



MERIDIAN HILL

WHAT IS A SHEPHERDESS?

The Role

General Description

The Shepherdesses are a group of women who will nurture, counsel, and pray for members of the Grace Meridian Hill community, with a particular focus on the women of the church. They will work alongside the Elders and under their authority, assisting them in the care of the flock. As with Deaconesses, they are publicly nominated and elected by the congregation and examined and commissioned for service by the Session.

Responsibilities

The responsibilities of the Shepherdess are threefold: (1) *Discipling* – verbally communicating the gospel in relationship through intentional conversations and equipping; (2) *Caring* – nurturing and sympathizing with the suffering through ministries of counseling, hospitality, visitation, prayer, and evangelism; (3) *Leading* – assisting the Elders in mobilizing the flock and providing input and perspective in matters pertaining to organizational leadership.

Biblical Affirmations

1. Women and men are created in the image of God with equal dignity and worth as co-heirs of the grace of life (Gen. 1:27; 1 Pet. 3:7).
2. The Church—the new humanity re-created in Christ—ought to celebrate and protect the value of women in its relationships and ministries (Gal. 3:28; cf. Matt. 27:55-56, 61; 28:1-10; Mark 14:9; etc.). The service and leadership of our sisters in Christ are not optional or preferable but essential to the flourishing of the Body of Christ, as every member of the Body uses their various gifts (1 Cor. 12:12-31; Eph. 4:4-16).
3. Scripture is sufficiently clear that the functions of “authoritative teaching” (1 Tim. 2:11-12) and authoritative discernment of doctrine (1 Cor. 14:29, 34-35) that ordinarily belong to the ordained Office of Elder/Overseer are to be carried out by men only.
4. Apart from this biblical restriction, called and qualified women are encouraged to serve in roles of public leadership in various ministries of word and deed under the authority of the Elders (e.g., Rom. 16:1, 7; 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:9-16).

Frequently Asked Questions

Do we find a role like the Shepherdess in scripture and church history?

Yes. Scripture encourages “older women” in the church to mentor and instruct younger women in the family of Christ (1 Tim. 5:2; Tit. 2:3); it also recognizes the service of women in public roles of leadership (e.g., Rom. 16:1, 3), particularly in diaconal ministry (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:11). Further, historians and theologians (e.g., John Chrysostom, John Calvin) have observed that the early church had an “order of widows,” a public role in the church based on 1 Timothy 5:9-10. In a time and culture when male leaders could not enter homes of women who were suffering from sickness or poverty, these widows were often responsible for ministries of mercy

and hospitality (deed-ministry). As such, the “order of widows” operated with considerable overlap with the “order of deaconesses.” However, according to early church fathers and historians (e.g., Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian), they were also invested in *word-ministry*: prayer, catechesis, visiting the sick, preparation of female candidates for baptism, and supervision of women in the church. These female leaders were not ordained, but were enrolled (i.e., publicly recognized as distinct from other common widows) and evaluated for qualifications (see 1 Tim. 5:9-10), all under the authority of the elders.

We are not creating an order of *literal* widows, but we see this as biblical and historical precedent for the formation of a *group of publicly recognized and examined female servant-leaders who are devoted to word-ministry focused especially on the women of the church.*

Why have we created the Shepherdess role?

Providing our sisters in Christ with opportunities to serve, lead, and belong in the church is not optional or merely “preferable” but essential to the health and flourishing of the Body. The Shepherdess role is one effort to maximize these opportunities. In particular, it is our prayer that the Shepherdess role will: (a) provide leadership opportunities for those especially gifted in “discipleship” and care ministries; (b) supplement and complement the shepherding ministry of the Elders, particularly in areas and cases in which men are limited; (c) enable our ordained leadership to receive regular input and insight from the perspective of women; (d) increase the access of female members to trained and accountable leaders.

Will the Shepherdesses be ordained?

No. They will be *commissioned* similar to candidates for the role of Deaconess (BCO 9-7). We are not creating a new office nor modifying any existing office (BCO 7-2). We are simply creating a new role of service for lay persons in our local church, as the PCA’s Book of Church Order allows us to do in accordance with the needs of the ministry.

Why are we electing (voting on) candidate for the Shepherdess role?

Although we use the same voting procedures to elect Elders and Deacons (the only two offices recognized by the BCO), the election of Shepherdesses does not by itself confer ecclesiastical authority. An election simply recognizes the role to be one that’s subject to public accountability, similar to the manner in which the “order of widows” in 1 Timothy 5:9-10 were subject to public evaluation and approval (as is our role of Deaconess per BCO 9-7).

Do other Grace DC congregations have Shepherdesses?

All three of our congregations share the same basic commitment to the women of our church. However, each congregation is expressing this commitment in different ways, according to local needs. Grace Downtown, for example, has recently formed a Women’s Leadership Council. The Shepherdess role is specific to the Grace Meridian Hill congregation.