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Lynn Anderson

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Moving From Managers to Shepherds

LYNN ANDERSON

It was a Kodak moment.

Bill's silver hair and frail figure evidenced his nearly 80 years, but his face glowed with obvious affection for Mike. Mike, 20-something, tough—and months into a recovery program—stood beside Bill in the baptistery. Bill spoke soft, clear words. Mike nodded slightly. Their eyes met in a way that left the whole congregation sensing a special bond between the two men.

Age and huge social differences could have stood between them. Bill a retired CEO. Mike a product of the streets. But Bill had been doing what God called shepherds to do. Rather than merely “sitting on a church board, managing an institution and calling shots” he had been “in the pasture with the sheep.” Over many breakfasts, they shared like father and son. Mike took recovery's “fifth step” with Bill. (“Admit to God and one other person the exact nature of your wrongs.”) In those hours over open Bibles, Bill built a bridge from Mike's heart to his, and Jesus walked over. Mike calls Bill his shepherd.

Bill and Mike flesh out two key principles:

1. The *dominant biblical metaphor for spiritual leadership is “shepherd and flock.”*
2. Relational, *“shepherding” leadership connects powerfully with post-moderns.* They seek “wisdom figures” but distrust “authority figures.”

So, it seems that the way Jesus did things is still the most effective “spiritual leadership strategy” today. But relational, “shepherd-flock” spiritual leadership is definitely new. All through the Bible, the dominant spiritual leadership metaphor is “shepherd and flock.” *The metaphor is never “board” or “manager!”* God is our “shepherd” (Ps 23:1). Then the human leaders of God's people—the prophets, priests and kings of Old Testament times—are called shepherds of his flock (Ps 78:70-71). Then Jesus is “the good shepherd” (John 10:11). In New Testament times, apostles—and then elders—are to “shepherd of the flock” (John 21:15-19, 1 Pet 5:3-5).

Note what elders (shepherds) do for flocks:

- “Guard,” “watch out for” and “feed” (Acts 20:28-30)
- “Equip for ministry.” (Eph 4:10-14)
- “Care for” and “teach” (1 Tim 3:5-6)
- “Encourage,” “refute falsehood” (Titus 1:9-10)
- “Pray for and anoint the sick” (James 5:14)
- “Serve,” “lead,” “be an example” (1 Pet 5:1-5)
- “Keep watch over” (Heb 13:17)

Shepherding is mostly about relationships.¹ In contrast, many modern church leaders spend most of their time:

- Managing—buildings, budgets, personnel and programs
- Calling shots and making decisions
- Legislating in matters of opinion
- Greasing the squeaky wheels

But good news is happening! Post-moderns who seek *genuine relationships* with mentors of *personal integrity* are connecting with growing numbers of elders and ministers who want out of the boardroom and into the pasture. Eager to move *from managing board to shepherds circles*, many church leaders are taking one or more of the following steps.

- *Learning shepherding and equipping skills.* As one friend put it, “I am not going to let anyone make an elder out of me until I already have a flock. I’m intentionally learning shepherding and equipping skills.”²
- *Delegating management away from shepherds.* Buildings, budgets, personnel and programs. To make time for shepherding, wise leaders know they must carefully delegate managerial tasks to others.³
- *Turning “the herd” into “flock.”* Chopping a church directory up into chunks does not make “flocks” of those fragments. Real flocks have relational affinity with their shepherd. So some shepherding teams work through the church directory, a few names at each meeting, swapping information about each name, to clarify which family belongs naturally in which shepherd’s flock. Other churches ask each member which shepherd they most naturally relate with, to link “flocks” up with their natural “shepherds.”⁴
- *Turning “board meetings” into shepherd’s circles.* When elders “do management,” their meetings can bog down into growth-stalling bureaucracy—taking precious shepherding time and energy away from the sheep. Yet someone must “manage the store.” Who and how? Some shepherding elders carve out a small administrative group from among themselves to handle management/governance. Others delegate management to staff. Others delegate management to a team of staff and deacons. Some call a full-time administrator. Others use some combination of the above. The urgent goal, however, no matter how management/governance is structured, is that shepherds spend more time “being shepherds,” which is their biblical calling. And, they spend less time “having management meetings,” which aren’t mentioned in their biblical job description. Then, effective shepherding circles can meet to pray and coordinate shepherding assignments or for encouragement or study sessions. Or better still—be one-on-one with sheep.
- *Letting the leader lead.* Things go best when a designated leader keeps “all the wagons headed west.” Not an autocrat—detached from the rest of the leadership team—but a team-leader who gathers up the values and passions of the body and points these in doable directions—and keeps things moving. This is most naturally the senior minister—but not always. When no leader is empowered, as Lyle Schaller says, “You destine your churches to grow no larger than a committee of amateurs that can manage—part time.”

1. See my book, *They Smell Like Sheep* (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Company, 2002).

2. For shepherd-training resources write to Hope Network Ministries at hopenet@ont.com

3. For a “map” on passing the managing baton from the shepherds to the servants, email hopenet@ont.com and ask for RENOC.

4. For a mechanism, write jim.hackney@heritagechurchofchrist.org.

The journey from the boardroom to the pasture may take a decade—but the benefits are well worth it. When shepherds “shepherd” and “equip,” good things happen: *The flock gets better care.* The overall ministry capacity of the church expands. Weariness diminishes as more shoulders are equipped to bear the shepherding burden. *Leaders find joy.* Plus, then God-hungry people find the integrity, community, and “wisdom figures” for which they long.

Most important of all, *Jesus’ style will be imitated and God’s plan will implemented.*

LYNN ANDERSON CONDUCTS LEADERSHIP WORKSHOPS AND GUIDES CHURCH LEADERS IN FORMING MENTORING CIRCLES. HE SERVES ON THE ADVISORY BOARD OF LEAVEN.

