

The Shepherding Mission of the Church: Hope and Challenges for Pastoral Agents in Nigeria

Daniel Bernard Yashim

Abstract

This study examines the shepherding mission of the Church in Nigeria, highlighting hopes and challenges faced by pastoral agents. The research explores the theological foundations of pastoral ministry in the Nigerian context, and the experiences of pastoral agents. Many of the Ministers of the Gospel in Nigeria are passing through a lot of persecution and circumscription to freedom of religion from Islamic terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen etc. As a result, lives have been lost, properties destroyed, Churches have been destroyed and deserted in some places. This work employs the spiral cycle method of Pastoral theology in order to create a deeper understanding of the shepherding mission of the Church by the identification of key challenges and hope for pastoral agents. This work argues that if Shepherding mission of the Church is properly studied and understood, Ministers of the Gospel would persevere and continually take active steps in the spread of the gospel irrespective of the setbacks because God is its source. This study contributes to Pastoral theology and practice; Church growth and development in Nigeria which calls for interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

Key words: Shepherding Mission, Church Pastoral Agents, Nigeria, Hopes, Challenges.

Introduction

It is no longer a bound of contention, among Theologians and other field of expertise in the Church that, the Church exist for Mission (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 16). The way and methods of caring out this Mission in the church from time immemorial keep changing because of how civilizations and modernizations keep affecting and posing challenges in different times and places. This paper focus on the Shepherding Mission of the Church in given hope to the people of our time despite the difficult situation we are in, not just in the Nigeria society but in the global community. We shall study the fact that despite the hope that Pastoral Agents are bringing to the Church far and near there are also some challenges faced by the Pastoral Agents in Shepherding mission of the Church.

This article is divided into five segments with the introduction and conclusion which ascertain the fact that shepherding mission of the Church is the main reason why the Church exists and draws our consciousness to the fact that methods and methodology of going about shepherding mission are determined by the challenges of civilizations and modernisation. The Fathers of the second Vatican council in their wisdom have pointed out how the shepherding ministry is a divine mandate to go out to the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature (Ad Gentes 1). The biblical journey of shepherding mission drew more light to that shepherding mission is not just human activities but fulfilling divine mandate. The shepherding mission of the Church explores the different ways of the mission. The hope and challenges for pastoral agents showed its pros and cons of the mission. The challenges are meant to encourage the agents in the mission. The study ends with some recommendations and conclusion.

Definitions of Terms

a. Shepherding Mission

Shepherding means "the caring, loving, accepting attitude of a Christian leader in his relationship with those entrusted to his charge" (Yemi, 2000). While Mission refers to the activities of Jesus as a Shepherd seeking souls for the Kingdom of God as handed over to the Church through the Apostles, the meaning of Shepherding Mission as understood in this paper is taking care of God's people and leading them to the Kingdom of God through the ministry of the Church.

b. Pastoral Agent

In the context of this paper, Pastoral Agent could be a Priest or Lay person who are basically trained by the Church and in the name of the Church cater for the needs of the faithful (Faweh 2019). It is important to stress here that it is not only Priests and Religious that cater for the needs of the faithful in the Church.

c. Church

In the understanding of this paper, Church is the community gathered by the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit to proclaim the wonders of God and the salvation of humanity performed by Jesus Christ, God-man, dead and risen (Akpunonu, 1992). The word Church like its equivalent in the Greek word "ekklesia" for a religious user is the community of worshippers assembled to worship God (Komanchak, 1999).

Biblical Dimension of Shepherding

Shepherding ministry in the Old Testament has made do with the metaphor of YHWH as shepherd with the Israelites as his flock and the metaphor of the Israelites leaders as shepherds. (Obinwa, 2022). However, the term shepherd is not used to replace one of the names of YAHWA, as such it is rather a title used to express the special relationship between him and his covenants people.

The shepherding role of God as a shepherd of Israel “encapsulates his competence and function as the creator and preserver of his people (Ps 93:6-7). It also combines with his saving and ruling power (Ps 80:1-2)” (*Ibid*). Psalm 23 makes it clear that God is experienced as a shepherd who is very much concerned about the welfare of the flock. Besides the fact that he is the shepherd who caringly protects his flocks as a group, he also provides life- nourishment for them (Ez 34:11-12). The shepherd-flock relationship between God and his covenant people, the Israelites according to Obinwa “has not been always a smooth-sailing one. The people were very often insubordinate and rebellious to YAHWH, regardless his special care for them as his flocks” (*Ibid*).

Despite the faithfulness of God as shepherd the people were stubborn turning aside to other gods from time to time, thus as testified by the prophet that “like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn, can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?” (Hosea 4:16) As a good shepherd, however, God wishes that his wayward flock returns to him for its own benefit. He had wanted to maintain a very close rapport with his people and get them to listen to him as a flock does to its recognized shepherd. But they would not listen to him due to their stubbornness of heart. God would however not give up; rather he keeps trying to woo them back to himself, pleading that they might listen to him (psalm 81:13-14).

The shepherd-leader relationship with the covenant people is seen when Moses said: “let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd (Num 27:15-17). The leaders of the Israelite people were not seen to appoint themselves as shepherds. They were appointed by God and served as his viceroys among the people. In 2 Samuel 7:7 for instance while reacting to David's proposal to build the Lord a house a cedar, God makes it clear that the Judges who were leaders in Israel were set up by him to be shepherds of the people. The people confessed when they said to David “look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The Lord said to you. It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel and who shall be ruler over Israel” (2 Samuel 5:1-3).

Because the people's shepherds (leadership in Israel) are his ministers or his appointed agents, God has always shown active interest in how they are indeed shepherding the flock entrusted to their care. The text of Ezekiel 34 showed God expression on both the good and the bad shepherds. It is as a result of the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep as we read in Jer 23:1-2, Ezekiel 34, Zech 11:15-17, Isaiah 56:11-12 etc. that God said he will “remove the unfaithful shepherds, take over the shepherding by himself, and then appoint others to replace them. He promises to end the era of the unfaithful leaders to take good care of his flock and give them a future which will be much better than their past” (Obinwa, 2022).

In the New Testament John's gospel features the most explicit usage of shepherd language. Gunter declared that "Jesus draws heavily on Old Testament Shepherds- leader language to identify himself as the promised shepherd for whom Israel had been waiting, as well as to sharply contrast himself with the foolish shepherds in Israel in his days" (Gunter, 2018). The activity of Jesus showed he is the Good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, emphasizing his care for his people. Gunter argues that the central emphasis of his passage is the distinct quality of affection for people found in Jesus which is lacking in Israel's previous leaders:

The burden of John 10, however, is not so much on the task of the shepherd as in the manner in which the shepherd undertakes his role. Unlike the "false shepherd the good shepherd has a close and caring relationship with his flock.... The climax of the metaphor takes this exercise of courage to the ultimate degree. The shepherd does not put the interest of the sheep first only when it is reasonable to do so, but also when it requires more than might be expected (ibid).

Christian shepherding can therefore be defined as the caring, loving, accepting attitude of a Christian leader in his relationship with those entrusted to his charge" (Yemi, 2002). The New Testament writer following the example of the Lord Jesus knew that the welfare and well-being of the people of God should be the major concern of Christian leaders as we read in Phil. 1:3-11, 1 Thess. 2:7-8, 2 Cor. 11:28. Peter was told by the risen Lord to shepherd the flock (John 21:15) and in his ministry. Shepherding was not lost for his first epistle he declared: "you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:25).

Shepherding today is not limited to the pastors, it is extend to all leaders either elders, deacons, church staff, volunteers and those who are spiritually and relationally apt (Dag, 2013). It is all about building relationship to take care of the sick, hungry, those hurt, and the vulnerable. The role of being a shepherd is a serious role to God for people to carry out effectively and faithfully (*Ibid*). Good shepherds like kings David Hezekiah, Jesus' disciples, and men like Timothy and Titus are to be made role model in the church toady through showing selfless love and sacrifice of one's time, effort, money and resources to care for those who need help. The love shown through shepherding care creates an environment that people want to be a part of, and partake. This counter-culture can be hated by those who are outside, but will always lead to a discussion on why these (Shepherds) are going above and beyond the call of duty to care for one another. Shepherding through the family unity and church congregation is an amazing way to preach the gospel implicitly and to start conversation on sharing the gospel explicitly (*Ibid*).

Shepherding Mission of the Church

The Shepherding mission of the Church is a profound and multifaceted aspect of its identity and purpose. This mission is rooted in the teachings of Jesus

Christ and encompasses the call to guide, nurture, and protect the faithful while also reaching out to those who are lost or in need. In his work "Shepherding and Human promotion in Psalm 23: Lessons for Pastoral Ministry" Luke Emehiele Ijezie, observed that Shepherding mission of the Church has to do with the "pastoral ministry of the Church which the Shepherding leadership of the Divine Shepherd is made present to the people of God. The Good Shepherd per excellence is Jesus Christ and the ordained ministers are seen as his human representatives" (Ijezie, 2013).

To understand the shepherding mission of the Church let me draw our attention to the fact that "it is important that we consider the metaphor of shepherd, to use to understand the role of a pastor or those placed in charge of the people of God, we are aware of what the ancient role of the shepherd entails. Otherwise, we risk shaping our understanding of this role by our contemporary methods" (Dykstra, 2005), of shepherding, where the shepherd does not develop a bond to the sheep and becomes someone who drives their sheep by the use of dogs and helicopters" (Derek, 1997). The role of the shepherd in the ancient near east would require the shepherd to spend long stretches of time alone, working autonomously, and to be courageous when it was required to protect the sheep from predators. The shepherds would get to know their sheep and call them by name or with specific clicking sounds" (Craig, 2014). The shepherd would lead his sheep in time of very little rain, across great distances to places where there was ample food and water (Lucas, 2000). The shepherd would sleep with the sheep, and the sheep would follow him because they knew and trusted the shepherd (Craig, 2014).

The role of the Pastor, therefore, requires a continuous sacrificial lifestyle that does not shy away from suffering and hardship, whilst still upholding our eternal hope in Jesus. The job of the Pastor is to work in the best interest of the people for whom they take care. This requires them not to use the people of the Church as a means for free meals, repairing of the car or odd jobs around the house etc. This care comes in the form of encouraging those who are weak and struggling, and offering support. There needs to be an affirmation of their place in the family of Christ. The pastor must also facilitate and allow time for the healing of those who have been wounded, both emotionally and physically. The pastor can help facilitate the financial support for those in the Church who are lacking and needy. Pastors need to become leaders who operate simultaneously in an authoritative, yet rational manner. They must act considering the fact that" God is the shepherd overall and will care for those belonging to Him, despite the diligence or the lack of it of the pastor" (Onwubiko, 2004).

The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church States that the mission of the Church is to proclaim and establish the Kingdom of God, which began with Jesus (CCC 848). The Second Vatican Council reinforced this idea, asserting that the Church's mission is to reveal and communicate God's love to

all nations, recognizing the ongoing need for evangelization in a world that often remains unaware of the Gospel message (*Dei Verbum* 10).

Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *Fathers of the Church* (Benedict XVI 2008), reiterates the urgency of evangelization in light of modern challenges, emphasizing that the Shepherding mission of the Church is to call all peoples to salvation through Christ (*Ibid*). He highlights that the Shepherding mission is essential for the Church, as it reflects her very nature and purpose (*Ibid*).

Evangelii Nuntiandi articulates a comprehensive vision of the Church's mission, emphasizing that evangelization is integral to her identity. The Church is called to proclaim the Gospel in diverse contexts, engaging with the world while remaining faithful to the message of Christ. This mission is a collective endeavor, involving all members of the Church, and is essential for the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity (*EN* no. 16). Scholars, whether directly or indirectly, categorize shepherding mission into the following ministries:

a. Teaching Ministry

For Tod (2003), as a pastor pastoring the flock of God, teaching ministry cannot be overemphasized. "The pastor-teacher focuses on communicating the word of God, the spiritual food, to the congregation for understanding and application-by lecture questions, discussion, explanations and demonstrations. The spiritual food makes normal health, growth and living possible. There are various styles of teaching, but the task is always the same; to get the word of God into the lives of the congregation.

Shepherds were very common in Bible times, and we have many illustrations of what a shepherd does from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus who is the Good shepherd brought the teaching aspect in ministry when He went ashore, "He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). St. Paul did not omit the teaching ministry of the Church when he writes in Ephesians 4:11-12 that God "gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors, and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." To watch over the people means to teach them so as to be vigilant and alert, so that danger does not overtake those for whom one is responsible. The leaders teach the word and watch over souls, fulfilling their great responsibility joyfully" (*Ibid*).

This ministry of teaching is comparable to feeding the sheep, is the most prominent and most important function of the shepherd. It is listed foremost among the shepherd's functions in Ezekiel 34, Psalm 23, and John 21. John 10 has the same emphasis - the shepherd leads the sheep to pasture. Acts 20 speaks of guarding and in this context, guarding is done by teaching truth and warning against error. I Peter 5 stressed that a shepherd must have the eagerness to

shepherd his own flock and warns against the heavy – handed, dictatorial attitude (*Ibid*).

b. Caring Ministry

The teaching in Ezekiel 34, Psalms 23 as well as that of Jesus in John 10 show that one of the roles of a shepherd is the visible signs of God's care and concern for His people. When Jesus said: He is the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for His sheep; He sets the standard for all who are called to be shepherds ((Hahn, 2007).

According to Hahn, one key theme that emerges from the writings of theologians on shepherding is the importance of relational shepherding. They emphasize the need for pastoral agents to develop deep relationships with their congregations, providing emotional, spiritual, and practical support in times of need. This relational approach to shepherding mission of the Church is nothing but the care the Pastoral Agents give that makes the individuals feel valued, supported and cared for (*Ibid*). Quoting St. Augustine in his paper presented on the occasion of CIWA Patron day 2023 titled “The significance of Pastoral Ministry in the Development of St. Augustine's Theological Achievements: Implications\ for studies in CIWA, Samuel P. Gwimi states, 'For Augustine, the primary duty of the Pastor is to bring the flock to Christ, the one shepherd. It is Christ who speaks and the same Christ who feeds, and so, the ecclesial ministry finds its source in the Good Shepherd (Gwimi, 2023).

The caring aspect of the shepherding ministry provides essential pastoral support to individuals within the community. This includes counseling, spiritual guidance, and emotional support during times of joy, sorrow, or crisis. By care giving the Pastoral Agents after a listening ear, they in turn offer a compassionate presence and wise counsel, help individuals navigate life's challenges and deepen their spiritual journey. Makutu (2022) accepted that care-giving in shepherding mission of the Church partake in restoring, healing and caring for those that are wounded in the society when he said “shepherding motif is the call to be caregivers of our time. Just like it was in the Old Testament and especially in the case of Ezekiel 34, a lot of people (sheep) in the contemporary world are being wounded, especially due to ethical decisions and choices made. For instance, in issues of infertility due to the cultural demand in any setting, a couple who are unable to have children might end up being exposed to a new technological way of getting children. Some of these are expensive in terms of finances. Other methods are emotionally and psychologically disturbing. In addition, in some cases, the children do not even come. In other cases, pre-determination of the sex or gender of the child may turn the opposite, and so the people end up wounded emotionally” (*Ibid*).

The Good Shepherd in sending the 12 in Matthew Chapter 10 and letter the 70 in Luke's gospel chapter 10 to go ahead of him in telling the good news of the kingdom of God and to minister to the needs of the people emphasizes the

ministry of healing in the shepherding mission of the Church. According to Aaron (2005) healing must not be limited to stereotyped, but it must reach the totality of the person. Healing for him should touch the body, mind and soul. It is practical and spiritual in its nature.

c. Healing Ministry

Scripture presents Jesus as one who toured through all towns and villages teaching, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness" (Matt 9:35). This healing ministry ushered in a new lease of life, the messianic era (reign) announced by the Old Testament prophecy; "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed... (Lk 7:22-23). The Old Testament showed God's constant concern for the well-being of his people. A liberating God, a God that sets his people free. A similar concern for the poor, the sick etc. was concretized by Jesus in the New Testament. The Church continued Christ's ministry of healing through the sacrament of anointing of the sick. During the first ten centuries, it functioned more as a sacrament of healing, than a preparation for death. But from the eleventh century to the Second Vatican Council, it was seen exclusively as such a preparation, and hence, the name "last Anointing or *Extreme Unction*".

The Second Vatican Council in its constitution on the Sacred Liturgy has officially provided another and more fitting" name, "Anointing of the sick", a name that contracts the idea formerly suggested to priests and faithful alike by the term "last", that "the sacrament should be received only in very great danger of death or even at the moment of dying." The anointing of the sick is now for the professed purpose of healing the whole man. In line with this re-orientation of the Sacrament's purpose, it is to be administered not just to those in danger of death, but also to any one suffering from a serious illness or even in an old age situation (Anyanwu, 1992).

Anderson (1990) did not see healing ministry "as when one begins to cast and bind, rather it is a "ministry of giving proper pastoral care as a shepherd to people, helping them become independent in faith in a healthy.

Hope and Challenges for Pastoral Agents

The shepherding mission of the Church is a profound and multifaceted aspect of its identity and purpose. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ, this mission encompasses the call to guide, nurture, and protect the faithful while also reaching out to those who are lost or in need. The Church's shepherding role is not without its challenges, particularly in a rapidly changing world. Let us see, the hope of the Pastoral Agents in this mission and then delve into the challenges associated with it.

A. Hope of Pastoral Agents

The Church's shepherding mission is particularly relevant in addressing the challenges faced by contemporary society. In a society marked by despair,

confusion, and moral relativism, the Church offers a message of hope and truth. Pope Benedict XIV noted that the Church's duty to proclaim the Gospel is essential, especially in a time when many are abandoning their faith (*Motu Proprio*, 2010). The Church's shepherding mission serves as a beacon of hope for those searching for meaning and direction. According to Dag “the shepherding mission by its very nature gives opportunity for Pastoral Agents to provide pastoral care and support to individuals grappling with anxiety, depression, grief, trauma, and various mental health conditions” (Dag, 2013).

Another area pointed out by St. Pope John Paul II to be considered for the Pastoral Agents in shepherding ministry is the continuous offer in integral human development. The shepherding “mission extends beyond spiritual care to encompass the holistic development of individuals (McGervey, 2024). This commitment to integral human development reflects the pastoral agents' hope for a world where every person can flourish in body, mind and spirit.

B. Challenges

While the shepherding mission can be rewarding, it also comes with its fair share of challenges. The following challenges are considered in this study.

i. Cultural Challenge

Cultural challenge is a challenge shepherding mission cannot avoid but must navigate diverse cultural contexts that influence how the Gospel is received. According to Ogun, “the major challenge passed by culture is the attention paid to the external more than internal dynamics of the way of life of people” (Ogun 2019) often times, these are superficial and provisional. What is real gives way to appearances (EG. 62). Quoting St. Pope John Paul II, he emphasized the need for the Church to adapt its evangelization efforts to different socio-Cultural environment (Ogun, 2019). This requires sensitivity and understanding as well as a willingness to engage in dialogue with those of different beliefs.

ii. Internal Challenges

The Church also faces internal challenges that can hinder its shepherding mission. Issues such as division, scandals, and divisions within the Church can undermine its credibility and effectiveness in reaching out to the faithful and the wider community. The Church must continually strive for renewal and reform to fulfill its mission authentically.

iii. Leadership

This is another threat to the shepherding mission. Our leaders play a crucial role in the shepherding mission of the Church. They are called to be shepherds of their flock, guiding and nurturing the faithful with love and compassion. Quoting St. Pope John Paul II in his keynote address to the bishops of the United States, Kaigama (2019), emphasized the fundamental duty of Bishops to evangelize and communicate divine life through the sacrament. The laity also has a vital role in the Church's shepherding mission. All baptized Christians

are called to be active participants in the Church's mission, sharing the Good News and highlighting the importance of the laity's involvement in promoting justice and integral liberation (*Libertatis Consecientia*, 63).

iv. Time and Availability

Shepherds in this ministry often face the challenge of balancing their pastoral responsibilities with other commitments, such as family work, and personal needs. Meeting the diverse needs of individuals within the congregation requires significant time and availability, leading to potential burnout or neglect of personal well-being.

Recommendations

After a careful study of the above subject matter the following recommendations are made.

1. For effective and efficiency in the Shepherding Mission of the Church, every Pastoral Agents should be trained according to the vision of the Church before going into the field.
2. Because of the peculiarity in the particular Churches in terms of Culture and civilisation, local Ordinaries should establish Schools of Evangelisation to accommodate and encourage effective participation of the non-Ordained in the mission.
3. To encourage Pastoral Agents who are actively involved in the mission of the Church, incentives, either in cash or in kind is recommended. This can be done to the individual or to them as a group to give them a sense of belonging.
4. Another recommendation very important here is the 4th level of Pastoral Spiral Circle Method of Pastoral Theologians. This level concerns itself with Pastoral action plan which is considered good enough for implementation. It is expected at this level that the recommendations are to be implemented for the period of five years before an evaluation is made.

Conclusion

The Shepherding mission of the Church is dynamic and essential in the aspect of its identity. It is rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ the good Shepherd whose mission is to offer hope to individuals and communities seeking spiritual nourishment and guidance. While the Church faces significant Challenges in a secularized and pluralistic world, let the Pastoral Agents never relent on the call that they should remain committed to the mission like their Lord and Master Jesus Christ, bearing in mind that it was not easy for Jesus and will never be easy for any generation.

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