

Who Chooses the Shepherd?

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When churches lose pastors and synods lose bishops, there is both a sense of loss and a sense of excitement that occurs – loss for the ministry of the shepherd who is leaving and excitement about the possibilities that exist in the coming of a new shepherd. Call committees are formed, transition teams commence work, constitutions are consulted, surveys are prepared and discussions occur throughout the church on what gifts and skills are desired in the shepherd to come.

The details of the process, the interviews that occur and the voting at various points in that process can easily lure us into thinking that we ourselves hold the responsibility of choosing the next shepherd. In fact, scripture states again and again that the choice of a shepherd lies in the hands of God.

In Exodus 3, the Lord said to Moses from the burning bush, "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (v. 9-10). The Lord did the choosing.

In 1 Sam. 9:15, the Lord says to Samuel, "Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel." The Lord did the choosing.

In Jer.23:4, God promises his people Israel, "I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD." The Lord raises up shepherds.

Even in the New Testament, the Lord does the choosing. After Jesus' ascension, the apostles sought to replace the position left by Judas the betrayer. And they prayed, "'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry....'" And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles (Acts 1:24-26). The Lord did the choosing.

A POSTURE OF DISCERNING

The prayer of the apostles in Acts 1 points the way for us who seek a shepherd. In that prayer, they not only acknowledged that God does the choosing, but in fact that God has already chosen. "Show us," they pray, "which one you have chosen."

"Show us." It was a prayer for discernment – discernment of God's choice of a shepherd. The posture then of those who are charged with various tasks in the call process is not one of choosing, but one of discerning God's choice.

That posture shift from one of choosing to one of discerning is most important as we go through the call process. First it places the power in the equation where it belongs – with God. Second a posture of discerning is one of receiving, of being open to God's leading, of looking for what God is showing, of looking upon candidates as God looks upon candidates, and seeking God's hand and guidance in the individual and in the process.

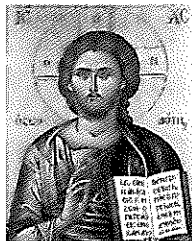
God's instructions to Samuel before the anointing of King David are helpful here (1 Sam. 16:1,6-7): The Lord said to Samuel ... "Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

Congregational profiles and surveys that ask about gifts and skills desired in a shepherd may have their place within the call process, but this passage from 1 Samuel tells us that gifts and skills alone will not show all that we need to see. If we would know God's choice for a shepherd, then we must see as the Lord sees, using eyes that look beyond what the world would see to discern God in the heart of a candidate, to discern God's hand upon a candidate.

At the same time, an emphasis placed only on the candidate without a full consideration of our own context would also not be fully discerning, for it the scripture passages above make it clear that God provides shepherds that match particular needs among God's people. God is surely leading in our church. God is surely active in our midst. So true discerning leads us to ask also:

- What is God doing among us?
- Where is God leading our ministry?
- What new ministries might God be suggesting for us?
- Where is God needed in the world around us?

"Show us" is the prayer of this time of transition in our lives as God's people. "Show us" is our constant prayer and the nature of our posture during this time of seeking and discerning God's choice of a shepherd for us.



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Litany and Prayers of Discernment for the Election of a Bishop

by The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel
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*Below are two offerings for prayer in the months prior to an Assembly at which a bishop will be elected. The first is a **Litany** with congregational responses, intended for use in place of the Prayer of the Church at the chief weekly liturgy. The second is a series of **Three Prayers** that may be used separately or together, perhaps as petitions for the Prayer of the Church at the chief weekly liturgy, at evening or morning prayer services, at meetings, ministeriums, conference assemblies, or at any time in which people of the church are gathered. Either form may also be used at the Synod Assembly Eucharist or just prior to the first ballot for bishop. Both forms are intended to assist parishes and agencies of a Synod to be engaged in prayerful discernment during a very special time in their life and mission together.*

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I. Litany of Discernment for the Election of a Bishop

P. In these months and days before our congregations, pastors and lay ministers meet in Assembly to elect a bishop, it is appropriate that we bring our prayers to almighty God, asking for discernment and guidance, that in all our deliberations and conversations, the Holy Spirit might be present and make known to us a chief shepherd of God's own choosing.

A. Let us pray. Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father, in all ages, you have raised up faithful servants to shepherd and guide your holy people and to make known your will among us. Increase in us the gifts of discernment and understanding in this time, that we might know and do your will as we prepare to elect a bishop for our church.

C. Send your Holy Spirit among us, O Lord.

A. Open our minds, our hearts, and our eyes that we might see as you see and choose as you choose a shepherd of faith and godliness.

C. Send your Holy Spirit among us, O Lord.

A. Open our ears and guide our tongues that, in all our conversations, our listening and speaking might be filled with your grace and favor.

C. Send your Holy Spirit among us, O Lord.

A. Raise up for us a chief shepherd to lead and guide the work of our Synod.

C. Raise up a shepherd for us, O Lord.

A. Call forth a shepherd of wisdom and strength for the duties of oversight and counsel.

C. Raise up a shepherd for us, O Lord.

A. Make known among us a shepherd of compassion and grace to care for our churches, our pastors and our leaders.

C. Raise up a shepherd for us, O Lord.

A. Bring forth a shepherd centered in Christ who can build up your Church and unite your faithful people.

C. Raise up a shepherd for us, O Lord.

A. Send us a shepherd of learning and understanding who can preach and teach, guard and interpret the apostolic faith of the Church of Jesus Christ.

C. Raise up a shepherd for us, O Lord.

A. Send us a shepherd who is filled with the Holy Spirit to encourage and support the mission and ministries of our synod.

C. Raise up a shepherd for us, O Lord.

P. Almighty God, you are our guide and our Good Shepherd. In you we place our hope and our trust. Hear the prayers of your faithful people and lead us in these days until you bring us to one mind and one heart in you and you show us that shepherd and bishop of your own choosing; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C. Amen

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II. Prayers of Preparation for the Election of a Bishop

P. Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom you revealed your power and might and promised your presence and blessing, be among us during this special time in the life of our church as we pray for a bishop to shepherd us.

Reveal your power and might to us in our ministries, in our ministers, in our planning and in all our deliberations.

Bless and guide our prayers and our labors that our mission and witness might be strong in you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C. Amen

P. Send forth your Holy Spirit, O Lord, and raise up for us a shepherd of your own choosing: a bishop to lead and guide us, a shepherd of wisdom and strength, compassion and grace, holiness and learning, with vision and the commitment to build up your Church and unite your faithful people around the love of him who offered himself for us and for all the world, Jesus Christ our Lord.

C: Amen

P. O Wise and Gracious God, when your chosen people Israel prayed for a leader, you sent the prophet Samuel to discern your will, not with the eyes of the faithless, not with the ears of the popular, not with the wisdom of humanity, but with the insight of faith and trust in you alone. As we prepare for the election of a bishop for our church, make our conversations holy, our listening attentive, our prayer fervent, our trust in you strong, and our insight filled with faith and knowledge of your will for our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C. Amen