

The 5 Ms of Shepherding

Essential practices for an effective small-group leader

By Life Together

1. Minister to the needs of your members.

Okay, so this one may seem obvious, but one of the critical roles of a small-group leader is to shepherd the people in your group. Does the word "shepherd" scare you? It shouldn't. God has provided you with the gifts and abilities to care for those in your small group.

In a thriving small group, the members and the leaders must be healthy. In fact, I would say the success of your small group depends on the health of its members. A healthy small group integrates fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and worship—even early on.

As the small-group leader, you need to pray for and love on each member of the group. That means making sure people feel connected with other members in the group and being attentive to what people say during group gatherings. For example, you may sense after the first several meetings that one couple in the group is struggling in their marriage. Your job as a leader is to pray for them. After you develop a deeper friendship with the couple, you may even suggest that they talk to a pastor or Christian counselor.

My point is that, as the shepherd of the small group, you need eyes to see the needs of your members.

2. Mentor them into spiritual maturity.

An effective small-group leader seeks to cultivate the spiritual habits of his or her group. To do you do that, you must know the condition of your sheep—those under your care. In the back of your mind, as you lead the group, ask this for each person: "What is the next step in his or her spiritual maturity?"

Everyone's "next step" will look different. For some, it may be making a decision to be baptized. Some may need to take a step toward dealing with pride or anger issues. Another person's next step might be choosing to forgive someone who has caused deep hurt.

3. Motivate your members for ministry.

SHAPE stands for spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personality, and experience. It's a helpful reminder of the way God has uniquely made each person. Regularly help group members think through their SHAPE. Are they using their gifts? Do they know what roles best fit their personality type? Are they growing and developing in their SHAPE? Are they serving in a way that fits their SHAPE? You must model this. Explain your own SHAPE and how the roles you have fit you well, including small-group leadership. Help each member harness his or her spiritual gifts for service in God's kingdom.

4. Multiply the life and mission of your members.

It's not enough for your members to stay members. Every member should be moving toward becoming a multiplier—by sharing their faith with those around them, by starting a new small group, or by training others to participate in kingdom work.

As a small-group leader, your vision must be to see your group collectively—and the members individually—take the next logical step in development. There must always be movement toward participating more in God's mission.

This could mean training another set of leaders to launch a new small group. It may mean making sure the empty chair is always filled by encouraging members to invite others to join the group. Or it may mean that you consistently challenge group members to make a difference for Christ in their daily lives. Pour your life into your group members so that they will pour their lives into others.

5. Model a surrendered heart.

Pride, arrogance, and worldly leadership have no place in a small group. Never forget that the transformation happening in your group is the work of God Almighty—not you. If your leadership is effective, if your shepherding is making a difference in the lives of your members, expect spiritual warfare. That is, expect conflict, struggles, and trials. Satan loves to strangle healthy small groups.

This is when it becomes the most important for you to model a surrendered, humble attitude. God works best in our weakness. That's when his strength becomes most evident in our lives.

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Discuss

1. Is your small group continually growing, changing, and maturing? Or are you stuck in a rut, simply going through the motions each time you meet? What leads you to believe this?
2. How can you help your group members be multipliers?
3. What are the spiritual gifts of each of your group members? How can you encourage them to use those gifts for the advancement of God's kingdom?