

Can a Megachurch Pastor Really Shepherd the Flock?

It's a common assumption that large churches don't care for people as well as smaller churches. But by structuring global and local leadership well, large churches can actually care for people even better.

God does not prefer big churches over small churches any more than godly parents prefer tall children over short ones.

Churches, like children, have in the complexity of their DNA a natural size they will reach if healthy and then not grow beyond that. Because of sickness, churches, like children, can also have their growth stunted. The issue is not whether a church is large or small, but whether it is healthy or unhealthy.

However, one of the common assumptions is that larger churches do not care for people as well as smaller churches. Having been the pastor of the same church for what is now 18 years, I am very certain we take much better care of our people today than we did when we were small.

How can this be? Well, it's not easy. We have room to grow and do better, and by God's grace we will. But there are some principles we've learned that may be of help to you and your ministry no matter what size it is.

Flock-focused and sheep-focused leaders. A while back I was at a hardware store and got stopped by someone who had a family member suffering with a medical condition. I spoke with them for a bit, encouraged them to get connected at one of our church locations by their home, and took their contact information. I then sent an email to one of the pastors on staff at that church. He forwarded it to a volunteer elder, who called the man who was suffering, visited the hospital,

and had his wife (a deacon in our church) follow up with the wife. These leaders have done an amazing job of lovingly coming alongside a hurting family who is now connected to our church family.

The elder and his deacon wife in this scenario were sheep-focused. By handing off this pastoral duty, I remained flock-focused. At times I am still sheep-focused: doing hospital visits, officiating weddings, praying for individuals, and so on. But as the church has grown we have needed to increase our shepherds so that now we have around 60 elders/pastors (most of whom are unpaid), 40 men in the eldership process (most of them unpaid), and hundreds and hundreds of male and female deacons (most of them unpaid).

As a general rule, at our church those who are paid are to spend much of their energy being flock-focused: helping to raise up other leaders and shepherds to care for people and building systems to ensure that we do all we can to love and help as many as we can. Those who are unpaid tend to be sheep-focused leaders and shepherds, caring for individual people and families.

Principles, not details. The New Testament gives us detailed accounts of elder and deacon qualifications and duties. What the New Testament does not give us are detailed accounts about how they are organized. Subsequently, we don't know such things as how often they meet, what voting percentage was required to approve something (or if they even voted), if they served according to limited terms, and who reported to whom. Why?

Because a local church, as well as networked families of local churches, need the freedom to organize and reorganize in the manner that best suits the innumerable factors that surround each situation. As circumstances change, the offices of elder and deacon do not change, as godly men and women are always to love and lead God's people, but how they are structured must

change.

Wisdom needed. It's similar in the government of the home. The Bible tells us a lot about what qualities make a good mom and dad, and gives us detailed instruction about the duties of parents toward their family and children. But the Bible does not tell us specific details such as when bedtime is, what the menu is for dinner, what the house rules are, or how to organize the family budget. Why?

Because parents are entrusted by God with the responsibility of making those kinds of decisions based upon the myriad variables that make up their family dynamics. This is why being Spirit-led is incredibly important for God's leaders in the home and church. And this is why those leaders need wisdom in turning biblical principles into practical methods.

Elders in the New Testament. Gene Getz served for years as a professor at Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary and a pastor of Fellowship Bible Church. In his book *Elders and Leaders*, Getz follows the form and function of New Testament church leadership chronologically. He shows how various church leaders, titles, and functions come into being and grow with the church as it expands. In particular, he makes 14 observations about elders and how they work together in the New Testament:

Observation 1: The Term 'Elders'

In the early years of Christianity, spiritual leaders in local churches were consistently identified as "elders" (*presbuteroi*).

Observation 2: The Term 'Overseers'

As Paul and his fellow missionaries expanded their church-planting ministry into areas that were heavily populated with Gentiles, spiritual leaders were eventually also identified as "overseers" or "bishops" (*episkopoi*).

Observation 3: Managing

One of the basic terms New Testament writers used to describe the overarching function of elders/overseers was “to manage” (*proistemi*).

Observation 4: Shepherding

The second term New Testament writers used to describe the overarching function of elders/overseers was “to shepherd or tend [*poimaino*] the flock of God.”

Observation 5: A Noble Task

When Paul outlined these overarching functions for elders/overseers, he made this opportunity available to any man who desired this “noble task” and who was qualified spiritually (1 Timothy 3:1).

Observation 6: Specific Functions

In order for elders/overseers to carry out the overarching responsibility of “managing” the church effectively and “shepherding” God’s flock as faithful and sensitive leaders, New Testament writers described and prescribed at least six specific and essential functions.

Observation 7: Qualifications

The New Testament outlines very specific qualifications for serving as local church leaders, but they were not revealed in writing until Paul wrote letters to Timothy and Titus following his first imprisonment in Rome (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9).

Observation 8: Human Responsibility

As the biblical story unfolds, we see more emphasis on human responsibility in selecting and appointing “qualified leaders.”

Observation 9: Apostolic Representatives

Though Timothy and Titus assisted Paul as apostolic representatives in selecting and appointing leaders in Ephesus and on the island of Crete, we're not told how other churches in the New Testament world carried out this process.

Observation 10: A Unified Team

As the biblical story unfolds in the New Testament, it becomes increasingly clear that each local church was to be managed and shepherded by a unified team of godly men.

Observation 11: A Primary Leader

The New Testament definitely teaches and illustrates that when there is a plurality of leadership, someone needs to function as the primary leader of the team.

Observation 12: Accountability

In the early years of the church, there was accountability for elders/overseers among themselves and also beyond their local ministry.

Observation 13: Delegation

The New Testament teaches that elders/overseers must maintain their priorities by delegating responsibilities to other qualified men and women who can assist them in managing and shepherding the church.

Observation 14: Function and Form

The biblical story on local church leadership does not describe specific "forms"—only "functions" and "directives."

Getz's observations are particularly helpful at Mars Hill, where we are a church family spread across multiple locations with multiple leadership teams. Our situation is similar to New Testament churches scattered geographically with both

local leadership in each church and leadership across the churches helping them to coordinate their resources and efforts as one church.

Church networks in the New Testament. We see this dynamic in the New Testament, for example, in Revelation 1–3, where John as the first among equals pastor writes a common letter to the seven churches, addressing each one individually. Many of the letters are written to networks of churches scattered throughout a particular city (e.g. Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, Philippi, etc.).

Similarly, some of the New Testament instruction letters, such as 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, are called “general epistles” in that they were intended to be read and obeyed at multiple churches. Furthermore, the New Testament indicates there were churches spread across regions as a linked network of congregations in such places as 1 Peter 1:1, which refers to churches in the areas of “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.”

Just as we see a mixture of local and global leadership in the New Testament, large churches like Mars Hill can care for people well with good local leadership in churches and global leadership across churches.

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