

CHAPTER TWO

POOR FOLLOW-UP OF STUDENTS BY THEIR TEACHERS

What is a teacher? Someone may respond, “a person who teaches a lesson” Another may insist, “someone who helps students learn.” Do you see any difference between those definitions? The first definition focuses on the teacher, while the second focuses on the pupil. The first can describe the person who lectures from a teaching resource, but the second necessitates an individual who helps students understand and apply a biblical concept.

The two answers illustrate a fundamental difference of view-point about the role of a teacher, and point to the major reason leaders have identified “poor follow-up of students by their teachers” as the second greatest education concern.

One pastor expressed it like this: “Without a doubt, for me the greatest challenge is encouraging teachers and club leaders to have contact with their kids during the week between church exposures. I don’t think I have one teacher who contacts students during the week to better understand their world.” Another pastor expressed his frustration this way: “Our teachers don’t visit, don’t have socials, and are not interested in contacting visitors or absentees.”

Dr. Henrietta Mears has said, “The teacher has not taught until the student has learned.” I agree with her. While some teachers follow a practice based on the first definition, the nature of our Christian message demands that we follow the higher definition of teaching. Our focus must always be on our students and the growth of their relationship to Christ. This type of teaching requires more than instruction; it necessitates knowing the students that we teach.

Jesus illustrated this principle when he stated that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and that they know him (John 10:14). Teachers desirous of guiding students, likewise must know them, and allow their learners to in turn know them. Unfortunately, this type of teacher-student relationship is the exception rather than the norm in most churches.

Guiding students into Christlikeness is enhanced by a long-term relationship between teacher and learner. Teachers who believe that their responsibility is over at the end of a class period hinder the discipleship process. What is even more detrimental is that some congregations get so far behind in volunteer staffing that they adopt a quarterly, monthly or weekly teacher rotation. This practice (while preferred by some teachers) is never in the best interest of students. With this practice teachers rarely accept “ownership” of a class. They do their thing for the Church, drop their content, and then leave.

How can a church break out of this rut? How can a congregation encourage teachers to be more than in-class instructors? How can it help them assume responsibility for caring beyond the classroom?

Let me share six principles that will encourage teachers to accept ownership for their classes. A teacher-shepherding ministry can be a reality for the church that develops: a shared-ministry concept; an accountability system; examples of shepherding; a specific ministry assignment; resources for shepherds and celebration of success.

A Team-Ministry Concept

Whose responsibility is it to teach and care for the members of the church? Most people would answer, “the pastor.” While I agree with that response, let me also stress the need for the whole congregation to share in service. Teachers will more likely accept responsibility for student follow-up if their church as a whole believes that ministry belongs to the entire congregation.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he actually addressed all Christians “everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he stated that each believer was given a gift of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). Therefore the active service of every Christian is just as important to the congregation, as a body part is necessary to the whole body. In his second letter he reminded the church that Christ “died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who dies for them and was raised again” (2 Cor. 5:15). Living for Christ cannot be separated from living for others: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). A shared-ministry concept was encouraged by Paul when he wrote: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and *gave us the ministry* of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:17-18, emphasis mine).

All Christians have been given the ministry of reconciliation. The pastor is not the only minister in the congregation; all are ministers. All are

directed to bear with one another (Eph. 4:2), encourage one another (1 Thes. 5:11), instruct one another (Rom. 15:14) and be devoted to one another (Rom. 12:10). Churches that desire effectiveness in shepherding realize that ministry is more than just the pastors' responsibility. Time will not permit pastors to teach and care for everyone. Nor will their spiritual gifts make them effective in every aspect of ministry. Even personality factors will limit their ability to connect the same way with everyone in the congregation.

Why is it that a team-ministry concept is not fully practiced in most churches? In some situations the problem lies with the clergy. Pastors enjoy making hospital calls, leading the services, deciding direction and being the hub around which the ministry centers. In other situations the problem lies with the laity. Some congregations believe only pastors should minister. In fact, some make their view perfectly clear when they resound, "That's what we pay you for!"

A look at the New testament reveals that even Jesus did not practice solo ministry. He sent out the disciples two by two and commissioned them to go and make more followers. This multiplication process has continued through the pages of church history to the present. The congregation that continually teaches and models a shared-ministry concept will find more of their teachers adopting the responsibility of caring for students.

An Accountability System

Most churches have a procedure for the follow-up of visitors or absent members. The problem many face, however, is that their procedure is not *comprehensive* enough to care for everyone all of the time. As one pastor expressed it: "Too often people fall through the cracks. It's not unusual for us to find someone was hospitalized or has left the church well after the event had taken place."

A *good format* used by many churches for follow-up is the dividing of their membership among church board members. However this format provides little or no oversight for visitors or nonmembers, who frequently comprise over one-third of the congregation.

A *better format* for follow-up is to take advantage of the already established Sunday School structure. Teachers of children can give oversight to their students, and the well-functioning adult department can offer consistent follow-up of their people (churches that do not have life-stage Adult Bible Fellowships can use their small group ministry to shepherd people). In the ABF approach, all adults, whether they attend Sunday School or not, can be placed in subcongregations. Each class leader is responsible for the care of everyone within that age fellowship. Since teachers in the children and youth grades also follow up with their students, many families in the congregation will have contact from two sources.

A comprehensive system is a must for follow-up, but *accountability* within the system is equally critical. Contacts with visitors and other special calls are channeled by the class leader to several people interested in caring. If awareness of the need begins at the class level, they handle it directly; if it comes from another member or through the pastors, the class also follows up. For example, when Alice Clark went to the hospital to have her baby, the leader of the Homebuilders lined up members of the class to provide meals for Alice's family. Accountability takes place as the class leader reports to the pastors or at the monthly board meeting

Regular meetings help assure accountability. Throughout the month class and ministry leaders should make the staff aware of situations that require pastoral attention. The agenda of the monthly board meeting should include a review of what is happening in each of the small congregations.

Teachers working with children have a similar vehicle for accountability in their monthly staff meetings. While each teacher is responsible for a particular group of students, at the monthly meeting they can discuss overall student participation. At the meetings the team leader follows up on how the teachers are following up. The atmosphere at these meetings is not heavy; the purpose is not to heap guilt on those who are negligent. Rather they are times of information, rejoicing and ongoing prayer for individual students.

The weekly use of *records and report forms* helps teachers and program leaders stay abreast of developments in the classroom. Accountability forms should not encumber teachers, but simply assist them in tracking student absenteeism. People management is relatively easy with the use of computer software, particularly programs designed for churches.

Good records begin with a comprehensive class roster. This is not an enrollment record which may include someone who hasn't attended the church in years. Rather, it's a realistic listing of people who are under the care of the class. Since a copy of absentees is also made for the program director, weekly follow-up on the teacher's follow-up is possible (sample attendance records are included at the end of this chapter, but several types of systems are available through your local Christian bookstore).

Attendance patterns should be reviewed at team meetings in the children's division, or likewise at the adult leaders' meeting or board meeting. Expressions of concern noted on the form provide items for prayer. In addition, team leaders can plan a strategy for ministering more effectively to their students.

Examples of Shepherding

If we want our teachers to shepherd their students, then pastors and program directors must do a good job of shepherding them. Unfortunately,

willing personnel are often quickly recruited and then stuck in some remote classroom—never again remembered until, in burnout, they ask to resign. Follow-up and caring *by* teachers will rarely happen, until follow-up and caring *of* teachers if first taking place.

After a teacher's first class session, a wise team leader will check to see how the class progressed. Upon coming across a good article, the thoughtful leader will make a copy for a teacher who would profit from it. A personal note or card for a special occasion goes a long way in building camaraderie.

Thoughtfulness is also expressed by the leader who asks a teacher if some time-off is needed. If there is a sickness within the worker's family, the caring team leader will call or visit, or perhaps prepare a meal for the family. When pastors and program directors demonstrate caring, teachers see ways of shepherding that they can imitate.

A Specific Ministry Assignment

Terry Freeze is a single woman who serves in her church's club program, works in children's church and sings on the worship team. Fred Guthrie serves on the board of elders at his church, teaches an adult Sunday School class, chairs the stewardship committee, sings in the choir and leads a home Bible study. I admire the commitment level of Terry and Fred; I am amazed at their ongoing service and cheerful spirit. However, I am also concerned for them.

Terry and Fred typify the deeply committed in our churches who are sacrificially giving much of their time in many arenas of service. When people give that much time to church programs, I begin to wonder if their own needs and other responsibilities are being met. How often do they feel ministered to, or are they always giving out?

The average worker in America spends forty-eight hours per week on the job. For most people, time is their scarcest commodity. Do members have enough time for their family or friends? Are they cultivating relationships with the unchurched? And even regarding their church service, are they realistically doing the best job possible in each area of responsibility?

A congregation that wants to develop a shepherding ministry through its teachers must make *realistic ministry assignments*. It must also guard against the proliferation of church activities that compete for the worker's participation. While we may want our best leaders to serve as church officers, we often tie-up these gifted people in administrative detail. A church that desires intentionality in its shepherding ministry must reduce the workload of its people so that their primary responsibility is their teaching and shepherding.

Some congregations can accomplish this by reducing the amount of meetings in a calendar year. Many churches, however, will need to

streamline their governing structures so that fewer people run the routine operation, freeing up more leaders so that they can spend time with people.

When a church tries to reduce worker load, it often finds that it has several jobs for which it has no personnel. While this is frustrating initially, in the long-term it is actually a blessing. First, the new situation will force some to look for additional people to fill those ministry openings (not the already overworked). Second, it may lead the church to realize that they are offering more programs than they can realistically staff.

Are your leaders expected to attend multiple church activities throughout the week? If so, it's possible that the overall church programming is interfering with their ability to do their best in teaching and shepherding.

Many people are involved in community activities outside of the local church, and this is good for believers. But if reducing a teacher's responsibility at the church simply means that they add additional responsibilities with organizations, we have defeated our own purpose. Church leaders need to help teachers plan for balance in their responsibilities. If a person's primary ministry is in a neighborhood shelter, than they must have enough freedom to do that job well. Likewise if a congregant's ministry is teaching a Sunday School class, they also need enough time to shepherd those they teach.

Resources for Shepherds

A church has every right to ask its teachers to shepherd students, but it also has an obligation to help teachers with that responsibility by providing resources to assist them. The greatest resource the teacher needs is *time*, and we've just suggested how teachers and leaders need realistic schedules. This is so critical that a wise church will periodically schedule seminars on time management, personal goals and the art of self-discipline.

A second resource helpful to teachers is *training in shepherding*. Just as some people feel inadequate about personal evangelism, some teachers feel uncomfortable making student contacts. They wonder what they should say in a telephone call to their students, or their parents, especially if a parent is unchurched. Program leaders can model good conversations at in-service training times. Since the sharing of student contact stories is highly motivational, these team meetings are a good place to help newer teachers catch a vision for follow-up.

In addition to time and training, many churches assist teachers by providing *materials* for shepherding. Some program directors supply their teachers with cards to send notes to absent students; others even provide postage stamps. A number of churches purchase bulk subscriptions to Christian magazines for their teachers. One pastor indicated that he selects and gives good commentaries to adult teachers to supplement their

curriculum. Over time the teachers begin to develop good reference libraries. Another church periodically mails a relevant booklet to their teachers, just to let them know they are thinking of them. There are many materials available to help volunteers with teaching and shepherding. A church makes a good investment of its money when it budgets for resources for teachers.

Before we move from the topic of resources, let me make a bold suggestion. While it's appropriate for a church to provide follow-up materials for its teachers, let me suggest that we encourage teachers to develop their own *personal ministry fund*. This account becomes part of their annual family budget, and is above the amount given to the church. The amount may be small at first, but when they discipline themselves to work up to 1 or 2 percent of their annual income, they will have ample funds for carrying on their personal ministries.

With this fund they may purchase a commentary for class preparation. They may use part of the money to buy a gift for a sick child. They may tap the fund to take their class out for a social activity, or provide a dessert fellowship in their home. The ministry account may also be used for babysitting expenses when they go on visitation.

A ministries fund is beneficial to both the teacher and church for several reasons. First, if this type of money is not budgeted (either by the church or the teacher), quality shepherding will not likely take place. A youth worker, for example, might not be able to afford the \$37.50 to have the junior high kids over for pizza.

Second, teachers will not feel "taken advantage of" if the money they use for ministry had already been budgeted for that purpose. When workers keep shelling out money for postage, shower gifts or materials that they do not have in their own budget, resentment may produce a negative feeling about church service.

Third, when volunteers use their own ministry account, they become more involved and excited about what's taking place in students' lives. Remember, Jesus taught that where our treasure is, that's where our heart is. As we invest our money into specific people. Our heart is drawn to an even deeper commitment to them.

Any efforts that are made to assist teachers with their shepherding will let them know that they are appreciated.

Celebration of Successes

Research studies demonstrate how people live up to our expectations. For example, teachers who believe they have a group of exceptional students will typically grade them higher than teachers who believe they have a group of less capable students. In the story of *The Little Engine That Could*, the little switcher repeated, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." As a

result he actually did pull the cars up the mountain! Similarly, in the area of outreach and caring, people who say, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can,” actually do reach out!

Obviously, a deeply introverted person will not become a charismatic leader. We all have certain parameters and comfort zones related to personalities and experience. Nevertheless, teachers who think they can make some strides in the area of follow-up or shepherding will see their dreams realized.

Teachers can be helped to *think they can* by celebrating the successes of those who are reaching out. For example, on my way to church one Sunday I noticed one of our members helping a woman and her children with their disabled vehicle. I was proud of Larry. Later I mentioned to the congregation how his example typifies who we are—servants of Christ. Our people realized that caring *is* taking place daily, and they need to believe, “Yes, I can do it too!”

When working with people everyday we encounter heartbreaks and happiness. While we remember in prayer the apathetic student, or the adult who does not want involvement or intimacy, we cannot afford to let those negative experiences drain our enthusiasm. Regular outreach leads to profitable conversations, supportive connections and other types of meaningful encounters. Wise program directors highlight these successes and help their staff catch a vision for shepherding.

Conclusion

You have heard the expression: “The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” It appears that the same holds true in ministry. Ministry-rich congregations become more effective, while ministry-poor churches become more impoverished. Success breeds success. A church that begins to care beyond the classroom will begin to view itself as a caring church. In turn, as they think of themselves as a caring congregation, they will demonstrate even more caring.

A church that is struggling with the follow-up of students by teachers must move away from bemoaning its situation to target a positive game plan for shepherding. As successes are celebrated and further encouraged, regular shepherding by teachers (and the entire congregation) will continue to grow.

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A Check list for Effective Follow-up

Does our church have...

- A Shared-Ministry Concept
- An Accountability System
- Examples of Shepherding
- A Specific Ministry Assignment
- Resources for Shepherds
- Celebration of Successes

Sample Record Form

BPEFC Kids' Zone Information

Name: _____ M/F Birthdate: ____/____/____

Phone: (____) _____ Address: _____

E-mail Address: _____

Parents' Name(s): _____ Mailbox #:

Would you like a mailbox? Yes No (please circle)

Parents' Address (if different than above): _____

Name of your School: _____

Medical Information (allergies, seizures, asthma, etc.): _____

Other Needs (ADHD, ADD, behavior issues, etc.): _____

Foods to stay away from: _____

Check area(s) you want more information on:

- Child Dedication
- Baptism
- Ministry Opportunities within the Kids' Zone
- Kids' Zone Summer 2004
- Other: _____