

Healthy Shepherd, Healthy Flock...

How healthy is your flock? It likely depends on the health of YOU, the shepherd...

As a pastor, a key role you play is “shepherd”. You are called to care for and protect your congregation, your flock. You are called to nourish them, to help them grow spiritually, to help them be healthy, and to help them embrace the “abundant life” that God has promised us all through Christ Jesus. I can think of no higher or more worthy calling. My guess is that this is very likely a key reason you felt called to ministry in the first place!



If we focus for a moment on the inter-relationship between the shepherd and the flock – both in the literal and the pastoral setting – several interesting truths become apparent. First, the flock is only as healthy as the shepherd. In a literal interpretation, sheep are not safe from predators if the shepherd is not sufficiently healthy or well to provide adequate constant protection. Moreover, the flock takes its cues from the shepherd. If the shepherd is anxious, unsettled, or ungrounded, the sheep will sense and reflect that nervous state in their own behavior.

In a church setting, it works very similarly. The congregation (flock) will reflect the health of the shepherd (i.e., the pastor). At a minimum, if the pastor is not investing in his or her own wellness and self-care sufficiently, they will not have the energy, stamina and persistence to truly shepherd as they are called to. Moreover, if the shepherd is not exemplifying behaviors that are consistent with long-term health and wellness (e.g., workaholic, a need to control, lack of self-care), the congregation’s ability and willingness to address their own similar issues or challenges is likely significantly diminished. Finally, the shepherd needs to ensure he or she is healthy enough themselves to be able to come alongside others in a healthy way.

The fact is this: pastoral self-care isn’t just for the benefit of the pastor. An investment in pastoral self-care is also an investment in the health of your flock. In short -- healthy shepherd, healthy flock.

The same is true from a leadership standpoint: the health and strength of a pastor’s leadership skills have a direct impact on the health of the congregation. Consider how your flock interacts with each other. Is it healthy or not? How consistently healthy is it? Now consider how you interact with them as the shepherd. Are your conflict management and influence skills sufficiently developed to help shepherd your flock to “greener pastures” of collaboration and cooperation, or could you use some additional growth in that area? How actively and effectively are you personally investing in developing lay leaders within your flock, to help “shepherd” and lead alongside you (and increasingly independently from you)? Finally, is your flock relying primarily on you, as the shepherd, to determine the vision and direction for the church, or are they ideally pushing you to expand your vision in key areas of your collective ministry?

You see, there is another critical truth: the flock will not develop or grow in the key areas of leadership, conflict resolution, developing vision, and others unless the shepherd's leadership skills are sufficiently strong to encourage, empower and enable this type of growth. In fact, in many cases, a rate limiting factor may be the ability of the shepherd to lead, empower, and develop others. Investing time and energy in further developing key areas of your leadership and management style is not just an investment for you—it can be an important investment for your congregation. Consider asking an experienced leadership or management mentor or an experienced colleague to walk alongside you as you focus on strengthening a few key skills that will help your flock to find even greener pastures moving forward.

Reflection Questions:

- Do you have the energy, stamina and persistence to consistently shepherd as you would like to?
- How actively do you model good wellness and self-care to your congregation?
- In what areas would stronger personal leadership or management stronger skills benefit you, as a shepherd, as well as your congregation? What commitment are you willing to make in this area?

About The Author:

Chris Clark is a strategic, passionate, faith-based, retired executive with over 20 years of executive leadership with a successful global med-tech company, as well as extensive lay leadership experience. Chris seeks to help address what he refers to as “The Crisis in Comprehensive Pastoral Health” through public and lay advocacy, and by walking alongside pastors in individual mentoring relationships focused on providing leadership and management insights. You can learn more about Chris and his ministry, Northern ELM Mentoring Group, at www.NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com.

Additional Resources:

If you are interested in reading more about pastoral self-care, including the importance of developing leadership and management skills, I recommend the following resources:

- *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care: Negotiating Today's Challenges with Resilience and Grace* (Rowman & Littlefield) by Richard P. Olson, Ruth Lofgren Rosell, Nathan S. Marsh and Angela Barker Jackson.
- *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Zondervan) by Peter Scazzero.
- *Faithful and Fractured: Responding to the Clergy Health Crisis* (Baker Academic) by Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Jason Byassee.

In addition, the Pastoral Respite Ministry at Silver Bay YMCA (Silver Bay, NY) offers online Pastoral Self-Care Cohorts where groups of pastors come together to support each other and explore different wellness topics. Please contact Rev. Garth Allen (gallen@silverbay.org) or Rev. Bruce Tamlyn (btamlyn@silverbay.org) if you are interested in joining a pastoral self-care cohort or in initiating a spiritual direction relationship to further support your self-care efforts.



Finally, if you are interested in exploring either a short-term or ongoing mentoring relationship to strengthen your leadership and management skills, please contact Chris Clark of Northern Elm Mentoring Group (email to ChrisClark@NorthernElmMentoringGroup.com). All mentoring engagements are conducted on a pro-bono basis, with the request that participants prayerfully consider a donation to Silver Bay YMCA's Pastoral Respite Program in lieu of mentoring fees.

