

# LEAD ON

## LEADING AS SHEPHERDS

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What job combines the skills of provider, protector, search and rescue, teacher, guide and even midwifery? Believe it or not, it's a shepherd! I should know: my father was one, and for the first 18 years of my life I was his 'under-shepherd'!

For the Christian leader 'the shepherd' image is so familiar it can be easily overlooked or misunderstood. But despite being culturally and historically somewhat removed from 21st century ministry, it has much to offer in developing a well-rounded leadership perspective: it is far more than being simply a 'pastor', the English version of the Latin for 'shepherd'. In fact, the Bible promotes a comprehensive view of shepherd leadership that I believe every minister in God's Church needs to model.

The challenge may seem daunting, as we seek to model our leadership on the Good Shepherd (**John 10**), yet I believe it will make us humbler and ultimately more reliant on Him. It should go without saying that we are always sheep before we are shepherds! Here I explore six marks for leadership that show how the shepherd knows, leads, feeds, protects, brings and loves the sheep:

### 1. THE SHEPHERD KNOWS THE SHEEP

'I am the Good Shepherd; I **know** my sheep and my sheep **know** me...' (verse 14).

One of my most treasured possessions from my father is his 'flock book', containing all the information about each sheep recorded in great detail so nothing should be forgotten. My father knew each and every one of his sheep: he knew who was looking off colour, who the greedy ones were, he knew their history, the lambs they reared, and could recognise them not only by look but also sound.

Christian leaders should develop a 'flock book' mentality to those entrusted to our care. You see, you can't lead those you do not know! Relationships are a foundational mark of good leadership.

How do relationships happen? Time and practice.

It can feel overwhelming at times – especially if, like me, you're not great with names or in a larger church – but it can have a huge impact on ministry. And it shouldn't surprise us to find that this intimate knowing is merely a reflection of God himself, as Jesus continues, '...just as the Father knows me and I know the Father' (verse 15).

Jesus 'calls his own sheep by name' (verse 3) and gives us the model for our ministry: a heart for knowing people.

### 2. THE SHEPHERD LEADS THE SHEEP

'He calls his own sheep by name and **leads** them out' (verse 3b).

When leading a flock, shepherds always go before the sheep, not driving them with a stick from the back, and because they know his voice, they are willing to follow. On the rare occasions when my father would have to go away, he would invite a friend to help look after the sheep. The reaction of the sheep to the 'stranger's voice' (verse 5) was always very muted because they did not know his voice and so were reluctant to follow.

Leading is probably what comes to mind when we think of our responsibility as shepherds. Yet our understanding of leadership can be far removed from that modelled by the Good Shepherd. Where secular leadership can be synonymous with power, manipulation and force, the shepherd is motivated by the well-being of the flock and not for personal gain

(see 1 Peter 5:3). Jesus never forces, instead he calls, 'When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice' (verse 4).

I have often found communication with my congregation very frustrating. In the midst of so many competing and divergent voices it is a challenge to be heard above the noise. Shepherds not only need to be visible, they also need to be constantly calling people to follow the way, the truth and the life found in Jesus. For we are all like sheep, given to wander off and get into all sorts of difficulty - so the shepherd leader must lead audibly.

### 3. THE SHEPHERD FEEDS THE SHEEP

'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and **find pasture**' (verse 9).

John 10 is a picture of the safety to feed in absolute confidence and assurance that all is well. David picks this theme up in Psalm 23 when he speaks of the Lord as his Shepherd. 'He makes me **lie down** in green pastures, he leads me beside **quiet** waters, he refreshes my soul' (Psalm 23:2-3).

The only way to make a sheep 'lie down' is to ensure that they have had plenty of food and water. It's the same in our leadership task: the way to bring lasting contentment that refreshes the soul is found in being fed and watered by the Word of God.

If you watch sheep closely, you will notice that after they are well fed and watered, they will quickly lie down for a long period and chew the cud, a process of unswallowing grass, chewing and then digesting to ensure the maximum nutritional benefit. The shepherd needs to feed the sheep under their care well to allow the process of chewing the cud, which as Christians is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, taking the Word of God to do the work of God in our inner being.

Sometimes we are so frightened of giving too much food that we give people too little and leave them still hungry. But the shepherds' task to feed the sheep is a key mark of our ministry to ensure God's people live. Just as Jesus says, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4).

Feeding the sheep regularly and deeply with the rich Word of God is our task and the sheep will lie down and be refreshed.

### 4. THE SHEPHERD PROTECTS THE SHEEP

'I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; **no one will snatch them** out of my hand' (verse 28).

When I was growing up, I thought my father was needlessly abrupt in his handling of dog walkers who did not keep their dogs on leads when near the flock -



wouldn't a polite gentle notice suffice?! What I soon realised was just how much of a threat a dog off its lead was to the sheep – not because they would somehow eat the sheep, but rather they would spook them causing them to dart to and fro, often into ditches, barbed wire fences or even the road!

Sheep have few defences from attack, they have no bite or claws and cannot outrun a predator. Their only real security is in the shepherd. This is where the shepherd's rod or staff (Psalm 23:4-5) is a helpful image, which is often used for counting and directing the sheep, but importantly is also used to protect them from wild animals and thieves.

Christian leaders are called upon to protect Christ's sheep from both external and internal threats that would lead them astray – we must be diligent as Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-31.

The Christian leader requires fortitude, even if we are temperamentally otherwise inclined. There are times when we must get tough for the sake of the wellbeing of the sheep. We see this in the way Jesus deals with Pharisees who were blocking people from entering God's kingdom, which is the setting for John 10, as he accuses them of being blind guides (John 9:40-41).

### 5. THE SHEPHERD BRINGS THE SHEEP

'I have other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. I must **bring** them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd' (verse 16).

Mixing sheep from two different flocks needs to be done very carefully to avoid fighting. I recall some very big fights going on when we tried to introduce new sheep to an established flock. The 'other sheep' Jesus is talking about here are the Gentile believers who will be brought together with Jewish believers to form one flock.

When we are about our evangelistic task, we must not underestimate how difficult it can be to integrate sheep, especially if they look and speak differently, or even just come from the next village! The need for unity given by Jesus underlines the fact that the shepherd is doing evangelism by bringing other sheep in: we must do the same. This going and bringing is reminiscent of Jesus being a seeking and saving shepherd in Luke 15, as he gives his full personal attention to the recovery of one animal rather than to the safety of the rest of the flock.

It is so easy for us to be preoccupied with counting how big our flock is, that we forget the evangelism imperative. Jesus reminds us that God counts by ones! The task of the shepherd to bring sheep in is never finished and there should be a hunger in us all to keep

searching for the lost and finding sensitive and culturally appropriate ways to bring them into the flock.

### 6. THE SHEPHERD LOVES THE SHEEP

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **lays down his life** for the sheep' (verse 11).

Being a shepherd is hard work – it involves every aspect of your life. Growing up, my father never really had a day off, saw through many long winter days with little return, and pretty much smelt like a sheep, which could be embarrassing at parents' evening!

Jesus never mentions the love the shepherd has for the sheep, although it is implicit in his actions and especially his willingness to 'lay down his life for the sheep'. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is contrasted sharply with the thieves, robbers, hired hands and wolves.

This is greatly challenging to the Christian leader, for the shepherd is modelled on Jesus' sacrificial love. In the Ordinal when Presbyters are ordained, John 10 is read, then the bishop says:

'Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he brought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood.'

The church doesn't need so much managers, supervisors and directors as it does shepherds who will treasure the sheep – leaders who will point to the Good Shepherd the one who has come 'that they may have life, and have it to the full' (verse 10).

Be shepherds... are you ready?

#### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Which of the six marks do you find most challenging and why?
- What other sheep/shepherd scriptures help to flesh out the role?
- What is God calling you to do differently as a leader?

