

imitating the Good Shepherd

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Student Leadership Journal, volume 2 number 3

Ever try to get 500 sheep to go into a barn?

One hot Wyoming afternoon when I was working as a shepherd on my family's ranch, I tried to move our stubborn flock toward the barn door to no avail. As I swam through the sea of woolly backs, screaming and shoving, I got more and more frustrated. Finally, I grabbed a docile-looking ewe and dragged her through the open door.

The other 499 followed. At once. I could barely see the barn door for all the dust, noise, wild eyes and churning hooves flying up around it.

I stood back and laughed. One minute no amount of yelling and pushing could get even one sheep through the door. But after just one ewe crossed that black hole, the whole flock was running at top speed to smash their way into the barn.

I no longer work on the ranch. I'm an InterVarsity staff member. But I'm still a shepherd - trying to get God's flock on campus to go where they've never been before and do what they've never done before. Looking back, I'm struck by how sheep-like people can be. At times no amount of verbal persuasion can convince a group to do something. But if just one person takes the lead and shows others the way, the group eagerly follows. The biblical image of a leader is not of a cowboy, after all, but of a shepherd. Cowboys drive and push their herds from behind. Shepherds lead their flocks from the front.

The Bible, in fact, is full of shepherd imagery - both describing how God leads and cares for us, and how we are to lead and care for others in God's flock. God the Father is portrayed as a shepherd in Psalm 23. In Luke 15:1-7 Jesus compares himself to a shepherd who goes after lost sheep. In John 21:15-17 Jesus tells Peter, "Feed my lambs..... Take care of my sheep" and "Feed my sheep." God's leaders are called shepherds in the New Testament as well as the Old: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28); "I will give [Israel] shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). *And if you are a leader in your campus fellowship, you are a shepherd in God's kingdom, too.*

Frankly, being likened to a shepherd is heavy stuff. The shepherds in Jesus' era carried a lot of responsibility. Their lives were hard and dangerous. They were on call to protect their flock from predators 24 hours a day. Sheep are prone to wander; without a shepherd's constant vigilance, a flock would simply disappear.

So what does it mean to "shepherd" members of God's flock today? What does Jesus the Good Shepherd teach us leaders about being shepherds on campus?



Learning from the Good Shepherd

In John 10 Jesus tells a story about a shepherd and a sheep pen: "The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (v. 2-5).

In Jesus' day, sheep pens were made of a round wall, with no roof and one gate. The pen served as a home for several flocks. Every morning different shepherds would come to the pen; to separate their sheep from the others, they would stand at the gate and call them: "Here Fat Belly! Here Gray Leg!" The sheep would follow the shepherd out to pasture because they knew his voice.

This parable isn't just aimed at leaders. All of us Christians are the sheep, and Jesus is the shepherd. We shepherds in God's flock, however, should take note: before we can be good shepherds who lead the way for others, we must first be sheep who know and follow the Chief Shepherd's voice ourselves. How well do we hear his voice among the others that clamor for our attention?

Society screams, "Money!" Bobby McFerrin soothingly advises, "Don't worry. Be happy." Michelob promises, "You can have it all." Your professors confidently state, "God is a myth." The Almighty GPA says, "I'm your ticket to success. Worship me." Yet through the deafening roar the Shepherd's voice whispers, "Follow me."

Good leaders listen for the voice of the Chief Shepherd. As we develop an inner life of quietness and prayer, we can learn to be more sensitive to his leading. God knows what is best for you and your chapter, and desires to direct you. Don't shortchange your flock or yourself by trying to do things without listening to him.

Pursuing Our Sheep

In John 10:9-10 Jesus continues his sheep story, but with a new twist. In this section, Jesus the Good Shepherd says, "I am the gate [for the sheep]; whoever enters through me will be saved." The scene has changed from the outskirts of a Palestinian village, where the sheep pens had gates, to the countryside, where they often didn't. Shepherds in rural areas would lie across the entrance at night to keep sheep in and predators out.

I am the gate. Jesus is our gate, our point of entry to a new life with God. In a way, we InterVarsity leaders are gates, too - gates through whom the shepherdless sheep on campus can find the warmth of Christian fellowship and, hopefully, the Good Shepherd himself. Many students, in fact, desire the love, acceptance and truth that your fellowship has to offer. Like sheep, however, they fear walking into an unknown situation.

Jesus goes on to describe the life of a sheep in his flock: "He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that [the sheep] may have life, and have it to the full." To a Jew, to "come in and go out" as you please implied that

you enjoyed security, abundance and peace. This phrase takes on particular significance when discussing sheep; they easily get sick when threatened by predators or a lack of nourishment. People also need God's peace and provision to thrive. Think of those around you whose lives are characterized by chaos, fear, anger or insecurity. They need a shepherd to lead them into pasture.

Good shepherds pursue people who are scared to get involved. They are "gates" - initiating relationships and acting like hosts (rather than guests or members) at large and small-group meetings.

One day my brothers and I were (once again) trying to move the sheep into the barn. Everything was going smoothly until the last little lamb reached the door and froze in fear; the rest of the sheep had disappeared into the rear of the barn, and all he could see was darkness.

He took one last look at the door, turned on his heels and shot through my hands. He zipped across the corral, squeezing under the gate faster than I could leap over it. Over ditches and under barbed-wire fences into the open pasture he flew, with me huffing and puffing behind him. After many aborted grabs, I finally snagged the little bugger a good half-mile from the barn. I held him tight and spoke softly to him. I could feel his heart beating thum-thum-thum-thum against my chest. His eyes were rolled back. One pant jerked into the next as he tried to catch his breath. (I wasn't doing much better.)

That's how hard you may need to pursue new students - especially if they've never visited a Christian group before. They may feel nervous, alone and out of place. So call them. Drop by. Chase them out through the pastures of your campus. Draw them to yourself and bring them in through the gate where they can come in and go out in peace.

As we gather for large group at Colorado State U., I try to meet all the students I don't recognize. Once I've gotten to know them a little, I introduce them to someone else in the fellowship -perhaps someone with whom they share something obvious in common (year in school, major, whatever). I then slip away to meet other new people. During the meeting I sit next to someone I don't know and introduce him or her around afterwards.

Though our initial interaction with people is critical, we don't stop being "gates" for people after the first meeting - or even the fourth. We small-group leaders and other leaders must continue to pursue new folks until they are secure enough in their relationships with us and God to be gates for someone else. One student whom we initially welcomed into our I-V chapter tearfully told me how she had tried all year to find her niche among us, but always felt excluded. Here's a lamb who was invited to go through the gate, but always felt us slamming it back in her face when she tried to do so.

Protecting Our Sheep

In John 10: 12-13, Jesus paints a picture of how sheep suffer when their shepherd does not take a deep interest in them: "The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."

The hired hand in Jesus' story is indistinguishable from the good shepherd *until the wolves attack*. Then he's the first one to run away. The hired hand only watches the sheep because he gets paid to do so. At the first sign of danger, he's out to save his own skin.

You obviously haven't become an I-V student leader for the money. **But are you in leadership because you care about people?** Perhaps part of you thought that asserting leadership would look good on your transcript-or at least make others in the group look up to you. Maybe you wanted to please the I-V staff worker or student leaders who urged you to consider leadership.

Good shepherds persevere when their flock is under attack because they care about the sheep themselves. When the following problems threaten your group, will you run or will you stick it out?

Unresolved conflict. An untreated sickness among a few sheep will eventually affect the whole flock. Similarly, **unresolved conflict among a few members of your fellowship may eventually destroy your group.**

Lack of commitment **You can't produce commitment in your group by talking about the lack of it.** if people begin to lose their sense of commitment, examine your chapter or small group's vision. **Commitment is tied to vision.** People who have a vision for their small group or chapter will also be committed to it.

Difficult sheep. When I became a shepherd at my family's ranch, all the sheep initially looked the same to me - white, wooly and wild. But eventually I began to notice distinguishing characteristics. Some had longer ears. One had an unusual black spot on top of its head.

The longer you spend with your small-group members or others in your chapter, the more aware you will become not only of their outward idiosyncracies, but deep-rooted needs. There will be someone in your group who can't stop talking. Another will come every week, sit at the back of the room and seldom talk to anyone. Some will party, get drunk and maybe even sleep around.

When you get to know these problem sheep, remember - they're not the wolves. They're sheep who need special attention. It's these people whom God will use to make a good shepherd out of you. **Anyone can care for people who are like them and reciprocate that care. But only good shepherds will take the time to bind up sheep when they're hurting.**

If you feel burdened about a difficult sheep in your flock, ask yourself: do I find this person hard to deal with because of a mere personality clash, or because they're in some way sinning against God and our group? If it's the former, ask God to give you a love for the person that transcends your differences. If it's the latter, confront the situation immediately. Find out if they're even aware that they're sinning. Ask about their motives and the circumstances surrounding their behavior. Have they already tried to overcome this sin? How? Throughout, **take the posture of their advocate - not their enemy.** Pray together and ask God to show them how to change. You may want to bring your campus staff worker in on the situation, or even a professional counselor.

Earlier we talked about pursuing new people. You may also need to pursue those already in your small group or chapter who start to stray from their faith, your group or both because of sin or messed up priorities. Jesus told the Jewish leaders this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ... There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:4, 7). Will you go the extra mile to pursue one lost sheep under your care?

Laying Down Our Lives

In John 10:14-21 Jesus winds up his parable by emphasizing the ultimate price of being a good shepherd: "I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay it down of my own accord" (vv. 15, 17, 18). In *The Land & The Book* (State Mutual), Dr. W.M. Thomson writes: "When the thief and robber come the faithful shepherd has often to put his life in his hand to defend the flock. I have known more than one case where [a shepherd] had literally to lay it down in the contest. A poor fellow.... instead of fleeing, actually fought three Bedouin robbers until he was hacked to pieces ... and died among the sheep he was defending."

What will you have to lay down to shepherd your flock? Time, other relationships, weekend road trips, self-centeredness - things that get in the way of giving your sheep the care they need. With all the other things to do in and out of class, on and off the campus, it's easy to neglect the people under your care. Don't sit back after the initial rush of New Student Outreach. Have meals with people. Go to movies together. Take folks home to meet your parents. Invite them to go to a weekend conference with you. When they get hurt, show your care by being there. Rejoice with them when they're celebrating. Get to know them well enough that they know and trust your voice as you provide leadership.

Saved by Love

As you listen to each section of Jesus' parable about sheep and shepherds in John 10, one overarching truth emerges: the good shepherd has a deep, throbbing love for his sheep. That's the kind of love Jesus the Good Shepherd has for us; and that's the kind of life-changing love that he desires us to have for others.

When I was a shepherd, I was entrusted with the task of playing midwife to 1,000 pregnant sheep, I worked hard to get the birthing room prepared. When the sheep went out to pasture, I kept a close watch for ewes who looked ready to give birth. One cold fall day I decided to check on the flock every 30 minutes; a newborn lamb would soon die of exposure in the chill wind.

About mid-afternoon I got busy doing something in the barn and suddenly realized that it had been an hour since

I last checked the flock. I ran out of the barn and spotted a ewe with not one but two little white lambs laying in the grass next to her, cold, lifeless and still.

I jumped into our pickup and raced down the pasture. As soon as I got there I picked up the closest lamb. It was stiff and hard and dead. Then, as my heart sank, I heard a faint cry: "Buh-h-h-h." My eyes raced to the other lamb. He looked just as dead - but he wasn't. I laid him under the heater in the front seat and sped back to the barn. His life depended on getting warm. Fast.

I thought my carpet-lined heated box in the barn would bring him around. But he just lay, unmoving, in the bottom of it. Minutes ticked by. Still no response.

I picked him up again, put him under the heater in my pickup and tore to my grandma's house. "Fill the sink with warm water!" I called out as I burst through the door. She did, and we watched the lamb lay in warm water up to his ears. We saw nothing except a few feeble movements of his back legs. I began to feel desperate.

I hurried him back to the hot, carpet-lined box in the barn. *Maybe some warm milk will do the trick*, I thought. But after I eased the black nipple of the bottle between his clenched teeth, I began to hear chattering breathing a sure sign that some liquid had gone down his lungs. *Great shepherd I am*, I thought. *First I try to kill him with neglect, and now I pour milk down his lungs!*

Totally exasperated, I sat down in the straw and took the lifeless ball of wool in my arms. For a while I just stared up into the cobwebbed roof boards. Then I prayed. *God, I know this is just one tiny lamb. I know, that there are millions of other lambs on this planet. I know that there will be many more in my flock. But I don't want this one to die. He's ... he's special Would you save him?*

The lamb just lay in my arms, eyes shut, still.

I laid him back down in his pen and went to check on the rest of the flock. When I returned, I could sense something was different. What? A small feeling of hope steadily rose inside me. I rounded the corner and gasped. There he was, standing on all fours. My lamb was almost dead, but now he lives. This lamb was loved back to life.

Cultivating all the outward characteristics of an effective leader amounts to nothing if you do not love the sheep that God has entrusted to you. As the apostle Peter wrote, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care.... not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be" (1 Peter 5:2).

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