Welcome to Summer

Summer is upon us: vacations, campmeetings; the hazy, lazy days of summer—just kidding! It seems as if summers are as hectic as the rest of the year, maybe even more so. I hope that you will have a few minutes to catch up on SHAPE happenings over the past couple months and see what is ahead, and maybe even be encouraged and challenged. Find ten to fifteen minutes to explore:

- Randy Montgomery’s thoughts as he considers “Beauty in Imperfection.”
- The testimony of a cluster leader who has experienced the power and blessing of SHAPE.
- Photos of great pastors from Oklahoma and Western Pennsylvania.
- The Great Commission: noun or verb, lifestyle or event, or both? Take a few minutes to consider the call of Christ to the church.
- SHAPE happenings across North America.

Have a great summer of activities, and don’t forget Sabbath and self-care as well!

Beauty in Imperfection

While reading the latest issue of Leadership Journal (Spring, 2014), which is entirely dedicated to failure in ministry, my first thought was, “Here we go again.” In one convenient place it lists:

- 80% of pastors are discouraged in their role as pastors.
- 50% of pastors say they are unable to meet the demands of their job and are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way of making a living.
- For every 20 pastors who go into ministry, only one retires from the ministry.
- 25% of pastors have been forced out or fired from their ministry at least once.
- 45% of pastors say they’ve experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they need to take a leave of absence.
- Of 1,050 pastors surveyed by the Schaeffer Institute, every one of them—100 percent—had a close associate or friend

Unless otherwise noted, SHAPE articles are written by Paul Dreger. He has served the Church of God for thirty-eight years as pastor, area administrator in Tennessee, and currently national director of SHAPE (Sustaining Health and Pastoral Excellence).

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SHAPE on the Go

May
19 Illinois Leader Cohort 1 Training
22–23 Michigan Cohort 4 Orientation Training

June
22–23 National Steering Committee, Oklahoma City
23–26 “Be Bold!” Oklahoma City

August
18–20 Michigan Cohort 4 Orientation Retreat

Please contact Paul at PDreger@chog.org for summer training dates and fall scheduling as soon as possible.

Submissions

E-mail SHAPE-related articles and relevant photos to Paul at PDreger@chog.org to be considered for SHAPE newsletter. Submission implies consent for publication.

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from seminary who had left the ministry because of burnout, conflict in their church, or from a moral failure.

- 70% of pastors say they do not have a single close friend, and the same percentage say they have lower self-esteem than when they entered the ministry.
- Denominational health insurance agencies report that medical costs for clergy are higher than the average professional group.

After I got over my “here we go again” reaction, I began to contemplate this question: Who are these pastors? My reason for reflections stems from the fact that most of my interactions with my colleagues goes something like this:

“Hey, how’s it going? How are you?” To which I hear the standard reply: “Fine.”

My observation is that most of us in ministry struggle greatly to be authentic with one another. It may be our largest elephant in the room. Please understand: I am not pointing an accusatory finger. I catch myself being just as “fine” as you are. My grieving centers around the fact that most of us in ministry have very few places where we feel safe enough to be genuine and real. Frankly, I find myself becoming more intolerant of our “fine-ness.”

Pastor, can I tell you something? We are not fine. We may be redeemed. We may be called. We are certainly on the winning team. We may even be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led. But we’re not perfect, nor are we fine. The sooner we can come to terms with that reality, the better. Ministry is difficult. It often takes a toll on our families, our health, and our emotional well-being. We didn’t receive a suit of armor, tool belt of awesome gadgets, or mega-powers when we received our ministerial certificate. We are not immune to being wounded. Our scars tell the silent stories of repressed pain.

In truth, I have learned that God’s story is one of how he redeems imperfect, broken people and uses them to bless a fractured world. There is beauty in your imperfection. Those we seek to minister to are hungry for authenticity. I have stopped saying “I’m fine.” Several years ago I had Peter Lord preach in the church I was pastoring. He taught us to say “I’m blessed” rather than “I’m fine.” Rarely am I fine, but I am always blessed.

I want to strongly encourage you to find a group (it may be a very small cluster) of people with whom you can be your authentic self. SHAPE often provides such a safe, secure group. Make sure you keep it real. Lay down the ground rules of confidentiality. Take off your pastor hat with this group and risk being really you. Let your cracks show. You need a safe place where friends will love you, not because of what you do, but because of who you are. And never forget that the Father, who knows us best, loves and accepts you no matter what.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39 niv).

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8 niv).
Discipleship for me was a personal journey of growing in my relationship with Jesus as a young believer. I really was quite selfish in those early days of my life in Christ. After all, just a short time after confessing my sin and need of salvation and accepting Jesus as my person savior, I sensed the Spirit of God say to me, “Paul, I want you to shepherd my people.” That was the last thing on my mind. I wanted to be a teacher. And I told God that. “Thank you, God, but NO THANKS! I will be a godly teacher and serve you in the classroom helping prepare others to contribute positively to the world. But don’t make me be a pastor.” That may have been a fairly deep thought for a twelve-year-old. But what stood behind that feeling, more than my desire to be a teacher, was the dread of being a pastor. I was haunted by the sounds of my father coming home from board meetings of the congregation he pastored and throwing up in the bathroom across the hall from my bedroom. I was repelled by sounds of my mother lying in the hallway outside my bedroom (it was a very small house!), crying and asking God to let them leave life in pastoral ministry. Yet three years later at an altar in my home congregation I knelt and said, “God, I am tired of fighting; tired of this spiritual roller coaster ride that offers no peace or joy or hope. I surrender my life—with all its potential ups and downs, highs and lows, joys and sorrows—to you and to your will for my life. I will shepherd your people, whatever that means and wherever it leads.” It was the turning point of my life.

At age twelve I accepted Jesus as my Savior and I knew the joy of his love and forgiveness.

At age fifteen Jesus received all of me—my hopes, dreams, and desires—and I knew the power and peace of his indwelling presence. And I have been maturing in that relationship ever since.

Since that time my focus has been singular: “Jesus, who would you have me be and what would you have me do?” That journey has been filled with ups and downs, highs and lows, joys and sorrows. But it has also, and more importantly, been filled with the love, joy, peace, and power of the Lord.

Now back to discipleship. Since age fifteen there has been a growing understanding of my responsibility to others. How can I fulfill Jesus’ call to “make disciples of all nations”? As a pastor my efforts gravitated toward developing materials and programs and events and sermons that would lead those I served to a deeper relationship with God. A graded discipleship curriculum and discipleship classes were drawing people into a deeper relationship with God and lives were being changed.

Then God took me a little deeper. Was discipleship about a curriculum and a class? Well, in part, but that was not the most important part. And I began to see discipleship more as a lifestyle than an event. “As you are going,” Jesus said, “disciple.” We have made a verb into a noun, a lifestyle into an event. Oh, sure, I knew that I was discipling my children, that the home was a place where we grew together in our relationship to Christ. And I always knew I had a responsibility to lead believers into a deepening relationship to God. But discipleship became how I relate to every person I meet on life’s journey, from the complete stranger to my most intimate relationships. From the clerk at the store, to the stranger on the plane, to the couple at the fitness center, I had a responsibility to be a good steward of my life. I began to realize that my life was about more than being just a witness, that my life was the channel through which God desired to disciple people who crossed my life’s path. Every word, action, deed was either a positive example of godly love and grace that could be used to lead another person closer to God or a hindrance to that person meeting the God of love and grace I had come to know and love. Every relationship, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is part of my “going and discipling.” Not just an event, but a lifestyle.

So, as you are going, know that you are making disciples at every level of one’s relationship to God. From the person who has never heard the name of Jesus or been consciously touched by divine love to the most godly of saints in the life of the body of Christ, your life either leads persons closer to God or further from the Lord of time and eternity.

It has been over forty years since that day I knelt and said, “I surrender my life,” and asked God to take complete control. The temptation to wrestle control back from God has been ever lurking in the background of my spirit and there have been a few times that I have done so. But my God of love and grace has continually offered the means of return. And I am learning more and more the joy of knowing that I can live my life moment by moment in the power of God’s Spirit.

As you are going, disciple! Together we can make a difference as we journey into the fullness of Christ.
The Illinois Cohort 1 Leader Orientation Retreat took place April 7–8 at Camp Warren near Decatur.

Leader training continued on April 23 for the North Central Region.

The second draft of the SHARE Manual has been completed and distributed to the regional directors/coordinators for review prior to final editing and the beginning of cluster trials in the fall.

We hope to make SHARE available early in 2015 to all SHAPE pastors and clusters who have completed at least one year of the SHAPE journey.

The first SHAPE cohort for the Carolinas was launched January 12–14 in Charlotte, North Carolina, with twenty-nine pastors from North and South Carolina in attendance. On April 28, cluster leaders gathered once again in Charlotte for their final leader training. This gathering provided opportunity for cluster leaders to compare notes and encourage one another as they began their SHAPE experience, ask questions that arose as a result of their first cluster meetings, and review the SHAPE curriculum to clarify steps of the journey. Mike Claypool serves as regional pastor and SHAPE director for the Carolinas.

What Shape Has Meant to Me

Several years ago I received a call asking me to become part of a group that was training coaches for SHAPE. I went in expecting to gain knowledge and skills to minister to others. What I found was the missing piece in my life and ministry—connectivity. The group I trained with became dear family to me, and the group I eventually coached has become precious beyond measure. We have supported each other through several serious changes in our lives. In fact, we are in our fifth year of meeting together. My ladies, Maybrey G’fellers, Lynda Smith, Linda Parton, and I would tell you that SHAPE is one of the best investments of time and commitment we have ever made and we are thoroughly enjoying the journey together. Encouraged by what SHAPE has meant in her own life, Maybrey formed a group of ladies who have been meeting over a year, once a week, for prayer and to visit elderly shut-ins and those in nursing homes. They have seen tremendous answers to prayer.

—Dorothy Hall, Tennessee