

Shepherds in training: Reinventing leadership

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

Seminaries generally do a fine job of educating the minds of people who are called into ministry. But how well do they form the hearts and spirits of those people? Do seminaries build leaders who are servants of Christ?

Gordon Cosby, longtime pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., thinks that seminaries do far too little to shape people as ministers of the gospel. (See our interview with [Gordon Cosby](#).) Along with Rebecca Stelle, a Lutheran minister, Cosby is trying to reinvent leadership training. Among the many things that are not necessary in his program: buildings, faculty and a shelf full of books. What is needed are patience, discipline and a willingness to surrender one's ego.

The program, situated in northwest Washington's Adams-Morgan neighborhood, is called Shepherds' Training and is linked to a nonprofit organization called Becoming Church. Half of those in the program are recovering from a chemical addiction and about a third have at some time been in jail or prison. Nearly half have been homeless—and some are homeless even as they participate in Shepherds' Training. When participants finish the program after two to three years, the title they are given is not "pastor" but "donkey"—a reminder that their job is that of being humble servants, ready to work.

Larry Watson is a donkey. He grew up in Adams-Morgan and never imagined himself a minister of any kind. The choice for young men in his neighborhood was between selling drugs and taking a dead-end, low-paying job and struggling to pay the bills. He chose drugs, and as a result spent time in and out of prison.

Finally free and sober, Watson became a drug and alcohol counselor and worked for one of the many ministries associated with the Church of the Savior. Then Cosby approached Watson with an idea. Would Watson be interested in participating in a spiritual support group in which people would gather together to help each other grow more deeply in the Christian life? Watson joined Cosby's first spiritual support

group and continued in the program as it developed. He was ordained in the first group of donkeys in the spring of 2008 (the group included Cosby and Stelle). Nine shepherds in training are in the program now, and several more are set to start the program.

Shepherds' Training has its roots in Cosby's long-held belief that "every serious follower of Christ is a minister." While that idea is often taken to mean that people don't need formal preparation to be ministers, Cosby stresses the opposite point: everybody needs training.

"Jesus knew his disciples needed preparation. The American Empire is probably much more entrenched and much more powerful than the Roman Empire that he was up against. To feel that we don't need any preparation is dumb. We need preparation." The real question, said Cosby, is "what kind of preparation."

Cosby has concluded that people often come out of seminary less well prepared for ministry than when they entered. "Seminary can be a hindrance to the understanding of the gospel," he said. In his view, seminary tends to build up people's egos and does not challenge them to follow the way of love. "Love cannot take the way of power. This is what Christ's life and death taught."

The people involved in Shepherds' Training "will never go to seminary," said Cosby. "And if they did, it would not likely help them."

Shepherds' Training attempts to provide a rigorous spiritual formation and theological education with an eye toward fostering social transformation in the culturally diverse Adams-Morgan neighborhood. The program takes an incremental approach, says Stelle, director of Becoming Church and developer of the Shepherds curriculum. The first step is to cultivate leaders by way of a spiritual support group.

Dozens of people in the neighborhood already attend small weekly gatherings to share spiritual struggles, read the Bible and pray together. The sessions are modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, but with some key differences. For example, at the start of the meeting the group reads a litany in which participants claim Jesus Christ as their "higher power." Every group meeting begins with a reading from the Bible instead of from the AA Big Book. In addition, members commit themselves to pray for one another, to engage in prayer and Bible study 15 minutes a day, to tithe to the group and to earnestly seek God's call in their lives. These groups appeal to people who have already been helped by a 12-step program.

For members of the spiritual support group, the addiction they are fighting is an addiction to “the world system.”

Cosby calls the spiritual support group an “elementary form” of the Christian life. It brings diverse people together and offers a way for them to be open with one another. The groups are always smaller than 15.

“We feel that the smallness is important to intimacy, and needed if we are to really get to know the people, to feel our way into their pain and allow them to feel their way into our pain,” Cosby said. The groups are intentionally formed so as to be half black and half white, half rich and half poor.

Neither Cosby nor Stelle likes the idea of setting quotas, but both see them as necessary. “I dislike quotas, and I have always disliked them,” said Cosby. “But I am getting so old and I haven’t got long to live, so I have to have the quota. I don’t know how else to do it. We have a tendency to move toward our comfort zones, and we lose contact with that part of the family that is unlearned and doesn’t have power, the ones that Jesus told us to be with.”

Stelle said people often challenge the quotas, asking, “Why do we care if someone is white or black?” But when she hears that question, she suspects that people are really asking, “Why can’t we go back into denial about the things that separate us?”

The spiritual support group creates a unique setting in which racial and economic divisions can be addressed. Said Stelle: “You can’t ask in church on Sunday morning: Why are there so many white people here?” But within the support groups, people have an opportunity to face economic and racial differences and tensions.

While the purpose of the group is to offer spiritual support, it also brings to the surface potential leaders. Each support group is run by a donkey, who keeps an eye out for those who might want to be part of Shepherds’ Training. Potential shepherds attend a retreat and then engage in an eight-week, one-on-one meeting with a tutor. The tutoring process uses Daniel Ehrlander’s book *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God’s Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe*, a biblically grounded text that takes the reader through the entire Bible in simple but theologically rich language.

One shepherd in training, Thomasine Brown, said that though she had been reading the Bible her whole life, *Manna and Mercy* gave her a systematic understanding that

she had not had. The one-on-one meetings help people decide if they are interested in continuing in the program and investing in the community.

Becoming Church seeks to pair “social opposites” for the tutoring program so that participants can connect with someone very different. “To learn about manna from someone who doesn’t have any can be a powerful experience,” said Stelle. “We are not just conveying information, we are entering into relationships that shape our hearts.”

The next step toward becoming a donkey is agreeing to increase Bible study and prayer time to 30 minutes a day. The students then start taking the four classes designed by Stelle, which are offered in six-week segments. The four classes emphasize social and economic justice and Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God.

With each step they take in the program, participants are asked to add a new spiritual discipline—increasing time spent in prayer, tithing, observing Sabbath and discerning specific calls. Eventually, participants commit to going on a silent retreat. Finally, everyone in the group receives leadership training as they learn to articulate the gospel and embody it. Donkeys go on to lead their own spiritual support groups.

The first class deals with power and money. Participants are asked to examine their relationship to both. “Money is one of the enormously acceptable idols of our society,” Stelle observed. “Every American denomination is working with some form of the prosperity gospel; some are just more subtle about it than others. We need to deal with this as directly as we can.”

The text for this class is a booklet produced by the Church of the Savior called *The Ministry of Money Study Circle*. The class tries to convey Jesus’ insistence that you cannot serve both God and money and create the foundation for divesting oneself of the world—an act that Stelle and Cosby believe is central to the Christian life.

The second class focuses on the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer. Participants work their way through the Sermon on the Mount, trying to understand what Jesus meant by *meek* and by *poor in spirit*. What is this “upside down” theology proposed by Jesus and how are we supposed to live it? Discussion is central. Participants read both the Bible and an additional text and write a one-to-two-page paper every week. The emphasis is on learning but also, as Stelle puts it, on “shaping the heart and challenging societal ways of being.”

The third class tackles “the world system” by studying the temptations of Jesus, the nature of evil, and the American culture that rules hearts and minds. The text for this class is Henri Nouwen’s *In the Name of Jesus*.

For the final class, Stelle uses Richard Rohr’s *Great Themes of Paul* to lead students to what is on the other side of the sacrifice of ego. This class explores the reconciliation of all creation in Christ. Having come out of the alienation and isolation of the world, participants encounter the mystical body of Christ. At the very least, Stelle said, she wants participants to ask, “Have I died into the presence and the reality of love?”

Stelle lamented that there are not more materials like *Manna and Mercy* that deal directly with theological issues without relying on jargon or focusing on scholarly debates that mean little to the people with whom she works. Articulating a theology that can be lived and expressed in everyday life is the fundamental mission of Shepherds’ Training.

Mary Easley, who has just completed the second class, is curious about what lies ahead. Her mother had attended the Church of the Savior for decades, but when Stelle mentioned to Easley the possibility of joining the spiritual support groups and then the Shepherds program, she was not interested. But now she not only is in training but is a mentor for people just beginning the program. Looking back on her life, Easley can see that people often turned to her for help and support. Shepherds’ Training is confirming her sense of herself as a leader.

Easley’s story reveals the delicate balance in the program between asking people to surrender their ego on the one hand and building up their sense of power on the other. People need to see themselves as leaders and begin to trust their own voices, even as they give up the world system and whatever investment they had in it.

Stelle said she frequently receives calls from people interested in Shepherds’ Training and in the model that Becoming Church is providing, but she also senses strong reluctance. “People don’t want to give up anything to be followers of Jesus. This way of being requires you to give up a lot: money, time, your privilege, your sense of having all the answers.”

Cosby echoed that point. “What we are called to do is impossible. We can’t do it alone. It depends on whether God wants to do it with us.”