant element in their overall shepherding of the flock. Paul from Southside was very emphatic about this idea almost to the point of obsession, using the phrase “walk the walk” a number of times during the interview. This conviction was illustrated when he said,

I think it is important to live the Christian life well, so that people can see that the Christian life is real and authentic, not just “talking the talk” but “walking the walk.” If we are not living the Christian life then we are not leading by example as we should, particularly with our own family. If you can’t do it with your own family, then how can you do it with anyone else?

This statement indicated how seriously Paul took the exhortation of Peter to the elders to be “eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock,”¹²⁸ but it also reflected his conviction regarding how central this was to everything else he did in shepherding the flock. At Eastside, Matthew expressed a similar view when he stated, “It is primarily about the way I live my life for Christ. Elders ought to be people who by their honesty and integrity can be trusted within the congregation. Elders are human and we all have our faults, and plenty of them, but elders need to be examples to the people we are trying to get alongside and support.” Whilst admitting his weaknesses, he was persuaded that his own character had to undergird all his endeavours as a shepherd of the flock, implying that if it was significantly flawed, then his pastoral work would be seriously hindered. Perhaps others were operating under this assumption,

¹²⁸ 1 Peter 5:2-3.

but these two elders expressed specifically their awareness of the significance of the quality of their lives.

What Affected the Way in Which the Elders Engaged in Pastoral Care?

The purpose of this research question was to study what factors the elders felt influenced them either positively or negatively as they sought to shepherd the flock. Positively, one of the most common responses, being given by five of the six interviewed, indicated that the elders' sense of calling to the office was a significant motivational influence as they endeavoured to fulfill their pastoral responsibilities. Luke from Downtown put it this way: "I took vows when I was ordained and I either fulfill those vows or else resign. Otherwise it would be hypocritical, a denial of my whole sense of calling." Whilst this implied an acknowledgement that there was a sense of duty involved in the role, the place of calling was clearly central as he continued, "It has to be about the sense of calling, equipping, and serving the Lord as he has called me to do."

Serving at Westside, John expressed similar sentiments but with a slightly different emphasis. He said, "I have been appointed to the role of elder, but I would be shepherding because of my gift anyway, even if I wasn't an elder. It is something I do, something that happens." Although John had been set apart to the office, he chose to highlight his awareness of an inward desire to care for others, an internal calling to do what the fellowship had then appointed him for. Mark from Uptown stated some aspects of the work which he found difficult and with which he struggled, but also affirmed a sense of the calling of God. He said, "What motivates me to keep going is that I believe the Lord's hand is on me and he wants me to be there, and while he wants me on session, I will be." This statement conveyed a genuine inward conviction that God had set him

apart and appointed him to this role, creating an ongoing compulsion to persevere in faithfulness as a shepherd. Peter, leading a small group in Northside put it quite simply when he said, “Understanding the biblical call to eldership is a motivation.”

In addition to a sense of God’s call to the eldership, several elders expressed an awareness of their gifts which they felt suited them for pastoral work, along with an inward inclination to care for people in the church. Peter listed a few of those gifts, “More generally, looking out for other people, being compassionate and caring, being concerned about other people’s spiritual growth, wanting to help them on, and being a people person.” It was significant that in his service at Northside, he was not only aware of a concern for the spiritual growth of others, but also felt a desire to be of help to them in that process. In answer to a question about the gifts necessary for pastoral care, which indirectly allowed elders to outline their own gifts, John answered, “Loving people, you need to be a people person. Also spiritual gifts, being able to communicate the gospel, to assess a situation and to have wisdom. I think a lot of pastoral situations require immediate wisdom.” Whilst not restricted to the eldership, the presence of genuine love for people would have to be an essential quality to persevere in the work of shepherding.

Mark, who had a personal responsibility to oversee pastoral care at Uptown, looked for certain qualities in others when appointing leaders. He stated that, for him, it was about

...caring for others, seeing their need, giving of yourself and giving your time even when it is inconvenient. I see folks with a heart for others, that caring, willingness to give of themselves, being willing to inconvenience themselves for the sake of others, and that to me is the heart of pastoral care. It is a special gift and not everybody has it.

Elders who had this “heart for others” would therefore have experienced an inward motivation which would have assisted them greatly in the work to which they had been called. John from Westside spoke of his love for others as something that was prompted by God. He commented, “At a most basic level it would be the twenty-third Psalm and how Jesus dealt with people, showing compassion and love. It is in our loving of one another that we show Christ to the world. That is where my love of people comes from.”

Three elders indicated that they were helped significantly in carrying out their pastoral work by the relationship they had with the minister and his attitude toward them. Most ministers were not able to engage in routine visiting due to the number of members in the congregation, but it was clear that several tried to encourage the session in their service. The minister in Downtown was a great help to Luke. Luke described him in this way,

He is never in any way judgmental when some of us have said how inadequate we feel in terms of visitation, but his response has always been to support and encourage... He seems to know just the right thing to say at the right time. He is very supportive of his elders and he sees that as one of his main shepherding roles.

It would have been very discouraging for Luke if the minister had been critical of his efforts, in what he was finding already a demanding responsibility, but instead, it was very encouraging to be treated in the way he was. He continued, “He comes to visit me once a year because it is his sense of calling, and he prays for me in the work here, and this is incredibly invaluable to me.” At Eastside, Matthew expressed his appreciation for the friendship and support of the minister, something which greatly spurred him on in his pastoral work. He stated, “The minister is very good at getting alongside the session,

encouraging them and asking how things are going. He is very good at communicating with the elders in terms of what is happening... He encourages and supports the elders well, both one on one and in session meetings.” Matthew also experienced the minister’s interest in and care for him in a very practical way when his wife was away from home on a field trip. He said, “He invited me and the kids ‘round for tea. He is there, very approachable. He will take time and talk to you, and is very good at emailing.” He also sensed the minister’s genuine pastoral care towards him on those occasions when he had indicated to the minister that he had to face something difficult at work on a particular day that week. He commented, “You would be pretty sure that you would get an email from him telling you he was thinking about you. Those little things mean a lot to people, and you come away thinking, he has a real interest in me.” He also stated that this behavior was something that modeled for him how he should treat others. All of these were clearly very helpful influences on Matthew in his ministry as an elder.

John also commented how his minister at Westside was an encouragement to him. He explained,

He meets with us once a year and he asks how things are going, what help he can be to you, do you need him to speak to a family or get one of the staff to visit. There is accountability and the offer of help. His preaching is part of it too, being done with a pastoral emphasis he is helping and supporting you whenever you go into the home.

This sense of the minister both equipping John for pastoral work through his preaching, and making himself available to help if needed, affected him in a positive way and seemed to be a source of impetus in his shepherding.

Two elders indicated that previous experience had in some sense helped to formulate their view of their calling as an elder and was a positive influence as they

carried out their duties. Peter talked about how others had helped and supported him during his Christian journey, and referred to the blessing he had experienced from being in various communities of fellowship as he grew up and studied away from home. This experience made him passionate about the small group community which he led in Northside. He commented, “We are trying to build up these small communities where our lives are shared and hopefully our lives are a little bit different from those around us, and that we would support each other in being disciples of Jesus Christ.”

For Matthew, it was the example of an elder from the congregation where he grew up, whom he accompanied on district visitation during his teens, some of it to people very peripheral to the congregation. The elder had also given Matthew opportunities to speak at the men’s Bible class which he oversaw. Matthew shared, “He was a big influence on me and helped me to develop my understanding of what an elder should be, and I would aspire to be like him.”

Negatively, four elders stated that an awareness of their own sinfulness and failings at times gave them a feeling of inadequacy when it came to their ability to pastor others. Luke expressed this in quite stark terms. Speaking of himself he said, “What makes you think you can advise other people, when you look at the state of your own walk with God, you are a fraud. You are talking to people about living a godly life and look at your own.” This was likely not an admission of obvious hypocrisy in his own life, but rather a sense of his own fallen condition and imperfection. Significantly, at times it sounded as though it could also have been an incentive for godly living. He stated, “If it develops where people say, he is an elder but he never bothers, he never cares, then it potentially affects other people, so part of motivation is, am I adversely

affecting other people?” Further, he made allusion to the fact that one day he would have to give an account of his service as an elder when he spoke of “when it comes to judgment, will anyone point the finger at me?”

Matthew referred to his own busyness and the pressures of work and family life, as at times having an adverse effect on his own fellowship with God, something which clearly made him feel inadequate as an elder. He commented, “Things can look fine on the outside, but on the inside you know that your walk isn’t what it should be. I have had times like that and I have really struggled in those times in my role as an elder within the church.” This confession conveyed Matthew’s reluctance to shepherd others in those times when he felt so keenly the weakness of his own fellowship with God.

An admission of a similar nature was made by Peter regarding his ministry at Northside when he said, “Also you can be hindered by your own feelings and weaknesses. Sometimes you are apathetic or spiritually lukewarm, and you are glad to be doing something else. We are all human.” Equally Paul, who spoke of the importance of “walking the walk,” and at times seemed assured of his positive influence on others, nevertheless referred to an awareness of his own shortcomings. He said,

We are all subject to this, pressures as we live our daily lives. Sometimes we are close to God, other times not so close for many different reasons. Sometimes it is our own laziness that stops us giving pastoral care, maybe the football is more important. It is getting the time to do what you have to do, and it is about priorities.

It was significant that although Paul seemed to be a godly, spiritual man, at times he felt hindered by the limitations stemming from his own human nature.

There was a mixed response concerning the role that session meetings played in the overall work of the elders. Two of those interviewed stated they found them difficult

and at times frustrating, considering them almost a necessary evil. Mark felt very strongly about what seemed a negative influence regarding his service on the eldership. He said, “Sometimes you can be so burdened and sometimes you can feel so demotivated, and being on session generally, you are coming out of meetings with the screaming heebie-jeebies.” This statement clearly reflected what he felt was a discouraging aspect to some of those times when elders came together. Mark indicated that at Uptown they had previously planned that at every other monthly session meeting the focus would be on fellowship and prayer rather than business, incidentally business that was also dealt with by a business committee meeting every two weeks. Despite this plan, he acknowledged, “[B]ut the one for prayer and fellowship is almost always all business, so we are not getting training, we are firefighting most of the time.”

Peter expressed similar sentiments about Northside. He did acknowledge that there were positive aspects to some of the meetings, particularly when an elder would report to the group regarding their district, outlining the good things and also the frustrations. These times of reporting to session seemed to be an encouragement to him as he experienced some of the same things in his own group, and therefore realised he was not alone. However, he also reflected his irritation with much of the business when he stated,

Kirk session I struggle with greatly. I am a pragmatist and an activist, and I like the doing rather than sitting about discussing things. A strength, or a weakness that I have is that I make up my mind quickly. I make a decision and I want to move on. I struggle with debating things for a couple of hours after having worked ten hours, put the kids to bed, got my tea and maybe I have other things to do before the next day.

It appeared that the discussion and decision-making part of the work of shepherding the flock, which had to be integral to leadership in some shape or form, was

tedious to Peter, and something which he would have avoided if possible. He concluded by stating that he was willing to endure the session meetings so that he could be involved in other aspects of the work that he enjoyed.

At Downtown, which had gone through a difficult and divisive time prior to the current ministry, leaving some of the elders lacking in confidence, Luke seemed very positive about session meetings. He said, “The minister was very good at bringing session together, moving us on patiently, moving some of us on from that (difficult time), saying the past is the past, but we have jobs to do now...relationships that had become fractured are good.” Luke viewed these times when the session were together as opportunities to help heal the wounds of the past and support each other in the challenges they faced.

Three elders were of the view that some training might help them in their service on session, whilst acknowledging that they received instruction at the time of their election and ordination. One stated that involvement in the study had caused them to return to the denomination’s book on the eldership with an intention to read it again, as well as expressing the desire for some form of refresher course. One said they received ongoing training at session and stated concerning a training course at that time, “I think I would feel it was just another thing to go to, which I don’t need. It might be helpful in the future if I had a bit more time.” Whether the elder concerned would have more time in the future is another question.

How Did the Elders Assess Their Provision of Pastoral Care?

When elders felt there were situations in which they were able to help others, and be a source of pastoral support to them, they sensed some measure of personal

effectiveness in their labours. Paul expressed an inclination to visit some of the elderly members of the congregation at Southside, and indicated that whilst he found it difficult at times, there were other occasions when it was very rewarding. He shared,

I am motivated by the encouragement you get when you visit people, lots of encouragement, asking you to come back soon, daughters and sons contacting you...We have been invited out to lunch and received gift vouchers because of things that we have done. The response of the people have indicated some effectiveness on our part.

Obviously, Paul did not visit people in order to receive these expressions of appreciation, but when they were given, it was apparent that they were a real boost to him, and conveyed to him the value that some others placed on his interest in them.

At Eastside, Matthew spoke of an occasion when he felt he had been a blessing to a family in his district with whom he had spent some time during a visit. He stated that before he arrived, having previously arranged to call with them, he was not aware of any difficulties in the home. He went on,

It was one of those occasions when you visit at the right time. They had been going through a very difficult time with a child who had a medical problem, a lot of pressure coping with that... The husband had a job with a lot of pressure, and he had been turning to alcohol as a release and I arrived at the home in the middle of that.

He indicated that he had felt able to pastor the family, supporting the wife and speaking to the husband about his problems. It was obvious in the interview that this had been a means of helping Matthew feel that there were times when he could effectively care for some of the flock.

Peter, who was very committed to the pastoral oversight of his small group, talked about a particular time when everyone in the group was affected in some way, along with many others in the congregation at Northside. He referred to a situation when the young

child of one of the group members was gravely ill, and not expected to survive. He outlined how his group had been a catalyst for supporting the parents by messages, meals, babysitters, by mobilising people to pray and by sharing information with the session. He spoke about how the father had been amazed at the support they had received from the church, and how they felt that the fellowship were their true family. Peter said, “I am still quite moved when I think about it. It was a terrible time that we went through, but for our discipleship group it was something that brought us together and made us a lot stronger.” He outlined how he had personally phoned daily and visited the hospital, and that it had deepened the bond between himself and the father, who was a member of his group. He described how people had agonised tearfully in prayer, and he felt it had been a powerful experience for the group, and something in which he had played a significant part.

When it came to the strategy used in pastoral care, four elders felt that there were significant drawbacks in using district visitation by elders. Uptown had abandoned any attempt to employ that method, and even in those congregations where it was included in some form, reservations were expressed about its effectiveness. At Westside, each elder was appointed to a district but not every elder did the visiting, with some delegating it to either assistants, or some of the specialised visiting teams. Even here John was very emphatic, “If you are only visiting someone twice a year, with the best will in the world, if they have problems, then if you only see them every six months, you are not their best friend to come alongside them.” He felt it was important to get to know people and build a relationship with them, which he said would prove difficult if you were not with them very often. Later he asserted,

I know that it’s (pastoral care) not happening at the level that it is in my small group... I know it is not happening at that level in districts... Pastoral

care geographically organised is not the best, being in charge of twenty five families, being in charge is fine but don't expect me to do it all because it is not done effectively. 'Effectively' is when it is done to one another.

Although John was part of a session where a district structure was used, his comments indicated that he was convinced it was not the most effective way to shepherd the flock.

At Northside, where the younger elders favoured small groups, Peter also had responsibility for some who had joined the church and either were attending another group, or were not in any group. He said, "Trying to visit them in the traditional way seems to be a more unpopular way from both the elders' and the people's perspective, due to the busyness of our lives." He did refer to "arriving unannounced," which in light of today's communication options seemed strange, but it was clear that he felt it was an unsatisfactory method of providing pastoral care.

At Downtown, Luke led a small group but also had responsibility for a district, and stated that he had previously felt unmotivated and was purely delivering material without any sense of purpose. He said, "Several times I was very close to resigning as I didn't feel I was fulfilling the role properly, yet I couldn't see how in relation to the other responsibilities I could do that as well." When he acknowledged his difficulty, the minister tried to encourage him and suggested that he start looking at the corners and not at the "black hole" of the big district, which he felt would give Luke a sense of satisfaction that he was making a difference at least in those corners. Yet, he followed this account with the telling words, "With a very large congregation you have to break it down to what individuals and what I can do most effectively, and you can't do everything." This statement sounded like an admission that he was still struggling to make any real progress within his district.

One elder recognised that the way districts and groups were arranged in the congregation potentially reduced the ability to shepherd well, whilst also increasing the workload of the elder. John stated, “The people in my group would be from three different districts, so I would be asked from time to time by their elder about them. Some of my group are in someone else’s district, which is not the best situation, but that’s how it is set up.” A more co-ordinated approach might have made life easier for everyone concerned.

There was an awareness on the part of some elders that if pastoral care was exclusively the responsibility of the session, then as the congregation grew there would be the temptation to elect new elders to cope with the increasing number of families.

Luke stated,

Having such a large congregation, and where shepherding had been associated with the eldership, you end up in a situation where you wonder if you appoint elders for the sake of having elders to visit. We have taken the approach that this would be putting the cart before the horse, that elders must be people called of God, who have proven lives of service. That’s what encouraged us to develop bereavement groups and others, who are not necessarily elders, to see pastoring in a bigger more holistic way.

In fact, that very thing was happening in Eastside where every elder was expected to visit their district. Matthew admitted, “We have ten elders at the moment, so the congregation is divided into ten areas, each elder having the responsibility for somewhere between twenty and thirty families or homes. We are in the process of electing elders to try and spread that load.” This idea may have been based on the assumption that there were such suitable people within the congregation, but it did sound like filling vacancies.

Three elders acknowledged, not in a critical manner, that there were some people on their session who were not necessarily suited to pastoral care, yet who they felt could

still have a role in leadership in some way. At Uptown, in reference to their eldership, Mark said, “People are gifted in different ways and it is absolutely the case that not everyone is gifted to visit, to sit and listen, to just get alongside people as they do life. Not everyone has that gift, so why should we try to make people exercise gifts they don’t have?”

John at Westside had a comparable view which he expressed as “matching gifts much more than just saying everyone is a shepherd, because not all are best used as shepherds, yet they make very good elders.” This observation was a recognition that if all members of session were expected to have the same part to play in the provision of pastoral care, then at times it would be done poorly. In a similar vein, Luke stated of the Downtown session, “I have become more convinced that not everybody has great people skills;...it means the way they relate may be different, it doesn’t mean they can’t offer anything as an elder, they still can, but they need to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses.” This conveyed similar sentiments to what John had shared, that some elders might have a less direct role in the overall business of shepherding the flock. Paul implied that some of the elders in the district system at Southside, perhaps due to age, were reluctant to be involved in visitation, when he stated that he felt there should be provision for “...when a person feels they don’t want to have a district any more, they can say that. That could be expanded so you could also say I don’t feel I have the gift of pastoral care; that would be better handled by somebody else” He also recognised the possibility of others outside session being involved: “Maybe somebody outside the eldership could be involved. I would have absolutely no problem with that.”

Four of those interviewed stated, in one way or another, that the demands on their time meant they felt less effective in shepherding than they would like to be. Some were very busy at work and had families, leaving them stretched when expectations were high for their service on session. Mark stated this fact clearly,

The other thing is other responsibilities, and most elders will be engaged in some other work, leading a prayer ministry or a house group. I lead worship, so you are doing all these different things and you are overstretched and overcommitted in so many other ways, and sometimes pastoral care is the bottom of your agenda.

Four elders expressed frustration related to the unwillingness of many members to receive the pastoral care available to them. At Westside, John stated, “Less than half of our communicant members are attending a small group, not as much as I would like to see. It leaves a lot for the elders to do outside that.” Mark referred to the same feature at Uptown,

They (groups) are our primary pastoral care but the tragedy is that it is the core of the church that are in the groups, so the folks who sail in and out on a Sunday morning are not coming into the groups. Some of them tell me it’s not for them, that they just don’t get it, this small group thing, sitting ’round drinking coffee and reading the Bible.

He also expressed frustration that there were those in the congregation who were opting out of the care structure, but who expected to be visited privately in their homes. He stated, “There are people who are feeling, ‘I need a visit, I should be visited,’ and what we are saying to those people is if you have a need for a visit, tell us and we will visit you.” He felt very deeply about those who were on the fringes and commented, “The people who concern me are those who are not connected in any way, they are not in a fellowship group, they are not in a prayer cell...they don’t come to any of the weekly

organisations, they just come on Sundays. He summed it up by saying in a resigned and disappointed manner, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink.”

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

This study was designed to explore how Kirk Sessions of healthy, growing congregations of the PCI approach and provide pastoral care for their members. Four research questions were framed to guide the study. The research questions were:

RQ 1: How do sessions approach the task of exercising pastoral care to the flock?

RQ 2: How do elders personally exercise their pastoral care responsibility towards individual members?

RQ 3: What affects the way in which elders engage in pastoral care?

RQ 4: How do elders assess the provision of pastoral care in their congregation?

The importance of this study is reflected in the fact that the PCI, through the General Assembly of 2011, encouraged the sessions of all congregations to review their provision of pastoral care.

Summary of Findings

This study has shown that Kirk Sessions of healthy, growing congregations of the PCI were genuinely attempting to engage in providing pastoral care to their members. They all recognised that if the sheep are to be shepherded meaningfully, then it requires ongoing supervisory oversight by session, and the personal active involvement of the elders, working alongside the ministerial staff and other volunteers where appropriate. All sessions are engaged in this process through either district visitation, a small group structure, or a combination of both. Most accepted that effective pastoral care could not

be delivered by the elders alone, but needed the input of members of the congregation in a variety of ways. Whilst all sought to provide this care to the best of their ability, there was a general recognition of a measure of imperfection built into the task due to the limitations of the elders and the willingness or otherwise of people to be pastored by others. The level at which elders engaged in the lives of those entrusted to them varied, with some contact being more occasional and superficial, while for others it was regular with a more intimate dimension. The work of shepherding the sheep was affected to varying degrees by the elders' sense of call to service, feelings of their own inadequacy, the response from those for whom they were caring and the relationship they had with the minister.

Discussion of Findings

I first will draw some conclusions about the pastoral care provided in each congregation in this study and then discuss the findings in relation to the areas outlined in the research questions.

Southside Presbyterian

Southside was a congregation that differed significantly from the other five in that they had what I would call a “patchwork quilt” kind of approach to pastoral care. In the context of district visitation, the elder spoke of getting to know people, and pastoring one another, yet there were only three groups specifically for ladies. He was extremely focused on the importance of living well for God yet seemed mostly to visit with elderly members who would not see him outside their own home. It seemed that unavoidably there would be significant gaps in the provision of care, with some people receiving much and others hardly any. There also seemed to be those on session at Southside who

felt either unsuited for pastoral care, or unwilling to engage in visiting, yet the district system was the preferred option.

Northside Presbyterian

I think that Northside was in a process of transition from district visitation to small group care. The congregation had been declining and aging, but then began to experience the ongoing and significant addition of younger families, which left essentially two generational groups on session and in the fellowship. The elders seemed to get on well together, but the older ones preferred to visit in districts, and most of the older members liked to be visited in that way. The younger elders however, were keen on the discipleship group approach, which tended to draw the younger church members. I suspect that eventually in time they will move to an exclusively small group way of shepherding the flock, which Peter proved can be very effective and fruitful.

Uptown Presbyterian

Uptown, the second largest of the six congregations, had faced their own failure in shepherding the flock honestly, and opted exclusively for a small group structure, with some elders being involved in areas other than pastoral care. Due to their size they were able to employ extra staff, and have volunteers to assist in caring for the members. The difficulty was that there was a significant number of members who did not want to be involved in small groups, leaving the session struggling to shepherd them in any meaningful way. The dynamics within the life of the congregation also resulted in great demands being placed on the time and energy of some of the elders, which seemed at times to hinder their ability to care for the flock as they wished.

Downtown Presbyterian

The major difficulty at Downtown was the involvement of some of the elders in small group leadership, whilst at the same time being expected to visit regularly within a geographical district. For the elder involved in this study, the inability to do both, at times, created a real sense of failure, accompanied by a feeling that this could be negatively affecting the impression others had of his life and his role in the congregation. The understanding and encouragement of the minister was a great help to him, as was the fellowship, support, and mutual care experienced in the small group which he led.

Eastside Presbyterian

At Eastside, the elder seemed to place a high priority on “visibility,” the importance of session giving the lead and setting an example of attendance at and involvement in meetings and activities within the life of the congregation. Along with this expectation of visibility, the emphasis on two annual, seasonal bursts of visitation in districts, with the accompanying difficulty of having time to genuinely get to know people on that basis, caused me to question the overall effectiveness of the strategy. However, this approach did seem to facilitate a more general acquaintance with a good number of people on the part of the elders.

Westside Presbyterian

The largest of the congregations involved in this study used districts and groups quite extensively. The Westside elder led a small group in which there seemed to be genuine mutual care, support, and fellowship, but he was also responsible for a district, whose oversight was largely delegated to a combination of his assistant and some specialised volunteer visiting teams. An unusual arrangement existed here in that

generally there was little connection between the elder's group and his district, so that another elder would be responsible for some within his group and vice versa. This approach seemed to be driven by a policy of arranging districts in a geographical manner, resulting in a random mixture of communicants, adherents, peripheral families, and possibly some group members. I am sure this could have been arranged more suitably in order to facilitate more effective shepherding on the part of the elders.

I turn now to discuss the findings with reference to the research questions that framed this study.

How Do Sessions Approach the Task of Providing Pastoral Care?

As previously alluded to, all sessions took the provision of pastoral care seriously, being persuaded of the importance of the biblical injunction to "be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care."¹²⁹ Despite the historical emphasis on the role of "the minister" in this endeavour, typified by material referenced earlier,¹³⁰ all congregations saw it in a wider context and used some form of group structure in their strategy. This perspective in itself showed a significant development from the traditional pattern that had existed in most PCI congregations for generations, illustrated previously by Luke's comments about his father, where elders went to session meetings, distributed the elements, and delivered material to homes in his district.

This strategy demonstrated an awareness that pastoral care involved a much deeper engagement with people, and a conviction in keeping with literature cited

¹²⁹ 1 Peter 5:1-2.

¹³⁰ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 88.

previously¹³¹ that “ministry is not the work of one person or even one group of people. Thus, the care of the local body is not the sole responsibility of the elders, but of all the members.” This recognition that caring for the flock, whilst entrusted to the elders, involves others as exhorted by the “one another” statements in scripture, was the biblical incentive to use informal smaller groups where this care might be facilitated. I found the use of district visitation, unless conducted by others outside the session, a rather strange practice when used in combination with groups, as was the practice in three congregations. If someone meets informally with others on a regular basis, where an elder is either present or leading the group, then could that not be the context of pastoral care for that person? Would there be any necessity for that same person also to be visited by another elder? Further, what would be the necessity for the elder in that group to visit someone who is involved in another small group that is led by a different elder? I can understand that if an individual is not involved in a group, then caring for them may make necessary some other form of contact.

However, for those meeting regularly with others, the opportunity to receive shepherding care from the elder and other members is already in place, making district contact seem unnecessary, unless in a time of particular need. It would surely be more effective at least to ensure that a person who is part of a small group would be a member of the district assigned to the elder of that group, something which happens at Northside with those in the younger age range. This system would require a departure from the traditional mindset in PCI, referred to above, that views districts as having to be a geographical entity, surely a vestige from a day when few had transport and delivery was

¹³¹ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 27.

the normal practice. It would at the same time co-ordinate pastoral care for a significant section of the congregation.

The practice of home visitation by elders, whilst having historic precedence in PCI, presents a number of difficulties. One is that, to be done systematically and well, undoubtedly it would involve a considerable demand on time and energy, both of which can be in short supply for an elder who is employed and has family commitments. The equivalent of an evening spent with eight or ten others in a group context would take many hours spread over a number of weeks if undertaken by visiting people in their homes. I would suggest that the former would be a much more attractive option than the latter for many of today's busy elders, and could avoid the feelings of guilt and discouragement expressed earlier. Further, reference was made by those interviewed to the importance of getting to know those whom they were seeking to shepherd, yet the ability to do this was acknowledged to be limited through district visitation.

Taking the pattern of the "annual family visitation," referred to in literature cited earlier,¹³² it would be extremely unlikely that an elder could get to know a family in any meaningful way by visiting them once a year, or even twice a year which was the practice in some congregations in this study. As stated in literature cited earlier,¹³³ it may be possible to get to know "about" the particular members of the family, which at a basic level would convey an interest in them, but to gain a personal knowledge of them by seeing them annually would prove much more difficult. It is hard to imagine that an individual would be open about any personal matters that would concern them, in the

¹³² De Jong, *Taking Heed to the Flock*, 8.

¹³³ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 241.

context of an annual visit from someone they did not know particularly well. This kind of knowledge may be possible in some situations, as outlined by Matthew earlier, but I think it would be an extremely rare occurrence in the normal course of such visitation. Those interviewed in this study confirmed the opinion cited previously regarding home visitation by elders, that in the vast majority of cases it ends in failure, destroys motivation, and produces a sense of defeat and guilt in the elders.¹³⁴

In contrast to this, an evening spent together perhaps twice a month, where the Bible is studied and those present are sharing topics for prayer, and then praying for each other, could be a much more productive method of implementing pastoral care. Should a difficulty or particular pastoral need be identified in the group setting, a home visit from the elder, visiting team or minister, if appropriate, would then allow for following up on the particular issue. It was the testimony of those involved in small groups that pointed to pastoral interaction being possible in a way that simply was not happening in any other context.

I found it strange that at Southside, groups were only available for women yet, as previously stated, Paul extolled the virtues and benefits of such meetings and on several occasions referred to the varying gifts in the eldership and the need to supplement pastoral care from the congregation. Southside does arrange activities for larger groups of men but more by way of friendship and evangelism. It seems to me that if groups can be such a blessing to women, and they allow caring for one another to take place, then in some way they ought to be an integral part of congregational life, and available to everyone.

¹³⁴ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 127.

The benefit that a group structure can bring to the overall strategy for pastoral care was referred to by all interviewed, and was demonstrated earlier by Peter at Northside, where those in his discipleship group had developed a real bond of friendship. They supported each other in a crisis, spent time together informally, and according to Peter, were really “looking after each other,” which surely lies at the heart of pastoral care. This example bears out the assertion in material quoted previously¹³⁵ that dedicated contact is the foundation for any shepherding plan. This experience also affirms comments made in literature referenced earlier that as Christians we are in a relationship of mutual care for one another,¹³⁶ and the small group provides an ideal environment where this can take place. It may also be that the generation in which we live prefers community life and feels more comfortable in the informal, inclusive atmosphere that a group context provides. Today we are part of a relational generation in which many barriers have been removed, first names are often used rather than titles, and people seek significance in company and friendships. If this is true, then the part that these factors play in the overall shepherding of the flock will surely become increasingly important and relevant as the years pass. The suspicion and fear that was expressed about the potential danger of people meeting in this way could be addressed easily by giving leadership of each group to one of the elders.

It is significant that the PCI has been encouraging congregations to consider a system of small groups as one method of providing primary pastoral care, albeit with a co-ordinator overseeing the process. This system is being suggested because as a

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Billington, *Growing a Healthy Church*, 8.

denomination there has been a recognition that in many situations, the strategy of routine district visitation by elders may no longer be the most realistic means of shepherding the flock. Indeed, it is a moot point whether this has ever been as effective in the past as we sometimes imagine. Strangely, the current leaflet produced by the PCI giving guidance to congregations seeking to elect elders quotes directly from the code as previously cited,¹³⁷ that elders would be assigned a district with a view to regular visitation. Considering the most recent publications of PCI quoted previously,¹³⁸ the denomination urgently needs to address this anomaly in their approach to pastoral care.

How Were Individual Elders Involved in Pastoral Care?

All elders interviewed were convinced they had an important role to play in shepherding the flock, which included not only overseeing the process, but also a personal involvement on their part. For some this meant leading a small group, which they each took seriously and saw as a significant way to care for those for whom they felt a responsibility. They were able to pastor the members in a group setting, and at times this led to an involvement with them in a more personal and confidential way. If elders are giving their time and energy conscientiously in this way, along with session meetings and possibly some other ministry in the church, then this seems to be a major investment of themselves. To expect more than this is surely to make excessive and unreasonable demands on people, many of whom may have a considerable number of other life commitments. There was some reference to elders communicating pastorally by text and

¹³⁷ *Code of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, Section 30(1), (2).

¹³⁸ Board of Evangelism and Christian Training of PCI, *Developing Pastoral Care in our Congregations*, 5.

telephone, and perhaps the recommendation quoted earlier¹³⁹ that a phone call can convey a genuine interest and be much appreciated would be worth serious consideration as part of the whole process. If an elder was retired and wished to use the extra time available to engage in shepherding the flock in a wider sense, which was the case at Westside, then no doubt that would be acceptable and greatly appreciated by any group of elders. Perhaps every session should consider the other elements in each elder's life when deciding how they will allocate pastoral responsibilities, thus ensuring that those who are already busy do not become overcommitted. The time may well come in the future, when those who have many demands on them now will be more available to do extra if they so wish.

Reference was made by several of those interviewed to the possibility of delegating some of the pastoral care to others, particularly when individuals or teams with a heart and suitable gifts for this were available. This idea was an interesting perspective on the responsibility to shepherd the flock that biblically is allocated to the elders.¹⁴⁰ It was also another aspect of the recognition cited previously that in the church we are in a relationship of mutual care for one another,¹⁴¹ thus including the involvement of others, even outside a small group context, or developing from it. In this sense it would mean that there would be times when elders would choose to enlist the help of suitable people outside the eldership to deliver a particular aspect of care to individuals or families. This concept could work well if a male elder felt that a woman in his group, or

¹³⁹ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 128.

¹⁴⁰ 1 Peter 5:1-2.

¹⁴¹ Billington, *Growing a Healthy Church*, 8.

one for whom he was responsible, would benefit from female support. It might also be a great help to an elder who was entrusted with the care of some elderly members, either housebound or in nursing care. He could then delegate someone else who was willing to make regular visits, largely to be responsible for shepherding contact with the person concerned. This practice could free up elders to concentrate on those in their small group with whom they would like to maintain regular contact. In this situation the elders would still be shepherding the flock, but rather than doing it themselves, they are making sure that it is done. In the world of farming this might be akin to a shepherd caring for his sheep, who at times uses the services of a younger trainee shepherd to look after part of the flock. Perhaps the biblical instruction to the elders leaves scope for pastoral care to happen this way in the church. This system would not be an abrogation of the responsibility to be shepherds of God's flock on the part of elders, but rather the overseeing of the implementation of that very task using the gifts of others.

The use of Sundays in the pastoral process was a very interesting element for me, and one which received little attention in the literature I consulted. It was striking that for some of the elders it was an intentional aspect of caring for the church, rather than simply a casual friendliness to those they might meet during the morning. One referred to his activity on Sunday as fishing, deliberately looking for people to speak to, and at times asking the Lord to direct him to someone who might need some kind of help or support. It would be easy for elders to take their seats quietly and wait for the service to start, yet this unselfish use of the time to meet with others personally could be a very effective way of caring for members. It would add to the time spent with individuals, thereby facilitating the process of getting alongside people and getting to know them, something

that all those interviewed stated in some form was part of their objective in shepherding. Consider an elder who had eight members in their small group, should they speak to one person before the service and one person after, then they would make contact with each of their group members every month. This would be in addition to any time they would spend with them when meeting together in homes, which might provide an opportunity for them to speak more personally, and in a private way should they wish to do so. This way of shepherding could be particularly useful when groups meet once a month rather than every two weeks, which was the case in Downtown.

The relationship between the session and the weekly church programmes mentioned by three elders seemed to be more a demonstration of their interest in and support for those who were serving in this way than any overtly pastoral contact. This contact could be a means of encouraging leaders in what can sometimes be a difficult work, which could have value in itself, yet even this might usefully be delegated to someone else in the congregation who had an interest in the particular organisation. However, this responsibility did not appear to be a very time-consuming exercise, possibly only involving one or two visits a year, which should be manageable for most. Yet, in the context of the busy work and family schedules that many have today, there may be a necessity to rationalise regarding the use of time. It would be better to be committed to one form of pastoral care and do it well and effectively, than try to undertake several different areas of ministry and do some or all of them poorly. In a previous generation with a somewhat slower pace of life and different family and work dynamics, it might have been possible to give more of oneself to some of these tasks. We live in a changed world today with greater expectations from others in all areas of life,

and it is important for those who are tasked with leadership and oversight in the church to know what they can and cannot do.

What Affected the Way in Which the Elders Engaged in Pastoral Care?

By asking what motivated the elders, and what they found difficult about shepherding the flock, I gave them an opportunity to outline how various aspects of their ministry affected what they did. This question assumed that their service would be influenced by how they approached the task, as well as their experience as they carried it out.

It was significant that five of those interviewed stated that their sense of inward call to care for others, along with their commitment to the work of the eldership pledged at ordination, were both significant factors in exercising their role. It was encouraging to hear that their service was first a matter of the heart and not just the head, that they felt the desire before they were given the task. This sentiment was illustrated perfectly when John stated, “I would be shepherding because of my gift anyway, even if I wasn’t an elder.” John’s statement agreed with literature cited earlier,¹⁴² that when God truly calls someone to shepherd the flock, they are moved by the Spirit to do so, and experience an inward compulsion and strength to persevere. I think this must lie at the heart of genuine pastoral care, as there can be many discouragements and difficulties along the way, and a sense of God’s call is of paramount importance in the long-term. This demonstration of caring could be very relevant when electing new elders in a congregation, giving helpful guidance regarding what to look for in someone who also had biblical character qualities. Presumably, a person who was suited in this way would already be outwardly

¹⁴² Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 27.

demonstrating some of the appropriate inward longings and gifts, prior to election and ordination. This gifting is also a subject that could be a topic of discussion for sessions overseeing the process, and for the Presbytery when meeting with prospective elders.

Reference was made by some elders to the fact that they felt there were members on session not best suited or gifted to be personally involved in shepherding the flock in the sense referred to above. This concern would raise the question as to whether there is a place on session for some who do not feel called to pastor people directly themselves, but have gifts of leadership, wisdom, and teaching that could be a great asset to the wider work of the congregation. Perhaps there is a place for these, along with taking into consideration the individual life commitments of an elder before determining what their role would be in the overall work of shepherding. This approach would mean that any session would be a team using the collective gifts and availability of time in a way that would best promote the discipleship and welfare of the congregation and its members. This strategy might also avoid the temptation to try and coerce people into fulfilling a role for which they may not necessarily be suited, something that could exist in a session seeking to move towards a small group pastoral care strategy.

A significant fact for four of the elders that might be expressed as a hurdle for them to overcome was a keen sense of their own weaknesses and limitations as fallen people. They were aware that people would be watching their lives and would expect to see authentic godliness expressed in their relationship with others. This concern is a justifiable one as the biblical description of the elder is in terms of godly character and

holiness of life, as outlined by Paul to Timothy.¹⁴³ The elder is called to be one who is “above reproach,” which some might interpret as being without flaw, yet this could never be an expectation for fallen people who will only be perfect in heaven. Elders ought to see this as both an encouragement and a challenge. It means that those who elected them to the office detected within them the qualities of life listed by Paul, being persuaded that they fitted the requirements. This confidence placed in the elders is not an incentive to complacency in living, but an assurance that although they are keenly aware of their sin, they also display godliness of life in some measure. Elders need to remember that they will always be conscious of their own sin to a greater or lesser degree, and that God has always called such imperfect people to shepherd his flock.

The reference to being “above reproach” refers to a life that shows no consistently sinful pattern in the important areas of living. This concept might be compared to a house that is of sound structure, with no major faults, yet which needs some decoration and improvement. The elder ought not to feel disqualified from pastoral care because of personal shortcomings, otherwise the flock of God would be without shepherds. On the other hand, the picture of the elder painted in these verses ought to be a constant challenge to each member of the session. There is no room for complacency in any Christian’s life, but especially not the elder’s. Should one who is acting as a shepherd begin to be careless about the godliness described, that could be a genuine hindrance to the flock who, as those envisaged previously by Luke at Westside, may well begin to question the right of the individual to shepherd. In the pastoral task, elders are informed

¹⁴³ 1 Timothy 3:2-3.

by Peter that part of their responsibility is “being examples to the flock.”¹⁴⁴ It is good for elders to keep in sight that the flock are entitled to look for an example of holy living from them. This expectation can be an effective spur to pursuing the other part of the exhortation given by Paul to the elders from Ephesus to “keep watch over yourselves.”¹⁴⁵

In literature referenced earlier,¹⁴⁶ it was suggested that elders could be encouraged in their labours by looking to the coming again of Christ, which could keep them from being disheartened. This motivation was not evident in the responses of those interviewed. Only one elder made a reference to this, and not directly in relation to the second coming, but rather to the account that would one day have to be given to the Lord. His concern was that people would be able to point a finger at him and speak of him as a stumbling block to their faith. It seemed that issues relating more to earthly service had a greater impact on their work, and two in particular.

The role of the minister in motivation was significant for three elders, something which personally I found quite challenging. They spoke of being visited by him at least annually, in order to ask about them, their families, and how they felt about their role in shepherding the flock. Reference was also made to the understanding, sympathetic, and non-judgmental way in which they were dealt with by him. I can see that this relationship would have several benefits. The elder concerned would receive a word of appreciation from the minister for the work they were doing, something which we all need regardless of how effective we feel we might be. This support would be particularly important if the

¹⁴⁴ 1 Peter 5:3.

¹⁴⁵ Acts 20:28.

¹⁴⁶ Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ’s Under-Shepherds,” 338.

individual felt discouraged or lacking in motivation. It would also be an opportunity for the minister to show an awareness of the demands made on any individual as they sought to balance their different commitments in life. There may be the temptation for a frustrated minister to try and shame into some kind of pastoral action an elder who is dealing with various responsibilities and finding it difficult. I was reminded from this study that scolding will achieve little, and anything undertaken out of guilt will not be from the heart, will almost certainly be short-lived, and is likely to be fruitless. For an elder who is bowed down under many burdens, the last thing they need is for someone to express dissatisfaction about their service in the church. The elders spoke of their appreciation for this much better approach. A minister more than anyone would know of the tyranny of unsuccessfully trying to meet many demands, and should be most sympathetic to the plight of a busy life. I was challenged to reflect on the extent to which I encourage the elders, appreciate them, and shepherd them as they seek to shepherd others.

A further, and somewhat negative influence on two of the elders, was session meetings. One found them tedious and frustrating due to seemingly endless discussions, when in their mind the issues were clear and had already been decided. The other expressed a “hair-pulling-out” response to some meetings due to feeling burdened and de-motivated generally. Whilst session meetings are a necessary part of leadership and shepherding, perhaps they could be made more tolerable for those who struggle in this way. Maybe a time limit for discussion could be set for any individual item on the agenda, in a similar manner to the way business is conducted at the General Assembly. Sufficient opportunity for discussion obviously needs to be given, and opinions sought,

but a time limit could avoid what may seem on occasions an endless repetition of pros and cons. Consideration might be given to delegating mundane matters that are not controversial to a smaller group of the session who would have the authority to make decisions, even through email or text contact with one another. Some sessions that have larger numbers do not require all elders to be present at each meeting, but have a number who do not attend meetings for a period of time. This group would then change and different people would be released from attendance for the same period. This means that at any one time there would always be a group having respite from what can be a demanding and wearying experience. Of course there may be those who love debating and for whom time is never an issue, and such people could be allowed to attend every meeting if they so desire, while others take the break in their place. It is possible, just as some elders feel they are not suited to providing personal, individual pastoral care, that some may have an intense dislike for meetings.

How Did the Elders Assess Their Provision of Pastoral Care?

This question was an attempt to discover how the session members felt about the pastoral care that was taking place within their congregation. I was keen to know what they thought were the overall strengths and weaknesses of their practice, and some of these were revealed throughout the interview process.

It became clear that one of the ways of making a positive assessment of their shepherding of the flock was when they personally felt they had been able to help someone, or be a blessing to them. It seemed important, not just that they were being faithful in their calling, but that there were occasions when they were able practically to demonstrate the love for others that they had previously expressed as central to their

pastoral role. This assessment is an understandable way of viewing the effectiveness of care, as personal perception can play a major part in how we individually feel about the corporate activity. When Peter referred to a special time of caring in which he was involved he said, “I am still quite moved when I think about it.” He was very positive about the things that were happening in the congregation, affected in no small measure by the intimacy, support, and love that were shared in his small group. It seems to me that there would be much more likelihood that elders could feel they were contributing significantly to the lives of others if they were given the opportunity to do so. This sense of effectiveness may be another reason to attempt to develop group pastoral care if it is not in place, and to extend it if already a part of the overall strategy. We want elders to be encouraged in their service, and the more opportunities they have to feel they are being used by God, the better.

There was a majority view among the elders interviewed that there were significant drawbacks to district visitation, even where it was used in some form. These included a lack of availability of time, the inability to get to know people, the difficulty of achieving the goal, neglecting the gifts of others, and a lack of motivation for the task. In literature quoted previously, Witmer concluded that, in his experience, the instances of this happening successfully were extremely rare, and in the majority of cases it “leads to a sense of defeat and guilt.”¹⁴⁷ This result was confirmed by the elders in this study. It seems that the time may have come for sessions to honestly assess if they can provide ongoing pastoral care in the way that it has been traditionally delivered in previous generations. The conclusion of this study is that in the majority of cases the answer will

¹⁴⁷ Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 127.

be no, and therefore this should be acknowledged and it should be replaced by an approach that can work in our twenty-first century culture. It is foolish to have a strategy that is not working, and pretend that something is happening when it is not. In the words of Mark from Uptown, some might need to admit “that we were just kidding ourselves.” This transition has the potential to generate a feeling of success, genuinely get to know people, use the gifts of the body, experience motivation for service, and enable elders to live without the constant guilt of feeling the job is being done very badly.

Having said that, one other closely related issue was a source of frustration for several participants in this study. It stemmed from the unwillingness of a significant number of members to become involved in the small group structure for pastoral care and discipleship. Uptown had abandoned completely any attempt to implement district visitation and were totally given over to a small group strategy, and it was there that the disappointment was expressed most emphatically. Certainly every effort must be made to persuade people of the blessing that meeting this way with others can be, and to encourage them to take the opportunities available to them. As we do so, we must keep in mind that not everyone wants to be pastored at all, never mind in this context. Some of these people would almost certainly be involved with other groups in the congregation and perhaps they will informally be watching out for each other’s welfare. Maybe these are some of the people to look out for and connect with at the Sunday service through a casual conversation. This intentionality, in turn, could lead to a pastoral opportunity, or a warm invitation to a small group gathering.

It is my observation that there are always those who do not wish to get involved and are content to stay on the fringes of the congregation, its fellowship and care. In my

view it is quite likely that those people would not wish to be visited in their own home by an elder or anyone else, for anything other than a cordial friendly contact. I am convinced that those who wish to be part of the pastoral care of the church will make it their business to be involved where and when it is provided. Of course, there may be ways of caring at a more superficial level, whereby people who meet together within the church programme can keep an eye out for one another, and may therefore be able to alert someone if they feel something is wrong. At least this would be showing people they were cared about, if not cared for in the pastoral sense. We need to remember that pastoral care, like everything else in the church, will always be imperfect, because it is provided by sinners to sinners. Whilst we try to “be shepherds to the flock of God” to the best of our ability, we recognise that there will often be a sense of frustration that we cannot do it better.

One final matter, referred to above, that was part of the overall assessment of the ability to provide pastoral care, was the gifting within the session, with particular reference to those not well suited to the task. It is not surprising in a denomination that historically has often elected elders on the basis of profile within the congregation, past service, family connection, or popularity, that there may be those on session with limited pastoral gifts. During what appears to be a time of transition for many congregations, recognition may need to be given to the unwillingness or inability of some elders to personally engage in any form of pastoral care. It would be foolish in this context to attempt to coerce someone to perform a function for which they are not equipped, thereby risking harm to the elder and those who need to be pastored. In such circumstances it may be necessary to include those appropriately gifted and willing, whilst discerning what

gifts others may have that might be used elsewhere in the life of the church. It is helpful to keep in mind the picture of the church as the body with different parts that have different functions. We might be tempted to say that one part of the body is the session and all concerned ought to be able to do what that part is designed to do, namely shepherd the flock. However, if we accept that in the ideal congregation that would be the case, whilst in reality it may be quite different, then perhaps it would be possible to care within those limitations while trying to develop the session for the future. One suggestion from the study was that elders could be asked whether they would wish to be personally involved, allowing those who may feel they would struggle, to opt out, with the understanding that they would be able to serve in some other capacity. The only other option would be to place before the session a mandate for pastoral care that had to include everyone, which may ultimately result in resignations by some elders, and not necessarily be in the best interests of the congregation. All participants in the study indicated that there were other opportunities for occasional involvement in the wider support of members, such as visiting the elderly, housebound, bereaved or those in hospital; providing transport to appointments, getting groceries, cutting grass and providing meals. These could create an outlet for those elders either to oversee such a ministry, or be personally involved themselves, thus giving them a sense of inclusion in the matter of caring. It would be prudent then, whenever the congregations were electing new elders, to determine in the view of the session, what gifts and abilities were desirable in those who were being sought to shepherd the flock.

It would be even wiser if those conversations were to take place before a decision was made to elect elders, thus assessing whether there were individuals within the

fellowship suitable for the task. This process might even then result in a decision not to proceed with an election if it was concluded that no such people were present among the members. This approach also avoids the very questionable strategy of appointing new elders to oversee districts within the congregation, thus working on the basis of perceived need rather than divine provision.

Recommendations for Practice

I have drawn some conclusions about the practice of pastoral care in the preceding discussions, and made some tentative suggestions from the lessons that can be learned from this study. I would now like to outline some recommendations for those involved both on session and in the congregations.

Recommendations for Sessions

It is important in the life of any congregation that sessions keep the matter of pastoral care clearly in view, as it is vital for the welfare of the congregation, and the discipleship and growth of its members. It is easy to assume that it is happening when in reality it may be virtually non-existent, or at best an ad hoc process that meanders along. We are not always good at reviewing what we do in the PCI, and this would be a useful exercise, enabling a clarification of the strategy being used, and ascertaining who is included in the care being provided. It is generally acknowledged that whilst ministers are usually actively and energetically involved in this provision in an ongoing way, it is neither possible nor biblical for them to be expected to provide all the pastoral care for all the congregation all the time.

It is clear from this study that where district visitation by elders is intended to be an integral part of shepherding the flock, it is usually either not happening or only

occurring in a partial manner. I would suggest that all sessions determine whether this strategy is more wishful thinking than actual practice, and if the former, then consider how they might realistically use the alternative small group method. All the congregations in this study used them in some way, and my personal experience would indicate that they can also work in a more rural setting, where normally we tend to think of people as more reserved and traditional in their views of church life. This way of providing pastoral care could be a better use of time, enabling deeper relationships to develop, and facilitating the use of the gifts of the wider church, and give those involved a sense of achievement and success. There is always scope for fringe support to be provided in very practical ways by various people, but this could supplement the main provision of mutual care amongst those who meet together regularly. It is also assumed that when specific care is required in a particular situation of need, it can be provided by the appropriate person or group.

To those sessions who may feel wary of small groups meeting together, while it is necessary that they are well led, there are far more benefits than risks. Resisting their place within the life of the church may deprive God's people of the blessing of travelling their earthly journey in the company of those who can bring a richness to their lives. It diminishes the opportunities for the "one another" ministry that features so prominently in the scriptures, and reduces the possibility of learning from those who have had experiences and possess wisdom that are foreign to others. To spend time around God's word with others who share many of life's trials with them, who want to serve the same Saviour, and who need others to stand with them and encourage them, can only be for good of all concerned and for God's glory.

Recommendations for Elders

Each elder needs to assess their own gifts and ability to engage pastorally with others in a personal way, either individually or in a group setting. This assessment could help to free them from the guilt, frustration, and sense of failure that comes with neglecting what they feel they should be attending to. An acknowledgement of their own inclinations would enable a session to determine how best each elder could be involved. It is no shame to identify how God has made us, and it might bring a sense of relief to know that we are not a square peg trying to be squeezed into a round hole. Then each person could identify how they would best fit into the whole regime of caring for the flock, and engage in whatever they are most suited to do.

As elders play their part in the caring process, they need to remember that, even though they are sinners with all the common struggles against the enemies of the soul, they are called by God, who has used people just like them to do the work of his kingdom down through the generations. It is in their weakness that they can be strong in the Lord's grace, and all he asks is that they do what they can to the best of their ability as they have the opportunity. They need to be able to live and serve, whilst being conscious of the imperfection that is, and always will be, part of the process.

On a practical note I would recommend that elders involved personally in pastoral care, consider their use of Sunday morning worship in fulfilling their role. Many of the people they will be seeking to pastor will be present on those occasions, and time before and after the services can be well spent making contact with some of those entrusted to them. Coming slightly earlier and leaving a bit later could provide precious moments of interaction with those whom we seek to shepherd.

Finally, those who are involved in overseeing and facilitating pastoral care today need to remember that as they do so, they are setting the tone for those coming behind them. The way they go about being shepherds of the flock now is a model for those who will do so in the future. Matthew illustrated this when he referred to an elder in his home church: “He was a big influence on me and helped me to develop my understanding of what an elder should be, and I would aspire to be like him.” This example indicates the kind of effect the life and service of an elder can have on the next generation, and thereby on the future of the fellowship in which they serve. Perhaps this is an integral part of the exhortation by Peter to elders to be examples to the flock,¹⁴⁸ knowing that some of those watching may one day be handed the baton of pastoral care. Elders need to ask themselves whether or not, if in the future the elders of their congregation were shepherding the flock in the way they are doing, would they feel they were being cared for by them.

Recommendations for Ministers

Although ministers, pastors, or teaching elders, however they are known and viewed, have not been in focus specifically in this study, there are some conclusions that could be helpful to them. They need to be aware of the many demands made on elders, and the various life commitments they may have. It is easy to complain about their lack of engagement when they may be struggling to balance the different aspects of their lives. As those in full-time ministry who may be at a different stage in life, it is vital to try to understand the nature of their work responsibilities and family involvement, in order to take into account the dynamics of their daily and weekly routines. They need to

¹⁴⁸ 1 Peter 5:3.

remember that although the session members are full-time Christians, they are only part-time elders, and whilst for ministers the church may be everything, for them it is part of a bigger picture. They need to be thankful for those who have more time to give, and sympathetic to those who have less.

Ministers also need to ensure they do not underestimate the encouragement that their support for elders can give. Although many of the session are seeking to be shepherds, they are also sheep, and can experience the same difficulties and challenges as those for whom they care. They, too, can become weary, discouraged, disillusioned, and lacking in motivation the same as members or ministers, and they, too, need pastoral care. Some may experience it within their small groups, but they will certainly benefit greatly from a word of enquiry or appreciation from the minister. It is to those with whom they share the work of pastoral care, that they need to give the most encouragement.

Finally, ministers ought to ensure that when the matter of new elders is raised, they stress the importance of character, gifts, and suitability before their availability, record of involvement, and faithfulness in the congregation. It might be even more profitable to consider the kind of people needed to be shepherds of the flock of God before the addition of elders is ever mentioned. This consideration would enable session members to be watchful in an ongoing way, for those within the membership who may show signs they could be qualified to help pastor the church in the future.

Recommendations for Congregations

Several conclusions from this study lead to recommendations for members of congregations in the PCI. They need to be aware that there are those in the congregation who are called and able to shepherd them in a personal way. It is important they

understand that for some of the elders it will involve more than simply an annual or biannual visit to their home to see how everyone is doing. Whilst this might demonstrate an interest in them and their family on the part of the church, it usually does not facilitate the exercise of meaningful pastoral care. Undoubtedly, they will experience the occasional support from their minister, elder, or others in a particular time of need, which is not to be dismissed lightly. However, they must be aware that genuine, ongoing care is only possible when they meet in smaller numbers where those present can learn about each other's lives and struggles, so they may give and receive the support everyone needs throughout life. Nobody should feel so independent that they can sail life's oceans by themselves. God has made them to need others as they seek to live for him, and he has provided those people in the fellowship to which he has joined them. Equally, they themselves are placed in that body so they can give the blessing of loving care to their brothers and sisters in the church family.

To that end, every member needs to consider involving themselves in the group structure that may be available within their congregation. They ought to recognise that it is designed to help all concerned to live for Christ in a hostile world. If they are serious about growing in grace and serving the Lord, then it would be of great benefit to them and to others, if they enter in rather than remain outside.

Congregations also need to be aware that usually those involved in shepherding the flock are doing their best with the time and energy they have available. It would be very helpful for members to take part in the pastoral care opportunities that are provided within the fellowship, rather than waiting for someone to visit, and perhaps being critical when it does not happen. Should they feel the need for someone to call on them, then the

appropriate response might be, as John suggested, “We are saying to those people if you have a need for a visit, tell us and we will visit you.”

Recommendations for Further Research

Two issues relating to the provision of pastoral care by sessions in the PCI were beyond the scope of this study but could be worthy of further investigation. One would be to conduct similar research, but instead of using suburban congregations from Northern Ireland, interviewing elders from churches located in a different context. This might present two options. One could be those congregations located in the South of Ireland, in a predominantly Roman Catholic culture, with members who have come from a Roman Catholic background and now serve as elders in a Presbyterian church. A significant number have been growing steadily in numbers over the last twenty years and this would provide a completely different dynamic to those fellowships from the North involved in this study.

A second area of study that could prove valuable would be one which focuses on members of congregations who are not elders, to research how people perceive the pastoral care that is provided by sessions. It is one thing to hear how those whose role it is to shepherd the flock think of the process, but it could be another to have the views of those who consider themselves sheep to be pastored. This area of study might also include an issue that vexed several of the participants in this study, namely why a significant number of members opt out of the small group structure that the elders so desperately want them to be part of. This research may require the involvement of some who are in those groups and some who have chosen not to be involved. This study could be particularly relevant in light of the General Assembly’s 2011 recommendation that all

sessions of the PCI congregations review their provision of pastoral care, and consider the use of small groups as one of their options for the future.

A Final Word

God has entrusted to elders the church that he bought with the blood of Christ, and there is no greater privilege than to shepherd those who are loved by him and belong to him. It is something that all those want to do well and effectively, who are called by God to serve on a session, and have a heart for his people. It is my prayer that this study might enable sessions in the days ahead to consider how best they can facilitate and faithfully deliver that care to the flock of God that is so precious to him. I encourage them to press on in this glorious task, in the knowledge that the day will come when the Lamb will be their shepherd and he will lead them to springs of living water, and wipe every tear from their eyes.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Revelation 7:17.

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