

# SHEPHERDING

Caring for church members through  
house churches

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## 19.2 CARING FOR CHURCH MEMBERS THROUGH HOUSE CHURCHES

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- *"<sup>42</sup>And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in prayers. <sup>43</sup>Then fear (**awe**) came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup>Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, <sup>45</sup>and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. <sup>46</sup>So continuing daily with one accord to the temple, and breaking bread from house to house...<sup>47</sup>praising God and having favor with all people. And the Lord added to the church (**ecclesia**) daily those who were being saved". (Acts 2:42-47)*
- *"<sup>3</sup>Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, <sup>4</sup>who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches (**ecclesiae**) of the Gentiles. <sup>5</sup>Likewise greet the church (**ecclesia**) that is in their house". (Romans 16:3-5)*
- *"<sup>15</sup>Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church (**ecclesia**) that is in his house". (Colossians 4:15)*
- *"... to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church (**ecclesia**) in your house". (Philemon 2)*

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### AIM

The aim of this article is to examine the

- operation of the young New Testament church;
- the Biblical metaphor of the shepherd in the church; and the
- application of the shepherding ministry in a small group environment.

The focus will be directed towards the caring for church members in the small group environment.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his book *Successful Home Cell Groups*, Dr. Paul Yonggi Cho describes his church as both the smallest and largest in the world. **The home cell group system developed there** has brought about phenomenal growth, as well as intimate fellowship and involvement. His Yoido Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul, Korea, already numbered more than 500 000 members involved in more than 50 000 cell groups by November 1980.

A search of the internet shows that the cell church concept has indeed taken firm root in the church all over the world. Different networks and alliances have been formed to promote the concept and specific training has been formalized by the different networks and even individual churches – see, for example, the internet home page of Cell Church International ([www.cellchurchint.co.za](http://www.cellchurchint.co.za)).

A plethora of books on the subject is available. Some, such as the *Cell Leader's Guidebook* by Ong Swee Geok (1994: Touch Outreach Ministries), are simple and practical books that should be easily understood by most church members, except the illiterate. Others, such as Ralph Neighbour's *Where Do We Go From Here*, (1990: Touch Publications) are thick academic works that most church members and many leaders would find just too much to bear. It is no wonder that the home cell concept has taken on such a wide and fragmented array of applications.

This article is not about the pro's and cons of the home cell and house church movements and will consequently not debate those concepts. It will, however, be necessary to refer to some aspects in order to establish what the Biblical metaphor of effective shepherding proposes.

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## DEFINITIONS

- A **home cell** (or cell group) is described as a small group of members of a larger church, who are committed to building up one another, and also to fulfil the Great Commission in reaching out to the lost. They meet together weekly, as well as having contact with other people throughout the week. The Cell is like a larger family than just your own. It is comparable to the cells in a human body that provide protection, communication, life, sustenance, etc. Likewise, the home cell is there for the protection, edification, acceptance, support and communication (LFCC: 2003). In other words, home cells are small organisational units of a larger congregation.
- Home cells are also described as extensions of an on-going institutional church ministry that meets in homes of individual church members. They may meet for prayer, for fellowship, for Bible study or a number of other reasons. Generally speaking, elders do not lead them and the sacraments are not administered in these meetings (Parousia Network: 2001). **The functions practised are therefore limited.**

- A **house church, on the other hand**, is the smallest expression of the local church (Hanley: 1999). In other words, it is a self-contained church meeting that takes place in a home. It has clearly defined leadership (who could called "elders" and perhaps even "deacons"). The house church meets regularly for all the functions normally associated with the local church. These include fellowship, prayer, worship, instruction and the ministering of the sacraments (Parousia Network; 2001).
- Based on Acts 2:42-47, this is the concept the author prefers instead of home cells. If all parties concerned follow Biblical principles of leadership and submission, the house church need not be a threat to the stability of any larger congregational covering it may submit to.

**THE YOUNG  
CHURCH OF THE  
BIBLE**

According to Acts 2:42-47, the young church

- continued in the apostles' doctrine (and therefore received regular teaching);
- prayed together;
- broke bread from house to house (participated in the Lord's table or communion);
- cared for the needs of all among themselves; and
- faithfully attended the worship activities in the temple.

The first four functions above all seem to relate to what could be described as a function of caring in different ways for those who were members of the house churches. The house church was clearly a fully functional church and its activities went beyond what is practised generally in modern home cells.

It is important to remember that these house churches remained the observable church for many decades. There were no separate church buildings for the congregations to meet in until the year 150 AD. As all the New Testament books were completed by the year 90 AD (probably even earlier), all the epistles would then have been written to house churches (Comiskey; 2003).

Scripture does not mention different congregations in a single city and this implies that there was only one local congregation in a city, made up of a number of house churches.

## THE SHEPHERD IN THE BIBLE

- *"<sup>1</sup>The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: <sup>2</sup>Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not ...as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; <sup>4</sup>and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away". (2 Pet. 5:1-4)*

An analysis of the work of Biblical figures that are regarded as examples of the leadership gifts in the young church (the so-called five-fold ministry gifts or ascension gifts) shows that the shepherd or pastor is the only fully resident ministry of the five. The others all seem to be itinerant ministries. In the natural too, the shepherd is the only person who always stays with the flock.

Dr. Randall Smith, a noted Bible scholar, spent two weeks with a shepherd boy in Israel, after which he produced a video on the role of the shepherd. His findings help to explain the shepherding metaphor as set out in Psalm 23 and other Scriptures, and will be used in the following discussion of the shepherd's role of caring for the flock.

- **One should never lose sight of the fact that Biblical metaphors and parables were not just ideas plucked out of thin air, but related to aspects of real, everyday life that could be understood by the audience of the time.**

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- **It is also important to note that the Greek *poimen* is translated "shepherd" in every instance in the New Testament, except in Ephesians 4:11, where it is translated "pastor" (Phillips:2003).**
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## CARING FOR THE FLOCK: OVERVIEW

Caring for the sheep flock in the natural involves several functions that include protecting them, feeding them, disciplining them and comforting them.

According to Neighbour (1990:210) a shepherd in the church is a revealer, not a teacher. He describes shepherds as enablers, facilitators. They may or may not be effective teachers, counsellors, or evangelists, but they must be lovers of their flock. **They should share their lives with transparency with those of their flock.**

The shepherd of real sheep stays out in the veld with his flock. In the process he comes to know them all intimately and they learn to know his voice:

- *"<sup>2</sup>he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice". (John 10:2-4)*

In a home cell or house church environment where the group is required to split up into two groups on a routinely regular basis (approximately every six months, according to Neighbour (1990:217)) it would be most difficult to build such a strong relationship of trust with all concerned.

Dr. Randall Smith learned from the shepherd that the sheep follow him by sound, not sight. In the sparse pasture of the Israeli hills, the sheep always have their heads down, looking for something to graze. Consequently they follow the shepherd's voice as he calls or as he hits on stones with his staff. They will not follow the voice of a stranger. This reality clearly illustrates the place that trust takes.

- **Pastoral care can be described as a most important inwardly focussed ministry of the church** (Van der Merwe: 1998).

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## FEEDING THE FLOCK

- *"<sup>1</sup>The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. <sup>2</sup>He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters". (Psalm 23:1-2)*

The flock is fed by **leading them** to places where there is grass. In the same way the shepherd of the house church should lead his flock to where they can be fed spiritually. If they are not fed spiritually, they will not grow spiritually. This can take up the form of sound teaching through anointed teachers of the Bible, the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc. The shepherd out in the veld does not personally feed the sheep, but he leads them to where they can feed themselves. Likewise, the shepherd of a house church need not fulfil every function himself, but should exercise the caring leadership to ensure that their needs be met. This is the facilitation role that Neighbour (1990:217) describes.

Sheep in the natural are afraid of running (noisy) water, as it warns them of the danger it holds – the wool below the neck can become waterlogged and heavy, pulling them into the water where they drown. The shepherd diverts the running water into a still pool, or carries it to a trough with a bucket.

- Feeding the flock may even imply the provision of a feeding scheme. The author pastors a small congregation in the Harvest Network and the congregation meets in a facility at his house. Snacks are provided after every meeting and the author is well aware of the fact that many times those snacks have been the only meal some of the members had had that day (and even longer). The fact that the congregation is actually not more than a fully functioning house church at this stage, has made this "feeding ministry" easy to implement in a non-humiliating manner.

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## COMFORTING THE FLOCK

Dr. Randall Smith's experience with the shepherd boy taught him that sheep would not lie down if they were uncomfortable. If that is the case, they mill around the whole night and tend to bite and hurt each other.

When the sheep are brought into the sheepfold in the evening, the shepherd inspects everyone and cleans out parasites from their noses and ears.

- *You anoint my head with oil". (Psalm 23:5)*

Sheep have a light skin and are prone to what is termed "summer fever" which also causes discomfort. The shepherd then rubs a good measure of oil into the sheep's head. Asked whether this really relieves the fever, the shepherd answered Dr. Smith that he did not think so. He thought it was more the assurance that he cared for the sheep that brought them comfort.

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In the same way the shepherd in the house church environment can bring comfort to the flock through his caring attitude – which may range from warm, open communication to formal counselling.

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## **PROTECTING THE FLOCK**

- *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me". (Psalm 23: 4)*

The shepherds in the East regard the valleys of the dry streambeds (the wadi's) as a place of danger. Consequently they try to keep their flock on higher ground. The rod is used to throw at wild animals that would threaten the flock, such as jackal. The bent staff is used to lift sheep that have fallen into a crevice to safety.

Shepherds in the East would construct a sheepfold out of rocks or thorns branches. The shepherd sleeps in the doorway and literally becomes the door. Any wild animal or thief would have to "go through him" to enter the sheepfold. This provides them security.

Likewise, the shepherd of the house church should care for his flock by protecting them from dangers such as false teaching, jealousy, strife, etc. He should be the "door" of his "sheepfold".

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## **DISCIPLINING THE FLOCK**

Shepherds in the Israeli veld discipline a sheep that constantly leads others astray by breaking its leg. The leg is then set and bandaged, and for a few weeks the shepherd carries this sheep on his shoulders. He tends the sheep all the time, feeding it and seeing that it has water to drink. In the end this action bonds the sheep to the shepherd to such an extent that it never leaves the side of the shepherd.

The shepherd of the house church may also be confronted by the need to minister discipline to members of his flock. This should be done in a manner that creates a stronger bond and not bring division. For this the shepherd will need much wisdom and he (or she) should do this prayerfully at all times.

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## **EXERCISING SPIRITUAL GIFTS**

- *"<sup>10</sup>As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. <sup>11</sup>If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong he glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen". (1 Pet. 4:10-11)*
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The gifts of the Holy Spirit are described in Romans 12, 1 Cor. 12, and Eph. 4. Once again one must bear in mind that these Epistles were written to house churches.

In 1 Cor. 14:26 Paul writes to the church "*Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification*". Paul adds the fact that all members of the church should take an active role in edifying one another, to his explanation in 1 Cor. 12:26 that the church is one body with many members. If one member suffers, the whole body suffers. If one member is honoured, all the members are to rejoice with it.

Scripture therefore clearly shows that the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the leadership gifts should be exercised in the house church. This serves to edify the whole body.

The modern house church also provides the intimacy of a small, closely knit group in which individuals would feel more freedom to experiment with the different gifts. Very few can or will participate in the large group setting. One could describe the small group setting as a laboratory in which individuals can be facilitated to experiment with and grow in the application of the spiritual gifts for the benefit of all.

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**ADVANTAGES  
OF THE HOUSE  
CHURCH**

The house church has certain definite advantages over the full assembly of the modern congregation in caring for God's flock (Van der Merwe; 1998:29):

- The house church provides an environment conducive of intimate fellowship or *koinonia*.
- Ministry can be exercised more easily.
- A personal atmosphere exists.
- Spiritual growth takes place at a faster pace.
- Greater unselfconsciousness exists.
- Spiritual gifts are exercised more freely.
- Conflict can be dealt with more effectively and in a constructive manner.
- Ministries develop faster.

## CONCLUSION

From the above it is clear that the house church is the Biblical model of conducting the full function of the church. Modern churches present an upside down organisation in which the larger congregation is the primary unit that is organised into smaller units called home cells, cell groups, care groups, small groups, etc. The Biblical model is the house church as primary unit, which come together from time to time in the larger ecclesia or local church.

Overall, it is easier to build a position of mutual trust in the small group such as the house church. In such conditions people would be more open to share their feelings and experiences. For example, whereas people would not easily share with the whole congregation that they are in a financial crisis, it becomes easier to do so in the smaller setting of the house church.

If the church is to fulfil its function of equipping its members...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...according to the effective working by which every part does its share, **causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love** (Eph. 4:12-16), self-contained house churches are not optional units of church life. They are the bare necessities!

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