



**Go Smell Like a Shepherd Again:
A Round Table Conversation about Small Churches**

June 24, 2026

Adam Mixon: Hey folks, this is Adam Mixon with the Ministry Collaborative. I'm here with my colleague, Adam Borneman, and my good friend, Pastor Sherrad Hayes from down in the southern part of Georgia. And we've been talking a lot about the simplicity of the Gospel, and how in times like this, some are just mistaken. They think that to preach faithfully the Gospel means that we have retreated into some type of hiding, but I don't think that's our sentiment. I think the Gospel is disruptive and it's unsettling. We are not hiding when we dare stand faithfully and declare the Gospel, and we just want to pull back some layers on that. So Sherrad, what do you think out the gate?

Sherrad Hayes: Yeah, I think what we're talking about applies so well across ministry contexts. You know, just thinking about my context in rural Georgia: there is a connection with the Gospel directly to the needs of the community around you. And if you preach the Gospel faithfully, I think it's necessarily going to give you feet to get out and, not just in a way that campaigns for one particular issue or candidate or another, but actually meets people, real people, face to face.

I saw this really in context of: there's a ministry in our county called Focus Ministries, which does some wonderful, wonderful work. But, they found out a while ago during COVID, there was an element missing to their food pantry services that wasn't relational; that there was something missing from just handing folks a bag of food, and then sending them on their way. So, they had pastors come in, and be set up to pray with folks. But really it was just to listen to their stories, and to hear what they were going through, and what their struggles were: White, Black, people from all across the county, coming to this place, and having a "sit down" with a pastor in a very simple format of just asking, "How are you? How is your family?" And then, "How can I pray for you?" That is something that, I think, highlights the simplicity of the Gospel in action in a way that's not flashy, a way that's not showy, in a way that works to meet the real needs of people, and is not just backed off away from the world, but actually seeing real folks in their struggles, and trying to meet them where they are.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. Something that it engages. And we've said it in some previous podcasts, it's about proximity: knowing, understanding, meeting, caring about your neighbor – which again, if we take that and we reason it out, just stretch it out, I think, at least from my perspective (and you can tell me if I'm just missing wide, right?), if I'm given to charity, that type of charity, that type of openness, and I stay on that road, I'm going to end in a place that requires justice. It's going to force me to be like, "You know what? What are we missing here? Why are there so many hungry people in this zip code? What's going on systemically that is demanding this type of poverty to persist?" I think if we stay on that road, it's going to take us into some places, and bring us into contexts where we're not only just doing charitable acts, but we're engaging in justice work. The Gospel won't stay in the little box that we want it in. It won't limit to just our charity work or us just wrapping sandwiches, but it forces us to start thinking systemically, which is going to necessarily engage our community on every level.

Adam Borneman: What I like about what you two are saying is it's a powerful reminder that highly contextualizing this sort of work also includes taking seriously where peoples' on-ramps are, and how fast they need to go, or can go, or can't go. I think the easy way out, sometimes, is to have a blanket statement or action or program, and just assume that, "Hey, you're either on board with this good work we're doing or you're not." And human beings are complex. It's okay as a pastor, as a congregation, to say, "You know what? I think we actually need about four on-ramps to help people dig deeper into this." And that could be not only in the case of charity to justice, but as we've been talking about, towards leading a simple life, towards patience, just towards the Fruit of the Spirit in general.

I think what also necessitates that, or demands it, is that we know from the statistics out there and the trends out there that it's because the world feels so out of control that people increasingly want church to feel like something safe and in control. And yet, it's a place where the Gospel needs to sometimes gently – or more than gently – disrupt us. And so, we have to really get sort of granular with where people are, and where they need to go. Jesus does this really well, probably more than we're willing to admit, but that's what it makes me think, as you all are talking is the importance of contextualizing that work from person to person, group to group, zip code to zip code.

Sherrad: Yeah. I appreciate what Adam said about the connection between charity and justice work. And I think if you're doing charity rightly, it's necessarily going to lead to a care and concern about justice, and what the fundamental issues are. And I liked how, Adam Borneman, you said about having multiple on-ramps to that, and I think that is one of the best ways to get it. So, if you can do charity work that's real face to face with people, the more folks are going to see the incongruity between the Gospel that is preached and the Gospel that is lived out in other arenas of life. And so, if you get real concerned about who your neighbor is, what your neighbor is suffering, and what changes need to happen in order not just to alleviate their suffering, but to proclaim Christ in every sphere of life, you're going to be concerned about both. You're going to be concerned about their immediate need, and you're going to be concerned about what we're doing more broadly as a nation, as a state, as a community, to further this kind of suffering, and undoing that.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. That being said, I think the church has the unique ability to create spaces where that type of contact can occur without having to build an infrastructure to do it. It's there. We're a community. We rely on that contact, or that relationship, that allows for that type of – I don't want to say growth or entry or – that's not the right word, but it allows for the encounter of the Gospel in ways that are practical, but also deeply spiritual and transformational.

Adam Borneman: And I think this is a...this is an advantage, or an inherent privilege, of smaller congregations. You all have me thinking of a wonderful book that I've carried around with me for quite some time, *A Beautiful Constraint* by Adam Morgan and Mark Barden. And it's these stories, but also just lessons, on why it's good to have limitations and constraints. You all talk about your congregations, you have right in front of you a context, a space where people can have encounter, and you actually don't have the luxury of overthinking it. You don't have the luxury of coming up with some big flashy program. There's not the critical mass of people. There's probably not the funding, and that's fine. And so, from my perspective, I'm really drawn to that. I'm drawn to where simplicity is a necessity for bringing people together, and having those sort of encounters, and not just bringing each other together for *Kum ba yah*, but bringing each other together to tell deeper stories about the community they are in,

to tell deeper narratives about the lives that they've lived. I love hearing you all describe it, because overprogramming it is not really an option in the first place.

Sherrad: It is a privilege to be able to look out in the pews and know each person that you're preaching to, to have these kinds of conversations. You talked about having multiple on-ramps, Adam. You know, I was thinking, as I'm talking to each individual person, I can help them find what their particular on-ramp is going to be, and it gets very personal like that. And I think, regardless of your size, any church is going to need to find ways to help facilitate leaders within that church to help folks find their particular on-ramp. That personal connection still needs to be maintained. And the great privilege of pastoring in a small church is that you can help do that personally, and you can model that. But even in a small church, you can see other folks doing that with other people. And so, you kind of facilitate a community where we're, we're bearing one another's burdens, like Paul tells us to. It's an exciting place to be in a church where you can see that taking place.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. I think the gift of being smaller is there aren't any illusions. You can't hide behind stuff. You can't hide behind your prosperity or whatever. Whether it's a large or small congregation, it's the same people, same problems that are manifesting in some different ways, or they have more layers behind which they can hide. But again, that's the power of the Gospel. It has a way of cutting through all of that. And I think that, regardless of the context, if that pastor preacher is determined to speak faithfully about who Jesus is and what Jesus values, and who Jesus loves, then that's going to be transformational across contexts. And we just can't abandon that. That is not a program. That is the proclamation of a person. That's different.

I'm from an old Black Baptist tradition, and it used to be a rule that if you didn't go to Calvary on Sunday, you didn't finish your sermon. If you don't bring this thing back to Jesus, the redemptive work that was accomplished at Calvary, "Son, you didn't do your job today." I don't know if that's too far off the mark. People need to be reminded regularly of who Jesus is, and what matters to Jesus.

Borneman, I remember you gave me a card when we were in Iowa, a little square card that said, "Jesus doesn't care about this."

Adam Borneman: David Feltman used to carry around these little laminated cards, and he would be in a committee meeting at whatever little governing body, whatever, and they'd be rambling on about something, and he would just hand you a little card that says, "I don't think Jesus cares about this."

Adam Mixon: Yeah. But again, it's that thing. Where does that get lost? And all of the machinery, and all of the ... Yeah, we can't lose that. And as preachers, I don't care what's your context, don't lose that.

Adam Borneman: Both of you have had different relationships to larger size contexts. Either you know pastors well who are in those contexts, you've ministered in those contexts or preached. So, frankly, what is your advice? If a large, big steeple church calls you in and says, "You know, we really want to get our folks moving towards deeper paths of discipleship, and we want to try not to let – for lack of a better word – the programmatic life of the church get in the way of that." What is your gentle, gracious

way of helping those larger communities move in that direction? Obviously, the simplicity of proclaiming the Gospel; and what else?

Adam Mixon: Wow. I think in the early church, especially when we're reading the Gospels, it's always, these are stories that people are telling who had an encounter with Jesus. Point blank. "Come see a man."

I don't know if we've gotten too erudite, but it has to be insisted: "Have you been with Jesus?" Period. The goal is relationship with God through Jesus, sustained by the power of the Spirit. To me, that needs to be non-negotiable. If that's not at the core, then what am I doing? You can get all these principles from a self-help aisle somewhere in a bookstore. If it ain't about Jesus – pardon the way I'm saying that – then what's the point? You know, I just don't understand. What are we doing when we stand behind the sacred desk, if we're not preaching Jesus, or leading people into an encounter with a resurrected Savior? If that is not the work, then...

Sherrad: Yes. It has to be an encounter with a crucified and risen Christ. And that is the only kind of disruption that's going to lead you into a deeper relationship with God. And not just in a spiritual sense – although that's absolutely true – like, in a real, practical sense. And so, I think my advice to pastors who have larger congregations is: get out among the sheep. It's like, show up on Sunday morning smelling like the sheep. Be willing to be proved wrong by someone else's encounter with Jesus during the week. We are meant to encounter Christ in community, so don't isolate yourself. Don't think you have all the answers. Go out, go to a small group, and sit in a small group during the week. Take time to still have personal prayer with someone who's in your congregation. Do the basic things.

Adam Mixon: Center relationships.

Sherrad: Yes. Center relationships, because that's how you're going to have an encounter with Jesus, too. Because they have the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit that you do, and you can trust that God is going to do something in you through that other person that you're able to sit across. So, get out there, and be with people, and prioritize that aggressively in your schedule, and how you manage your calendar.

Adam Borneman: Yeah. I mean, you're describing a very deep, and I think in many contexts, what we might call an adaptive type of change, because it really is moving into new territory, and learning things you would never expect to learn otherwise. I'll tack on just one technical piece to all of that: working with so many individual pastors throughout the week, one of the things we talk most about is so many of our colleagues out there in these busier, over-programmed contexts, they'll say, "Yes, I know I'm at risk of burnout. I know I'm too busy. I know this is over-programmed. I don't know how to get out of it."

And a lot of it is to start by taking just a rigorous inventory of how your time, and everyone else's time, is being spent. And usually what you realize is, "Wow, this two-hour meeting that happens every Tuesday could actually be a 40-minute meeting." What am I going to do with the rest of that time? And that's where you can start to kind of fall in love with your calling again, and to go smell like a shepherd again. I know that's easier said than done, because I talk to folks about this all the time. But once you turn that

corner of making the main thing about the main thing, it's life-changing for you as a leader, and for a congregation. It really does. It shifts the culture of a congregation when they see their pastoral staff, or whoever, showing up in the inefficient, messy, granular stuff of everyday life.

Adam Mixon: Right. I was thinking about Mark and Elizabeth, and the work they do with church boards, and how Mark has been pretty insistent about making sure that there's room for studying Scripture in the board meeting. And again, it sounds like, "Wow, that's revolutionary. That we're leading the church, so we would actually study together, or center ourselves on a text." And in some ways, that's a way of leveraging time that's already being spent, but transforming how that time is being spent.

Adam Borneman: And it's incredibly inefficient. And inefficiency is an anathema in our culture. It's blasphemy.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. And it's not life-giving. Making those subtle little turns, though, people will be relieved. They get back an hour and 20 minutes, and that 40 minutes was generative. They were energized and encouraged, rather than just being tired and frustrated. As pastors, we have the unique opportunity to help people make meaning, rather than get mired in minutiae.

Sherrad: Right. It's not a waste of time if it's time intentionally spent with someone else. And I think one of the things that meetings just suck out is it neither leads to productivity, nor does it give you intentional relational time with another person. Part of that is a gift of having young children, and wanting to do something productive, and being told, "Daddy, look at my box of treasures." And I just have to stop whatever I had planned. And it's not that it's a very inefficient use of time, but it's the most productive use of time, to just stop and spend a moment with my child. I think that has such great implications for pastoral ministry, too. It's like, sometimes you're going to get that call, and the best thing you can do is just stop everything else, and be present with the person in that moment. And I think the best kind of ministry facilitates that, not just from the pastor to the congregation, but among members of the congregation to one another.

Adam Borneman: Yeah, because it's no longer a question of, "Am I being productive?" It's that, "What am I producing here?" And maybe, Sherrad, as you're talking: the simplest way I think about it is, "Am I producing something that's easily measured, and has some incentive, and is going to keep the machine running? Or am I producing the Fruit of the Spirit?" And sometimes those things might mingle a little bit, but that basic litmus test for me is really important, because what you're describing is, you know, stopping for the parishioner or the child or whoever who wants to exhibit something in front of you that's a witness to the Gospel is, it's okay to say, "You know what? Actually, this is productive too. This is the Spirit producing fruit in me and in this relationship."

Sherrad: Yeah. I mean, one of the most disruptive things about the Gospel for me, personally, is it changes how I measure what is good fruit. And I have to stop and say, "Okay, my indication of what might be good or productive is not necessarily going to matter in the light of eternity from God's perspective. But that something that anyone else, or even that I, would be tempted to just pass on by as unimportant, is going to be, from the perspective of eternity of most importance, and is actually going

to be something that is going to be remembered and honored and last far beyond the time when the new heavens and the new earth come crashing down to one another.

Adam Mixon: That's wonderful.