

# Can the shepherd model be an effective tool in pastoral practice and Christian formation?

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The shepherd motif found in the Gospel of John, which is used by Jesus as a parable to describe the kingdom of God, has become relevant for pastoral ministry and Christian discipleship. The understanding of the shepherd model can be best used to describe the relationship with God and his people. However, the shepherd imagery can be both a 'blessing or a cursing': if people are well nurtured it displays a good shepherd, but if they are neglected the shepherd is denounced as a bad leader.

In contrast to the understanding of shepherd from a Biblical perspective, within our modern day context, the role of the shepherd has been modified, yet, what it propose to be and do is still the same. On the other hand, the image has become inextricably bound up within the confines of human institution, and as such display characteristics that are intrinsic of its captures. These characteristics manifest themselves in the injustice and marginalisation of groups of people. As a result of this, a pronounce ideology continues to cement itself within the structure of society that is male dominance. This ideology advocates the centrality of men and the marginality of women within the hierarchy of gender roles, and as such highlights the evil of sexism.

This seemingly appears to be the norm especially in the area of defining images and leadership roles within the institution of the church. Although there have been an emergence of other images to be emulated as effective models within pastoral practice, such as 'Midwife', who in society is normally a woman, has fail to make a lasting impression. Therefore, in the context of pastoral practice the image that is most commonly used, even to the detriment of others, namely women, still holds to the image of a shepherd as it main premise.

The imagery of the shepherd as a pastoral model although seemingly appears to be alongside the marginalised and prepared to cross boundaries, still evokes a sense of injustice, for its imagery has played a significant role in the suppression of women and non-white people.

Exploring the nature of the shepherd imagery in relation to black women from a womanist perspective and its impact upon women in the church is crucial. This is important in order for the continual process of deepening of one's understanding of his or her faith and relationship with God. Therefore, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the shepherd model as an effective tool in pastoral practice and Christian formation is key.

### **Womanist Perspective**

The New Bible dictionary defines the word shepherd as those “who cares for sheep, and those of a divine or mortal nature who cares for human beings”<sup>1</sup>. This, definition interestingly does not give any gender to the word shepherd, yet, further reading into the dictionary does not show any visibility of a feminine shepherd.

In contrast with the meaning given to the word shepherd by Douglas, there were many women in the Biblical context that looked after sheep. Moses wife Zipporah is a prime example of the modern term ‘shepherdess’. However, within the biblical narratives the imposition of the word shepherd negates the role played by women such as Zipporah. Therefore, their importance within the society and the text was denied although both men and women were doing the same job. Oden argues that, “modern stereotypes that portray shepherds always as male fail to grasp the fact that in primitive pastoral societies, women as often as men were active in caring for valued animals”.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, further interrogation of the word has been captured by patriarchy and androcentrism, portraying the paternal insights of ‘caring’ by men only. In contrast with the Biblical ideology, the same notion is firmly rooted within our society today, as the model of the shepherd in pastoral practice fails to acknowledge and address women in its framework. C.W. Brister says so well;

We have seen that this shepherd motif has become a stone of stumbling for some moderns who resent the idea of being viewed as part of a dumb

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<sup>1</sup> J.D. Douglas, ed., ‘Shepherd’, in *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: Richard Clay and Company Ltd., 1962), p.1175.

<sup>2</sup>T C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essential of Ministry* (USA: Harper SanFrancisco, 1983), p.52.

flock, driven by herd instinct or manoeuvred by a strong paternalistic leader.<sup>3</sup>

From a womanist perspective the model of the shepherd has become an instrumental factor in the marginalisation of black women, hence we cannot identify with its imagery. Foster Boyd states that the shepherd imagery is:

Traditionally, the image of the pastor as the 'shepherd' and the parishioners as 'flock', predominantly white, male, linear and fraternal...the images of a shepherd engender at least discomfort and at most abhorrence and revulsion on the part of African American women.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, emerging from womanist ideology is the term 'WomanistCare', which is the "intentional process of care giving and care receiving by African American women".<sup>5</sup> There main objective in adopting this model for pastoral practice is to find other alternatives that will capture the essence of black women's experience. As a result of this they have moved away from the shepherd model, "servant"<sup>6</sup> or "wounded healer"<sup>7</sup> so that both black men and women can appropriate it in the context of their suffering. With this in mind the notion of "safe place"<sup>8</sup> which is cited by Westfield encapsulates the idea of black women courageously providing a 'safe place' where women can seek refuge, share experiences and stories and simply 'be'. This safe place is linked with the notion of hospitality that is feeding your guest. This understanding has being part of the historic role of black women such as Harriet Tubman during the era of slavery, where she used the underground railways to provide a 'safe place' for her people.

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<sup>3</sup> C.W. Brister, 'WomanistCare: Reflections on Pastoral Care and African American Women', in E.M. Townes ed., *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspective on Hope, Salvation and Transformation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), p.202.

<sup>4</sup> M. Foster Boyd, 'WomanistCare: Reflections on Pastoral Care and the Transformation of African American Women', in E.M. Townes, ed., *Ibid.*, p.199.

<sup>5</sup> Foster Boyd, *Ibid.*, p.198.

<sup>6</sup> Jacquelyn Grant indicates that this image is particularly oppressive to African American women, since they have been viewed as the 'servants of servants' (white women). J.Grant, 'The Sin of Servanthood', in E.M. Townes, ed., *A Troubling in my Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), p.200.

<sup>7</sup> This imagery was put forward by Henri Nouwen some thirty years ago. WomanistCare reject this image as it continues to dwell on the wounds that need to be healed. Foster Boyd, *Op.cit.*, pp.199&200.

<sup>8</sup> N.L. Westfield, *'Dear Sister'-A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001), p.5.

In addition, the concept continued into the modern times in the United Kingdom during the Windrush period, with the arrival of African Caribbean people to this country. The black migrants also offered hospitality in a 'safe place' to their own which is closely linked to the shepherd motif-shepherd leads the flock to 'safe ground' where they can be fed.

### **Church Impact**

On the other hand, Marsha Foster Boyd offers the image of 'empowered conjourner' in place of shepherd and other pastoral practice models. The word "Conjourner"<sup>9</sup> was developed by "Cecelia Williams Bryant",<sup>10</sup> thus Boyd believes that "to envision oneself as an empowered conjourner, one understands that through one's life, through one's hurt, through one's victories; one has power to conjourn with others."<sup>11</sup>

With the expression of 'empowered conjourner' as a model that black women can identify with, they are in the process of redefining the perceived notion that persists in keeping their personhood in shackles. Therefore, there is unwillingness from womanist theologians to accept the shepherd paradigm as a true example for pastoral practice and Christian development, which conveys a lack of mutuality. However, whilst the shepherd icon seemingly appears to be a negative factor, it has enabled black women to challenge the power structure or those who acquiesce with the dominant male figure.

The idea of the empowered conjourner fits well into a context that I am part of that is as a black female minister. This however, mean that I will aim to provide a 'safe place' for women perhaps in the manse or the church-through worship where the liturgy is used as pastoral care. Likewise, through the medium of pastoral visiting, group meetings and classes with the aim of being alongside people in their journey.

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<sup>9</sup> A 'Conjourner' is a person or persons whom 'heaven has summoned to journey with us'. Conjourners are spiritual companions brought together on a common path for a particular time. M. Foster Boyd, *Ibid.*, p.200.

<sup>10</sup> Kuja: *A Spirituality of the Hidden Way* (Baltimore, MD: Akousa Visions, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Foster Boyd, *Op.cit.*, p.200.

The role of the shepherd in pastoral practice encompasses “the biblical concept of the shepherd who feeds dependency needs on the part of the parishioners.”<sup>12</sup> However, Oden validates such a notion “is not inherent in the imagery to convey the whole of the meaning when transferred from one setting to another.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, in comparison with the experiences that women faced within the church, it is highly impossible to be in solidarity with the idea of being dependant on a male figure: when a fundamental issue such as, sexism emerges strongly from the shepherd model. J.T. Phelps, drawing upon a letter from the Roman Catholic Church in her essay states that “the sin of sexism depersonalises women, it makes them objects to be possessed and used...sexism is a moral and social evil.”<sup>14</sup>

Pastoral practice, when understood as an integral part of the church and that which enables others to be more grounded in their faith, will not be divorced from the fact that all women especially black women are systematically denied equality and access to that which can make life fairer and easier. Pattison states;

The fact that images are taken from the Bible may give them a power and authority, which they would not be accorded if they came from some other source. It is possible in this circumstance that the Bible is being used once again to legitimate ideas derived from other sources.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, the shepherd model is seen as a tool, whereby the oppressive structure of racism and sexism persists to violate women in the church. Hence, their role within the ‘fold’ is not viewed as one of nurturing and learning, but is often demeaned. Francis Wood contends that;

When one uses the criteria of denying others’ full humanity, viewing ‘otherness’ in a negative light, and perpetuating patterns of discrimination

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<sup>12</sup> R. J. Hunter ed., ‘Shepherd’, in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p.1164.

<sup>13</sup> Oden, *Op.cit.*, p.53.

<sup>14</sup> J.T. Phelps, ‘Confronting the Evil of Social Sin and Socially Sinful Structures’, in E.M.Townes, ed., *Op.cit.*, p.55.

<sup>15</sup> S. Pattison, *Critique of Pastoral Care* (Great Britain: SCM Press, 2000), p.122.

as the measure of social evil, one can conclude that the treatment of women in churches all too often fits those criteria.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the minister because he/she is seen as someone in authority should not limit or demean, “but enhances, centres and extends the meaning of other ancillary images.”<sup>17</sup> Structuring such qualities within the life of pastoral practice and Christian development in the church makes it possible for the minister to be sensitive to the issues that confronts its female members. Likewise, because of the use of the shepherd imagery in the Bible and the church with negative stereotypical views continues to stand out, making it harder for women to operate in full womanhood in whatever capacity their gifts and talents are required within the church. As a result, can also be a hindering factor in their spiritual development.

In view of the nature of the shepherd model in pastoral practice and Christian formation, which seeks to maintain patriarchal rule, appears to be ambiguous in its concept of inclusivity. Therefore, the shepherd model in effect can be perceived as one of insubordination: with the sheep having no voice and ‘going wherever the shepherd may lead’.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

To be fair to the shepherd model that has been intrinsically part of pastoral practice it is important that both the positive and negative sides are presented. In my attempt to do this I will look at the advantages of keeping it as good imagery for pastoral practice and Christian formation, also the disadvantages for dismantling it and adopting other images that shows inclusivity.

The possessed qualities highlighted, such as it caring instinct, prepared to incorporate others and show concern for those entrusted in their care is admirable. In view of this, the notion of accountability is visible as the shepherd is conscious of his/her role, which gives him/her the discipline to minister to his/her flock without partiality. Showing

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<sup>16</sup> F.E. Wood, ‘The role of the church in the oppression of African-American women’, in E.M. Townes ed., *Ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>17</sup> Oden, *Op.cit.*, p.52.

genuine love and compassion to those who may feel marginalised, uncomfortable and unworthy.

Another advantage of this model in relation to Christian formation is the concept of being part of a community, where ideas and faith stories are shared, encouraged and challenged in a safe environment. Thereby enabling each person to grow in confidence, increase in knowledge and practices of the Christian faith irrespective of where they are in their faith pilgrimage.

Likewise, it is imperative for us to hold on to the shepherd model as it demonstrates a quality that is crucial for ministry that is, pastoring in humility. A perception that is often beheld is that the shepherd model seemingly appears to be that of a simplistic leader, too practical, not engaging intellectually. This viewpoint is also held by Oden who makes the following remark, “despite good intentions, some secularised equalitarian thinking prematurely viewed the image of servant as demeaning, treating servicing as if it were by definition degrading.”<sup>18</sup> However, in spite of the perspicacity, it does not limit the efficacy of the shepherd imagery.

In my opinion there is something poignant that is visible in the role of the shepherd when articulated in pastoral practice and Christian formation, which shows vulnerability and dependency. Vulnerability because of the task they are prepared to engage in, being servants catering for the needs of the flock, thus the notion of servicing in humility is easily perceived in their actions. Oden attest that;

No well-conceived view of pastoral office can ever set aside or leave behind this basic diaconal pattern: serving God through service to the neighbour. Diakonia is an essential layer of every theory, grade, or proper definition of ministry.<sup>19</sup>

On the hand, the shepherd is aware that the task cannot be performed without God’s help; therefore, he is totally dependant on the source of life giving strength.

In all fairness shepherding, which seems outdated may still have something vital to offer in this critical era where in pastoral practice and discipleship the minister/leader must still exude courage and be alongside people in their journey.

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<sup>18</sup> Oden, *Op.cit.*, p.54.

<sup>19</sup> Oden, *Ibid.*, p.54.

In contrast to the advantages, there are problems emanating from holding on to the shepherd imagery in a society that is equalitarian outwardly, but still holds to some unenlightened views. When the word shepherd is used, the picture often comes to mind is that of a white male figure equally surrounded by a flock of white sheep. In view of our multi-cultural world I fail to see how this can be a positive image for people of colour, and shepherds who have black and brown sheep. Therefore, the colour significance needs to be addressed seriously if the use of picture in pastoral engagement is to become a more meaningful tool. In addition, the Western Eurocentric image often portrayed only represent a fraction of the earthly population. This, however, begs the question as to whether white people only are leaders? In reality this is not true, therefore why the insistence of portraying them in this light, given the fact that it has negative connotations attached to its symbolism.

Moreover, the androcentric feature of the shepherd cannot be the most helpful role model to emulate, totally negating women in its representation of leadership role. There are many female ministers in the Church, thus by holding to male a figure head could often aid in the deskilling of people in the church. Thus resulting in God's purposes been unfulfilled in many individuals. However, the centrality of the maleness of the shepherd figure characterises Jacquelyn Grants belief that Jesus have been captured by patriarchy. Thus, the patriarchal society have become "obsessed with Jesus maleness"<sup>20</sup>, and as such models everything on Jesus' gender forgetting his nature.

Moreover, this model does not show collaborative ministry in practice. The shepherd is sole leader of the flock. In spite of Jesus incorporation of disciples, he is still the one who leads his followers, and as such he is the shepherd. Thus, within our modern context of today, this model fails to convey the message of teamwork as it heralds the shepherd as a one-person team. Therefore, if Christian formation is also the active response to God's call both to the laity and ordained, it is imperative that each person within the church community/flock be given the appropriate tools to have a clear perception of his or her personal vocation as God's disciple.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Grant, 'Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation' in M. Stevens ed., *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p.58.

## **Conclusion**

The shepherd model as an effective tool in pastoral practice and Christian formation is not as straightforward as it appears to be. However, relating it to our context today displays some of the characteristics that a minister/leader must display, but unfortunately it has fallen into the trap of misuse and abuse, rendering it an unhelpful tool especially in the care of women, more so black women.

Overall, there are positive qualities that can be redeemed and used in pastoral practice and discipleship learning. However, the negative use of the model in my opinion can seem like a huge barrier to overcome and needs further exploration given the high percentage of female to men in the church. Thus I hold to the belief as a non-white person that the shepherd model in light of the evidence is not an effective model to be use in pastoral practice and Christian formation given the vast amount of other appropriate images in the Bible.

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