



ROD AND STAFF: TOOLS FOR A SHEPHERD

by Bill Frisbie

Piles: Taking the mystery out of serving.

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Several years ago, when our four children were young and my wife worked 3, 10 hour shifts, a day, all at home, I nearly stumbled upon a mystery. On a regular basis, piles of stuff would simply appear at the top or bottom of our stairways. It was such a pain to step over and around them. Desiring to be a gracious husband, I considered the hectic nature of Carol's life and nobly chose not to complain. After all, I could still pass safely from one floor to the other. One day, Carol was a bit upset with me, though I had no clue what I had done. Turns out, she was also in pursuit of solving a mystery. She could not understand why I would be uninterested in helping with a simple housekeeping matter placed so obviously before me. Dialogue began and the meaning of the mysterious piles was now revealed: The stuff at the top was to go down, and the stuff at the bottom was to go up with whoever was traveling that direction. Since I was leaving them lay, the transportation task had always fallen to her. The mystery solved, my sense of nobility also moved to sheepish embarrassment. I apologized for not taking the responsibility to ask a few simple questions that would have cleared up things long before. The end result was greater understanding of the differences in men and women's perceptions, (details of which are best held for a future issue) and of what kind of service meant the most to the other when a need arises.

How can we apply this lesson to our life in community? We know of course that all our provision comes from God, but as a part of that provision He has called us to serve one another in practical ways. (See Luke 10:25-37, Galatians 5:13, Hebrew 10:23-25, James 2:14-19) We serve most effectively when we take time to communicate with those we serve.

Scenario: "Well, last week my car broke down. I was late to work once and if I am late again I might lose my job".

Do we step around this apparent verbal pile, mistaking it for purely a prayer request? Perhaps we want to avoid it or assume someone else is probably already addressing it. Consider, instead, responding with probing questions: "We will gladly pray for your situation; however in what specific practical ways can we help?"

This same principle applies when someone from our group (or sphere of influence) is experiencing a crisis. This would include things such as job loss, death in the family, child birth, and marital crisis. Such times are guaranteed to create needs. Let's not make the mistakes of assuming what will help the most or that someone else is taking care of those needs. Let's rather take a proactive approach. Invite a list, ask what they would find helpful, and if you get an idea of something you would like to do beyond those things, it is fine do it, but make sure those areas they will find most helpful are addressed first. If the person is in a crisis where they cannot think straight, make sure someone is committed to stay close to them and in one sense "think" for them. Have that person assess what the needs are and help organize ways to meet them.

Sometimes someone else's felt need may not seem of value to us, nevertheless we may choose to serve that need as a way to demonstrate love. Let's say for example, you are not a big fan of having a pet, but your group member's out-of-town relative has died and they need someone to care for their dog while they are gone to the funeral. By caring for their dog, you are speaking value to them. Some years ago, I heard of a more extreme example, about a mission team, beginning to minister to an unreached village. They spent some time in the village assessing the situation. Obvious needs were all around; better waste management, clean drinking water and so forth. However, when asked, the number one need in people's minds was a soccer field. Building that field opened wide the door to ministry and a greater appreciation when they met other needs.

Like-wise, an act of service that appeals to us may speak less to someone else. This is where it really helps to know each other or at the very least ask questions. Scenario: A mother of a young child is feeling stressed out, and we remember how nice it was to have our mother take our child for the day. In turn, we offer a kind-hearted solution to babysit the child for a day, only to be surprised by the look of terror on her face. It is then we discover the mother

actually finds the idea of being separated from her child a greater stressor. After further discussion, it becomes clear that some help with laundry and dishes will actually bring more relief.

It is sometimes appropriate to redirect a person when their perceived need is going to lead them into more trouble or is completely unrealistic. Scenario: They have to have that car now and want help going to buy it with their minimum payment at a buy here/pay here lot. It serves better to redirect them to alternative solutions, since such transactions generally create a terrible financial mess later.

Biblically, our biological families are the first source in meeting each other's needs. Ideally, next is our church family, specifically starting within the small group. When the small group does not have the capacity to meet a need, then taking it out to the broader church is appropriate.

Just as I discovered how to better serve once I stopped assuming and started asking questions, so, too, our lives together in community will be energized by heart-felt acts of serving one another through the power of Christ.

1. Take a moment to reflect on the way God has met your needs through other people.
List the things that were helpful and even unhelpful. Now analyze why each was helpful and make a note of what you learned.
2. Proactively discuss with your group: When I am (*insert situation*), these are the kind of things that I find helpful.
3. Interview a couple people from your group that have recently gone through difficult times. What was their experience with others helping them?
4. If there is no one in your immediate sphere of influence in a time of need, email other group leaders and offer to help with a need in their group.