



5 Ways to Shepherd Your People

The image of a shepherd is one we have to learn about in order to understand how the metaphor challenges parish leaders. Shepherds literally live WITH the sheep. They sleep with them, guard their pens, lead them to food and water, search for the wanderers, and talk to the flock until the flock recognizes THEIR shepherd's voice. The sheep in turn, live in trust, safety and community.

With this in mind, here are some staff/leader behaviors that derive from the image of a shepherd:

1. Make sure you are doing what those in the parish are doing: working, juggling family, home and health, having fun, dealing with sickness and sorrow. I know this sounds like a silly thing to say, but those of us who work in parishes can often forget that those we serve do not have access to daily Mass, the Blessed Sacrament, work that immerses them in Scripture and Tradition, and like-minded people around them. They are doing all these daily living things much more disconnected from easily accessible faith practices.
2. Share: listen well and talk some. Don't make the mistake of not sharing some of your hopes, dreams, joys and sorrows. Don't shield your "flock" from your own dyings and risings, your own failures and successes, your own joys and sorrows. They will come to trust you when there is that wonderful dynamic of you hearing them with empathy and focus, AND them hearing your voice as well...as one with them. Journey with them. Together learn to hear Christ's voice.
3. Protect them. Help them build sound practices that care for their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-beings. Set up systems of shared service so no one burns out. Make sure the parish (or the part of the parish over which you have influence) is organized for Sabbath, for breaks from ministry, for quiet and for play. And hand on spiritual practices that will draw them into an intimate relationship with God in Christ, with the life-giving force of the Spirit, and with the community of faith: Private prayer practices like *Lectio Divina*, meditation, rosary prayer, small group practices like Scripture sharing, learning communities, communities of care and compassion, neighborhood family groups, and special event practices like retreats, periods of contemplation and creativity, work camps for charity and justice, and prayer experiences for specific sub-sets of your community: mothers, men's groups, teens, trauma, etc.
4. Connect to them and connect them to each other. Send handwritten notes. Leave voicemail. Shoot off a text. Send emails. Let them know they belong, are loved and cared for, and "seen" in their joys and sorrows. Set up systems for parishioners to connect to each other: babysitting co-ops, surrogate grandparenting, home and car repair referrals or services, gourmet food groups, book groups, digital faith sharing communities. You get the idea...connect. Foster friendships, connections and therefore belonging.
5. Observe who's not around and reach out. Haven't seen someone in a while? Newly registered parishioner that you've not met? Young person no longer coming to church with the family? Family with a recent loss or trauma? Widow or widower who just can't bear to come to church alone? You get the idea. And set up a simple way for parishioners to let you know when they hear of people who need the touch of Christ. Then reach out. Call, send a note or a text, email, drop by...choose the means most appropriate but DO something other than observe.