

## What Does Success Look Like for FBC, #2: Energetic Pastoral Care

First Baptist Church Decatur

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Texts: Psalm 23; Mt. 9:35-38

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### Introduction

We are in a series in which I am laying out five goals for FBC Decatur which can constitute success for us. These goals apply equally to clergy and laity, staff and members. They give us something we can all strive for. I introduced the first of these last week – Excellent Worship. I emphasized that our church will be successful if when people come to worship here they can truly worship, which includes being encountered by the Word of God and coming away changed. This is the first and most important task that I see for any church, and certainly for our church.

Today I want to turn to a second “E.” My topic is “energetic pastoral care.” Worshipping the God who made us is the very first reason people come to church. But today I say that *providing a supportive community to which people can belong and where they can find care across the life span* is the second main reason people come to church. One measure by which our church can be considered successful is this – whether energetic pastoral care is offered and received by all who belong to this community. In this message I will try to unpack what I mean by that.

### The Lord is My Shepherd

When you are frightened, sick, or sad, which Bible passage offers you the deepest, most profound sense of comfort?

For me, it is probably Psalm 23. I didn’t grow up reading the Bible, but when I became a believer in high school this passage was one I was told to memorize. And so I did, in the King James. I wonder how many of you could pretty much recite it by memory. Let’s try it:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.*

*He leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul.*

*He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:*

*For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies*

*Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*

*And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

I learned that passage in high school. I can remember a few key times when I have prayed it, over and over again. One of these was in 2006. Our oldest child Holly lay unconscious in a hospital bed in Jackson, Tennessee. A car accident.

At first we did not know if she would ever wake up.  
When she did wake up we did not know for a while if she would ever speak again.  
When she did speak again, we did not know for a while if she would ever make sense again.

During those dark days, sometimes all I had was Psalm 23. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Sometimes that was the only way I could pray. Just recite that psalm over and over.

Have you ever been there? Just you and a sacred Bible passage like this, in the long hours of the night?

My first point is simply this. All human beings share profound vulnerability. We are vulnerable in every dimension of our existence: physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational. That applies to Christians no more and no less than it does to everyone else.

We are vulnerable not just because of what happens to us, but because of what might happen.

We are vulnerable not just because of what happens to us, but because of what happens to those we love.

And of course we face the ultimate vulnerability, indeed the fact, that we all shall die and we alone of all the creatures know that we shall die.

Every one of us vulnerable people needs a community around us that can help us bear our vulnerabilities, fears, and griefs – all the terrors of life.

For most of us, the first line of defense is our family. And that's wonderful.

But it's interesting how many people don't have family, or don't have family any more, or don't have family nearby, or don't have a good relationship with family. They need a new kind of family. Many of them turn to the church. And they need the church to be there for them. (Even if they do have a family.)

Let's take it from another angle. One of the traditional functions of the church is as a community to which one belongs. You and I publicly and officially join the community. After that, we belong. Let's call it making a covenant. Once we have covenanted to be a part of a faith community, we take on new obligations and we at least implicitly begin to expect certain things

of others. The more deeply we commit to the community, the more we offer it, and really, the more we come to expect of it. By the way, this is why just attending a church, but not joining it, is not the same thing, and why I beg you (if that is you) to come on down and join us, really join us!

One of the main obligations we take on as church members, and one of the main things we come to expect, or at least hope for, is mutual care. We hope and maybe even expect that when our loved one is in the hospital, or our marriage is in crisis, that the church will be there to care for us. And we at least implicitly covenant to be there to care for others.

When it's working well, there is a beautiful rhythm to it – when I am in need, you come help me; when you are in need, I come help you. The Body of Christ, in action.

Since it is very rare for everyone to be in need at the same time, there is usually enough care to go around. That's how church is supposed to work. And it is so beautiful.

When the church really shows up for people in time of need, a lot of people are very positively affected. Of course this includes the sick person and their spouse or family. But then there are often others. Extended family, friends, co-workers. And you know, some of these folks don't know Jesus or haven't been in church in years. Hospital bedsides are mission fields.

There is a trend these days in some of the hot megachurches. In these churches the pastor makes no attempt to offer pastoral services such as weddings, funerals, or hospital visits. In these churches, the pastor is at the center of a kind of church brand, and the brand offers much, but it does not include a pastor's personal touch. Clearly, many people are attracted to such churches. Especially many young people. I wonder how long that model will work for them. Perhaps until the time that it is *their* baby in the hospital.

### The Good Shepherd

I know that I could not be a pastor in that way. And it is not who we are trying to be at FBC Decatur. I think that it is the opposite of how Jesus did his ministry. Look again at Matthew 9:35-38, especially that line:

*When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

Jesus described himself as the good shepherd. He described God as one who chases down the one lost sheep out of a hundred. The word pastor comes from shepherd. The pastor pastors, that is, cares for the sheep. All of the sheep. Every last one. Those that are present, and those that are absent. Those that are well, and those that are sick. Those that are straying, and those that are well within the fold. It is a big job. But it is our commission.

## Energetic Pastoral Care

These are reasons why I believe energetic pastoral care is fundamental to the mission of the church. It's why I have set it as the second of our five primary goals in this season of our church's life.

I have so far emphasized pastoral care in times of crisis, and there are certainly many crises that afflict our membership. Every week we care for someone, or many folks, who are in the hospital, or rehab center, who are ill, dying, or grieving. There is plenty to do for the pastoral staff, primarily me and Bob right now. And there are times where people need a pastor.

But there is also plenty to do for all of us. We have very committed members who make caregiving for those in need a major focus of their lives. They visit the hospitals, rehab centers, nursing homes, retirement communities, and the homebound. I want to especially commend the senior care team, led by Jim Manley, for its strenuous and committed efforts to care for our seniors.

As I have visited in our Sunday School classes in recent weeks, I have been deeply impressed by the way that members of Sunday School classes in this church care for each other, sometimes based on relationships that go back decades.

I heard a story recently of a class in which when a member experienced a profound life crisis, members of that class committed to be with their classmate every day for several months to help her get through her crisis. They just would not let her face her crisis alone. That is just really awesome. That is really church.

Many people experience profound social isolation in modern America and have few if any heart friends. Our church is different, and it is something we should celebrate – and invite our neighbors and co-workers to enjoy with us.

To me, clearly one of the greatest needs of the moment in our church is to create classes or groups for twenty or thirtysomethings that will take root and give them a community to go through life with for the next sixty years, just like what has happened in many of the established groups in our church. Those efforts are launching very soon.

## Developmental Pastoral Care

I should say here that energetic pastoral care, more broadly considered, is everything we do to invite people into a relationship with Christ, form disciples, and guide decision making. Some pastoral care, in this sense, is developmental rather than crisis oriented. It involves walking through the normal stages of life with people at every step of the life span, and offering teaching, counsel, and care especially in life transitions and when people get stuck and can't get through a particularly difficult spot without some help. It's caring for babies and children, preparing

children and young adults for confession of faith and baptism, preparing those who marry for successful marriage, helping people make the transition to parenthood, then the stages of parenthood, then grandparenthood, then aging, and so on.

FBC Decatur can be seen as “successful” when we are offering effective and consistent developmental pastoral care and crisis pastoral care, covering the entire life span, to all our people. No exceptions. This too is a responsibility of all of us. Still, the Personnel Committee is working on some staff changes that can enable us to ramp up both the crisis and the developmental pastoral care work of our church. You will be hearing about these changes soon. They too will cost money, and the budget for them is built into our 2017 Ministry Action Plan.

The fields are white unto the harvest, as Jesus said. He prayed that we would have sufficient workers to bring in the harvest. Will you be one of those workers? Invest deeply in this community. Move from the margins to the center. Join the church. Join a Bible study class. Get to know people. See what they need. Act to meet that need. Make that call. Send that email. Drop by the hospital. No such gesture is ever wasted. And then when it is your time of need, tell your sisters and brothers what you need, and let them take care of you.

May FBC Decatur continue to be a high-touch, high-care church – caring for each other, caring for many others, with the pastoral, shepherding love of Jesus Christ.