

Creative Shepherding

By Bob Young

I love math and science. My early training was as a mathematician with a heavy dose of science courses. I often see illustrations drawn from the realm of science. I am thinking about the church. I see different kinds of particles circling a center, each particle requiring a different kind of magnetism to stay connected with the whole, drawn toward the center.

This is a picture of the church. This is a picture of discipleship. What is the center that keeps the particles from flying off in all directions? What is the center that maintains unity? I see only one biblical answer: Jesus. The unifying force is not the church, friendships, human leadership, the Bible, or authority structures. The unifying force is not the pulpit, a pastor, or any person.

By definition, serving as an elder or shepherd means caring for the flock. Elders will one day give an account of the spiritual status of each sheep in their flock. This means that elders are called to be aware of and to care for the needs of the sheep. What does that mean? How is that done? Elders must help the members maintain connection with Jesus. I see two “how” options. Elders either shepherd the flock proactively or reactively. Ideally, shepherding is proactive and maintains constant contact with the members. At times, shepherding becomes reactive. Hopefully, the reactive times are limited and the proactive times are the norm.

This article is about proactive shepherding. Not all sheep require the same level of care. Understanding how to identify and give different levels of care will help elders be more effective shepherds. Elders will be able to use their available time and resources for the greatest good with the greatest impact. They will be able personally to care for many more members of the flock, maintaining a high level of personal relationship with a large number of people.

The article suggests four types of shepherding care. The categories were suggested by an article on an unrelated topic. The application of the categories to shepherding and the category descriptions are mine. Each category focuses on specific members with specific needs, informing the kind of shepherding required.

The goal of shepherding is to constantly draw all of the sheep closer to the center. The categories below describe members in different situations and specific shepherding styles that correspond to the situation.

Priority Shepherding

Priority shepherding requires close frequent communication (face-to-face, phone, text, email, social media, etc.) Priority shepherding is committed to developing the shepherd-sheep relationship. The more contact the better. Many members need weekly contact at first, certainly bi-weekly or monthly. Priority shepherding keeps new members from quitting before they start. Some may react to the descriptions below and suggest that this category should be called “problem shepherding.” I like the description “priority shepherding” because the goal is to be proactive rather than reactive.

This model is helpful for new members who often have questions and various needs; it is also helpful for members who need affirmation and support. Often, new members are unsure of their role and place in the church. Members may be vulnerable, in need of mentoring, modeling, and close contact.

This model is essential for wandering members who must be noticed and helped before they become unrecoverable. This model is also helpful in the case of spiritually unhealthy Christians who need help but are often afraid to ask.

Priority shepherding is an essential tool when members have problems. Elders must be aware of problems. Without priority care, it is impossible to be aware of the specific problems faced by members.

Personal Shepherding

The biblical model of shepherding suggests a close relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. One way to describe the role of elders in the contemporary church is to talk about personal shepherding. It may be possible to shepherd groups, but most members want to know that they are personally noticed and significant.

Even established Christians desire and appreciate personal shepherding. Personal shepherding is quite important for Christians with limited experience and maturity, especially during the first two to three years of relationship. When Christians face dangerous times, they often need direction and leadership.

As the description suggests, personal shepherding is one on one, face to face, continuing to develop relationships. Contact that is less frequent than monthly can hardly be described as personal shepherding.

Personal shepherding will help every member develop a meaningful, personal, independent spiritual life.

Periodic or Programmed Shepherding

Every elder and every eldership needs a plan for spending quality personal time with every member, even the veterans. The members who serve faithfully and respond to communications also need to be contacted regularly. There is a place for routine check-ups, spiritual evaluation meetings that address specific personal matters, discuss the future, and encourage increased activity.

As a preacher in a local church, my wife and I made it our habit to maintain personal contact with every member, planning a personal contact at least annually. The elders did the same, even when the congregation grew to over 400 members. On more than one occasion, in preparation for a special event, my wife and I called every member of the church during the week before the event. (It is amazingly easy to call 500 people in a week, but such contact is intentional, planned, and purposeful.)

Speaking in general terms, the elders with whom I have consulted over the years have seen this as their greatest weakness.

Persevering Shepherding

It is often difficult to oversee, guide, and feed members – especially the seasoned one who can be stubborn, unresponsive to contact, and “Lone Ranger” Christians. Persevering shepherding requires that elders maintain communication and personal connection.

This may not be a separate category, but in the area of persevering shepherding, proactivity is especially important.

Elders will do well to know which shepherding category best fits each of your members. Reevaluate at least twice a year, four times each year is better in order to be ready to give an answer for the souls that have been entrusted to you.