

Dear Pastor...

Being a shepherd is not for weak people.

The late management guru, Peter Drucker, once said that the four hardest jobs in America are: the President of the United States, the CEO of a hospital, the president of a university, and a *pastor*. This is not a surprise when the average size congregation is 89 people—a clear indication why pastoring is among the four hardest jobs. Small churches have limited resources so many pastors are bi-vocational and sacrifice any raises in salaries in order to pay for a building and provide the required services necessary to have “church.”

On top of the stress that comes with the job they have a marriage to maintain and children to train. Paul said, “If anyone does not know how to *manage* his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” Add to the needs of his family, a congregation also has needs that require a manager’s attention. The pastor must wear the hats of a musician or lead worshipper, a computer tech, a teacher, an accountant, a fundraiser, an intercessor or a counselor. Pastoring a church requires management skills in many areas of church life. If the pastor isn’t naturally gifted or wired to manage some of these areas, the brain works harder and becomes more taxed by stress.

In his 1973 book, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, Peter Drucker wrote, “In modern society there is no other leadership group but *managers*. If the managers of our major institutions, and especially of business, do not take responsibility for the common good [of all under his or her care], no one else can or will.”

I found out early in my ministry that no one will care more about the state of your flock than you do, because you carry the responsibility to manage it. No one will care as much as you do about the sermon, or the worship service, or the planning and preparation that go into providing a meaningful Sunday worship experience. It can be a thankless and lonely job of managing everything, but who else will make it happen except the shepherd-manager? This is a problem that could easily be resolved through discipleship.

I’ve been shepherding people since I was 22 years old so I know what it’s like to experience everything mentioned above. Like you, I’ve felt the criticism, rejection, betrayal, loneliness, weariness, frustrations, disappointments, and all the other things that come with the calling. As I said at the beginning, *shepherding is not for wimps*.

I planted my first church in 1976 and served it for seven and a half years. It grew to 350 people and I turned it over to my successor. I planted my second church in 1986 and served it for eight years. It grew to 600 people and I turned it over to my successor. I planted my third church in 1999 and served it for fifteen and a half years. We peaked at 120 people; lost some, grew back to 100; lost some again; grew back to 90 and lost some again. Today my third church has 50 people and I’m 63 years old. Like the first two churches, I’ve passed the baton to my successor, a man I have discipled for many years.

Philip Wagner, pastor of Oasis Church in LA, cited some interesting statistics from *The Fuller Institute* and *George Barna and Pastoral Care, Inc.* See what you think about this.

- 4,000 new churches begin each year and 7,000 churches close.
- Over 1,700 pastors left the ministry every month last year.
- Over 3,500 people a day left the church last year.
- 50% of pastors feel so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could, but have no other way to make a living.
- 45.5% of pastors say they've experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.

These are sobering statistics. I have experienced—in some measure—all of the above and have wanted so many times to resign. Ever notice how a president's hair grays fast through their term in the White House? That's because of stress and we're with them in the stats of the four hardest jobs.

Despite all that I have shared, there's one thing I've done as a shepherd that nothing else compares to in energizing and making me more encouraged, more charged, and more refreshed *every* week. It is the very thing that Jesus made a priority, over all else, when he came to establish the church. His success was found in making *disciples*.

The one rewarding thing I have to look back on is I disciplined leaders to succeed me. It has been said that *there is no success without a successor*. Jesus knew this principle and, therefore, invested most of his time into equipping, training, and empowering twelve men he chose to be “with” him.

Three years ago, I knew I was nearing the end of my time as the pastor to my congregation. I had been grooming my successor for years, waiting for the right time for him and for me. So I went to the mountains and sequestered myself for six weeks to seek God for an exit strategy. He told me to develop and write a discipleship program that would build strong leaders to come alongside their pastors and help bear the burden of ministry to the flock.

Up to that time, I practiced this in a variety of ways, but not through a *system* that would instill a “lifestyle” of discipleship into future leaders. So God gave me a template comprised of six to seven tracts of weekly assignments that would create layers of growth and development. I asked the Lord, “how long should this system be?” to which he responded, “How long did my Son disciple his twelve?”

With the answer to that question, I decided that my books would cover three full years of layering assignments that could equip future leaders to equip other future leaders. A common problem for every pastor today is that the church lacks a leadership pool to draw from. In my experience, I've found that they don't grow on trees, they're made. It takes a leader to make a leader, and it takes a disciple to make another disciple. This is the “Great Commission” of Christ that is missing in many churches, and the main reason leaders are lacking in the pews. We're good at making spectators, but not very good at reproducing disciples. We have a stand for the fans, but lack a deep bench of players to fill in when other players need a break. That's why we burn out our volunteers so fast.

Another challenge I've experienced is that pastors are lonely, many times unaccountable, experience little immediate, tangible results or feedback from their efforts, and can fall into a

place of great stress with no way out of the grind. It wouldn't be this way if they had their Aaron and Hur to hold up their arms like Moses' needed when the Amalekites attacked Israel. When our arms grow weary, the battle rages stronger. When our arms are supported by disciples, the battle is won and our joy and passion restored.

My joy and passion was renewed when the Lord gave me this assignment to create an intentional method of discipleship for my church. So I prayed and searched for hungry, potential leaders to take under my wing. Three years later, I now have a deep bench of spiritual giants— heavy hitters, who can stand in the pulpit and preach with the best of them. They are sons and daughters in the faith who encourage, inspire, and inject me with their passion and joy every week when we meet. I get to hear about their journey, their insights, and the revelations they received from their past week's assignments. What they learn in the tracts they experience and live out through the week, returning with a report of their encounters and experiences with God in their studies and life. What I also enjoy is that each of the one, two, or three men I disciple in a group, contributes something different and alive—this type of feedback provides instant gratification toward my efforts; an experience a pastor won't get from the pulpit.

Discipleship is the primary method Jesus applied in his earthly ministry. He had no other method than this. What I've been doing for the last three years has permeated my congregation. Fifty percent of our members now are in a discipleship group, using this material. Their growth accelerates beyond normal; they experience deep friendships within their groups of four or less; they receive accountability in their groups; and they get more revelation and insight out of one Discipleship group meeting than they receive in a Sunday sermon.

Today, I have spiritual grandchildren. My first-tier disciples have completed Book Two and some are already in Book Three, most of them discipling their own groups. Some in their groups are discipling their own group—all using the same material, because it works, is self-explanatory, and easy to follow. Though my first-tier disciples continue on to their next new lesson or the next new book; they still go back through the same material they've been through with their own group, yet, without having to re-study. Their insights and revelations were written in their books their first time through. So all they have to do for their groups is to facilitate the meeting and allow the Holy Spirit to take it where it goes when something in the homework strikes a nerve, or sparks a revelation, or pricks the conscience to confess and repent.

It is so simple, yet so amazing what the Lord has done with the lives of those who started this journey with me two years ago. Of all the things I've done, in my role as a pastor, nothing has been more rewarding. Even more, it inadvertently deals with and removes many of the problems, weight and responsibilities a pastor carries when discipleship is *missing* in his flock.

Since I began writing and implementing this three year program, I found that I began counseling less, did less in the mundane and practical things of church life (the disciples stepped up), got to put upcoming disciple-leaders in the pulpit, set them in motion leading their own discipleship groups and shepherding them because they're more involved in those lives. This all happens because the spiritual needs of the flock are being met better, and their questions are being answered in the groups. My worship leaders are in the discipleship program and have become better worshipers. My youth group leaders are doing it with their strongest teens who are growing stronger in their walk to help other teens.

How I wish I could have had this resource when I first began pastoring. It would have solved so many challenges and problems, like those other pastors face today in their churches. That's why I am excited to share this with you. It isn't another program or a six week book study. It is a "life" course that perpetuates itself. It provides the railings for a train with disciples on board to see where the train takes them. The engine of this discipleship train is powered by the coal of the Holy Spirit's fire. Each passenger will experience their ride differently, but they'll arrive at the same destination of confidence, empowerment, spiritual maturity, intimacy with God, a greater knowledge of scripture, and the ability to discover the Bible's vast storehouse of treasures.

To top it all off, believe me when I say that my discipleship meetings are the highlight of my week and the disciples feel the same way.

Why is it that pastors leave the most precious, most powerful thing they could do for their congregation to someone else? If Jesus is the greatest example of what a shepherd can do for his flock—and he did this himself—then what is more important, in *managing* the house of God, than to train, equip, and empower men and women into a lifestyle of discipleship? The early church was birthed successfully, sustained successfully, and perpetuated successfully to this day because of Christ's foundation of discipleship management. Should we as pastors, do any less?

Dawson Trotman once asked, "Where is your man? Where is your woman?" And I humbly ask, "Where is your disciple, pastor?" Where and who is that someone you can invest in, rather than just pouring all your energy into building a facility, or managing a ministry that will eventually grow obsolete? We can't be a pastor forever, so what will we really leave behind when it is all said and done? Do we bury our gifts and talents to disciple others, or do we multiply what the Lord has left us with to invest? What will your legacy be? Will it outlive you? I have come to believe that legacies are built with people, not brick and mortar. You can't disciple brick and mortar.

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