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MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH:

Member Care

Necessity of member care:

Caring for the members of a church is a normal and necessary part of its function. This is seen by the fact that God so composed the body in such a way that there would be no division within the body in that the members would care for one another (1 Cor. 12:24-25). "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Cor. 12:26; Rom. 12:15). The body of Christ is an intricate organism which is diversified yet unified (1 Cor. 12:12,14,20) and well-equipped to care for itself. This is what God expects.



The reality and purpose of member care is seen in the New Testament by the forty "one another" statements which address how Christians are to treat each other. The number of these statements alone demonstrates that we as believers have a responsibility to one another. As believers fulfill these commands, they will be ministering to each other in a manner that builds up and strengthens one another (cf. Pro. 27:17), and ultimately the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16).

The principle which undergirds member care:

The underlying foundation of member care is love. Love is what believers are to manifest in all they do (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1-8). Jesus Himself stated: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). In this passage, Jesus commands believers to love one another as He has loved them. This is not an option. It is the way believers are to express themselves in the body of Christ. As believers express their love to one another in this way, they will give evidence to a watching world that they are truly disciples of Christ. Therefore, this ministry of love and care has the potential of being used by God to draw the lost to Himself. This can happen when they see believers love in this manner. They will observe a love that they do not normally see in this world. This will very likely cause them to be drawn to its source -- Jesus.

Elements of member care (by church leaders):

Member care has two elements associated with it. The first element is the care of the church members by church leaders (elders).¹ The second element is church members caring for one another. Both are important.

When considering the responsibility of church leaders for church members, Ezekiel 34 presents an insightful contrast between good and bad care of the flock of God. Please keep in mind that the context of this passage is the nation of Israel and their leaders, not the church. Yet, the supracultural principle of this passage -- caring for those under a leader's care -- is applicable for the leaders of their church today.

In the first portion of this passage (vss. 1-10), God reprimands the leaders of Israel (shepherds of Israel) through the prophet Ezekiel (vs. 1). He begins by declaring that they have become rich in their positions as shepherds by taking advantage of the sheep (vss. 2-3). God points out this abuse graphically when He says in verse 3: "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock." These men were out for their own profit and well-being at the expense of the people of Israel.

God then continues in His rebuke by stating that the shepherds of Israel were not concerned about the welfare of the sheep: "Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them" (vs. 4). The leaders of Israel were appointed by God to be the protectors and shepherds of the flock, but instead they were indifferent to the needs of the people who were placed under their care. The aftermath of their disregard for the flock resulted in that the people of Israel "...were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field" (vs. 5). God then goes on to say, "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek *for them*" (vs. 6). What a bleak picture resulted from these uncaring shepherds. They prospered while the sheep suffered. As a result of this tragedy, God said He was against them and would remove them from their positions as shepherds (vss. 7-10).

When considering this passage, one has to wonder if Peter was thinking about these exhortations in Ezekiel as he penned 1 Peter 5:2-4. There he said, "shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." In these verses, Peter addresses the underlying issues of which the shepherds in Ezekiel 34 were guilty. Yet in Peter's case, he reminds his readers that the Chief Shepherd will come, bringing with Him the reward which the faithful will re-

¹The term "church leaders" in this manual is synonymous with the word "elders." Elders are those who meet the scriptural qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, and are recognized by the church as such; this includes a church's pastor-teacher and/or evangelist. For further discussion, see the articles titled, "Church Leadership Roles Defined" and "Pastor's Equipping Ministry."

ceive. This sharply contrasts with the shepherds of Ezekiel 34 whom God would also visit, but for the purpose of removing them from their positions; not to reward them.

These issues are an important reminder to elders. One day they will stand before Christ to give an account for the souls of those whom were allotted to their charge (Heb. 13:17). If they are obedient to the exhortations of Peter, then they will be rewarded. If they are not faithful, then they will still be saved, but no rewards will be given to them (1 Cor. 3:10-15). Therefore, it is important that they be faithful, for Hebrews 10:31 states: "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Continuing on to the second portion of Ezekiel 34, a contrast is made between the wicked shepherds of Israel and God, the Good Shepherd. In verses 11-16, Ezekiel wrote that God responds to His sheep in the opposite way of the wicked shepherds. In contrast, God will search for and seek them out (vs. 11), care for and gather them (vss. 12-13), feed them in the best of pasture lands (vss. 13-15), give them rest (vs. 15), and take care of their physical needs and infirmities (vs. 16). This is the type of shepherd whom King David described in Psalm 23. This is also the example of the type of shepherd elders are to strive to be. Please note that not only will God care for His sheep in this way, He will also one day judge them (vss. 17-19). This too is a necessary responsibility of elders, in addition to caring for and loving the sheep (See article titled, "Church Discipline").

When considering the elder's ministry of member care, two principles need to be first and foremost. The first is that elders are to have a heart for and love the people under their care (1 Thes. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22). This is important because if they do not have a love for them, then their ministry will be ineffective. This may be the reason why Paul said that the elder is to aspire to this office (1 Tim. 3:1); for hopefully he who aspires to it will have a desire to serve those under his care. His desire would be in contrast to one who exercises oversight under compulsion and not voluntarily, or for sordid gain; for he should serve with eagerness (1 Pet. 5:2). If he becomes an elder for reasons other than a desire to serve God and His lambs, then he will not do it from a proper motive. It is tragic when this occurs.

The second principle is that elders should not lord it over their flock, but instead be examples for the flock to follow (1 Pet. 5:3). Those who lord it over others are not examples of Christ's love because they are not servants who exemplify the love of Christ. They are lords -- not men who manifest the fruit of the Spirit ("But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law", Gal. 5:22-23). Jesus said of those who desire to lord it over others: "...You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mat. 20:25-28). Therefore church leaders need to heed the words of Paul in Philipians 2:3-4: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." Such a leader will be an example to the flock as Peter spoke of in 1 Peter 5:3.

Some areas of member care which can be gleaned from the Scriptures in which elders should be investing their time are:

- Rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep -- Rom. 12:15
- Restoring those in sin (Gal. 6:1)
- Bearing the burdens of others (Gal. 6:2)
- Doing good to all people, especially to the children of God (Gal. 6:10)
- Caring for widows in need (1 Tim. 5:9-10)
- Ministering to believers in prison (Heb. 13:3)
- Ministering to believers who are ill-treated (Heb. 13:3)
- Visiting orphans and widows in their distress (Jam. 1:27)
- Meeting the physical needs of others (cf. Jam. 2:14-17; 1 John 3:17)
- Praying over the sick who call for the elders (Jam. 5:13-18)
- Turning a sinner from the error of his way (Jam. 5:19-20)
- Being sympathetic to others (1 Pet. 3:8)
- Disciplining those who have strayed (1 Cor. 5; Mat. 18:15-20)

This list is not exhaustive. There are many ways in which elders of a church can and should minister to the needs of their flock. They, like the Good Shepherd, need to care for their sheep (cf. John 10:1-15).

Elements of member care (by church members):

The second aspect of a church's member care is the responsibility that members have for one another. The Scriptures are clear that a true believer is to love the brethren (1 John 4:11). If he does not, then as the Apostle John said, such a person does not know God (1 John 4:8) and cannot love God (1 John 4:20). In a believer's love for the brethren, John goes so far as to say that he must be willing not only to provide for them material things when they are in need (food, clothing, etc.; 1 John 3:17; cf. Jam. 2:14-17), but even be willing to lay down his life for them (1 John 3:16). This is the ultimate form of love and sacrifice for one another (John 15:13). Christians are not to "love with word or with tongue" only, "but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18).

How then should the body of Christ minister to one another? As was stated previously, there are forty "one another" statements which are the responsibility of all believers. As one considers these statements, along with those commands listed previously, he can gain a good understanding of his responsibility in caring for his fellow members in the body of Christ. Below is a list of selected "one another" statements which help define areas of member care:

- "...admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14)
- "...through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13)
- "Bear one another's burdens..." (Gal. 6:2)
- "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love" (Eph. 4:2)
- "...we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25)
- "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." (Eph. 4:32)
- "...regard one another as more important than himself" (Php. 2:3)

- "Therefore encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing" (1 Thes. 5:11)
- "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men" (1 Thes. 5:15)
- "But encourage one another day after day..." (Heb. 3:13)
- "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24-25)
- "Do not speak against one another..." (Jam. 4:11)
- "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another..." (Jam. 5:16)
- "...fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Pet. 1:22)
- "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8)
- "Be hospitable to one another without complaint" (1 Pet. 4:9)
- "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10)

As mentioned earlier, when church members care for one another in this way, the body will grow, be strengthened and be a shining light to the unsaved world. Another advantage will be realized by the pastor and elders -- their workload will be diminished. This will occur because the body will be functioning as it should. Not all of the member care responsibility, which can be very time consuming as well as emotionally and physically draining, will then fall upon the church leaders; responsibility will be distributed to all members of the church. For pastors and church leaders who want to control everything and everyone, this is not a welcome thought. But for the pastor and leaders who want to mobilize and enable the body of Christ (who have been allotted to their charge to do the work of Christ), this is a very freeing and encouraging mandate. Encourage member care within your church, for a body which does not care for itself is not a unified, healthy body. It is sick and needs help because it is not functioning properly.

APPLICATION QUESTIONS:



1. As a church leader, how would you assess your guardianship and thoroughness in caring for the sheep? Are you pleased with your past performance when compared to the biblical standards presented here, or do you need to improve? If you need to improve, what changes need to be made?

2. Are you and your church leaders doing a good job caring for your members? If not, how could you work together to be better shepherds?

3. Have the members of your church been taught how to minister to one another in times of crises? If not and you were to preach four messages on this topic, what passages would you choose to preach on, and what would you want your church members to know about this topic?
 - Message one:
 - Message two:
 - Message three:
 - Message four:

4. Does your church have a plan prepared for how it will respond to a member in need?

5. Does your church have a plan prepared for how it will respond to a non-church member from your community who is in need?

6. If your church has not prepared a plan for how to care for a member who is in need, then please list the steps which you feel would be necessary in such a situation.
 - Step one:
 - Step two:
 - Step three:
 - Step four:
 - Step five:

- Step six:
7. If a non-church member of your community is in a crisis, what things can your church do to reach out to this person in their time of need?
- Step one:
 - Step two:
 - Step three:
 - Step four:
 - Step five:
 - Step six:
8. From the list below, are there any areas where your church leaders need to invest more time? Check those areas which need more attention by your leaders.
- Rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep -- Rom. 12:15
 - Restoring those in sin (Gal. 6:1)
 - Bearing the burdens of others (Gal. 6:2)
 - Doing good to all people, especially to the children of God (Gal. 6:10)
 - Caring for widows in need (1 Tim. 5:9-10)
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 - Turning a sinner from the error of his way (Jam. 5:19-20)
 - Being sympathetic to others (1 Pet. 3:8)
 - Disciplining those who have strayed (1 Cor. 5; Mat. 18:15-20)
9. What should be the foundational characteristics of a member care ministry?

