

Oloyede, SA 2024, 'Biblical Concept of Shepherding and its Significance for Pastoral Ministry in the African Context', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 49-76

Biblical Concept of Shepherding and its Significance for Pastoral Ministry in the African Context

Sunday Akinwale Oloyede
Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary
treasure0369@gmail.com

Abstract

One of the metaphors for portraying pastoral leadership in Christianity is the imagery of the shepherd. Africans have a rich cultural heritage and understanding of shepherding, which also informs their perception and expectations of a pastor as a shepherd. The contemporary existential challenges Africans face, especially Christians, also demand a shepherding role. Reports from mass/social media suggest that some pastors could not live up to their shepherding responsibilities. A descriptive method was employed to ascertain this perception using the Biblical data, existing literature, and survey responses from 167 Africans – comprising church members, leaders, student pastors in theological schools, and church pastors. This paper explores the task of shepherding and its significance for pastoral ministry in Africa. It affirms God as the great shepherd and Jesus as the good shepherd. The research shows that shepherding is not limited to pastors but is also expected from parents and Christian leaders, as 76% of the respondents opined. A called pastor is required to have a loving capacity and selfless character. Their responsibilities entail feeding the flock with God's word, caring for sick members, looking for backsliders, and bringing lost sinners to the fold. The research discovered a need for shepherding to be demonstrated more through teaching, discipleship, and visitation, as suggested by 97.6%. It thus underscores leading God's people to absolute submission as the ultimate task of shepherding.

Introduction

Numerous metaphors have been used to portray leadership in a religious milieu. One of such imageries conventionally employed in Christianity and particularly by the Baptist denomination in Africa is the shepherd. The concept of shepherding does not emerge from a vacuum but indisputably has Biblical antecedents and theological explanations. Africans have a rich cultural heritage and understanding of shepherding, which also informs their perception and expectations of the pastor as a shepherd. The contemporary existential challenges Africans face, especially Christians, also demand a shepherding role. Reports from the mass media and social media suggest that some pastors could not live up to their shepherding responsibilities. The significance of shepherding in the context of Africans and its antecedents necessitates this research.

Attempts that have been made to describe the meaning of shepherding and its varied applications include the relationship between a leader and the led, as well as the responsibilities of the leader. Previous studies have also explored Biblical exegesis of selected passages on shepherding, considered a general review and development of the concept, and carried out an overview of the functions of shepherds in the light of pastoral ministry. This paper, however, presents a treatment of the idea of shepherding by combining theological and Biblical inputs with statistics obtained from Africans. Hopefully, this approach would make the discourse more holistic and relevant for the church in Africa. This article, therefore, argues that an integrative approach to the shepherding metaphor is highly significant for a more comprehensive understanding and application towards a highly effective pastoral ministry in the African context.

This paper, therefore, examines the Biblical background and denotations of shepherding, reviews some theological explanations and applications of the shepherd imagery, and consequently discusses the significance of shepherding requirements and responsibilities for pastoral ministry. In succinct terms, the research finds out the perception and expectations of Africans about the shepherding roles of pastors. Answers were elicited and provided for the following research questions: What categories of people do you perceive to be shepherds from a religious context? What are the most expected qualities of a

pastor-shepherd in the African context? How significant are the shepherding roles to the existential challenges of Africans? To what extent is the pastoral ministry effective in the shepherding roles?

A descriptive method was employed to achieve these research objectives. A questionnaire was designed to survey the perception and expectations of African Christians about the shepherd metaphor and the shepherding ministry. The sample population of the respondents, which includes committed church members, student-pastors in theological schools, church workers and leaders, and serving church pastors, is 167.

The Biblical Concept of Shepherding

A shepherd generally refers to a sheep keeper who tends, feeds, or guards the flock. Shepherding in ancient Mediterranean culture has positive and negative backgrounds (Fowler 1991). Both perspectives are worthy of evaluation.

Shepherds and Shepherding in Ancient Times

Shepherds were notable persons in ancient times and Biblical accounts. Shepherding was then a common vocation in the unenclosed country of Palestine (Fowler 1991:1-4). The time-consuming and burdensome duties of a shepherd usually entail leading the flock out from the fold in the morning, marching ahead of them to the green pasture for food, watching them all day, taking care of the sheep to ensure that none of them stray away, searching for any sheep that eludes his watch and wanders away from the rest, and seeking diligently till he finds it and brings it back. The shepherd also has to supply the sheep regularly with water for this purpose; he guides them to some running streams or wells dug in the wilderness and furnished with troughs. He brings the flock home to the fold and counts them as they pass under the rod at the door to ensure that none of the sheep is lost. His labours always transcend the sunset time as he has to guard the fold through the dark hours from the attack of wild beasts, or the cunning attempts of the raiding thief (David 2006).

A glimpse of the onerous tasks of a shepherd is noticeable in the declaration of David's experience in 1 Samuel 17:34-35:

But David said to Saul, 'Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.'(NIV).

It is expedient to note however that Abel, the son of Adam, was the first shepherd recorded in the Bible (Gen. 4:2). The narrative account indicates that shepherding was a prominent occupation of the Israelites in the early patriarchal age. Some other good examples of shepherds in the Torah include Abraham (Gen. 12:16), Rachel (Gen. 29:9), Jacob (Gen. 30:31-40), the twelve sons of Jacob (Gen. 47), and Moses (Ex. 3:1) (Aranoff 2014). The vocation of shepherding was still a means of livelihood in the time of Jesus. Hence, the shepherds watching their flocks by night were among the first to receive the message of Jesus's birth and visit him (Luke 2:8–20) (Resane 2014). The significance of a shepherd in God's redemptive plan and the value of their work can be deduced from these historical antecedents.

Shepherds were treated with a disdain that made them seem irrelevant and insignificant in the society during ancient times. Resane (2014) also notes that while Biblical history unfolded among the settlers in the ancient Near East and the subsequent patriarchs, cultivation took pre-eminence and shepherding fell from favour and was assigned to those in the low social ranks of society such as the younger sons, hirelings, and slaves. Farmers such as in Egypt even hated shepherds (Gen. 46:34). David, the youngest of the eight children of Jesse, was saddled with task of a shepherd as recorded in 1 Samuel 16:11-13 indicating the despised status of a shepherd, which became widespread as a result of the disposition and influence of the Canaanites on the Israelites.

In spite of the fact that many biblical heroes were shepherds, some critics often identify keeping of sheep as a job for an ignoramus which a young boy and a dog could undertake. On the contrary,

Biblical commentators write of shepherding as a task leading to solitude and contemplation, thus making it an appropriate lifestyle for a religious individual. (Aranoff 2014:36)

This implies that piety and devotion are necessary elements in the character of a pastor. However, the pastor's devotion to a private life of meditation does not isolate him from the flock of God whom he is called to shepherd.

Denotations of Shepherds in the Old Testament

The Old Testament does not only refer to persons who guide a flock of sheep as shepherds but also use the designation for monarchical leaders (2 Sam. 5:2) and God himself (Isa. 40:11, Ps. 23:1). The prophetic literature refers to national leaders as shepherds (Ezek. 34:1, Jer. 23:1). The title of shepherd was used commonly for deities, leaders, and kings in the Old Testament era in which many of the people were familiar with nomadic life. The greatest leaders of the people, Moses (Isa. 63:11) and David (Ps. 78:70-72), were also shepherds (Resane 2014; Tidball 1997).

God's covenant relationship seems more prominent with people who were shepherds by profession. The apparent opposition these covenant people face has also led to some allegorical interpretations with the theme of the suffering righteous shepherd. Examples of this suffering shepherd motif include Abel the shepherd, whose offering was accepted by God, but who was murdered by Cain. Esau also attempted to kill Jacob, a shepherd who, having received Esau's birthright, also received Isaac's blessing in place of Esau and had to run for his dear life (Hamilton 2014). The theme, which reflects in the life of Moses and continues through David, found ultimate fulfilment in Jesus. Hamilton cites Laniak's observation that 'Moses and David are prototypical leaders' (2014:27). More importantly, YHWH (the Hebrew name for God; its equivalents are 'Yahweh' and 'Jehovah') reveals himself as the true shepherd ruler of Israel. Laniak (2006) elaborates on this statement when he writes, 'Prototypes are exemplars for phenomenological categories, ideal members that possess the primary attributes by which we define a class'(32). He goes on to say that there are two prototypical shepherd rulers in biblical literature, Moses and David. To use theological language, these figures 'typologically' anticipate the role of Christ as the ultimate shepherd. (2006:35)

Like Joseph, David was shepherding his father's flock, and his father sent him to see about his older brothers (1 Sam. 17:12-15) (Hamilton 2014:27-28). Gan (2010) also attests to the fact that Yahweh is the professed shepherd who led the Israelites like a flock through the wilderness (Ps. 77:21) and subsequently

passed shepherding responsibility to his earthly shepherds such as David (2 Sam. 5:2,7:7-8).

Psalms 23 is one of the passages that focus on the shepherd motif with particular reference to God as the shepherd leader of his people (Adamo 2018). David's critical reflection on the lessons learned from leading and guiding the sheep informed his description of the Lord's care, courage, and guidance for him ('The Lord is my shepherd' (Ps. 23:1)) and the Israelites.

The Hebrew word for shepherding is often translated as 'feeding' as it is impressed by the next statement, 'I shall not want' or 'I shall lack nothing' – alluding to the fact that the Psalmist means he will lack neither in this life nor in the next. (Resane 2014:1)

This implies the divine provision of the necessary food for physical nourishment (Deut. 2:7).

An explanation in the standard *midrash* is that shepherding is a prelude and was meant to train and prepare Moses and David for the ultimate task of leading the Israelites as prophet and king respectively. *Exodus Rabbah* (2:2) also 'presents God observing the leadership capabilities of both Moses and David through their shepherding skills (Aranoff 2014:37). Their excellent skill of caring for the sheep might have contributed to the higher calling they received from God to shepherd his flock - the people of Israel.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel are two prophets in the scripture who extensively referenced the shepherd leadership model. Ezekiel chooses a shepherd metaphor for kingship that was well-known throughout the ancient Near East, from Babylon to Egypt. God did not only decry the false shepherds of Israel in Ezekiel 34 but also unfolds the responsibilities of true shepherds as searching and bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured as well as strengthening the weak (Ezek. 34:4-16a) (Adeyemo 2006). This framework of shepherding roles is still pertinent to contemporary pastoral ministry.

Shepherding Connotations in the Gospels (Teaching of Christ)

Resane (2014) expounds the close connection between references to Old Testament shepherds and New Testament (NT) spiritual leaders. The concept

of tending or shepherding emanates from the NT Greek root *bo* (feed, feeding) and *botes* (a herder), which also gives the meaning of feeding or nourishing. The synoptic gospel writers express this as they relate to the people tending the pigs in Decapolis. The Greek word *poimen*, which means ‘shepherd’, occurs six times in John’s gospel alone and sixteen times in the entire New Testament. It was used extensively in John 10:1-18 where Jesus refers to himself as ‘the good shepherd [who] lays down his life for the sheep’ (v. 11).

In using the shepherd imagery, Jesus identified himself as the shepherd of Israel who would have the role of David as shepherd-king. The imagery also portrays his deity and messianic role (Blackaby 2008). A good shepherd cares for the sheep even to the point of death (John 10:13) so that he may present them unto God without blemish (Still 1996). Jesus demonstrated this sacrificial nature of the shepherd when he went to the cross in absolute submission to God’s will; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, thus fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 53:4 (Beke 2012). Jesus Christ is also regarded as the proverbial shepherd who sought for the lost sheep until he found it. The parable of the lost sheep thus corroborates Jesus’s assertion in Luke 19:10 that he has come to seek and to save those who are lost (Stott 2016). In essence, the good shepherd entered the Holy of Holies like the Jewish high priest to speak to the father on behalf of the sheep (Michaels 2010).

The relationship between Christ and his disciples was illustrated with the shepherd-sheep connection in which Jesus, the “great shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20), used the qualities of a good shepherd to teach important lessons and spoke of himself as one “who knew his sheep and would lay down his life for them” (John 10:7-18). Jesus committed the assignment of feeding his sheep to Peter after his resurrection (John 21:1) while Paul addressed the Ephesians’ elders as shepherds over the flock, that is, the church (Acts 20:28).

Lessons about Shepherding in the Epistles

Paul the apostle used the shepherd imagery as a link between the works of a pastor and that of a teacher in Ephesians 4:11 (Tidball 1997). Simon Peter, a disciple of Jesus, whom the resurrected Christ charged with the task of feeding his sheep, aptly referred to Christ as the chief shepherd. In his ultimate use of this biblical imagery, Jesus was recognised as the owner and true pastor of his flock (1 Pet. 2:25,5:2,4) from whom all other pastors can learn the task of

shepherding, being the perfect model. The sheep can, therefore, repose their confidence in Christ who will never fail even if the earthly shepherds fail. The shepherd motif was also used by Peter, who is a wise and devoted shepherd, to portray the responsibilities of his fellow elders and the pitfalls to avoid. 'They are not to serve grudgingly, but willingly, not greedily but eagerly; not arrogantly, but as examples' (Tidball 1997:138-139). He also encouraged the elders to be devoted to the welfare of the flock without the motive of personal earthly gain but in obedience to the chief shepherd who will reward them exceedingly. Mark Overstreet (2013) and J. R. Beke (2012) among many other scholars also attest to the fact that Jesus is not just the good shepherd but the chief shepherd.

The Shepherd Metaphor in a Theological Context

The field of pastoral theology has produced a number of articles on the person and work of a shepherd. This paper, however, contributes to the descriptive usage of 'shepherd' in Christian religion and its metaphorical equivalence to the leader or church pastor, and reiterates its significance in pastoral care and counselling.

Representation of God as the Good and Great Shepherd

According to Rodgers,

the metaphor of shepherd is often used to provide a biblical understanding of the functions and role of the pastor. (2010:2)

The shepherd imagery is valuable in pastoral care as a reflection of the pastor's role as leader, provider, and protector in contrast to the bad, uncaring, and worthless shepherds. The imagery also represents God as the good shepherd who cares for his people and a metaphorical illustration of the character and nature of the compassionate and just God (O'Kennedy 2009). Rodgers (2010) affirmed the crucial record in Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34 as connected to pastoral care; he also identified the need to exercise caution not to simply correlate the work of God described in these passages to the role and function of the pastor in the twenty-first century or of contemporary leaders. In succinct terms,

The primary concern of the shepherd metaphor is not a prescription of pastoral functions, but description of God Himself as revealed in the incarnation of Christ as the 'Good Shepherd' (Jn. 10:11); the 'one Shepherd' (Jn. 10:16; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24); the 'great Shepherd' (Heb. 13:20). The metaphor of shepherd in the Old Testament is generally an anthropomorphic representation of Yahweh. (Rodgers 2010:2)

This connotes that the biblical metaphor of a shepherd in the Old Testament is a key pointer to the perfect example of Christ the great and chief shepherd in the New Testament.

Keener remarks that while most Christological imagery texts are associated with God, other texts that employ the shepherd imagery for the church have the 'biblical images of shepherds as human leaders of God's people' (1997:1092). Though shepherds are used as natural analogies for rulers and leaders, the Biblical portrait is used primarily for God by the Israelites to denote his leadership, protection, and commitment to his covenant people. Hence, pastors have a perfect example in the life and ministry of Jesus who reveals the character of God, the great shepherd.

Reiteration of the Leadership Roles of a Pastor

Still (1996) explicitly describes a pastor as a shepherd who leads God's flock to green pastures. He aptly refers to a pastor as an under-shepherd of the flock of God whose task entails caring for the sick members and looking for those who have gone astray for restoration. Pastoring is an act of pasturing in which the Christian shepherd fattens the sheep (the congregation) through their consecration to make them suitable as an acceptable sacrifice before God. This goal, which may be accomplished through teaching, preaching, praying, counselling, visitation among other functions, will be subsequently discussed in this paper.

The pastor is called to feed the sheep even if the sheep, who are essentially members of his churches, do not want to be fed with the word of God (Still 1996:8). Jesus's teaching about the laws of the kingdom of God, popularly known as the Sermon on the Mount, is regarded as food for the sheep. Gan asserts that 'the metaphor of the shepherd is an illustration of love and care

for the flock' (2010:12). This is why God the shepherd-king condemned the unrighteous shepherds who failed to care for the people, refused to strengthen the weak, and neglected the sick and the injured in Ezekiel 34:4 and Zechariah 11:16. He also suggested that a righteous shepherd will search for the straying sheep; this is in consonance with God's tender care for his people (Ezek. 34:4-6,8, Zech. 11:16).

Shepherding has been described as a crucial task of overseeing the flock of God. This informed Young's identification of the assignments of pastoral leaders as nurturing, leading, healing, correcting, and protecting the members of a church (no date:3). Their tasks as shepherds are also dependent on their knowledge about the nature, life, resources, functions, and tasks of God's flock. The flock of God should be seen as the household of God and the habitation of the Spirit whose life is not only rooted in Christ but also receives from Christ and grows in him to nourish other members of the body of Christ. While the functions of God's flock are entrenched in glorifying God, growing to maturity and gospel proclamation, its tasks include worshipping God, nurturing, and evangelism. The resources for discharging the responsibilities are basically the word of God, the spirit of God, prayer, and spiritual gifts (Young no date:4-5).

The Depiction of God's People as Sheep

Petersen (2003) opines that the metaphor of sheep was used throughout the Bible to describe God's people as defenceless animals who lack the sharp teeth of a wolf, the slashing claws of a bear, the outer protection of a turtle, the speed of a cheetah, and the cunning of a fox. The Church, being a flock of sheep, is being cared for and secured by Jesus the good shepherd, the master and model shepherd who calls men and women to be under-shepherds of the flock (Petersen 2003). In addition to this shepherd-sheep relationship, the Johannine text (John 10) also reiterated the Old Testament idea of the almighty Jehovah God as 'shepherd' (Isa. 40:10-11, Ps. 23:1-4).

It is imperative to reiterate that pastors and church leaders are accountable as under-shepherds and stewards to God, the great shepherd, who assigned them the task of feeding and nurturing the sheep among other functions (Jer. 3:15). It has been observed, however, that church members who are to be nurtured as sheep have been abused and exploited by many shepherds who

claim to be God-called pastors. The recovery and restoration of such sheep after being spiritually abused, emotionally shattered, or sometimes physically wounded, is usually a difficult and long process (Visser and Dreyer 2013; Damiani 2002). Hence, a pastor who has strayed away from God, the great shepherd, cannot be a good shepherd to fellow sheep among whom he/she was privileged to be called as priest (Heb. 5:1-5).

While most pastors today hold a professional, institutionalised office as shepherds, the background of the profession in the Bible and the metaphoric usage of it are not usually identified with formal education. The contemporary discourse on orality has it that

approximately seventy thousand evangelical churches have been planted, and more than forty thousand churches are being led and shepherded by pastors without formal theological/seminary background and training (Abraham 2014:29)

This is not to jettison the significance of training even in an informal setting for effective shepherding. These pastor-shepherds who minister among traditional ethnic groups share the gospel of Jesus Christ simply and relationally, using storytelling to teach and explain Biblical truths.

This type of informal training that promotes oral strategies is now finding relevance in some African theological institutions; it had earlier been evident among founders and leaders of African-instituted churches. Orality has been introduced into theological education through the use of publications such as *Contextualisation of Expository Preaching: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation in Africa* (2018) by Ezekiel Ajibade and *Orality and Theological Training in the 21st Century: A Book on Digital Learning* (2016) by Jay Moon among others. Research works have also identified that carrying out pastoral ministry activities through oral strategies is an effective means of nurturing, counselling, discipleship, and evangelism in the modern generation. This includes the use of drama, Bible storying, or storytelling for teaching, preaching, discipleship, and evangelisation of both oral learners and congregations of literates. Pastoral care of victims of violence has also been

done effectively through storytelling (Dobbs 2018; Bush 2015; Metzger 2015; Willis and Evans 2004).

Survey and Research Questions

A survey was conducted among 167 African Christians to ascertain the perception and expectations of African Christians about the shepherd metaphor. The demography of the respondents is presented in the table below.

Nationality or Region of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative
South South, South East, or South West Nigeria	137	82.0	82.0
North Central, North East or North West Nigeria	24	14.4	96.4
Ghana, Cameroun, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire	6	3.6	100.0
	167	100.0	100.0
Status or Position in Church			
Church Pastors	81	48.5	48.5
Student Pastors, Associate Pastors, Church Leaders	52	31.1	79.6

Church Members and Church Workers	34	20.4	100.0
	167	100.0	100.0

The questionnaire was designed as a Google form and was sent to different WhatsApp groups and to email addresses of prospective respondents. The responses were collated and analysed by Google form and presented in categorised form as shown in the table above. From the table, it is expedient to note that about 96.4% of the respondents cut across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria, where this research was carried out. Citizens of Ghana, Cameroun, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire are also represented in the survey. This means the African Christians' perspective and expectations can be generalised for the whole continent. While 48.5% of the respondents are church pastors, 31.1% are student pastors, associate pastors, or church leaders such as deacons. The remaining 20.4% are committed church members serving as Sunday school or discipleship teachers, choir members, theological educators, denominational workers, or unit leaders. It is assumed that the relatively wide range of respondents also lends some credibility to the survey result. A quick overview of the research questions, as inferred from the respondents, is presented below.

Categories of people perceived to be shepherds from a religious context

The first research question seeks to find out the categories of people African Christians perceive to be shepherds. From the findings, it can be inferred that though pastors are usually regarded as shepherds, parents and other Christian leaders are expected to possess shepherding qualities and should thus be portrayed as shepherds. The survey findings corroborate this hypothesis, as 76% affirm that parents, Christian leaders, and pastors are all expected to have shepherding qualities and carry out responsibilities, while 22.2% regard only pastors as shepherds. This connotes that a pastor who is not a good parent is not likely to be a good leader or does not portray exemplary leadership.

A shepherd metaphor points to one who cares and supplies the need of others (caregiver), one who guides and guards others about issues of life

(guide/coach), and one who provides direction and counsel to a place of abundance and satisfaction (mentor). The metaphor of a shepherd encompasses the three imageries of a caregiver, guide/coach, and mentor. This was affirmed by 81.4% of the respondents in the research survey. In contrast, only 18.6% identified one or two of the imageries as adequate representations of a shepherd. From Biblical and contemporary examples, the moral qualities or defects of a pastor or Christian leader as a parent often reflect in their pastoral ministry or leadership, giving it credence or discredit. Biblical examples include prophets Eli and Samuel.

Expected Qualities of a Pastor (Shepherd)

The second research question attempts to identify the most expected qualities of a pastor-shepherd in the African context. A shepherd cannot carry out their tasks as caregiver, guide/coach, and mentor without one or more of these three essential qualities: calling experience, loving capacity, and sacrificial, selfless character. Assessing the respondents' perspectives on this research survey shows that 40.7% considered love and selflessness or either of the two to be basic qualities and capacities of a shepherd. By inference, pastors (parents and Christian leaders) can carry out their pastoral or shepherding responsibilities effectively towards transforming society through love. This opinion aligns with the scriptural truth of love and selflessness as a mark of true disciples of Christ (John 13:34-35). The qualities of love and selflessness of a pastor will also equip them to care for grieving or vulnerable church members without exploiting them.

In addition, 59.3% of the respondents opine that a shepherd should have a sense of calling with the other two qualities. The seeming failure of parenting and poor stewardship of influence by Christians at home, at the marketplace, and in contemporary society might not be unconnected to this negligence or ignorance of their calling as shepherds. The genuineness and commitment to the calling experience also seem to fade among some contemporary African pastors, thus leading to scandals and materialistic tendencies instead of societal impact and transformation through their leadership.

The next section addresses the other two research questions: How significant are the shepherding roles to the existential challenges of Africans? To what extent is the pastoral ministry effective in the shepherding roles?

The Significance of Shepherd's Imagery in Pastoral Ministry

Based on the preceding theological appraisal and survey, it can be concluded that the requirements and responsibilities expected of a shepherd are significant in meeting the existential challenges of African Christians, especially their church members. These requirements connote that a shepherd is a leader who has been called by God to lead his people as a prophet, priest, king (or pastor in contemporary time) and has responded to the great shepherd (Laniak 2006). The shepherding responsibilities are undoubtedly significant for societal transformation and nation building. It has been observed, however, that the effectiveness of pastoral ministry in the context of shepherding roles is relatively low and insignificant to an extent. In this section, the words *shepherd* and *pastor* will be used synonymously to further highlight the significance of a shepherd's assignments.

The Significance of Shepherding Qualities for Societal Transformation and Nation Building

Qualities of shepherding are quite significant for effective parenting, impactful Christian leadership, and fruitful pastoral ministry. Since shepherding qualities are not limited to pastors alone, parents and Christian leaders are also required to possess the virtues. Demonstrating the godly virtues expected of a shepherd by these three categories of people is significant for societal transformation and nation building. As a matter of necessity, a shepherd-pastor with a calling experience, a capacity to shepherd people, and the character of a shepherd is instrumental to such a paradigm shift in an African context. More so, the mass media portrays many pastors as people who lack a genuine call of God or of questionable character due to the many scandals involving them as a result of the atrocities they engage in.

God's promise to give his people shepherds after his own hearts who will rule with knowledge and understanding (Jer. 3:15) has implications and significance for contemporary leaders, especially pastors. Effective Christian leadership is feasible at home, in the marketplace, and in the nation at large when the three categories of people affirmed by respondents in the survey possess the essential qualities and meet the shepherding requirements. Such demonstration of shepherding qualities will adequately enable the church to

alleviate the occurrence of social vices and corrupt practices attributed to or emanating from poor parenting and bad leadership.

A pastor should consider his calling to shepherd God's people a privilege. Therefore, God's preference in choosing human agency to make his will known and accomplish his purpose should be taken with a sense of accountability and stewardship by contemporary under-shepherds. With regards to capacity, a shepherd needs God's heart as well as a sound godly mind. This will enable them to see what God the owner of the pastoral ministry sees and carry out only what he does. A pastor needs wisdom and discernment to effectively shepherd God's flock whose mission and life's destiny he must know (Laniak 2006:22). This philosophy of shepherding (having a heart for God and hands to build God's people) will eliminate the tendency of materialism, misappropriation of God's resources, and acts of corruption and exploitation which has hitherto reduced the impact of the church on nation building in Africa.

The twenty-third psalm was presented by Rummage (2005) as that which describes the benefits and caring acts of a good shepherd. The needs of the sheep for which pastoral care must be provided were also stated as

rest, refreshment, renewal and restoration, guidance in righteousness, courage, companionship, protection and comfort, food, acceptance and healing, blessings, unconditional love, and hope now and in the eternal future. (Rummage 2005:20)

These essential needs of church members inform the responsibilities of a pastor (parents and Christian leaders) as a shepherd to the flock of God, the great shepherd of their souls.

While the calling experience of a shepherd naturally entails caring for sheep, a pastor may find himself in a church with nominal membership, in which case he has to turn a flock of goats into a flock of sheep. This may require a loving capacity and character of self-control, self-denial, and self-discipline. Pastors should not be in ministry for the sake of what they would gain from the church members. They should also not be used 'as a means for their own

aggrandizement, to boost their ego and indulge their desire for power' (Still 1996:2).

The ultimate purpose of a shepherd is to lead God's people to absolute submission and sacrifice. The pastor is essentially a church leader who leads church members in effectively carrying out church ministries such as social ministry (Nihinlola 2013). This is in tandem with the cultural background: 'Israel's sheep were reared, fed, tended, retrieved, healed and restored – for sacrifice on the altar of God' (Still 1996:1). Hence, total devotion to wholesome worship and sacrificial service is the expected outcome of a shepherd's task. True pastors must be committed to the word of God, being thoroughly fed in knowledge, wisdom, grace, humility, courage, fear of God, and fearlessness of men. In order to accomplish this, the pastor must know the truth not only verbally, propositionally, and theologically but also religiously, devotionally, and morally (Still 1996:10). This calls for continuous training, spiritual development, and mentoring of the pastor.

The pastoral ministry is a relationship between Christ, the chief shepherd, the pastor as the under-shepherd, and the parishioners as the sheep. It is essentially the great shepherd of the sheep who facilitates the equipping of every believer for the task of ministry through the pastor. The pastor in turn sets a Christ-like example for the believer while he consciously adapts his leadership style, attitudes, and behaviours to accomplish the 'ultimate goal of preserving the safety of the flock and ensuring its development to maturity' (Tidball 1997:128-129). A pastor who declines to follow and yield to Christ absolutely is vulnerable to the Devil's deception and tends to become a false shepherd who neglects and exploits the innocent sheep.

Moreover, the features of shepherds assessed in this research are teaching, nurturing, caring, compassion, and empathy. These features identified as requirements of shepherding include feeding the flock with God's word, caring for sick members, looking for backsliders, bringing lost sinners, and visitation and identifying with members in grief or joyous moments. The opinion of 12% of the respondents who identified only feeding God's flock with God's word was superseded by the perspective of 88% who considered all the requirements as necessary and indispensable for every shepherd. Their calling experience, caring aptitude, and submissive attitude to the great shepherd and

ministry owner are undoubtedly vital for nation building. This cannot be accomplished, however, without the requirements of teaching, nurturing, caring, and showing compassion and empathy to the firm, strong, and maturing Christians or the feeble, naïve, shallow, and weak believers,

The Responsibilities of a Shepherd and their Significance for Pastoral Ministry

Martin Bucer highlighted the tasks of a pastoral ministry in five dimensions (2009). Tidball summarises these as drawing the alienated ones to Christ, leading back those who have been drawn away, securing amendment of lives that have fallen into sin, strengthening weak Christians, and preserving whole and strong Christians to encourage them to move forward on the path of righteousness (1997:47). Of all the pastoral roles earlier highlighted, the responsibilities of caring, spiritual nourishing, leading, and the related tasks will now be elucidated.

Caring

Caring in this context denotes directing and protecting or even sponsoring the congregation by attending to their needs. It is also associated with the act of presiding over, but with the principles of servant leadership (Luke 22:26). According to Resane (2014), the caring aspect of shepherd-leadership includes the corresponding functions of a traditional shepherd in the restoration, feeding, watering, grooming, shearing, and delivering of lambs. The resilient attitude of a shepherd in searching, finding, and bringing home a lost sheep describes the act of restoration which was demonstrated by Jesus the good shepherd (John 10:11) and is to be emulated by contemporary pastors for bringing erring saints and lost sinners to the fold (Resane 2014:2).

The love of a shepherd motivates him to look for a lost sheep until it is found; he rejoices and delights in bringing home the sheep rather than being angry. This genuine caring love heals the sorrowing soul, restores it, and disciplines when needed. This task of seeking and rescuing lost sheep requires the pastor's willingness to sacrifice (Oglesby 2005). Hence, while a shepherd-leader keeps the sheep of God in the fold, it is also their priority to find and

help people who have wandered, fallen into the fire, whilst being careful not to get burned themselves or soil their own clean clothes. (Resane 2014:2)

This responsibility must be taken with urgency and caution within the ecclesiastical context. It is urgent and needful because the pastor might have also strayed in some instances and anyone can be in danger of being deceived. It is also expedient for the strayed sheep to return to God before irredeemable destruction.

Practical ways of carrying out the care ministry include regular pastoral visits to parishioners especially in times of rejoicing, accomplishment, sickness, or grief. Effective social and welfare ministry for reaching out to the poor, orphans, widows, unemployed, and the like is another viable platform for demonstrating pastoral care. This caring ministry is also related to the spiritual nourishment of God's people, which is naturally referred to as feeding, watering, and grooming in a shepherding context.

Spiritual Nourishment

One of the inferences of Yahweh's promise that a day will come when there will be shepherds who will feed the flock with 'knowledge and understanding' (Jer. 3:15) is the responsibility of feeding and provision by pastors (Gan 2010:11). God the shepherd-king expects his servants to be caring shepherds who will feed his people with the teachings of divine principles for fruitful Christian living.

According to Resane, feeding indicates restoration of health, growth, and strength. In consonance with the didactic lessons in John 21:1-17, it is the responsibility of a shepherd-leader to feed the lamb of God both with milk for the spiritual growth of babes in Christ and with provision of solid food to enhance maturation in the Lord. This task of spiritual nourishment by pastors is otherwise known as equipping in the context of pastoral theology (Anderson 1985). While

solid food is training in righteousness so that the sheep can be fully equipped, able to stand in the day of testing (Anderson 1985:3)

the fundamentals of biblical teaching, apostles' creeds, denominational statements of faith and practices, ecclesiastical catechesis, and current discipleship manuals are materials for such nurturing and edification.

Feeding as spiritual nourishment needs to be complemented with watering. A conventional shepherd intentionally leads his flock to water regularly for renewal and refreshment. He will roll away the stone covering the well and draw the water for the flocks. The import of this is from the cultural/Biblical background of shepherding.

When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well. (Gen. 29:3)

Hence, a shepherd-leader prepares parishioners' hearts to be receptive to the nourishment of the Holy Spirit through Biblical exposition, prayer, and by living in selfless obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ (Resane 2014:2-3).

Grooming is another form of spiritual nourishment. It connotes the function of a pastor that resembles the work of a groom – someone employed in a stable to take care of horses and ensure their neat appearance. In succinct terms,

A shepherd grooms his sheep, keeps them clean and free of contamination from the world, the flesh and the devil. He then prepares them through instruction to be disciples, followers of the Good Shepherd, so they will, in turn, go out and minister to others. It was at the climax of his mission on earth that Christ, after grooming his disciples could entrust them with the (Great Commission) mandate. (Resane 2014:3)

Grooming in the light of this assertion implies an integral part of discipleship which is a continuous process that transcends completion of discipleship courses but equips believers for teaching and evangelism.

Shearing as a function of a shepherd is also a valuable exercise that amounts to spiritual nourishment. It implies that contemporary pastors have an obligation to discipline, encourage, and rebuke the church members so that

they may be fit for service to the Lord (2 Tim 3:17) The delivery of lambs is central to the overseeing work of a shepherd. The new birth experience of sinners who will be enlisted in the church is the responsibility of a pastor. This is in line with Isaiah 40:11:

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.

This, however, involves a partnership with the Holy Spirit. While the pastor 'proclaims the Gospel; the Holy Spirit then convicts the sinner, who eventually becomes a Christian' (Resane 2014:3). The tasks essentially include discipleship of new converts towards maturity through which they grow and live out their professed faith.

Leading

Leading has been regarded as the most common role of a shepherd. Joshua was described in Numbers 27:17 as one

who shall go out before them [Israelites] and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in; that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep which have no shepherd.

This clearly portrays the leadership role expected of contemporary pastors (Gan 2010:10; Anderson 1985:159). This role is crucial because leadership determines direction. A pastor directs the believers in the world to follow the lead of the good shepherd, guides them in the path of righteousness, instructs them not to be of the world, but leads them to pastures and water for spiritual nourishment.

This shepherd-leader's task calls for the discipline of the sheep to alert them to the world's pitfalls. This leadership task also means directing the flock out and teaching them to stay together in unity. (Resane 2014:4)

Protection of afflicted sheep is a role of the shepherd which is also connected to the task of leadership. In this regards, a pastor has to prevent the flock from

being vulnerable, to guard the sheep from the peril of deception (Isa. 56:11, Zech. 10:2-3), and to keep the flock from scattering (Jer. 10:21) (Gan 2010:12). Resane also adds that

the shepherd is expected to be ready to exercise control over the sheep in order to guide and direct them to prevent them from wandering off into danger. (2014:4)

The roles of supervising, guiding, and directing by a pastor were deduced from the shepherd's equipment of rod which is used to protect and defend the sheep and his staff which guides and directs them. These responsibilities are indisputably required and necessary for effective pastoral ministry in contemporary time.

African Christians, parents, church leaders, and pastors' perspectives on shepherding tasks rate teaching and preaching, praying and intercession for individual church members or as corporate entity, and pastoral care and counselling to the grieving souls as the three most important areas that African pastors are focusing on in their shepherding ministry. This was attested to by 73.1%, 54.5%, and 31.1% of the respondents respectively. The three least focused areas of pastoral ministry as observed in the African context are directing and protecting practitioners from imminent dangers of deception and heresy (14.4%), discipleship and leading God's people to absolute submission (18.6%), and visitation and caring (24.6%). Africans as communal people often desire the pastoral care and ministry of presence of their pastors in good or celebrating events and in grieving or mourning moments. Coincidentally, not many pastors are living up to the shepherding responsibility.

The research also shows that pastors in the African context should be more committed to discipleship (mentoring and building up to maturity in Christlikeness), leading God's people to a life of absolute submission, which is the ultimate goal of shepherding. The respondents also expect pastors to improve their preaching and teaching responsibilities with visitation and caring. Two inferences can be drawn from their opinion. First, it is probable that the teaching and preaching of African pastors (as prevalent as it seems) is

not fulfilling the essence of ministry gifts for the church. The purpose of the gifts is for equipping and training God's people for works of service

so that the body of Christ may be built up [...] reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
(Eph. 4:12-13)

Some African Christians seem naïve and immature, such that they fall into deception by false prophets and succumb to heretical teaching in a bid to seek for solution and deliverance from existential challenges. Second, that some pastors are not feeding the congregants with sound Biblical preaching but are promoting heresies and shallow faith is also a possibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The notion of shepherd is a Biblical metaphor which reflects the conventional but onerous tasks of shepherding. God used the vocation of shepherding to prepare people like Moses and David to become notable leaders of his people. The shepherd imagery was used for kings, priests, prophets, and leaders of the people to denote their skills for guiding, directing, caring for, and leading God's flock in the Old Testament. God is ultimately the great shepherd who nurtures the faithful shepherds and condemns the false ones. The self-description of Jesus as the good shepherd also provides a perfect leadership model for contemporary pastoral ministry. Future researchers may attempt an exegetical analysis of scriptural passages on the great shepherd to gain more insights on the shepherd metaphor.

A pastor must have a calling experience, a loving capacity to shepherd people, and selfless character. The responsibilities of a pastor as an under-shepherd entail feeding the flock with God's word, caring for sick members, looking for those who have gone astray for restoration, and bringing sinners to the fold. The genuine love and care of the shepherd is demonstrated through teaching, praying, discipleship, visitation, among other tasks, aside from his time of solitude and contemplation. To this end, this researcher recommends that theological institutions constantly emphasise the need for a lifestyle of

sobriety, contemplation, and solitude as a shepherd in their training of pastors for effective ministry.

Assessing the metaphor of shepherding in pastoral leadership through a research survey among 167 African Christians revealed that shepherding should not be limited to pastors. Nevertheless, shepherding qualities are expected from parents and Christian leaders as opined by 76% of the respondents. A shepherd metaphor points to one who cares and supplies the need of others (caregiver), one who guides and guards others about issues of life (guide/coach), and one who provides direction and counsel to a place of abundance and satisfaction (mentor) as affirmed by 81.4%. This article confirms that a shepherd must have a calling experience, a loving capacity, and a selfless character. Their responsibilities entail feeding the flock with God's word, caring for sick members, looking for backsliders, and bringing lost sinners to the fold. Their genuine love as shepherds should be demonstrated more through teaching, discipleship, and visitation, as suggested by 97.6%. This researcher thus recommends that these qualities be further assessed through empirical study involving only church members.

Based on these perspectives, this article submits that a pastor's shepherding qualities, requirements, and responsibilities (Christian parents and leaders inclusive) are significant for societal transformation, nation building, and impactful pastoral ministry. The ultimate mission of a shepherd is to lead God's people to absolute submission and to protect them from the imminent dangers of deception and heresy. This makes feeding, grooming, and shearing components of spiritual nourishment a must because they connote discipline and practical Christian living, which are of immense significance to pastoral ministry and the church in the African milieu.

Bibliography

- Abraham, A., 2014. Contextualized theological education for equipping the unreached, unengaged people groups in north India. In: S.E. Chiang and G. Lovejoy (eds), *Beyond literate Western practices: Continuing conversations in orality and theological education* (Hong Kong: International Orality Network), pp. 37-44.
- Adamo, D.T., 2018, 'Reading Psalm 23 in African context', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39(1), a1783.
- Adeyemo, T., 2006, *Africa Bible commentary*, WordAlive Publishers, Nairobi.
- Ajibade, E., 2018, *Contextualisation of expository preaching: Engaging orality for effective proclamation in Africa*, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Publishing Unit, Ogbomoso.
- Anderson, R.C., 1985, *The effective pastor: A practical guide to the ministry*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL.
- Aranoff, G., 2014, 'Shepherding as a metaphor', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42(1), 36-38.
- Beke, J.R., 2012, 'Gethsemane's king-lamb: A sermon on John 18:7-8, 12-13a', *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4(1), 25-42.
- Blackaby, H., 2008, *Experiencing the word: New Testament*, Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN.
- Bucer, M., 2009, *Concerning the true care of souls*. Translated by Peter Beale, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh.
- Bush, R.D., 2015, *A holistic strategy for the evangelization of oral learners*, Ph.D. thesis, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, TN.
- Damiani, R., 2002, 'Spiritual abuse within the church: Its damage and recovery process', *Evangel* 20(2), 42-47.

- David, D., 1997. Shepherd. In: M.G. Easton (ed.), *Easton Bible dictionary*, Albany: AGES Software, pp. 1072-1073.
- Dobbs, L., 2018, *Storytelling as a pastoral care intervention that ministers healing to adult parishioners of St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church in Canton, Georgia who have experienced violence*, D.Min. thesis, Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, NC.
- Fowler, D.L., 1991, 'The background to the good shepherd discourse in John 10', *SQR Faculty Publications and Presentations* 152, 1-12.
- Gan, J., 2010, *The metaphor of the shepherd in Zechariah 11:4-17*, MTh thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Hamilton, J.M., 2014. Did the church borrow leadership structures from the Old Testament or synagogue? In: B.L. Merkle and T.R. Schreiner (eds), *Shepherding God's flock: Biblical leadership in the New Testament and beyond* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications), pp. 13-32.
- Keener, C.S., 1997. Shepherd, flock. In: R. Martin and P. Davids (eds), *Dictionary of the later New Testament and its developments* (Westmont: Intersivarsity Press), pp. 1090-1093.
- Laniak, T., 2006, *Shepherds after my own heart: Pastoral traditions and leadership in biblical theology*, Intersivarsity Press, Westmont, IL.
- Metzger, B., 2015, *The storied pastor: Pastoral formation in the narrative mode*, M.Min. thesis, St. Stephen's University, St. Stephen, NB.
- Michaels, J.R., 2010, *The Gospel of John*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Moon, J., 2016, *Orality and theological training in the 21st century: A book on digital learning*, Digital Publishing Services, Hong Kong.
- Nihinlola, E., 2013, *Theology under the mango tree*, Fine Print and Manufacturing, Ikeja.

- Oglesby, W.B., 2005. Shepherd/shepherding. In: R.J. Hunter (ed.), *Dictionary of pastoral care and counselling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), p. 1164.
- O’Kennedy, D.F., 2009, ‘The shepherd imagery in Zechariah 9-14’, *Old Testament Essays* 22(2), 404-421.
- Overstreet, M., 2013, *Beyond literate Western practices: Contextualizing theological education in oral contexts*, International Orality Networks, Hong Kong.
- Petersen, B.L., 2003, *Shepherding God’s people*, Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO.
- Resane, K.T., 2014, ‘Leadership for the church: The shepherd model’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70(1), a2045.
- Rodgers, B., 2010, *A Christological Reading of the Shepherd Motif for Pastoral Theology with Special Reference to Ezekiel 34*, viewed 21 December 2016, from www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/RodgersB01.pdf
- Rummage, A.J., 2005, *A model for pastoral care and shepherding of a large and growing church*, D.Min. thesis, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA.
- Still, W., 1996, *The work of the pastor*, Paternoster Publishing, Carlisle.
- Stott, J., 2016, *Basic Christianity*, Intervarsity Press, Westmont, IL.
- Tidball, D., 1997, *Skilful shepherds: Explorations in pastoral theology*, Apollos, Leicester.
- Visser, R.A., and Y. Dreyer, 2013, ‘Abuse in the church? A social constructionist challenge to pastoral ministry’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1), a1940.
- Willis, A., and S. Evans (eds), 2004, *Making disciples of oral learners*, Lausanne Occasional Paper 54(25), Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Pattya.

Young, A., no date, *Shepherding God's flock*, Grace Theological College, Auckland.