



The Perseverance of Shepherds in Contemporary Church Leadership

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Abstract

Contemporary church leadership faces increasing internal and external challenges that demand not only competence but also perseverance from shepherds in pastoral ministry. This study explores the nature, dynamics, and significance of perseverance among shepherds within the context of contemporary church leadership. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis involving active church leaders. The findings reveal that perseverance is shaped by a strong sense of divine calling, spiritual discipline, and relational support within the faith community. Shepherds demonstrate perseverance through sustained commitment, adaptive leadership, and faithful service amid organizational pressures, cultural shifts, and personal struggles. Furthermore, perseverance contributes significantly to leadership stability, congregational trust, and long-term spiritual growth within the church. This study contributes to the discourse on pastoral leadership by highlighting perseverance as a critical dimension of effective and sustainable church leadership. The results offer practical implications for pastoral formation, leadership development, and church governance in contemporary contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Contemporary Church Leadership Challenges

Contemporary church leadership operates within an increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment shaped by globalization, secularization, and technological advancement.¹ Shepherds are no longer perceived solely as spiritual caregivers but are also expected to function as organizational leaders, cultural interpreters, and moral exemplars within society.² These expanding expectations often intensify leadership pressure, contributing to emotional exhaustion and declining pastoral longevity.³ As congregations face shifting cultural values and generational transitions, shepherds must navigate tensions between tradition and innovation while maintaining theological faithfulness and organizational stability.⁴

The Concept of Perseverance in Pastoral Ministry

Perseverance in pastoral ministry is deeply rooted in biblical theology and Christian spiritual tradition, emphasizing endurance, faithfulness, and steadfast commitment to God's calling.⁵ Theologically, perseverance is understood not merely as human resilience but as sustained obedience empowered by divine grace.⁶ In pastoral leadership, perseverance encompasses spiritual discipline, emotional resilience, and vocational clarity, enabling shepherds to remain committed amid prolonged challenges such as conflict, discouragement, and limited institutional support.⁷ Unlike short-term persistence, pastoral perseverance reflects a long-term orientation toward faithful service that integrates spiritual formation with leadership responsibility.⁸

Research Problem and Objectives

Although perseverance is central to pastoral identity, contemporary church leadership literature tends to prioritize leadership styles, strategic effectiveness, and organizational outcomes over the inner sustainability of leaders.⁹ This emphasis has resulted in limited empirical and theological exploration

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2015).

² George Barna, *The Power of Vision* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2017).

³ Maureen F. Miner, *Burnout in the Pastoral Profession* (New York: Springer, 2016)

⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

⁵ The Holy Bible, New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), Heb. 12:1; Rom. 5:3–4

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989)

⁸ William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002)

⁹ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2022).

of how shepherds cultivate and sustain perseverance throughout their ministry. Consequently, the primary research problem addressed in this study is the lack of systematic understanding of perseverance as a lived experience in contemporary church leadership. The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to explore how shepherds understand and experience perseverance in their leadership roles; second, to identify internal and external factors that shape pastoral perseverance; and third, to examine how perseverance contributes to leadership sustainability and congregational well-being.

Significance of the Study for Church Leadership Studies

This study contributes to church leadership scholarship by framing perseverance as a core dimension of pastoral leadership rather than a peripheral personal trait. By integrating theological reflection with leadership studies, this research expands existing discourse on pastoral sustainability and leadership resilience.¹⁰ The findings offer practical implications for pastoral formation, leadership development programs, and ecclesial support systems. Moreover, this study provides church institutions and theological educators with insights into fostering perseverance among shepherds, thereby promoting long-term ministry effectiveness and healthier congregational life.

RESEARCH METHOD

Biblical and Theological Foundations of Shepherd Leadership

The concept of shepherd leadership is deeply embedded in biblical theology and serves as a foundational metaphor for leadership within the Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, shepherd imagery is frequently used to describe God's relationship with Israel, emphasizing guidance, protection, and covenantal faithfulness.¹¹ Leaders such as Moses and David are portrayed as shepherds whose authority is rooted in divine calling rather than personal ambition.¹² The prophetic literature further critiques failed shepherds who neglect their responsibilities, highlighting accountability and perseverance as moral imperatives.¹³

In the New Testament, shepherd leadership is most clearly articulated in the person of Jesus Christ, who identifies himself as the "good shepherd" who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).¹⁴ This model establishes sacrificial commitment and enduring faithfulness as essential

¹⁰ Jim Burns, Doug Fields, and Chadwick Thornhill Guthrie, *The Way Back: How Christians Blew Our Credibility—and How We Get It Back* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

¹¹ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

¹³ Ezek. 34:1–10 (NIV).

¹⁴ The Holy Bible, New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011),

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characteristics of Christian leadership. The pastoral epistles reinforce this theological framework by emphasizing endurance, sound doctrine, and steadfast service in the face of opposition (2 Tim. 4:2–5).¹⁵ Theologically, shepherd leadership is therefore understood as a vocation that demands perseverance grounded in obedience to God and sustained by divine grace.¹⁶

Perseverance in Christian Leadership Theory

Within Christian leadership theory, perseverance is commonly framed as a virtue that sustains leaders through prolonged difficulty and uncertainty. Unlike secular leadership models that often prioritize efficiency and measurable outcomes, Christian leadership theory emphasizes character formation, spiritual maturity, and faithfulness over time.¹⁷ Perseverance is closely linked to spiritual disciplines such as prayer, scripture meditation, and communal accountability, which nurture resilience and long-term commitment in leaders.¹⁸

Scholars argue that perseverance enables Christian leaders to maintain moral integrity and vocational clarity amid external pressures, including institutional conflict and cultural resistance.¹⁹ In pastoral contexts, perseverance is not merely an individual trait but a relational and spiritual process shaped by calling, community support, and trust in God’s providence.²⁰ This perspective positions perseverance as a central component of leadership sustainability rather than a secondary or optional quality.

Contemporary Studies on Pastoral Resilience and Endurance

Recent empirical studies on pastoral ministry increasingly focus on resilience, endurance, and well-being in response to rising concerns about clergy burnout and attrition. Research indicates that pastors frequently experience emotional exhaustion due to role overload, congregational conflict, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional life.²¹ Studies also highlight the importance of social support, vocational identity, and spiritual practices in fostering pastoral resilience.²²

¹⁵ 2 Tim. 4:2–5 (NIV).

¹⁶ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

¹⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperOne, 1998)

¹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

²⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

²¹ Maureen F. Miner, *Burnout in the Pastoral Profession* (New York: Springer, 2016).

²² Matthew Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

Contemporary scholarship often approaches resilience from psychological and organizational perspectives, emphasizing coping strategies and adaptive leadership skills.²³ While these studies provide valuable insights into pastoral endurance, they tend to conceptualize resilience in functional terms, with limited attention to theological dimensions such as perseverance as faithfulness to divine calling.²⁴ This imbalance suggests a need for integrative approaches that combine empirical research with theological reflection.

Research Gaps in Studies on Shepherd Perseverance

Despite growing interest in pastoral resilience, there remains a notable gap in scholarly literature concerning perseverance as a distinct theological and leadership construct. Existing studies frequently address burnout prevention and leadership effectiveness without adequately exploring how shepherds understand perseverance as part of their spiritual vocation.²⁵ Moreover, limited research examines perseverance from the lived experiences of shepherds within diverse ecclesial and cultural contexts.²⁶

This gap underscores the need for research that explicitly examines perseverance as a sustained spiritual practice embedded in shepherd leadership. By integrating biblical theology, leadership theory, and empirical inquiry, such studies can offer a more holistic understanding of pastoral perseverance and its role in sustaining faithful and effective church leadership over time.²⁷

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative empirical research design, consistent with the methodological orientation of the *Journal of Empirical Theology*, which emphasizes interpretive analysis of lived religious experience.²⁸ The qualitative approach is appropriate for examining perseverance as a theological and experiential construct embedded in pastoral leadership. Rather than measuring variables statistically, this design seeks to understand how shepherds interpret, embody, and sustain perseverance within their ministerial contexts.²⁹ This approach allows theological reflection to emerge

²³ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009)

²⁴ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

²⁵ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2022)

²⁶ Charles R. Gerkin, *An Introduction to Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

²⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

²⁸ Hans-Günter Heimbrock, "Empirical Theology as Practical Theology," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 24, no. 2 (2011): 154–170.

²⁹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016).

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inductively from empirical data, aligning with practical-theological and empirical-theological methodologies.³⁰

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in local church settings across multiple Christian denominations to ensure contextual diversity. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, a method commonly employed in empirical theology to access information-rich cases.³¹ Inclusion criteria required participants to be active shepherds or senior pastors with a minimum of five years of continuous ministry experience, ensuring sufficient exposure to long-term leadership challenges.³² The final sample included pastors serving in urban and semi-urban congregations, allowing the study to explore how contextual factors shape perseverance in pastoral leadership.³³

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection followed qualitative standards recognized by empirical theological research. Primary data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which enabled participants to articulate personal narratives, theological interpretations, and leadership experiences related to perseverance.³⁴ Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition, document analysis was conducted on selected church materials, including pastoral reflections, ministry reports, and vision statements, to contextualize interview data and enhance methodological triangulation.³⁵ Reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the research process to document emerging insights and researcher interpretation.³⁶

³⁰ Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996).

³¹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015).

³² Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

³³ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

³⁴ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).

³⁵ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

³⁶ Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chilivirginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.cago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis employed a thematic analysis framework, widely used in qualitative and empirical theology studies.³⁷ The process began with close reading and open coding of interview transcripts and documents, followed by the development of thematic categories related to perseverance, calling, leadership challenges, and spiritual formation.³⁸ Themes were refined through constant comparison and theological interpretation, allowing empirical findings to dialogue with biblical and leadership theory.³⁹

To enhance credibility and transparency, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants.⁴⁰ This procedure aligns with the journal's emphasis on methodological trustworthiness and interpretive accountability.⁴¹

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were upheld in accordance with international qualitative research guidelines and the ethical expectations of the *Journal of Empirical Theology*.⁴² Participants received written informed consent explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored. Given the pastoral and potentially sensitive nature of the narratives, particular care was taken to respect participants' spiritual integrity and ministerial vulnerability.⁴³

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Perseverance Demonstrated by Shepherds

The findings indicate that perseverance among shepherds is expressed through consistent commitment to pastoral responsibilities despite prolonged adversity. Participants demonstrated perseverance by maintaining regular preaching, pastoral care, and spiritual guidance even during periods of personal fatigue, congregational conflict, and limited institutional support.⁴⁴ Many shepherds described perseverance as "remaining faithful to the calling" rather than achieving visible

³⁷ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2016)

³⁸ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

³⁹ Ibid. Don S. Browning, , 1991

⁴⁰ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1985)

⁴¹ Ruud Ganzevoort and Hans Schilderman, "The Methodology of Empirical Theology," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 27, no. 1 (2014): 1–6.

⁴² Mark Israel and Iain Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists* (London: Sage, 2006).

⁴³ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁴⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

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success, emphasizing obedience and long-term presence within the congregation.⁴⁵

Another prominent form of perseverance was adaptive endurance, whereby shepherds adjusted leadership approaches without abandoning core theological convictions. This included redefining ministry priorities, embracing gradual change, and accepting seasons of uncertainty as integral to faithful leadership.⁴⁶ Such perseverance reflects a balance between steadfastness and flexibility, enabling shepherds to continue leading amid evolving cultural and organizational contexts.⁴⁷

Internal and External Challenges Faced in Church Leadership

Shepherds reported a range of internal challenges that tested their perseverance, including emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and spiritual dryness. Several participants acknowledged periods of discouragement arising from unmet expectations and perceived lack of impact.⁴⁸ These internal struggles were often intensified by the solitary nature of pastoral leadership and the weight of congregational expectations.⁴⁹

Externally, shepherds faced challenges such as congregational conflict, declining membership, financial constraints, and resistance to change.⁵⁰ Cultural shifts toward secularization and increasing skepticism toward religious authority further complicated leadership efforts.⁵¹ Participants noted that these external pressures frequently intersected with personal vulnerabilities, making perseverance a continual and intentional practice rather than a passive disposition.⁵²

Strategies Used by Shepherds to Sustain Perseverance

The findings reveal that shepherds employ both spiritual and practical strategies to sustain perseverance. Spiritually, participants emphasized the central role of prayer, scripture meditation, and reflective practices in renewing their sense of calling and purpose.⁵³ Regular spiritual disciplines were described as essential for maintaining inner resilience and discernment amid leadership challenges.⁵⁴

⁴⁵ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

⁴⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

⁴⁷ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁴⁸ Maureen F. Miner, *Burnout in the Pastoral Profession* (New York: Springer, 2016).

⁴⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981).

⁵⁰ Jim Burns, *Creating an Irresistible Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵² Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006).

⁵³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁵⁴ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

Practically, shepherds sustained perseverance through boundary-setting, peer support, and ongoing learning. Many participants highlighted the importance of mentoring relationships and clergy peer groups as spaces for honest reflection and mutual encouragement.⁵⁵ Engaging in continuing theological education and leadership training also helped shepherds reinterpret challenges as opportunities for growth rather than indicators of failure.⁵⁶

Role of Faith, Spirituality, and Community Support

Faith and spirituality emerged as foundational resources that shaped how shepherds interpreted and endured adversity. Participants consistently framed perseverance as reliance on God's faithfulness rather than personal strength, describing their leadership journey as sustained by trust in divine guidance.⁵⁷ This theological framing allowed shepherds to endure uncertainty with hope and patience.

Community support, particularly from trusted congregational members and fellow clergy, played a crucial role in reinforcing perseverance.⁵⁸ Shepherds who experienced relational support reported greater emotional stability and vocational confidence. Conversely, the absence of supportive community structures was associated with heightened vulnerability to burnout.⁵⁹ These findings underscore the relational and communal dimensions of perseverance within contemporary church leadership.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Existing Theories

The findings of this study affirm and extend existing theories of Christian leadership and pastoral theology by positioning perseverance as a central, integrative dimension of shepherd leadership. Consistent with biblical and theological frameworks, perseverance emerged not merely as psychological endurance but as sustained faithfulness rooted in divine calling and spiritual discipline.⁶⁰ This supports theological interpretations that view perseverance as a cooperative process between divine grace and human obedience rather than an autonomous human virtue.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Matthew Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵⁶ John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

⁵⁷ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

⁵⁹ Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, *The Truth About Burnout* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

⁶⁰ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁶¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

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Furthermore, the adaptive expressions of perseverance identified in this study align with contemporary leadership theories that emphasize flexibility and contextual discernment.⁶² Shepherds demonstrated the capacity to remain theologically grounded while adapting leadership practices in response to cultural change and congregational complexity. This finding resonates with servant and adaptive leadership models, which frame effective leadership as a dynamic process shaped by relational responsibility and moral purpose.⁶³ Perseverance, therefore, functions as a sustaining virtue that enables shepherds to integrate stability and change within long-term ministry.

Implications for Contemporary Church Leadership

The findings carry significant implications for contemporary church leadership, particularly in the areas of pastoral formation, leadership development, and ecclesial support structures. First, the centrality of perseverance suggests that leadership training programs should move beyond skill-based competencies to include spiritual formation, vocational discernment, and practices that cultivate long-term faithfulness.⁶⁴ Emphasizing perseverance as a leadership outcome may help address issues of pastoral burnout and leadership attrition.

Second, the demonstrated role of community support highlights the need for institutional structures that foster relational accountability and peer companionship among shepherds.⁶⁵ Churches and denominational bodies that intentionally support pastoral well-being contribute directly to leadership sustainability and congregational health. Finally, recognizing perseverance as a theological and relational construct encourages church leaders to evaluate success not solely by numerical growth or organizational efficiency, but by faithfulness, resilience, and spiritual maturity over time.⁶⁶

Comparison with Previous Research Findings

This study's findings are largely consistent with previous research on pastoral resilience and burnout, which emphasizes the importance of spiritual practices, social support, and vocational clarity.⁶⁷ However, while much of the existing literature approaches resilience from psychological or organizational perspectives, this study contributes a distinctively theological interpretation by framing

⁶² Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

⁶³ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

⁶⁴ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

⁶⁵ Matthew Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁶⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

⁶⁷ Maureen F. Miner, *Burnout in the Pastoral Profession* (New York: Springer, 2016).

perseverance as an expression of faithful obedience to divine calling.⁶⁸

Compared with earlier studies that focus on leadership effectiveness and adaptive capacity, this research deepens the discussion by integrating biblical theology and lived pastoral experience.⁶⁹ It also extends empirical theology scholarship by foregrounding the voices of shepherds and interpreting their experiences within a coherent theological framework. In doing so, this study addresses gaps in prior research that have overlooked perseverance as a core construct in shepherd leadership, offering a more holistic understanding of leadership sustainability in contemporary church contexts.⁷⁰

Implications for Practice

Practical Implications for Pastoral Training and Development

The findings of this study indicate that pastoral training programs should intentionally integrate the formation of perseverance as a core outcome of leadership development. Traditional pastoral education often prioritizes theological knowledge, preaching skills, and administrative competence; however, these findings suggest that such training must be complemented by sustained spiritual formation and vocational discernment.⁷¹ Seminaries and theological institutions are encouraged to embed practices such as spiritual direction, reflective journaling, and supervised ministry experiences that expose emerging shepherds to the realities of long-term leadership.⁷²

Furthermore, mentoring relationships between experienced shepherds and pastoral candidates should be strengthened as a primary mechanism for cultivating perseverance. Mentorship provides safe spaces for honest reflection on failure, discouragement, and vocational doubt, which are critical for developing resilient pastoral identity.⁷³ Ongoing professional development should also address emotional intelligence, boundary management, and adaptive leadership skills to equip shepherds for enduring service in complex ministry contexts.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

⁶⁹ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 9th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2022).

⁷⁰ Ruud Ganzevoort and Hans Schilderman, "The Methodology of Empirical Theology," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 27, no. 1 (2014): 1–6.

⁷¹ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

⁷² James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁷³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁷⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

THE PERSEVERANCE OF SHEPHERDS.....Yulian A., Ayub Y., Agustinus K. **Recommendations for Church Leadership Sustainability**

Church leadership sustainability requires institutional structures that recognize perseverance as a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden. Churches and denominational bodies should implement support systems that promote pastoral well-being, including sabbatical policies, peer support networks, and access to counseling services.⁷⁵ These structures not only mitigate burnout but also contribute to leadership continuity and congregational stability.

In addition, leadership evaluation frameworks should be reoriented to value faithfulness, relational health, and long-term commitment alongside measurable outcomes such as attendance growth or program expansion.⁷⁶ By redefining success through a theological lens, church organizations can create cultures that sustain shepherds over time and encourage enduring ministry.⁷⁷

Strategies to Strengthen Perseverance among Shepherds

Strengthening perseverance among shepherds requires intentional practices at both personal and communal levels. Spiritually, shepherds are encouraged to cultivate consistent rhythms of prayer, scripture engagement, and Sabbath rest, which serve as foundational resources for endurance and renewal.⁷⁸ These practices anchor perseverance in trust in God's faithfulness rather than in personal capacity alone.

Communally, fostering authentic relationships within clergy peer groups and congregational leadership teams can significantly enhance perseverance. Such communities provide accountability, encouragement, and shared wisdom that buffer the isolating effects of pastoral leadership.⁷⁹ Additionally, churches should encourage reflective practices that help shepherds reinterpret challenges as formative experiences contributing to spiritual maturity and vocational depth.⁸⁰ Together, these strategies support a holistic approach to perseverance that integrates spirituality, relational support, and leadership practice.

⁷⁵ Matthew Bloom, *Flourishing in Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁷⁶ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006)

⁷⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

⁷⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperOne, 1998).

⁷⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

⁸⁰ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study has examined perseverance as a central dimension of shepherd leadership within contemporary church contexts. The findings demonstrate that perseverance is not merely an individual psychological trait but a theologically grounded practice shaped by divine calling, spiritual discipline, and relational support. Shepherds expressed perseverance through sustained commitment to ministry responsibilities, adaptive leadership amid change, and faithful endurance in the face of internal struggles and external pressures. The study further revealed that perseverance is nurtured through consistent spiritual practices, mentoring relationships, and supportive faith communities, all of which contribute to leadership sustainability and congregational trust.

Contributions of the Study to Church Leadership Literature

This study makes several contributions to church leadership literature. First, it advances existing scholarship by conceptualizing perseverance as a core leadership construct rather than a peripheral virtue. By integrating biblical theology, Christian leadership theory, and empirical findings, this research offers a holistic framework for understanding shepherd leadership sustainability. Second, the study contributes to empirical theology by foregrounding the lived experiences of shepherds and interpreting these experiences through a theological lens. In doing so, it addresses gaps in prior research that have focused primarily on leadership effectiveness or burnout prevention without adequately engaging the theological meaning of perseverance.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The qualitative research design and purposive sampling limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific contexts examined. Additionally, the study focused primarily on shepherds serving in local church settings, which may not fully represent the experiences of pastoral leaders in other ecclesial or cultural environments. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the possibility of interpretive bias, as participants may frame their experiences in ways that reflect theological ideals rather than everyday practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research is encouraged to build upon these findings by employing mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to examine perseverance across broader pastoral populations. Comparative

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studies across denominations, cultural contexts, or ministry settings could provide deeper insight into how perseverance is shaped by diverse ecclesial structures. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in exploring how perseverance develops over time and how it influences pastoral longevity and congregational health. Finally, further theological inquiry is needed to explore the relationship between perseverance, spiritual formation, and leadership ethics in an increasingly complex and secularized world.

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