

A FLOCK WITHOUT A SHEPHERD: FRAGMENTED PASTORAL
PRESENCE IN PULPIT SUPPLY

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Introduction

North American Christianity has faced unprecedented trials in recent years, including the COVID–19 pandemic, the exposure of influential pastors’ and authors’ hidden sins, the spread of conflicting ideologies within churches, and the closure of many congregations due to declining attendance and financial strain. A glaring and increasingly threatening issue facing the North American church in the twenty-first century is the rapid rise in churches that have lost their pastoral leadership, whether due to retirement, career changes, or other reasons. Countless congregations and church boards lack leadership, financial resources, spiritual fervency, and are constrained by multiple contributing factors. Essentially, these churches have become flocks without shepherds. Studies conducted on the state of the modern church in Canada reveal that by 2036, half of the evangelical pastorate across the nation will be of retirement age.¹ If all these pastors were to retire within the same year, the evangelical church would require approximately 625 new pastors annually over the next twelve years to prevent vacancies due to retirement alone, excluding additional losses from burnout, career transitions, or misconduct.² However, it would be a miracle for every pulpit to remain filled, given the insufficient number of seminary graduates in pastoral ministry across North America.³ The reasons for this

1. Hiemstra, “Waking Up,” 42
2. Hiemstra, “Waking Up,” 42.
3. Hiemstra, “Waking Up,” 42; Veldkamp, “Laborers Are Few.”

discrepancy lie beyond the scope of this paper, but the reality is clear: Churches need pastors, and too few are being trained or are available.

In response to this issue, pastors, lay ministers, and seminarians have stepped in to support pastorless congregations by preaching, leading worship, or providing general oversight on Sundays when those churches would otherwise be without pastoral leadership. I will refer to this phenomenon as “pulpit supply.” For some congregations, this reliance on the help of other pastors and lay preachers is a perpetual reality. As stated above, many churches across North America are experiencing a loss of pastoral leadership within their congregation. From my own experience as a pulpit supply minister, this reality is one that can be detrimental to the health, witness, and vitality of a congregation. Whether churches are content with pulpit supply or view it as an imperfect but necessary solution, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of this model of ministry in shepherding a community of believers and its faithfulness to the essential nature of a pastor.⁴ Furthermore, one must consider and analyze the implications for the spiritual formation of congregations and the alternative avenues churches might pursue in place of it.

Before offering some evaluations of pulpit supply and its implications for congregations, I will begin with a short exposition on the phenomenon of pulpit supply. I will next examine the role of a pastor from a biblical and theological perspective of the pastor as shepherd. Having outlined my understanding of pastoral ministry within this framework, I will then explore the phenomenological experiences of congregations to assess whether

4. This paper depends on an ecclesiological perspective concerning the purpose of the community of believers and the nature of the Christian life. This topic remains deeply important for the modern church because ecclesial identity has rapidly transformed in recent years; however, a full exposition falls outside the scope of this study. Therefore, in this paper, I adopt an ecclesiological perspective that understands the Christian life as communal, physically embodied, dependent upon the *other*, and mediated through Christ’s presence by the Holy Spirit and the sacraments (namely baptism and the Lord’s Supper). For examples of this ecclesiological perspective, see Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27–47; *Sanctorum Communio*, 122–289.

this ideal is realized in contexts of pulpit supply. I will offer an account of my own experience as a pulpit supply minister over the past three years, with particular attention given to my time at Mimico Presbyterian Church in Etobicoke, Ontario. This account includes my reflections on spiritual community and Sunday worship, alongside the role and operation of pulpit supply. Next, I will look at the ministry model of pulpit supply through the phenomenological concept of internal time-consciousness. From this, I will offer insight into how individuals may be affected by the fragmented pastoral presence inherent in churches that rely fully on pulpit supply. I will argue that, although pulpit supply may serve an important and necessary role in certain circumstances, it cannot function as a viable long-term model for church ministry. By fragmenting pastoral presence, this model risks leaving congregations spiritually vulnerable, like sheep without a shepherd to consistently provide, protect, guide, and care for them.

Defining the Phenomenon: What Is Pulpit Supply?

Pulpit supply is often understood as the practice of ministers leading congregations on a rotating basis or filling in for the pastor of a congregation for any reason on a given Sunday. The phenomenon of pastors or preachers who lead congregations on a rotating basis, or are brought in for a particular Sunday, is not a new reality in Christianity. Jesus Christ himself may be characterized as an itinerant preacher, as evidenced by his movement from place to place, where he proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come and preached repentance (e.g., Matt 9:35; Mark 1:38–39; and Luke 8:1–3).⁵ A more modern example of this model of ministry is found in the eighteenth-century Methodist movement under the original leadership of John Wesley, which continues to function today.⁶ The Methodist movement, which was an outgrowth of the Anglican tradition, has been and conti-

5. For a discussion of Jesus' model of itinerancy, see Wright, *Jesus*, 184–85.

6. Chapman, "Methodism," 317.

nues to be fundamentally characterized by the concept of itinerancy. Itinerancy was a foundational characteristic of the movement and refers to “the practice of moving ministers, through appointment, to specific places where their services are needed and can best be used.”⁷ In the early years of the movement, ministers were regarded as “circuit riders,” meaning that they had a geographical region, or circuit, in which they would travel around serving multiple congregations in preaching and leadership. Methodist ministry was founded upon this model of perpetual movement.⁸ However, this model of ministry began to gradually transform over time. Dennis Campbell explains:

To this day all appointments of Methodist ministers are annual. Well into the twentieth century, preachers and their families would not know where they would be living and working until the bishop read the appointments at the end of the annual conference. Then they would pack up and move to the next place of service.⁹

The continual movement of Methodist pastors, or itinerancy, is central to their ministry, shaping both the structure of congregational leadership and the ongoing practice of pastoral service rooted in historical tradition. In sum, this discussion illustrates a ministerial model defined by rotation, mobility, and adaptability that is similar in some respects to the phenomenon of pulpit supply.

While pulpit supply and Methodist itinerancy share similarities in function, namely, ministers moving between congregations, they differ significantly in purpose, duration, and organization. Methodist itinerancy is rooted in historical tradition and theological calling, where ministers would spend at least one year with a congregation, whereas itinerancy in pulpit supply arises primarily from practical necessity, and congregations may have a new minister each Sunday. This distinction highlights that, although both involve movement of ministers, pulpit supply operates under different motivations and structures, which will

7. Campbell, “Ministry,” 275.

8. Campbell, “Ministry,” 275.

9. Campbell, “Ministry,” 275.

be defined in the following section. The purpose of the above example is to clarify what pulpit supply is not, setting it apart from other ministerial models that share some functional similarities, and to make it clear exactly what the phenomenon of pulpit supply is. Generally, pulpit supply refers to a form of ministry in which churches receive temporary pastoral support due to scheduling conflicts, sabbaticals, emergencies, or pastoral vacancies. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on pulpit supply specifically serving congregations that do not have a permanent pastor. Individuals serving in this capacity typically minister for a single Sunday, or on rare occasions for a few consecutive Sundays, and are given an honorarium for their service but might have no formal relationship with the church or even denomination.¹⁰ If a church operates in this manner due to a pastoral vacancy, a specific consequence often follows. Since supply ministers are typically present for only one Sunday at a time, the congregation lacks formal pastoral and theological guidance, leadership, and care between visits. This situation is compounded by the possibility of a different minister each week. At its core, the phenomenon is marked by fragmentation and disruption in both pastoral oversight and spiritual development. This is not to suggest that congregations without consistent pastoral leadership are destitute, but rather like a sheep without a shepherd, congregations might become spiritually vulnerable and lost. Congregations without pastoral leadership may still experience spiritual growth, but the conditions for that growth are inevitably more challenging.

While many congregations may find this situation less than ideal, some churches are content with this approach to ministry. A church community I have observed remained content for several years after its lead pastor retired during the pandemic, relying on a different speaker each Sunday and using YouTube videos for worship. One board member even remarked, “Why do we need to bring a pastor on staff? This is good enough, and people are content.” I found this surprising, as the church did not appear to be cultivating a spiritually vibrant community marked by

10. “Pulpit Supply.”

ongoing individual and corporate growth, formation, and meaningful engagement with the surrounding community. To be sure, churches with full-time pastors can exhibit similar patterns of stagnation; however, in this context, the absence of consistent pastoral presence appeared to contribute to a broader sense of spiritual and communal drift.

Although the phenomenon of pulpit supply is a reality in numerous churches and denominations, it is important to note that this experience is not a pervasive reality in ecclesial practice. Nevertheless, this reality does exist, and there are congregations and individuals who regard pulpit supply as an adequate way of functioning as a church. Precisely because this model is both present and, in some cases, accepted, it warrants careful evaluation. To that end, I now turn to a biblical and theological examination of the role and duty of a pastor, which will provide the necessary framework for assessing the phenomenological account of pulpit supply that will follow.

A Biblical and Theological Framework of Pastoral Ministry

To understand what it means to be a “pastor” biblically, this section will examine 1 Pet 5:1–4. The reason for selecting this passage, out of the many throughout Scripture that reflect godly leadership, is its emphasis on the metaphor of church leaders as “shepherds.” In 1 Pet 5:1–4, Peter likens the role and responsibilities of church leaders to that of a shepherd caring for their sheep. This imagery is further reinforced by Jesus himself, who declares to the Pharisees:

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:14–16 NIV).

Here, Jesus associates himself with the imagery of a shepherd, which was a common metaphor to describe the leaders of God’s

chosen people throughout the Old Testament.¹¹ As Jack Vancil explains,

As a compassionate and trustworthy shepherd, his mission and quality of leadership are marked by a willingness to die for the sheep (v 11; cf. 1 Sam 17:34–35). The author has specifically identified the mission and death of Jesus with his role as a shepherd by using ideas which look back to the Davidic shepherd of Ezek 34:11–16, 23–24.¹²

Ultimately, Jesus' life and ministry exemplify the kind of godly leadership associated with the shepherd metaphor. This understanding frames Christ's command to Peter in John 21:17 to feed his sheep, linking pastoral responsibility directly to shepherd-like care and sacrifice.

Peter picks up the use of the shepherd metaphor in these passages and exhorts church leaders to serve God's people with the weight and responsibility embedded in this imagery.¹³ An ancillary but noteworthy reason for focusing on the shepherd imagery in examining a pastor's duties is rooted in the etymology of the title itself. The word "pastor" is a direct transliteration of the Latin term for "shepherd."¹⁴ Whether explicitly or implicitly, the church has consistently associated the work, office, and responsibilities of a pastor with the care and guidance symbolized by a shepherd. With this rationale for examining the pastor as a shepherd, I will now turn to an exegetical overview of the two selected passages to highlight the essential aspects of shepherd-like leadership. Following this analysis, I will integrate these findings with broader biblical theology to explore a fuller conceptualization of pastoral ministry.

Leading like a Shepherd

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed:
Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over

11. Vancil, "Sheep," 1189–90.

12. Vancil, "Sheep," 1190.

13. Vancil, "Sheep," 1190.

14. Resane, "Leadership," 2.

them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Pet 5:1–4 NIV).

This passage appears at the conclusion of Peter's letter, as he shifts from discussing suffering and the Christian life (1 Pet 4:12–19) to addressing church leaders directly, instructing them on how to conduct themselves in relation to those in Christ under their care. In verse one, Peter begins this exhortation not by asserting his authority as an apostle or firsthand disciple of Christ, but by appealing to the elders (πρεσβύτερος)¹⁵ of the church on the basis of their shared responsibility, identifying himself as a fellow elder.¹⁶ In verse two, Peter establishes the central imperative of his exhortation, calling the elders of the church to conduct themselves as watchful shepherds of God's flock. As I. Howard Marshall observes, Peter draws not from household imagery but from the field, invoking the rich Jewish tradition in which God is depicted as the shepherd of his people and their leaders as "undershepherds."¹⁷ However, it is helpful to ask, what is involved in the work of shepherding? The work of shepherds in the ancient Near East was both dangerous and demanding, requiring not only physical endurance but also a distinct character marked by attentiveness, courage, and devotion.¹⁸

The work of shepherds was centred around four core responsibilities: provision, protection, guidance, and care. The shepherd of a flock was solely responsible for ensuring the provision of the sheep's physical needs, such as water and food (cf. Ps 23).¹⁹ Timothy Laniak articulates that shepherds were responsible for ensuring the continual provision of their flock, carefully manag-

15. John Calvin notes that the titles for the leaders of the church within the New Testament period were interchangeable and that they should be viewed synonymously; Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 314.

16. Marshall, *1 Peter*, 161.

17. Marshall, *1 Peter*, 162.

18. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 52.

19. Vancil, "Sheep," 1187.

ing their access to food, water, and rest.²⁰ This task required more than simply leading sheep to pasture; it demanded attentiveness to timing, environment, the varying needs within the flock, and the individual animals themselves.²¹ A shepherd's devotion and attentiveness to the flock is displayed in the fact that they typically knew each of their sheep by name, revealing a relational care and presence between that of a shepherd and their sheep (cf. John 10:14).²² A good shepherd was marked by their ability to exercise discernment in knowing when to move, where to graze, and how to avoid both scarcity and overuse of resources.²³

To fulfill these responsibilities, shepherds remained with their flocks both day and night, embodying a continuous presence that was intrinsic to faithful shepherding.²⁴ This devotion was not incidental but essential, as the wellbeing of the flock depended on the shepherd's ongoing provision. Shepherds protected their flocks through constant vigilance, physically guarding them from predators and thieves, guiding them along safe paths, monitoring and counting each animal, shielding vulnerable sheep, and ensuring security against harsh environmental conditions (cf. 1 Sam 17:34–35).²⁵ Their protective work was continuous, active, and often sacrificial, as scholars even note that in antiquity shepherds would sleep across the entrance of the fold/pen acting as a physical gate protecting the sheep (cf. John 10:9).²⁶ Furthermore, shepherds led their flocks intentionally, often positioning themselves at the front to direct the sheep along safe paths while preventing them from wandering into danger.²⁷ Their guidance was not merely physical but strategic and attentive as the shepherd oversaw the provision, protection, and care of the flock.

20. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 50.

21. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 50.

22. Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 386.

23. Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 386.

24. Vancil, "Sheep."

25. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 50–52.

26. Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 386.

27. Resane, "Leadership," 5.

The image of a shepherd portrays a leader who provides, protects, guides, and cares with attentiveness and compassion. Shepherds ensure the flock's physical needs are met, guard them from threats, lead them along safe paths, and attend to the vulnerable. Their leadership requires continuous presence, discernment, and relational engagement, exercising authority for the flock's betterment. The shepherd embodies selfless, vigilant, and skillful care, creating security and enabling the flock to thrive. This is the historical image that Peter is drawing against in his imperative to the leaders of the church to shepherd God's flock—to be shepherds that provide, care, watch over, protect, and know the sheep that have been entrusted to them as undershepherds.

Following the imperative to shepherd, Peter emphasizes the attitude and character required of church leaders.²⁸ Elders are to serve willingly and eagerly, modelling their lives as examples for the congregation rather than exercising authority in a domineering way.²⁹ Leadership is to be relational and service-oriented, reflecting Christ's own example as the Chief Shepherd.³⁰ Leaders are accountable to Christ and are called to guide the flock with self-sacrifice, humility, and mutual respect, especially caring for marginalized or suffering members.³¹ Their authority is exercised not for personal gain but to cultivate the wellbeing, growth, and moral formation of the people entrusted to them, embodying the same qualities they seek to nurture in the congregation.³² Peter concludes his exhortation by reminding his fellow elders of the hope that they share in Christ and his return as the "Chief Shepherd" when they will receive crowns of unfading glory.

Pastoral Shepherding as Presence

The exegetical and historical overview above demonstrates that Scripture and the Christian tradition consistently understand pas-

28. Grudem, *1 Peter*, 249.

29. Marshall, *1 Peter*, 163–64.

30. Marshall, *1 Peter*, 164.

31. Marshall, *1 Peter*, 164.

32. Laniak, *Shepherds*, 206.

toral ministry through the analogy of shepherding. Within this shepherding framework, four primary pastoral functions emerge: provision, protection, guidance, and care. Underlying each of these responsibilities, however, is the pastor's presence. Pastoral presence both precedes and sustains every other aspect of ministry, providing the relational context in which provision, protection, guidance, and care become meaningful and effective. Eugene Peterson captures this dynamic when he says,

The pastor's question is, "Who are these particular people, and how can I be with them in such a way that they can become what God is making them?" My job is simply to be there, teaching, preaching Scripture as well as I can, and being honest with them, not doing anything to interfere with what the Spirit is shaping in them.³³

The pastor's task is to be with the flock attentively, to discern how God is shaping both the individuals and the community, and to allow that work to unfold without interference. Presence, in this sense, is both relational and spiritual as it involves paying sustained attention to the needs, struggles, and growth of the people under one's care, embodying faithful, everyday attentiveness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reinforces this understanding by emphasizing that central to the work of a pastor is their immersion in the life of the community through prayer, listening, and intercession. Bonhoeffer expresses the belief that the pastor must devote time to intercessory prayer on behalf of the congregation, a discipline that is indispensable for effective ministry, because the wellbeing of the community depends on the pastor's attentiveness to God as well as to the people.³⁴ He emphasizes that pastoral care is marked by the combination of listening and speaking the Word.³⁵ It demands patience, humility, and a willingness to engage with the ordinary and often mundane realities of the congregation's life, reflecting a relational attentiveness that mirrors God's own care.³⁶ Once again, undergirding these practices en-

33. Peterson, *Contemplative Pastor*, 4.

34. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 91.

35. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

36. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

tails a continuity of presence from the pastor within the life of their community, leaving no room for a detached style of leadership that is individualistic or self-focused, but rather inherently selfless and for-one-another (*füreinander*).³⁷

This continuous presence is expressed not only in attentive listening and prayer but also in practical engagement with daily life. Peterson highlights that the pastor's work extends beyond the Sunday liturgy to the six days between Sundays, where faithful pastoral presence meets both the mundane and significant moments of everyday life. He writes, "It is the nature of pastoral life to be attentive to, immersed in, and appreciative of the everyday texture of people's lives—the buying and selling, the visiting and meeting, the going and coming. There are also crisis events to be met: birth and death, conversion and commitment, baptism and Eucharist, despair and celebration."³⁸ Here, Peterson highlights the essential aspect of pastoral ministry that extends beyond the pulpit and beyond the temporal reality that we call Sundays. In a pulpit supply model, however, the minister naturally remains absent for much of this intervening time, limiting the ability to cultivate the consistent relational presence through which pastors shepherd, guide, care for, and walk alongside a congregation in the rhythms of ordinary life. Bonhoeffer distinguishes these categories as "priestly" and "advisory."³⁹ Both Peterson and Bonhoeffer, although in very different contexts, highlight that pastoral ministry is more than preaching and more than administering the sacraments, as it is also a life of embedded presence with one's congregation. Peterson further notes that the central duty of pastoring is to keep the community attentive to God, and it is this duty that cannot be fragmented from Sunday to Sunday but must be done through daily relation with one's flock.⁴⁰ James K. A. Smith discusses the concept of "thick" practices, which further illuminates this point: The pastor's daily engagement, whether in prayer, Scripture study, or re-

37. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 178.

38. Peterson, *Contemplative Pastor*, 112.

39. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 248.

40. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 5.

lational ministry, forms habits that are “thick” and shape identity and desire for both the pastor and the congregation.⁴¹ Smith argues,

I suggest that the range of Christian practices “beyond Sunday” are best understood as extensions of the liturgical practices of gathered worship; they are important and formative because (and insofar as) they draw on the formative power of specifically liturgical practices.⁴²

Similarly, pastoral ministry can be seen as a kind of springboard: The structured leadership from the pulpit/platform, whether through preaching, teaching, or worship, can serve as the opening word in a conversation that continues beyond Sunday. It is the pastor’s ongoing presence, their attentive engagement in the everyday life of the flock, that sustains this extension, creating the environment in which “thick” practices form, and the community is nurtured over time.

Through this lens, pastoral presence is understood as a spiritual, relational, and practical aspect of shepherding God’s flock. The pastor is a constant companion to the flock, a guide and intercessor, a listener and teacher, present in both crises and ordinary life. Such presence cultivates trust, models humility and self-sacrifice, and ensures that leadership is exercised for the wellbeing of the community rather than for personal authority. As Bonhoeffer expresses, the pastor’s authority and effectiveness are rooted in faithful service and attentiveness, not extraordinary gifts, echoing the biblical metaphor of the shepherd who knows, protects, and tends the flock personally.⁴³ Ultimately, pastoral presence is the foundational posture from which the other dimensions of provision, protection, guidance, and care flow in shepherding God’s flock. It is both the medium and the measure of faithful pastoral ministry, embodying Christ’s own example as

41. The concept of “thick” practices derives from Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description,” though Smith applies the concept more directly to liturgy and the Christian life. See Geertz, *Interpretation*, 3–32; Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 75–80.

42. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 198.

43. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 107.

the good shepherd who is intimately acquainted with the needs, wounds, and potential of every member of the flock. This framework can be summarized as follows: The duty and responsibility of a pastor are that of a shepherd: to provide, protect, guide, and care for the flock of God through embodied presence within the community of believers, with the aim of directing their attention to God. This theological understanding of pastoral ministry provides the necessary framework for evaluating the phenomenon of pulpit supply.

Before continuing further, it is important to offer a clarifying note. The argument in the following sections will suggest that pulpit supply, as a model of ministry, tends toward fragmented pastoral presence, in which congregations risk becoming spiritually disoriented and, in a sense, wandering like sheep without a shepherd. At the same time, the implications of this analysis extend beyond the specific context of pulpit supply and may prove both convicting and relevant for churches, elders, leaders, and pastors more broadly.

Although this fragmentation might be most visibly expressed in congregations without a full-time minister, it is not limited to such settings. Even churches with resident pastors or established teams of clergy can, over time, develop patterns of sporadic, disrupted, or primarily task-oriented forms of shepherding. The danger emerges when pastoral ministry, regardless of its structural form, becomes shaped by routine and institutional expectation in such a way that the deeper calling to shepherd God's people is obscured or diminished. Ultimately, faithfulness in ministry is not determined by the number of pastors or the particular structure of ecclesial leadership, but by the extent to which those entrusted with pastoral care embody the ongoing duties of provision, guidance, protection, and care. In this way, all pastoral ministry is understood as participation in the work of undershepherds, who serve in faithful imitation of Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd.

A Phenomenological Analysis of Pulpit Supply

The analysis of pulpit supply will proceed in two stages. First, I will present an experiential account from my time serving as a pulpit supply minister at a church in Southern Ontario (hereafter “church A”) to develop a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.⁴⁴ In this way, pulpit supply will be examined both descriptively (as outlined earlier in my writing) and experientially. The second stage of this analysis will draw upon Edmund Husserl’s concept of internal time-consciousness in order to examine both the descriptive and experiential accounts of pulpit supply, which is admittedly an unusual application of Husserl’s concept.⁴⁵

The Pulpit Supply Experience

My involvement in the phenomenon of pulpit supply began on April 28, 2024, when I first served as a pulpit supply minister at a small church (“church B”) in Southern Ontario. At that stage in my ministry journey, I had only minimal homiletical experience, having preached on just a handful of occasions within the young adult’s group at my home church. As such, I approached this initial experience with pulpit supply as a new and largely unfamiliar

44. The names of churches and individuals referenced have been changed to protect their privacy.

45. I had originally intended for this paper to also utilize Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “habit” and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” to further explicate the phenomenological realities of pulpit supply, but that task is far too extensive for the present study. In brief, “habit” refers to embodied, pre-reflective “knowing in the body” formed through repetition and sustained interaction, while “habitus” describes the durable, generative dispositions shaped by repeated experience that structure perception, action, and expectation. Both concepts help to articulate how sustained pastoral presence contributes to the formation of stable spiritual patterns over time. In the context of pulpit supply, however, the discontinuity of pastoral presence disrupts the repeated, temporally extended encounters necessary for such formation, leaving spiritual instruction and care more fragmented and less integrated into enduring dispositions of faith. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 145–53; Bourdieu, *Outline*, 72–95.

iar form of ministry that lay outside my previous horizon of experience.

This opportunity arose unexpectedly. My roommate had been asked to preach that week but declined, as his uncle (who was serving as an interim pastor at the church during its recovery from significant loss following the COVID-19 pandemic) was unavailable due to a conflict with his other employment. Knowing I had some experience (albeit limited), my roommate invited me to step into the role. In that moment, I was presented with the opportunity to participate in pulpit supply, and I responded with a simple affirmation, “Sure!” At the time, I was nineteen years old, inexperienced but learning, and approaching ministry with a sense of openness, excitement, and immediacy, unshaped by the weight of any pastoral hardship or hurts. My response was not the result of extended deliberation but emerged within the immediacy of the situation, as a readiness to enter into the task as it was given. This initial “Yes” became a decisive moment, expanding the horizon of my ministerial experience and introducing me to forms of pastoral engagement that I had not previously anticipated.

Following this first sermon, my roommate’s uncle, an established pastor within his denomination with extensive experience in pulpit supply and in the not-for-profit sector, asked for permission to share my name and contact information with other churches in need throughout the Greater Toronto Area. In this way, what began as a singular, situated experience was taken up into a broader network of opportunities, extending and shaping my ongoing participation in the phenomenon of pulpit supply. Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of serving eight churches that do not have a full-time pastor on staff and have been given a unique perspective on and insights into the diversity of ecclesial expressions and experiences.

My most formative experiences with pulpit supply have come through church A, a Reformed congregation, where I have now preached over a dozen times. Only once were these experiences on consecutive Sundays. Almost every encounter in this setting has been marked by a profound sense of personal angst and pressure. My first time preaching there was riddled with confusion

and nervousness. Having grown up in a more modern Evangelical Protestant tradition, I was unaware that as the pulpit supply minister, I was responsible for preparing all the prayers, Scripture readings, and the order of service for a relatively high-liturgical congregation. I recall receiving an email from the lead elder the day before my sermon, asking if I had any of this prepared. I scrambled to my professor, a minister in that denomination, for guidance. I then proceeded the following day to lead an almost completely dissociated and robotic service. My newness to this tradition and the open horizon of experience and meaning making was not to my advantage but to my disadvantage. I clung to my iPad like it was a life raft and read word for word everything I had written in fear of “performing” the service wrong. That Sunday, I was given an honorarium of \$350 for essentially leading a group reading exercise. There was no relationship, no communal experience or meaning between the ten strangers and me. It was like being completely naked and vulnerable before them.

Those particular feelings of panic were unique to that occasion, but the underlying anxiety has been consistent and deeply spiritual. The deeper, ongoing anxiety arises from the fragmented nature of pulpit supply itself. My time with this congregation is severely limited. I am only gifted twenty minutes to speak into the lives of individuals who lack consistent pastoral presence six days out of the week. I have no awareness of what was preached the week prior, no knowledge of what will be preached the following week, and no ongoing relationship with the congregation to gauge their spiritual needs. My presence is discontinuous, fleeting, and disconnected from any sense of ecclesial continuity, spiritual growth, or communal formation. I do not know the joys, pains, struggles, or triumphs of those before me. In many ways, this experience is like being thrown into a debate with no understanding of the argument I am to defend.

In response to this discontinuity, I made a deliberate choice to focus my preaching on two constants: the good news of Jesus Christ and the hope of the resurrection and Christ’s second coming. I cannot ensure that my words build upon previous sermons or relate to the congregation’s lived experience. Yet, by anchoring my message in these enduring truths, I can trust that my lim-

ited, fragmented presence is not frivolously spent. Even in the absence of relational continuity or communal formation, the proclamation of the gospel ensures that Christ is magnified, and the words spoken retain eternal significance. Yet, if it is not me, if it is not one of the other pulpit supply ministers I do not know, then who will shepherd these people, even for just an hour? This awareness has been what keeps me returning to pulpit supply. It is the recognition that the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few and that these congregations often face immediate pastoral needs that may otherwise go unmet. Yet I also recognize that the care of the church does not finally rest upon my presence or labour alone but upon Christ, who continues to sustain his people in ways that often exceed the limits of formal pastoral ministry.

The perspective I have offered is from the side of a minister participating in this mode of pulpit supply. A more revealing and profound account, however, would likely come from a congregant who experiences it week after week: A minister who preaches to them—yet does not know their names—proclaims spiritual things to them—yet does not know their stories; he claims spiritual authority over them but is not truly their shepherd, but rather a hired hand. The experience of a congregant that I have described is only hypothetical and biased by my own experiences as the minister. A more thorough treatment and examination of this perspective should be undertaken in further research to provide a fuller account of what truly occurs in the experience from other perspectives and horizons. Unfortunately, for this paper, I was not able to conduct any qualitative research to round out my account.

Irrespective of one's perspective in experiencing this phenomenon, it becomes evident that provision and guidance are minimal and largely uniform, offered in a one-size-fits-all manner, while protection and care are almost entirely absent. The congregation receives the bare essentials of spiritual nourishment, yet the relational, protective, and formative dimensions of shepherding are missing. Congregants living within this reality have, in effect, become like a flock without a shepherd. If the congregation is indeed living as a flock without a shepherd, then

this reality is not only organizational in nature but also holds deep implications for the congregation's spiritual formation. These conditions not only affect the church as an organization in need of leadership and direction, but they are taken up into the inner life of the believer. Thus far, I have argued that the duty of a pastor, as a shepherd of God's flock, is to be present within the spiritual community—that is, to be present in provision, protection, guidance, and care. I have also shown that the phenomenon of pulpit supply is marked by fragmentation and discontinuity in both teaching and the shepherding that flows from pastoral leadership. However, up to this point, the examination of pulpit supply has remained largely descriptive and experientially biased, and the concept of pastors as shepherds has been outlined only at a theoretical level. Therefore, it is now necessary to analyze pulpit supply through a phenomenological lens in order to grasp how this model measures against the duty of shepherding God's flock. To carry out this analysis of the fragmentation and discontinuity ingrained in pulpit supply, the phenomenological concept of internal time-consciousness will be explored below.

Internal Time-Consciousness and Disrupted Pastoral Presence

In what I have described above, a central theme that emerges is the fragmentation of spiritual leadership that occurs in pulpit supply. It would be a misrepresentation to suggest that no shepherding occurs within congregations that rely on this model of ministry, as pastors are indeed present with the congregation during Sunday services, however brief that presence may be. Moreover, it is important to recognize that many congregations include individuals who exercise genuine pastoral gifting and contribute meaningfully to the care and support of others. More accurately, the concern lies not in an absolute absence of shepherding, nor in the suggestion that congregations are "lost" once the pastor leaves, but in the potential tension between concentrated moments of pastoral engagement and the extended periods of absence that follow. The issue, then, is one of continuity and sustained presence, between moments of explicit pastoral guidance and the ongoing rhythms of congregational life in which care is shared but not always consistently coordinated or embodied in a

singular pastoral presence. It is this imbalance that gives rise to the fragmentation of spiritual leadership characteristic of pulpit supply. Yet this fragmentation is not merely structural; it is also experiential and is more fully illuminated through Husserl's concept of internal time-consciousness.

The concept of internal time-consciousness claims that all experience unfolds within a unified temporal structure.⁴⁶ Husserl claims that every moment of experience includes the moments that have just passed (retention), the present (primal impression), and the anticipated future (protention), forming a continuous "living present" rather than isolated and fragmented moments of experience.⁴⁷ Therefore, one's consciousness is not simply a series of discontinuous events but is better understood as a flowing unity in which past, present, and future bind together as a unified and single experiential field.⁴⁸ This means that experiences are always temporally extended, meaning they exist along a temporal continuum in which the past informs the present and future, and they symbiotically function to provide an understanding of experience. Without this temporal structuring of consciousness, it would be impossible to experience unified objects or ongoing realities, since perception depends on the integration of successive moments.⁴⁹ Husserl uses the metaphor of a melody to illustrate this reality. Husserl explains:

We remember a melody, let us say, which in our youth we heard during a concert. Then it is obvious that the entire phenomenon of memory has, *mutatis mutandis*, exactly the same constitution as the perception of the melody. Like the perception, it has a favored point; to the now-point of the perception corresponds a now-point of the memory, and so on. We run through a melody in phantasy; we hear "as if" [*gleichsam*] first the first note, then the second, etc. At any given time, there is always a sound (or a tonal phase) in the now-point. The preceding sounds, however, are not erased from consciousness. With the apprehension of the sound appearing now, heard as if now, prima-

46. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 50.

47. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 51–52.

48. De Warren, "Time," 276.

49. Zahavi, "Edmund Husserl."

ry remembrance blends in the sounds heard as if just previously and the expectation (protention) of the sound to come.⁵⁰

Husserl reveals here that temporal synthesis is necessary for perceiving coherence and continuity. Furthermore, this illustration reveals that the continuity of experience depends on retention and protention, as what is no longer present is not lost but retained in modified form, while expectation continuously projects what is about to come, allowing the experience to flow meaningfully.⁵¹ In between these moments of retention and protention exists the “now-point,” which is surrounded by a continuity of memory and anticipation, meaning that no moment is experienced in isolation, but rather exists within a temporal horizon surrounding the moment.⁵²

The “now” is not a fixed or self-contained point, but rather an ideal limit within a continuous flow of experience. What is present is always in the process of passing into what has just been, while simultaneously giving way to what is about to come. As such, the present is never sharply defined but exists only within this seamless temporal continuity.⁵³ Furthermore, all temporal and perceptual experience is grounded in embodiment. There is no neutral or disembodied standpoint from which the world is perceived; rather, all perception arises from a situated “zero-point,” in which the subject, as embodied, serves as the point of reference for all that appears.⁵⁴ Finally, the world is not encountered through detached observation, but through active, bodily engagement. Experience is always mediated by the body and arises in and through the subject’s interaction with the world, such that the body and the world are disclosed together in lived experience.⁵⁵

When examining pulpit supply through this lens of internal time-consciousness, it becomes clear that a deep fragmentation

50. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 57–58.

51. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 58.

52. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 58; De Warren, “Time,” 276.

53. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 62–63.

54. Zahavi, “Edmund Husserl.”

55. Zahavi, “Edmund Husserl.”

exists in this model of ministry, as the spiritual leadership characteristic of this model contains limited to no sense of continuity or harmony within the moments of pastoral shepherding. The temporal gaps between moments of pastoral presence and the “beyond Sunday” periods of absence cannot be simply understood as mere organizational insufficiencies. As discussed above, internal time-consciousness is not a series of isolated instants but a continuous temporal field in which the past, present, and anticipated future are integrally bound together.⁵⁶ Congregants’ experience of pastoral care similarly unfolds along a temporal continuum where guidance received in one week carries forward into expectation and reflection in the following days, shaping both their present understanding and their anticipation of future care, but in pulpit supply, this flow is hindered.

Essentially, the discontinuity of pastoral presence in pulpit supply interrupts this temporal synthesis. The retention of past shepherding, the memory of prior guidance, provision, or spiritual care, is not seamlessly integrated with ongoing experience, and protention, the expectation that guidance and care will continue, cannot be fulfilled in the extended gaps between visits. As a result, congregants experience a disruption not only in the structural provision of pastoral duties but also in the temporal coherence of their spiritual life. The “now-point” of pastoral engagement exists within a temporal horizon, yet its significance fades quickly without the reinforcement of continuous shepherding. What Husserl describes as the seamless flow of perception and consciousness is here fractured, producing a sense of spiritual discontinuity in which the flock cannot fully integrate past experiences of care with present needs or anticipate future guidance. On the basis of internal time-consciousness, it is clear that pulpit supply falls short of faithfully fulfilling the duties of ongoing pastoral shepherding.

In sum, the absence of sustained pastoral presence disrupts the temporal continuity of congregational life, impeding the formation of a coherent spiritual experience shaped by retention of past care, the lived reality of present guidance, and the proten-

56. Husserl, *Phenomenology*, 50–52.

tional expectation of ongoing shepherding. Without this unified temporal flow, congregations are left without a stable integration of past instruction, present formation, and anticipated future care, resulting in a fragmented experience of spiritual life. In this condition, congregants become disoriented within a disrupted temporal horizon, spiritually unsettled and potentially wandering like lost sheep. These congregants need a shepherd, one who leads them to spiritual green pastures, to streams of living water, and along paths of righteousness. It becomes evident that the model of pulpit supply falls short, as it struggles to sustain the temporal coherence necessary for faithful pastoral shepherding as described above. Thus, it is necessary to consider alternative modes of ministry and ecclesial practice for churches that have had to rely upon pulpit supply.

Concluding Reflections: Beyond Pulpit Supply

At the outset of this paper, I noted that this experience is not a pervasive reality for the majority of congregations, but still one that does exist and impacts individual and congregational life. Therefore, the above study of the phenomenon is warranted as it is necessary to understand the implications of this model of ministry. However, to understand how pulpit supply functions through the utilization of supply ministers, we need to understand what the duty of a pastor is. First Peter 5:1–4 offers the biblical imagery of shepherding that portrays pastors as those who are called to provide, protect, guide, and care for the sheep of God's flock. My own experience as a pulpit supply minister offers a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of pulpit supply that is not only theoretical and descriptive but also experientially saturated. Finally, the implications of pulpit supply are more fully realized when compared with the Husserlian concept of internal time-consciousness. Overall, it becomes apparent that in pulpit supply, the temporal horizons and realities of congregants become fragmented as pastoral presence in between Sundays is limited or fully absent. As a result, congregants experience a disruption in the receiving of pastoral shepherding, which

inhibits their ability to create temporal coherence in their spiritual life.

At its core, pulpit supply, while necessary for some churches in moments of extended periods of crisis, is not an adequate model for ministry as it severely fragments pastoral presence in congregational life and fails to live up to the duties of a pastor as a shepherd of God's flock. But these sheep are in need of a shepherd, and it is not enough to say that pulpit supply is bad and be done with the topic; considerations for alternative ecclesial models are needed. Several alternative models of pastoral leadership can address the fragmentation inherent in pulpit supply and restore continuity in congregational life. Churches might consider using a shared pastoral ministry model that distributes preaching, teaching, and pastoral care across multiple ministers from neighbouring congregations, ensuring consistent leadership even when individual pastors are absent. This continuity allows congregants to internalize and develop spiritual practices and relationships under steady oversight. A second model for consideration would be a lay-led ministry with clergy oversight. Trained lay leaders could guide worship, teaching, and pastoral care while remaining accountable to a supervising clergy. Finally, a part-time interim pastor model offers temporary yet focused pastoral presence, particularly during transitions or shortages. When combined with local leadership, it helps prevent spiritual neglect and supports the formation of a community of faith, providing guidance and continuity even in limited durations. Together, these models demonstrate that pulpit supply is not the only option. By ensuring ongoing pastoral presence and fostering embodied spiritual practices, they provide congregations with the shepherding necessary for guidance, care, and the cultivation of enduring community and spiritual practices.

One final observation must be restated regarding the reality of fragmented pastoral presence in pulpit supply. While this fragmentation is most evident in churches relying on pulpit supply, it is not limited to congregations without a full-time pastor. Even churches with a resident minister or a team of full-time clergy can fall into a pattern of sporadic, disrupted, or task-oriented shepherding. The danger arises when pastors, regardless of their

position or model of ministry, become comfortable with the routines of “ministry life” and lose sight of their calling to shepherd God’s flock faithfully. Faithfulness in ministry is not determined by the number of pastors or the structure of leadership, but by how those in pastoral care embody the duties of provision, guidance, protection, and care as they undershepherd the flock in imitation of the chief shepherd, Christ Jesus.

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