



We love this church family! We feel called to use the very best of what God gives us to shepherd this family to love God, love each other, and love the world. As a church, we are called to grow up *together* to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.¹ Living out that calling in a family that is full of diverse convictions and experiences is anything but easy. However, we are better for pursuing it. Our discernment question about women and leadership brought the challenge and importance of this calling into sharp focus. Your shepherds did not begin the year with a pre-determined outcome in mind. We did not and do not always see everything the same way ourselves. However, we remain together. We are united in our love for each other, our conviction on what matters most, and our common desire to discern God's will for this family.

As shepherds, we first asked, does God give freedom for shepherd leadership that includes women and men? We all committed to study and prayer, and a supermajority² of shepherds believe that God gives us this freedom. For anyone looking to understand more about our conviction, we will be offering a shepherd-led class on Wednesday, November 30th, and Sunday, December 4th. We encourage you to reach out individually as well for study and dialogue.

We struggled together to discern the best way forward for the whole family. The shepherds unanimously agreed that Woodmont should be more inclusive of the gifts, voices, and wisdom of women. Here are three ways we feel compelled to pursue the freedom we have in Christ immediately.

1. Make the existing Executive, Vision, and Pastoral leadership teams more accessible to gifted women and men.³
2. Experience the preaching/teaching gifts of both men and women.⁴
3. Welcome more involvement from current shepherd spouses in counsel and pastoral care.

When it comes to shepherding Woodmont in this season, we discerned the best way to honor our entire family and the freedom we find from Scripture is to utilize shepherding couples. We believe spouses are partners in ministry and not prerequisites for a position. When we asked the church, what is the primary role of a shepherd? The most frequently cited answers were "knowing the flock" and "pastoral care." We believe shepherding couples will help us excel in both callings. We believe shepherding couples will offer the broadest path possible to both unity and excellent pastoral care. There is a significant part of our family struggling with the idea of women as shepherds. We pray the oneness in marriage that supersedes other roles will be helpful to you. There is also a significant part of our family struggling to embrace anything that feels like less than equality. We pray you see and experience our commitment to shared leadership. All of us need spiritual guides and many of us have experiences of a Godly couple who led us to look more like Jesus. We recognize this is not a perfect model and shepherding couples will create questions, challenges, and opportunities. We commit to working through them as a family. In the handout of today's announcement, you will find a few of the questions we've already started working on.

¹ Ephesians 2:21-22.

² While we strive for unanimous agreement in all things, it is our practice to require agreement from at least 75% of shepherds.

³ These teams have included men and women as well as members and ministers for many years.

⁴ We believe there is broader freedom than what we currently exercise and that the church will benefit when gifted women share from the Word of God. Scripture bears witness to this truth in women who taught, prayed, and prophesied. (Acts 2:17-18, Acts 18:26, Luke 2:36, 1 Corinthians 11:5, Matthew 28:5-10.)

We don't believe we are ready to immediately begin a new shepherd selection process. We ask for some time to address what matters most in our family. We anticipate beginning a new selection process sometime next year. We will continue working on the details of this shepherding model in collaboration with members of our church family. Shepherding only works when we are willing to be shepherded. We humbly ask that you continue along the journey with us as we seek to grow in our love of God and neighbor.

Finally, we believe it is important for all of us to remember our first call. Our first call is not to figure out who should serve in the role of shepherd. We are called to embrace the transformative relationship that comes from knowing The Good Shepherd. Pray for our family in this season. Renew your commitment to live in harmony with your sisters and brothers so that the world might know we are disciples of Jesus.

Questions:

I've never heard of this model. Do other churches use it? What benefit would it bring?

Yes, there are other churches working from this leadership model. We intend to learn from those churches. Here are a few of the benefits we anticipate: (1) It addresses the desire for more female pastoral care. (2) It brings the combined strengths and gifts of partnership into fuller service. (3) It honors the intent of shared partnership in the creation. (4) Pastoral care is enhanced and expanded in husband/wife teams.

What about single people who possess shepherding gifts? Or those who have a spouse uninterested in serving together?

We strive to value every spiritual gift in everyone. We acknowledge the church (early or modern) has not always succeeded in this aim. We have three sub-teams within our shepherd group currently in place (Executive, Vision, Pastoral) that include both male and female lay leaders regardless of marital status. We aim to make these teams more accessible and robust. Simply put, if you know anyone with strong pastoral gifts, we need them on the pastoral team (Likewise, with related gifts for the vision and executive teams). We pray the proposed path demonstrates our commitment to shared leadership.

I am struggling to embrace women as shepherds, how is this any different?

Shepherding couples honors the intent of shared partnership in the creation. They also embrace the oneness in a marriage that supersedes other roles. Furthermore, shepherding couples acknowledge the contributions that spouses already make to shepherding in the life of the church. Priscilla and Aquilla embody the kind of work we envision in shepherding people. (Acts 18:26)

I am strongly convicted that women serving as shepherds is an issue of equality, doesn't shepherd couples stop short of that?

First, we caution against conflating worth with gifts/roles. We never want to be guilty of suggesting that people who do not occupy certain roles or gifts are somehow worth less. We do understand there are limitations in this path and wrestled with them ourselves. Ultimately, we chose to not exercise all freedom in consideration of our brothers and sisters with differing beliefs. Our discernment question was not to decide what is best for all churches for all times. We believe the most beneficial step for the whole family is to pursue shepherding couples.

What will this look like for existing shepherds who were not nominated as a couple?

We have always required all existing shepherds to be reaffirmed in every selection process. We believe the next shepherd selection process should include new nominations that do not automatically assume future service.