
SHEPHERD

creating caring community



Shepherd: Guiding the Group's Care

Shepherding isn't a job we think about much today, but it is one of the oldest occupations in the Bible. In Genesis 4:2, the word shepherd appeared for the first time. Abel is referred to as "a shepherd of flocks" (HCSB). The shepherding role was important to the Israelites in both Old and New Testament times, and it influenced the language used in the Bible:

- *God is referred to as a shepherd (Ps. 78:52).*
- *Leaders of God's people were called shepherds (1 Kings 22:17).*
- *Jesus referred to Himself as a shepherd (Luke 12:32) and as the Good Shepherd (John 10:10,11,14).*
- *God's people are described as sheep (Ps. 95:7, Mic. 2:12) and as sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36).*
- *Psalm 23 uses shepherd imagery.*

If you think your job today is tough you've got it easy compared to the hard life shepherds had. They were often away from home for months at a time caring for their herds. Jacob complained to his father-in-law about the harsh conditions he endured as a shepherd when he said, "the heat consumed me by day and the frost by night, and sleep fled from my eyes" (Gen. 31:40). And guess what? If you are a leader of a group, you're a shepherd!

Don't miss something we said earlier about those to whom God has given the spiritual gift of shepherding: You can be a teacher without being a shepherd, but you can't be a shepherd without being a teacher! It is a central role for those who guide Step 2 groups.

Requirements

Although the spiritual gift of shepherd-teacher is not a requirement of guiding a Step 2 group, it sure helps. Paul listed a distinct gift of teaching (see Romans 12:7). Those with the teaching gift generally prefer standing before a large group—the bigger the better—as compared with those with the gift of shepherding, who prefer sitting among a smaller group.

We can think of three requirements of shepherds in the Bible, and those same requirements are still in effect today for those of us who lead Bible study groups:

1. **Love for the sheep.** *Sheep were not typically raised for their meat in Bible times, but for their wool and milk. A flock might be less than twelve sheep, and the shepherd would be with them constantly for the majority of their natural lives. Shepherds usually named their sheep, knew their personalities, and called them by name. As shepherds of people, how much more should we know our people's names, their stories, their needs, and how God is transforming them?*
2. **Constant vigilance.** *David fought off bears and lions in his role as a shepherd (1 Sam. 17:34-37). Predators like wolves, jackals, and hyenas were a constant menace to shepherds, as were robbers. A shepherd had to remain on guard constantly. Likewise, you must remain constantly on guard for the things that harm your group members. Always ready to fight for them. Always on the lookout for the Evil One and his schemes that destroy lives.*
3. **Sense of stewardship.** *Shepherds were not the owners of the sheep, but were stewards for an owner. As such, they were accountable for each of the sheep in their care. Perhaps this is why a shepherd would risk his life to rescue a sheep (or its remains) from the mouth of a wild animal (Amos 3:12). The shepherd was responsible for the life of each of the sheep entrusted to him. As shepherds, we are entrusted with God's precious people, and we should have a strong sense that we are personally responsible to God for them. The members of your group belong to Him. You're the shepherd.*

Responsibilities

Three key words describe the shepherding role: flock, community, and stories. Your group is more than an assembly that meets for Bible study. It is a flock you care about between group meeting times. If it functions at first like a class, you want to guide it toward community. Community is the result of shared stories. If you've ever heard me (David) speak, you know that I almost always try to say: "No one's story is complete until it has intersected with God's Story, which happens best in a community being enriched by the stories of others." That's your goal. You're going to need helpers. If your gift is teaching, you need a team to compensate on the shepherding front. If your gift is shepherding, you need a staff because your tendency is to try to do everything yourself—and you can't without burning out.

Recruiting

My (David's) dear departed mentor and friend, Bill Bryan, was known for really creative thematic approaches to leadership development. One year, the art included hearts to illustrate the theme: "CPR: Caring. Praying. Reaching." Bill encouraged all classes to enlist care group leaders, a prayer leader, and an outreach leader. My favorite theme was "The Shepherd's Staff." It had delightful art with a shepherd holding a staff. Bill encouraged all classes to enlist a staff of care group leaders, a prayer

leader, and an outreach leader. Plus other positions like a fellowship leader to plan parties! Bill's emphasis was always on care group leaders, the team of folks who took responsibility for 5- 7men, women, boys, or girls. Their job is easy to describe: "Contact every member of your group every week." Not just absentees. Everybody! Then report urgent requests for prayer or ministry to appropriate leaders. Describing the job is easy. You just need to pray for God's guidance about who to ask. Then you have to ask them!

Relationships

In the role of shepherd, you will of course want to develop relationships with all the members of the group. Sheep don't have great eyesight, but they have great hearing, and they learn to listen for the voice of their shepherd. If several flocks were placed in a pen overnight, all each shepherd had to do in the morning was call for his sheep and they'd follow him out! The relationship with the shepherd was the key. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd because of their close relationship.

If your group is a small one, relating to each member will be easier to do. In a kids class, each worker doubles up as a care group leader, dividing the ministry list equally. For a larger group, you will need a larger team of care group leaders. For example, in a small coed group with, say, no more than 14 people, you could enlist one male to stay in touch with 7 guys and one female group leader to touch base regularly with 7 gals. (It is always vital for men to contact men and women to contact women.) If you have 20 folks total, with 12 or so attending each time, you may need 4 group leaders with 5 people each. Who is the care group leaders' care group leader? You are! Don't just tell them what to do. Model it, contacting them every week to check in about their own stories, and to get an update on the stories of group members. That builds in some subtle accountability, too. But it's mostly about modeling the role of shepherding. In Eastern culture, sheep were led, not driven, and the people in your group will come to appreciate your role as shepherd as you provide an example for them to follow, gently and patiently leading them to care for one another.

Resources

Your main high-tech resource for the role of shepherding is probably a smartphone—or whatever tool(s) you use to make phone calls and send messages. A primary low-tech resource may be a notebook—or whatever tool you use to keep records and notes. You'll want a page for each member to record special dates. You may want to keep notes about things you learn about family, interests, background, hobbies, work, spiritual gifts, love languages, etc.

What other information might you want to include in your shepherding notebook/smartphone/tablet device?

Routines

Your main shepherding routine will be contacting your team each week. You will want to check in with them regularly and record any personal prayer requests. Then you'll want to get a report on other members, changes in their stories, and prayer needs. That will inform whatever prayer routine you develop to bring your flock before the Good Shepherd. If you don't have a team, then you're the one responsible for contacting group members and checking on them.

Ruts

The ruts to avoid in shepherding are on two extremes. On the one hand, you'll want to avoid becoming mechanical in your contact and prayer routines. On the other hand, the more dangerous rut is that of complacency. I (David) have a routine of working out 4- 5 times per week. I have been pretty faithful to it, until the last few weeks. Lots of travel. Late hours at the office. A book to write! Frankly, it is an easy rut to stay in. Except I have gained a few pounds, too. The solution is just to start. Or start over!

Results

One of the ways to measure the results of your shepherding role is what we call "active enrollment." This monthly number is the sum of two parts. For an ongoing year-round group, the first is the number of members who attended your group at least once in the past month. The second part is the members who would have been in attendance except they were working with kids or students. Some churches call these *associate members*, service members, or—my favorite—missionaries to kids!

Other ways to measure the results of your shepherding may be harder to quantify: people feeling valued and appreciated because you and your group have reached out to them, deeper relationships among group members, and fewer people "falling through the cracks." The list could go on. Oh, and don't forget that you can measure the number of answered prayers as you lead your group to pray for one another. That's good shepherding!

Read Luke 15:3-7 and describe how this parable could be applied to every member of your group regardless of their spiritual condition.

Requests

People are the subject of your prayer requests in the shepherding role. You will learn to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide your prayers and to show you how to reflect His work as Comforter and Counselor. Guess what? Effective shepherding will have a positive impact on your teaching role. A couple of old sayings—both true—jump to mind:

□ *People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.*

□ *We don't teach the Bible. We teach people the Bible.*

Teaching is most effective when it is informed by the needs of the group. Shepherding is the way it gets informed! Imagine how you would approach the other responsibilities of guiding your group if your first thought at the end of a group time was “I can hardly wait to see them again.” How would that change the way you prayed for them through the week? That’s good shepherding!

Rewards

To somebody, you are the greatest leader in the greatest group in the greatest church in all the world. And it has almost nothing to do with how you perform in the role of teaching! It is rather because you showed up at a sister’s graveside service. Or brought dinner from the group when they returned home after surgery. Or sent a birthday card. Or wrote a note on the anniversary of landing a new job, the birth of a grandchild, the death of a loved one, or some other date you recorded in your shepherding notebook or stored in your smartphone calendar. We have served churches for many years. It is not rare to watch someone who excels in the role of teacher but who neglects the role of shepherd see his or her class or group slowly dwindle away. Curiously, group members almost universally love the teaching of a person who practices the role of shepherding. The “teaching” usually involves a lot of listening to the conversation among the group—provoked by a good discussion question. The teaching-shepherd loves the sound of the flock’s voices engaging in discovering biblical truth. They love her voice when she shares a special insight from her own Bible study. They love that same voice on the other end of a phone call.

John (10:27) recorded these words of Jesus: “My sheep hear My voice, I know them, and they follow Me.” What a great verse for the 3 roles! Through the role of teacher, the guide’s voice is heard. Out of the role of shepherd, the guide knows the people. As a result, they follow. That sounds like the role of leader. We turn to that role in the next chapter.