

Life Groups – For Leaders and Potential Leaders

Part 5: Our discipleship, shepherding wineskin

The audio version of this teaching can be downloaded from <http://cornerstonechurch.co.za/life-groups-our-discipleship-shepherding-wineskin/>

In Part 4 we showed the qualifications and functions of a deacon. In this part we will look at shepherding in more detail.

The motivation for shepherding

Matt 9:35—38

35 And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them.” That's our saviour. But it's amazing how differently it's been with leaders throughout the ages, where rather than being moved by compassion they've seen the crowds and sought to take advantage of them.

When Jesus feeds the five thousand and the four thousand (Matt 14: 13 – 21; 15:32) the Scriptures re-iterate how he was moved by compassion.

Remember the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15? Aren't you glad that that's God's response to a person who was incredibly lost and practically a basket-case. What would our response be to a son who took his inheritance like that? But God is always motivated by love – it doesn't matter what our needs are, He is always motivated by love. Ahead of time He is already loving us.

We are motivated by love

If love isn't the chief motivating force in your life, you need to go back to your Father and let it happen there. *As leaders we can't afford to basically be “let loose” on people and not be motivated by love.*

There are scriptures that warn us strongly against not loving and shepherding (see Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 23:1—8). God gives a very strong warning against false shepherds who fleece the flock and are not concerned about the sheep but only about their own thing and themselves.

Jesus makes His statement on the shortage of labourers in Matthew 9 above in the context of where He was teaching and making disciples. This wasn't said in a classroom somewhere. So we see that shepherding is not for maintaining a flock but for the sake of taking the nations. God is saying, in our discipling, forward moving, apostolic nature, that we're called to really care, to be moved by compassion, to teach and proclaim and heal for the objective of truly loving people because they are harassed and helpless.

There are many that see opportunity in the church but when difficulty arrives they bail. But God is looking for those who stick it out.

Additional motivations for shepherding

Matt 28: 18—20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- God is interested in making disciples, not converts. We're motivated with the same objective.
- We're to be motivated by relational maturity

We want people to move on from being babies in Christ to relational maturity. Life Groups give new disciples some kind of connection, the kind a Sunday morning can't give.

People fight with each other. They don't know how to forgive and honour each other. We see it even in Acts 6 where the deacons are tasked to help a relational problem (read the scripture for more context). So we get in amongst them and bring about relational maturity.

Relational maturity has three stages

– Friendship only

We're always the perfect friend when we first meet. We're all comfortable to stay on this level as we don't want anyone to know what's hidden away (and it's also uncomfortable knowing everyone else's weaknesses too). A lot of people will come week on week to church and they don't want to experience a Christianity with relationships that go deeper. But it's our job to help people mature to relationship.

– Relationship

Here it's about covenant, where we find the warts we all have. Through covenant we commit ourselves to each other despite our warts.

We have a relationship with each other not because of each other but because of Christ. That's maturity. Being miff, reserving our rights and easily criticising are things we have to work on. We're all only one sentence away from criticism; we're all quick to give opinions and quick to want forgiveness. But we're slow in asking for forgiveness or even giving it.

But we lean on the love of Christ and our Father. Then we move onto partnership.

– Partnership

Once we move from friendship into relationship we move into partnership where we go and do ventures together for God. We see in the book of Acts where Paul and Barnabas were separated in the Antioch church for a partnership in ministry.

Our biggest job as leaders is going to be relationships – so you yourself have to learn how to forgive in advance. Some of us go into our 'miff tree' on occasions and we feel sorry for ourselves and believe

that everyone else is wrong. But some of us camp there and run electricity and everything. We live there and it's going to take a revival to shake us out of there.

We have to win in this area as leaders. Christ forgave us ahead of time, not just on the day we asked for forgiveness. That's how we should forgive, ahead of time. It doesn't matter what group you decide to belong to, you're going to be let down. So we must forgive ahead of time so we don't get hurt when people offend us. Sure, we handle hurting issues (and we do it Biblically) but we have to learn to be forgivers. We can't afford for leaders to be the ones always sitting in their miff trees. We don't withhold forgiveness, we live in it constantly.

People often come to a church and initially love it. But give it time. In the quest to find the perfect group of people, people cause themselves a lot of unhappiness. Just settle this in your heart. When you're at your local church and have decided on it you must stay long enough to produce fruit. Jesus' team must have had incredible fighting – Jesus didn't choose run-of-the-mill guys, they were opposites! Simon the zealot belonged to a group that used to kill tax collectors, yet Jesus calls him and Matthew.

Build everyone into Christ and His apostolic purpose. Even though there's a nice social element to Life Groups it's not about fun and games but the serious business of discipling and shepherding. We build them not into ourselves or our church's cause, but the body of Christ.

Big things happen in small groups

- Every Life Group meeting is an opportunity for an outpouring of the Spirit, for something to happen that's not the mundane. We've got to stick with it, even through evenings where it's boring. Some of the biggest changes in peoples' lives are going to be in small groups.
- We can only properly care for the flock in and through small groups where discipling takes place. This is where we get into each others' lives and where there's vulnerability and where we trust God together.
- We don't build a professional 'counseling' culture. People must learn to go to the Father (in discipling this is what we teach them). Otherwise we start requiring specialist counselors and professionals and the counselor becomes the life group. Rather, we want to build them into the life of a church with a Life Group.
- In a small group you learn where your strengths are.
- The best way we can shepherd responsibly is in a Life Group where people bear fruit. You can't declare you're a part of the church if you're not – what are you a part of if you attend Sundays only? That's attending a meeting, but we connect to our church through and in a Life Group.

Deacons' main responsibilities in shepherding

Deacons work with the elders and under their oversight as they care and shepherd in a small group. Here are some of the deacons' main responsibilities:

1) Love the sheep

However we handle the sheep it must be in love. Even when we correct, because that's always done with the hope of redemption and repentance.

- We support the sheep
- We pray for them
- We counsel them
- We teach them
- We encourage them. This is sorely missing in the body of Christ. With our culture, we live under criticism and cynicism most of the time. We're always told where we lack and how we aren't performing well enough.
- We respect them

2) Lead the sheep

- We lead by example (Hebrews 13:7).
- We make sure we're prepared
- We have a servant heart
- We are willing to yield to others
- We must be patient
- We look to empower the sheep
- We create opportunities for them
- We take them where they may not necessarily want to go (but must go)
- We show them the vision (of the church) and help them understand how it applies to them.
- We show them how to integrate into the church
- We help them to discover their giftings and their function
- We pray with and for them
- We help them with the Word of God
- We serve them

3) Feed the sheep

- Teach them how to read the Word and live it; how to practice it. We ought to be doing this in our own lives so that we can teach properly!
- Celebrate the discipline of reading the Word and knowing it. We don't download thoughts from the Internet and get on board with the latest fad. We need our own revelation. Every one of us should know our Scriptures.

Additional shepherding responsibilities:

- Look to integrate the fringe, frail and fragile. Go and look at those at the back of the church on Sundays and take care of them.
- Gather wherever and whenever you can. Shepherd's gather. Part of God's rebuke in Ezekiel 34 to the bad shepherds is that they don't gather the flock anymore. It doesn't matter what gift you have, if you don't gather you're going to scatter the sheep. Ask God to show you how to gather.
- Draw in new people. Look for them before and after meetings. Some of them stand around, waiting. We must discipline ourselves in this.
- Help the elders in praying and ministering to people in meetings and other relevant times.

- Facilitate people becoming friends. Introduce people to each other.
- Shepherds sort out relational issues
- Be a source of information. Know what's going on in the life of your church. Not just the information but where the church is going.
- Be a source of hope. When they come to you, there is always hope.
- Be pro-active. Don't wait for people to get sick or backslide. A good shepherd prays ahead of time and asks God who needs the phone call.
- Be all of this with your away-game as well, outside of meetings. You're a deacon everywhere. God will lead you to people that need to be shepherded.

The next two parts will focus more on the practicalities of leading a Life Group, starting with the practical expectations of deacons.