

## **Shepherds and Shepherding:**

### **Clarifying Who You Are & What You Do**

In agrarian societies, like the ones in which the Bible was written, the job description of shepherds was well known. This familiarity may have led to the metaphor in the Scripture between ministry leaders and shepherds. However, in our industrialized culture the nuances of shepherding have been somewhat lost. To make matters even more ambiguous, 'a shepherd' is a person or role, a noun. However, the Bible also uses the term as a verb, 'to shepherd.' As a missional community leader, you are a shepherd and are tasked to shepherd God's people. Confused yet?

#### **The Noun**

Shepherds were tasked with watching over other people's flocks of sheep. As a missional community leader, you are a shepherd. You have been called to watch over someone's flock. In this case, the flock belongs to God, who has entrusted them to you.

Missional community leaders at Mercyview have to balance different roles that require a diverse skill set. However, 'shepherd' is the primary role of a missional community at Mercyview.

#### **The Verb**

Now that you know that you are a shepherd, you may be asking; what does a shepherd do? Or what does it mean to shepherd? The word and role require action. Let me suggest four actions shepherds take toward their sheep.

1. Pursue the Sheep
2. Protect the Sheep
3. Feed the Sheep
4. Lead the Sheep

#### *Pursue the Sheep*

Shepherds pursue sheep. Sheep have a tendency to scatter, run and seek out their own interests. These tendencies are some of the reasons why sheep require shepherds.

People display similar tendencies. At Mercyview, missional community leaders are the first line of shepherds. This is a specific and vital role in the life of our church. Missional community leaders pursue people in several ways.

1. MC leaders invite new people to missional community

There is a stream of new people who visit Mercyview. Visiting a new church is a scary prospect. Like sheep without shepherd, new people sometimes struggle to connect in a meaningful way and may end up being frustrated and leaving. As MC leaders, inviting visitors to your missional community or connecting them to others leaders is the first way to pursue the sheep.

2. MC leaders engage 'fringe' members.

Fringe members are those members who are somewhat committed; they attend infrequently, rarely contribute or are generally unreliable. These members can be disappointing to leaders. All that being said, shepherds pursue sheep; even sheep that are illusive or difficult. Practically, this means meeting, calling, texting, e-mailing people when they are not present or have been gone for a while. It means investing time and effort into people who may not return the effort. It means covering offenses if necessary. It means being patient with people and their sin. Pursuing sheep on the fringes may be the most difficult task an MC leader has to do. You must remember that you were also a lost, difficult sheep when Jesus pursued and saved you from your sin!

3. MC leaders train the next generation.

Multiplication is a vital part of our church's DNA. In agrarian societies, younger shepherds learned the particulars and nuances of shepherding from more seasoned shepherds. Missional community apprentices learn missional community leadership from a more experienced leader. The quality and intention of the apprenticeship is primarily in your hands. The effort and investment you place toward your apprentice will color their experience, preparation, competency and overall ability to lead a missional community.

4. MC leaders seek out lost sheep.

Shepherds seek those sheep that are lost. As a missional community leader, you must not only seek out those members of your flock that have wandered, but you must also be intentional about pursuing people who have not yet come to the know Christ.

5. 'Shepherd' the Sheep.

Many shepherding opportunities will happen outside the formal missional community gathering. A leader should seek to understand their people's lives outside of the group. This requires a leader to know their people through intentional conversations or meetings.

*Protect the Sheep*

Sheep are somewhat helpless against the dangers of the world. They don't have sharp teeth or claws, they can't run particularly fast and they aren't very intelligent. They need the shepherd to watch over them, to chase away predators, to lead them away

from dangerous obstacles, and to regulate the flock. MC leaders must be vigilant in protecting their missional community members.

### 1. MC leaders fight external threats

In the New Testament pastors/shepherds were tasked to defend their flocks from false teachers, who were referred to as wolves. In the real world, a wolf can do tremendous damage to a flock of sheep. The same is true in the church. In fact, the majority of the New Testament was written to combat the efforts of false teachers.

On the missional community level, this facet of shepherding will primarily look like graciously correcting incidental false beliefs. However, a leader must be ready to confront deliberate false beliefs. Correction may occur in the group or in a one on one type situation. Use discernment to decide which avenue of correction is appropriate.

### 2. MC leaders contest internal threats

Eventually you will have a member or members of the group who will be a distraction. Sometimes the 'distractor' does not know that they are a distraction. In these cases, gracious correction outside the group is typically sufficient. When the 'distractor' is aware of their error, correction will likely be a bit more complicated. Let me suggest that you begin by trying to understand why the 'distractor' is acting in this way. Searching for the person's motivations and desires may uncover a lurking heart idol.

Confronting a 'distractor' in the MC gathering does not have to be intimidating. First, when the 'distractor' begins, simply step in and ask the group what they think. Another technique could be asking the 'distractor' to connect their comment with the discussion topic. If he or she can make a coherent connection, then the group may learn something. If they cannot make a connection, there is no need to shame them or prove your point; simply move on with the discussion. If the 'distractor' persists it may be time to call in reinforcements. Consult your coach for help. Collaborate together and move forward with a plan.

### *Feed the Sheep*

A flock of sheep cannot provide its own food. If they stay in one area too long, they will exhaust the food source and starve. The shepherd keeps the flock on the move to keep them fed and alive. The analogy breaks down a bit because as leaders we want to help our people feed themselves. However, in the missional community, it is your responsibility to teach your people the nuances of being a disciple in community.

Feeding your flock is not just teaching or discussing. Feeding encompasses the multiple facets of discipleship, including prayer, worship, mission, fellowship, etc. Feed them a balanced spiritual meal for the purpose of balanced Christian growth.

1. **Word:** As Christians, reading/studying the Bible is as essential to growth as food is to a growing child. Without it, growth is impossible. As a leader, be thinking about your groups Biblical intake. Discuss Scripture in the group, read Scripture together during the week, put a Bible reading plan together, etc. Think creatively to get the Scripture in front of people.
2. **Prayer:** The privilege of prayer is incredible! In a group, prayer is one of the most effective ways to minister to each other. God speaks to us through prayer. You must listen and believe that God will speak/minister through you and others. Unfortunately, prayer is one of the first things to go during a time crunch. You must be intentional about prayer by guarding prayer time in your missional community.
3. **Worship:** John Calvin rightly asserted that authentic knowledge of God leads to worship of God. Missional communities should make time to worship God, whether through song or other means. Worship is essential to have proper knowledge of God.
4. **Fellowship:** Hanging out together is not 'just hanging out together.' Crafting deep relationships takes time and investment in different environments. Fellowship may be one of the most important avenues by which a missional community grows together. Fellowship may also serve as a pivotal time for people to recharge through encouragement through conversation with other believers.
5. **Mission:** Mission is a natural implication of the gospel. God has been on mission for a very long time. Throughout the Old Testament and culminating in the life and work of Jesus, God's missionary nature was on display. At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry he commands his disciples (and us) to join his mission to save his people. Our missional communities are a natural context for our people to join God on his mission.

### *Lead the Sheep*

1. **Structural Leadership:**

Missional communities at Mercyview have very specific objectives and components designed to help a group achieve the objectives. Missional community leaders must steer their group toward these objectives by pursuing each of the 5 components consistently and frequently. Thinking creatively and in a balanced fashion will implicitly teach the members of your group to value multiple spiritual disciplines in their pursuit of the Lord.

2. **Personal Leadership:**

Don't be surprised when sheep go rogue. The Bible consistently speaks about the sheep wandering away, getting in trouble, or being attacked. Sheep require shepherds to remedy these and other issues. As a leader, you must graciously lead the members in your missional community through the aforementioned and other issues.

Personal leadership requires investment. Invest in your people, move toward them, and spend time getting to know them. Effective personal leadership requires commitment to ongoing investment.

1. Think Biblically: The missional community structure, objectives and components are grounded in the Scriptures.
2. Pursue objectives: Gospel Fluency, Authentic Community, Sustainable Mission
3. Pursue balance: Word, Prayer, Worship, Fellowship, Mission
4. Think creatively: Resist the temptation to fall into a specific routine.

## **Conclusion**

As a missional community leader, you are a shepherd (noun), and you shepherd (verb) the people in your group. My hope is that some of the nuances of your role are now more clear. As you lead the people that God has given you, remember these words from Paul:

*Therefore my beloved brothers be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's works of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

*I Corinthians 15:58*