

Developing the Heart of a Shepherd

Why it is vitally important that small-group leaders truly care

by [Heather Zempel](#) | posted 11/09/2009

Scripture paints a lot of pictures concerning leadership. To be honest, I like some of them better than others. I love the image of the leader in Ephesians 4, where the goal is to equip people to do the work of the ministry. I love the picture of the co-architect and worker with God to build his people into a "spiritual temple" or community that would worship and point towards God ([1 Peter 2:5](#)). But the image of the shepherd may be the best known of them all.

The shepherd is a prominent metaphor for leadership in the Bible. It is mentioned over 115 times, including some of the most famous passages of Scripture. Psalm 23 details the way that God shepherds his people. Ezekiel 34 issues a warning about the "shepherds of Israel" who have not led or cared for God's people well. Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10. After Christ's resurrection, he charged Peter to "feed my sheep" in John 21.

Shepherds Lead Sacrificially

Shepherds rise early in the morning to check on their flocks. They want to ensure that the sheep haven't been harmed during the night and that the fields are sufficient for grazing. Similarly, spiritual leadership doesn't come with a lot of privileges. It's a leadership based on self-sacrifice. In John 10:11, Jesus is the model for us. He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." Spiritual leaders must sacrifice time, energy, and rights to care for the people God has entrusted to their care. If we aren't willing to pick up the towel and serve, we will never develop the heart of the shepherd. To put this into practice, consider these practical ways to "rise early" and check on your fields and flocks:

- Rise 30 minutes early tomorrow morning to pray for your group members.
- Make a prayer list for your group and pray about one specific thing for each person over the week.
- Send them an email of encouragement or check in on their lives before you start work for the day.

Shepherds Feed Flocks

There are three primary ways that shepherds bring food and water to their sheep, and a good shepherd is skilled at all of them. In most cases, the shepherds guide their flocks to good pasture and pure water. Psalm 23 says, "He leads me beside peaceful streams." Sometimes, a leader simply needs to guide people to sources of nourishment. Shepherds are constantly on the move, leading their sheep from one pasture to another and from winter ranges to summer ranges. A good shepherd knows that the sheep cannot just camp out at one place forever. Good leaders will not let their groups camp on one topic semester after semester. They will keep them moving and learning new things.

At other times a skillful shepherd will actually prepare the pasture for the sheep to graze there. It's hard work, but it's necessary for the sheep to get the best food and nutrients. As leaders, we must do the hard work of creating an environment in which people can be fed—which means we must do the hard work of preparing lessons that provide nourishment and the potential for growth.

There are some occasions where the shepherd must be more intentional and actually feed the sheep himself. For instance, shepherds sometimes cannot find pure water and must draw the water from wells to feed the sheep. It is unbelievably strenuous work to draw water from a deep well and then give it to each sheep individually. This cannot be the general practice, but sometimes it is absolutely necessary as a leader to draw from the deep wells and be more personally involved in ensuring that the sheep are "fed"—and fed well. Here are some ideas for practically implementing this skill of a shepherd:

- Send your group members a link to a devotional thought at the beginning of the week.

- Complete a small-group blueprint and be intentional about moving your group around the discipleship map during different semesters.
- Write a devotional thought and send it to your group.
- Ask members what they are learning in their Bible reading. Create a culture in your group where people regularly share what they are reading and learning at the beginning of each week.
- Help members get involved in the right group for them, even if it means leading them to a different group.

Shepherds Care Intimately

One of the most important jobs of a shepherd is to provide a calming influence on the flock. In the book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, W. Phillip Keller illuminates the text by sharing his experience working as a shepherd. He says the presence of a shepherd in a flock of sheep removes fear of predators, resolves conflict among different animals, removes irritants, and brings peace. Our leadership should do the same.

The care for the sheep begins when the shepherd marks the sheep—he cuts a small design into the ear of the sheep to designate them as "his." This cut makes it easy for the shepherd to count the sheep, which he faithfully does every morning. Now, I don't advocate here that we implement small-group tattoos or piercings, but I do think it's a good idea to regularly count your sheep. It's good to keep track of who is at group and who is not. It's good to keep track of what is happening in the lives of people.

A good shepherd will regularly shear his sheep to remove excess wool. Often, the wool has accumulated mud, insects, and manure, and it is in the best health of the sheep for it to be removed. Good leaders will not hesitate to confront group members about things in their life that need to be removed.

Shepherds carry rods and staffs. These instruments are used for safety, correction, and comfort. Psalm 23 says, "Your rod and staff comfort me." The rod is used to fend off predators. The staff is used to rescue sheep, to point them towards the proper path, or to simply provide a point of contact between the shepherd and the sheep. That point of contact brings comfort to sheep on long journeys between pastures. A good leader will lead with a balance of correction and comfort. As our senior pastor often says, we need to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Shepherds also help sheep walk through difficult times. When moving the flock from the winter range to the summer range and back, the sheep have to walk through dangerous valleys. This reminds us of Psalm 23:4, "Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me." Shepherds don't help sheep get over the rough spots; they help the sheep get *through* the rough spots. There's a big difference. Here are some practical things you can do to care for the people in your group with the heart of a shepherd:

- Complete and submit a Win Sheet each week to "count" your sheep and to keep track of the good things God is doing in the lives of your members.
- Create a peaceful, welcoming environment for your group. Be the first to welcome newcomers. Be the first to be positive. When negative things are said, look for the solution.
- Lovingly confront sin.
- Send an email of encouragement to someone you know is going through a difficult time.

Shepherds Follow Well

In terms of spiritual leadership, a good shepherd will follow his Great Shepherd well. We cannot lead people to places that we aren't willing to go ourselves. And our leadership is only successful if we are leading people in the path of Christ. If we follow Christ, then we can follow along in the ruts in the path that he has already made.

—Heather Zempel is author of *Sacred Roads: Exploring the Historic Paths of Discipleship*. This article is reprinted from Heather's blog, [Wineskins for Discipleship](#), copyright 2007.