



Serving Our Children During and After COVID-19: Application of Shepherd Leadership at Home and School

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Abstract

Shepherding is one of humanity's oldest known occupations, dating back thousands of years. Yet, within the way of a shepherd lies hidden leadership treasures, which are especially valuable for parents, caregivers, and teachers during and after COVID-19. Shepherd leadership is a specific form of servant leadership. Although there are many similarities between shepherd leadership and servant leadership, theoretical or empirical studies of shepherd leadership are far behind servant leadership. The most referenced texts of shepherds and shepherd leadership can be found in the Bible. This paper examines the thinking, doing, and being of shepherds and the practical applications—guiding, providing, and protecting—of shepherd leadership to modern-day living. Multiple analyses of the Davidic Psalm 23 provide examples and illustrations of shepherd leadership principles. The current global pandemic is causing psychological, emotional, mental, and social effects on children (Ghosh et al., 2020; Ritz et al., 2020; United Nations, 2020). When country leaders and governments work hard to provide medical care for patients and vaccines for citizens, those who are parents, caregivers, and teachers can shepherd their children through the valley of the shadow of death and arrive at the tableland for enjoyment and pleasure. It is argued that shepherd leadership can be adopted by parents, caregivers, and teachers who serve the needs of children during and after COVID-19.

Keywords: Shepherd Leaders, Shepherd Leadership, Servant Leadership COVID-19

COVID-19 is no stranger to anyone. Without any invitation, this virus intrudes into our daily life and has redefined normalcy. No one knows precisely where it came from and when the threat will be over. Under this level of uncertainty, this paper argues that shepherd leadership—a specific form of servant leadership—can be adopted by parents, caregivers, and teachers who serve the needs of children during and after the global pandemic.

Reaves (2018) contended, “if one intends to be a servant leader, he must also have a shepherd’s heart. If one intends to lead as a shepherd, they must exemplify servant leadership”. Both shepherd leaders and servant leaders know and love the people they are leading. They are relational, seeking the interests of others over self. They are clear of their role and identity and do not abuse their power. Foster (2011) argued, “it is not possible to be a true shepherd unless one is also a servant.” Both shepherd leaders and servant leaders have the desire to serve and protect those who are under their care. As stated by Greenleaf (1970, p.13), the ultimate goal of servant leadership is that “they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants.” It is argued that the descriptors—healthier, wiser, freer and more autonomous—are likely to be common outcomes among followers of servant leaders and shepherd leaders. Therefore, shepherd leadership and servant leadership are not mutually exclusive. More precisely, shepherd leadership can be viewed as a specific form of servant leadership.

A difference between shepherd leadership and servant leadership is that the shepherd leader is firmly at the front of his/her followers as the role model, although he/she often comes alongside the people (McCormick and Davenport, 2003). On the other hand, there is no specific emphasis on where servant leaders lead from— front, side, or back. A servant leader can work alongside others, as Leo, the servant in the Journey to the East (Hesse, 1957). Leo lives among the travelers and does their chores. He holds the band of men together and uplifts their spirit with his songs and positivism. Without Leo, the group falls apart. After some years of wandering, the narrator of the story finds out that Leo was the titular head of the Order who sponsored the journey. The servant—Leo—is the leader. Servant leadership begins with the desire to serve others. Modern-day examples of servant leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Mahatma Gandhi are well-known visionary servant leaders who led and served—front, side, and back—their people around the world (Baldonado, 2017).

In comparison, there is a lot more scholarly research on the concept of servant leadership than shepherd leadership. The Google Ngram Viewer is an online search engine that charts the frequencies of any word or short sentence using the yearly count of n-grams found in sources printed between 1500 and 2019 in American English, British English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, and simplified Chinese. The usage of the phrase “servant leadership” and “shepherd leadership” in the annual publication among all google sources in 2019 are $2.58 \times 10^{-5}\%$ and $5.65 \times 10^{-8}\%$, respectively (Google Books Ngram Viewer, n.d.). This shows that servant leadership is mentioned 1,000 times more frequently than shepherd leadership. Therefore, research on shepherd leadership lacks behind servant leadership, and a better understanding of shepherd leadership adds value to our societies.

Swalm (2019a) suggested that shepherd leadership theory is popular in some faith-based communities, but its principles are timeless, universal, effective, and balanced. The concept of shepherd leadership should and could be developed by everyone regardless of his or her faith perspective. Hence, the literature review of this paper will explore the head (thinking), hands (working), and heart (motive) of shepherds and shepherd leaders with multiple analyses of the Davidic Psalm 23 of the Holy Bible. It forms the basis to discuss its applications outside of faith-based communities.

COVID-19 brings disturbance to children and their schooling. Parents, caregivers, and teachers face new norms as children stay home for extended periods and go to school sparingly. Schools worldwide have closed from face-to-face classes when the number of COVID-19 confirmed cases were high. During remote learning, young children have lessons through online platforms: group discussion and video learning. Parents collect worksheets, activity kits, and books from school so that children can continue their learning at home. Although the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among children is low and fatal cases are rare, the undesirable psychological, social, mental, and emotional impacts of COVID-19 on children are alarming (Ghosh et al., 2020; Ritz et al., 2020; United Nations, 2020). When world leaders and governments focus on medical care for patients and vaccination for citizens, this paper argues that parents, caregivers, and teachers are the most suitable people who apply shepherd leadership to care for these vulnerable children's wellness during and after the global pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rebanks (2015) described shepherds as mentally and emotionally tough, hardworking, patient, humble, caring, strong, and intelligent. Shepherds work together, and the experienced ones mentor the novices. Shepherds are long-term thinkers who are adaptable to changes, teachable, knowledgeable, and have an entrepreneurial spirit.

The shepherd metaphor is mentioned more than 500 times in the biblical narrative: the Old and New Testaments (Anderson, 1997). Morgan (1997) suggested that metaphors are powerful in providing a framework or window to view and understand leadership concepts. Singh (2010) agreed that metaphors help relate an idea to something familiar and make them more concrete. Therefore, metaphors can be used to formulate and express leadership concepts.

Shepherding is one of humanity's oldest known occupations, dating back thousands of years (Leman & Pentak, 2004). Swalm (2019a) argued that a shepherd's image is universal, and everyone has vague ideas about what shepherding involves. However, Anderson (1997) was cautious that the shepherd metaphor might bring about warm images of love, care, and tenderness, though the work of a shepherd is also protective, dangerous, dirty and smelly.

EXAMPLES AND DUTIES OF SHEPHERDS IN THE BIBLE

As recorded in the Holman Bible Dictionary (Gary, n.d.), Abel, the son of Adam (Genesis 4:2), was the first Bible reference of a shepherd, followed by Abraham (Genesis 12:16), Rachel (Genesis 29:9), Jacob (Genesis 30:31-40), and Moses

(Exodus 3:1). A shepherd—a keeper of sheep—led sheep to pasture and water (Psalm 23:1) and protected them from wild animals (1 Samuel 17:34-35). They guarded them either in the wilderness (Luke 2:8) or in sheepfolds (Zephaniah 2:6). Shepherds counted their sheep (Jeremiah 33:13), looked for the lost ones (Matthew 18:10-14) and carried the weak lambs in their arms (Isaiah 40:11).

EXPECTATIONS OF SHEPHERD LEADERS IN THE BIBLE

A shepherd leader is expected to serve others with virtues and skills (Graves, 2015). The expectations of King David, a shepherd leader, is that he “shepherded [his people] with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (Psalm 78:72). Furthermore, Jesus Christ, Christianity’s founder, self-proclaimed to be the good shepherd (John 10:7-8) and commissioned Peter, his lead disciple, to “feed my lambs”, “tend my lambs”, and “feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). Feeding and tending are actions of care and love instead of domination and power (Kinnison, 2010). In other words, a shepherd leader is expected to lead by example, not lord over others (1 Peter 5: 1-4). Keller (1970/2007) explained that a shepherd is different from a sheepdog; one leads, and the other barks at the flock. The apostle Paul established churches and described the leaders as the shepherds (Acts 20:28). The modern word “pastor” is the Latin word for shepherd (Latin-English Dictionary, n.d.). Throughout the Bible, the shepherd as a leader is a recurring metaphor indicating the relationship between God and His people (Psalm 23:1, Isaiah 40:11) and between leaders and their followers (2 Samuel 5:2, Ezekiel 34:1, Jeremiah 23:1) (Gary, n.d.).

SHEPHERD LEADERSHIP IN THE BIBLE: PURPOSES, CHARACTERISTICS, AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Swalm (2019b) elaborated that the primary purpose of shepherd leadership, as found in the Old Testament, is to care for their followers’ wellbeing through guiding, providing, and protecting them. Two key characteristics of shepherd leaders emerge in the New Testament. First, the shepherd leaders are good. The motivation of the good shepherd is his love for the sheep and his desire for their wellbeing. Their relationship is not position-oriented but relationally oriented. Second, the shepherd leaders protect their followers because it is the right thing to do. Thus, shepherd leaders are others-centered as opposed to self-centered. Swalm (2019a) argued that shepherd leadership could be easily understood and practically implemented by modern-day leaders at three behavioral levels, as described below.

Guiding. Shepherd leaders guide their followers into better versions of themselves. They help followers set appropriate goals and give them regular feedback on their goals. They help their followers identify what they need to be successful and model what they expect their followers to be. As a result, the followers know the value of their work and how their work improves the organization.

Providing. Shepherd leaders provide their followers with what they need to do their job. This includes training and time to meet and talk. In addition, they motivate their followers to reach their objectives and reward their positive achievements.

Protecting. Shepherd leaders protect their followers from unfair criticism and correct them in private. They create a work culture where people help each other and show respect and kindness to one another. Adequate time off for rest is essential for protecting followers.

Shepherd leadership has been advocated in faith-based communities (Kinnison, 2010; Resane, 2014, 2020). Keller (1970/2007), Leman and Pentak (2004), Lucado (2001), and McCormick and Davenport (2003) focused their study of shepherd leadership through in-depth analysis of the Davidic Psalm 23 of the Holy Bible (1988). The poem is italicized and stated below.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even 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.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Although this psalm is written in the masculine gender, the following four analyses are applicable to all genders. They/their/them are used as a gender-neutral language. The key is that a good understanding of the shepherd metaphor aids the discussion of shepherd leadership and its application by parents, caregivers, and teachers to serve children at home and school during and after the COVID-19.

ANALYSIS 1: A SHEPHERD LOOKS AT PSALM 23

As an experienced shepherd and prolific writer, Keller (1970/2007) explained a good shepherd's meticulous care and diligence for the sheep. He suggested that this poem is written from the perspective of sheep, praising the excellent work of their shepherd. This psalm highlights the adventures of sheep throughout the four seasons of a year.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. This statement is made by a sheep who is proud of their owner and content with their lot. It is not about an abundance of material or physical riches but contentment expressed with peace of mind. Under a good shepherd leader, their flock feels safe and cared for throughout the year.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. In spring, a good shepherd takes their sheep out of their pen for feeding. Due to their timid nature, sheep do not lie down unless they are free from hunger, fear (i.e. predator), agitation (i.e., flies or parasites), and tension (i.e., social rivalry). They are observant of the social dynamic among their sheep and intervene as needed. They plan and lead their flock to suitable pastures for feeding. They are always attentive to the surrounding environment for the sake of their flock's health and safety.

He leads me beside quiet waters. Quiet water for the sheep can come from different sources, such as dew from the grass, springs, or deep wells. For some water wells cut from the sandstone formation, shepherds need to lead their flock down a dark, deep and dangerous ramp to the water trough at the bottom of a cave. At the expense of a shepherd's effort and strength, their flock is supplied with clear water.

He restores my soul. Occasionally, a sheep can become cast—lying on its back with its feet in the air. Once a shepherd identifies a cast sheep, they rush to rescue their sheep and carry it on their shoulders. A good shepherd always looks for the wellness of their flock. The flock experiences their tender care, love and healing. As a result, they listen to their voice. They have built trusting relationships on a daily basis.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. A shepherd keeps their flock moving from pasture to pasture to prevent overgrazing of the forage. A good shepherd is conscious of sustainability and avoids land erosion due to overuse. If the ground is infested, moving off quickly prevents these parasites from completing their life cycle and jeopardizing the sheep's health. A good shepherd is always prepared and has a predetermined plan of action.

Even 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. When summer approaches, a shepherd takes their flock through the valleys to the alpine meadows above the timberline. Once again, this is a well-thought-out plan because the path has the gentlest gradient and is well watered with rivers, streams, and quiet pools along the way.

Along this journey, the shepherd is equipped with two simple tools: a rod and a staff. The rod can be used to safeguard the shepherd and their flock from danger. The shepherd uses the rod to drive off predators and deter other creatures from disturbing their flock. They can also use the rod to part the fleece of each sheep and examine its body. While a rod is used to correct a sheep who goes astray from the flock, the shepherd uses their staff to guide the sheep. Furthermore, a shepherd uses their staff to touch the side of their sheep gently. It reassures the sheep that it is on a proper path. When they pull a sheep closer to them with the staff, it is an expression of their tender care for the flock. A shepherd leads their flock gently, with persistence, up the paths that wind through the valleys. They know that the tableland ahead is the best for their flock, and they want them to enjoy their experiences together.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Before their arrival, a shepherd has already gone to the tableland several times to survey the land and remove any poisonous weeds. They would have chosen the location of their camp so that the flock gets the best bed ground. When they are at the tableland during the summer, the shepherd is watchful of potential predators. They also apply oil to the sheep's head so that the flock is free from the infestation of any nose flies or other insects. As the autumn mating season approaches, there could be heated battles between rams for possession of ewes. Once again, the shepherd applies oil to the rams' horns

so that their tension is dissipated with minimum damage. Under the meticulous care of the shepherd, they grow and thrive together.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Not only do the sheep benefit from the care of a good shepherd, but they also leave behind good fertilizer for the soil. While the flock moves from the tableland down to the foothill and back to the home range for the winter, they have the potential of restoring ravaged land to beauty. Their manure can richly benefit the soil. They give back to nature and create abundance. Resting at the good shepherd's house for a quiet, long winter, the sheep recount their adventure and are deeply satisfied with the good shepherd and their community.

ANALYSIS 2: SHEPHERD LEADERSHIP

McCormick and Davenport (2003) used Psalm 23 as the backdrop for discussing shepherd leadership theory. They outline a practical model of organizational leadership. The image of a shepherd offers the best fit for the life of an effective modern-day leader in business, education, and public office.

The Lord is my shepherd. Shepherds are leaders who are highly visible and perform the works of a servant. Shepherd leadership is a way of thinking, doing, and being. Sheep are not regarded as “dumb animals” but are held in high esteem. The shepherd and the sheep do life together, and their relationship is mutually beneficial. The shepherd leader has the foresight and is proactive in preparing an environment of contentment and abundance. They are always visible and available to assess and meet needs, resolve conflicts among people, and remove irritants or obstacles from the workplace. “Shepherding is not a remote form of leadership; it is high touch” (p.7).

I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet water. Shepherds meet needs. A shepherd leader has a genuine interest in building trust with their followers and actively listens to their needs. “The higher you rise in organizational leadership, the less you need to say, because each word is now more powerful, and the more you need to listen to the voices of others” (p.14). Under the shepherd leader's care, followers are willing to communicate their successes, failures, challenges, and problems. Then, the shepherd leader can understand people's strengths, needs, and stress behaviors. The purpose of active listening is to learn from the followers so that the shepherd leader's awareness is sharpened and they respond to others' needs appropriately. A shepherd leader is characterized by patience, insight, persistence, diligence, and care.

He restores my soul. Shepherds lead immortals. “To be a shepherd is to be awakened to the reality that you work among immortals” (p. 21). Without souls, people are like commodities or animals. With soul, people are majestic creations. A shepherd leader recognizes that each individual is unique and valuable to the community. They understand that mistakes happen, and they need to create second chances for their followers and restore their confidence. A shepherd leader chooses to lead with mercy and compassion.

He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Shepherds lead on the right paths. Sheep—and people—prefer to be led from the front instead

of herded from behind, drawn instead of driven by the shepherd's voice. There is a regular and ongoing articulation of values, direction, and expectations in verbal and written forms. There are planned visits and unplanned strolls. The shepherd leader interacts with the flock on their terms. The purpose of communication is not to merely disseminate information but to make connections with others. Spurs, prods, whips, ropes, and cutting horses—a cowboy's equipment—are not part of a shepherd toolbox. While people like flexibility and freedom, they also value being led on the right paths. The shepherd leader sets clear boundaries, outlines the paths, and guides the team to find the right ways forward.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Shepherds know the valley. Valleys are places where a shepherd and their flock learn to examine their values and priorities and develop depth and character. Valley experiences cultivate growth, and the team gets through the valley stronger and more united as a result.

I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Shepherds come alongside. A shepherd leader notices the changing needs of their followers. They are a problem solver who removes irritants, provides resources, and re-assigns work, and this requires the shepherd leader to be courageous in actions and judgement. They are a leader and a follower. The shepherd leader sometimes allows others to lead, come alongside, and be followers for the common good. They are flexible and able to make transitions well.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Shepherds use the right tools. The purposes of the rod and staff are to guide, discipline, and protect the sheep. For modern-day shepherd leaders, the equivalent tools for the same purpose are a compass and a frame. A compass helps people to find the core values and overall direction where they are going. A shepherd leader builds a frame—context and boundaries—so that the followers can navigate, take ownership, and make decisions to move forward. To guide, discipline, and protect, modern-day shepherd leadership is “more about helping people understand the questions than giving out a lot of answers” (p.68).

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Shepherds transform conflict. A shepherd leader promotes more intellectual conflict and less interpersonal conflict, as the former fuels a more civil workplace and the latter undermines morale. They mediate and facilitate reconciliation. The parties sit down at a common table and work things out. First, people share their perspectives. Then, they uncover good intentions and negative impacts. Finally, they apologize and express goodwill for the future of the relationship.

You anoint my head with oil. Shepherds remove irritants. A shepherd initiates and checks on the flock because it is unusual for sheep to seek help when needed. When a follower is confused, a shepherd leader clarifies roles and expectations. When a follower lacks confidence, a shepherd leader encourages and supports. When a follower's attitude or behavior is hostile and affects the team's overall morale, a shepherd leader confronts and corrects the wrongdoing.

My cup overflows. Shepherds create supply. A shepherd leader embraces and instills in others a mentality of abundance where the supply exceeds the demand. To do that, a shepherd leader must learn to care for his or her self in

addition to caring for others. An exhausted shepherd cannot create abundance for others.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. Shepherds share a positive vision. A shepherd leader is a realistic optimist. Bad things can happen to good people, but goodness and mercy follow them. Despite challenges and uncertainty ahead, a shepherd leader can reframe difficult developments into a part of the more positive whole. “The shepherd leaders, by giving themselves to others and by disciplining themselves as leaders, can expect goodness and mercy to follow, and the flock will also enjoy the fruit of the good character they develop” (p.106).

I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Shepherds cultivate loyalty by seeing life from their followers’ perspective and pay special attention to those who are the most needed. The closure of this poem is “the language of one who voluntarily commits to advancing the cause of [the] leader and wants the world to know” (p. 111).

ANALYSIS 3: THE WAY OF THE SHEPHERD

Leman and Pentak (2004) told a fable of a successful businessperson who learned the secrets to managing productive people from how a good shepherd tends their flock. It is impressive how these seven principles from ancient shepherding business remain relevant to the high-tech, fast-paced world. However, this leadership model is doable but with a high cost. Nevertheless, a shepherd leader is willing to pay the price, and the experience is rewarding.

First, everyone is a unique individual, not a number. A shepherd leader gets to know their flock, one sheep at a time. They take an interest in their people’s interests, goals, skills, and dreams. Leadership is professional and personal.

Second, a shepherd leader learns of each teammate’s SHAPE: strengths, heart, attitudes, personality, and experiences. When one works in an area fitting with their SHAPE, fulfillment occurs. Furthermore, regardless of age and experience, a right fit is pivotal. It is essential to have group-oriented team players. A shepherd leader must choose their people carefully.

Third, a shepherd earmarks their flock. A shepherd leader leaves their mark on the followers by constantly instilling meaning and belonging in the followers. The mission and values are clear among the followers.

Fourth, a shepherd leader provides a safe place for the flock to thrive. This includes the removal of uncertainty, distraction, agitation, and rivalry among members of the flock. People trust their leader because they are there to protect them. Their leader is visible and is always there to provide support.

Fifth, a shepherd leader uses their staff to direct the flock. This implies that they lead with persuasion instead of coercion. They offer suggestions and ideas, advocate and recommend. A shepherd leader establishes boundaries by setting expectations and providing direction but does not micromanage others. When a team member gets into trouble, a shepherd leader uses their staff to rescue the strayed sheep. They also use the staff to encourage others.

Sixth, a shepherd leader uses the rod, metaphorically, to fight for their people when attacked by others. They also use the rod to correct their people from

mistakes and provide teaching opportunities. This requires the shepherd leader to inspect their people's work and progress and provide clarification and assistance when needed.

Finally, the way of the shepherd is not a management technique but a lifestyle that places great value on the worth of other people. A shepherd is different from a hireling because it is a calling, not a job. A shepherd leader has a heart for the people. By being a good shepherd to the people, the leader is worthy of being followed.

ANALYSIS 4: TRAVELING LIGHT

From Psalm 23, Lucado (2001) described an inventory of psychological burdens that are common to human beings. To enjoy our life journey, we must travel light and forgo unnecessary baggage. Under the care of a good shepherd leader, the followers feel safe to unload these burdens:

- Discontentment: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
- Weariness and worry: He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.
- Hopelessness: He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- Grief, fear, and loneliness: Even 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.
- Disappointment and doubt: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.
- Homesickness: I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

At times, all of us experience these emotions. However, it is alarming when unhealthy feelings occupy our thoughts chronically. The sudden intrusion of COVID-19 and its ongoing invasion have caused fear and anxiety among many people, including children. Helping children release their negative emotions is vital to their psychological and emotional wellness.

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN

According to the United Nations (2020) study, children of all ages and in all countries are gravely affected by the effects of COVID-19. Vulnerable children are possibly the biggest victims. The pandemic's impact on children can be grouped into four parts.

1. Falling into poverty: Income shocks due to significant reduction of economic activity—as a result of physical distancing and lockdown measures—across all major economies threaten the livelihoods of millions of households with children worldwide. In addition, there are inadequate social protection measures to support families with children.
2. Learning: The worldwide closure of schools and the switch to distance learning prejudices the learning opportunities of children who have limited technology support at home. Children with disabilities and special needs

find it especially hard to learn through distance programs. The increase of children dropping out of school is also a grave concern.

3. **Survival and health:** Reduction in household income forces low-income families to cut back on essential health and food expenditures. The needs of children who typically rely on school meals for a reliable source of daily nutrition are unmet. Due to the high demand for hospital care by COVID-19 patients, children with chronic illnesses have reduced access to medical care. Some countries have suspended vaccination and immunization programs that protect children from lethal diseases such as polio and measles. Children experience anxiety and feel insecure as a result of social distancing and movement restrictions. This may trigger long-term mental health challenges.
4. **Safety:** Children may witness domestic violence against women or experience abuse while confined at home. Due to school closure, they cannot seek help from teachers, schools, or social services. Furthermore, the reliance on online learning may expose children to inappropriate content or online predators.

Across the globe, the adverse effects of COVID-19 “are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, on the poorest households within the countries, and on the girls within the poorest households” (United Nations, 2020, p.11). The combination of school closure and economic distress gives rise to the tragic issues of child labor, child soldiers, and child marriage. Overall, children are prone to exposure of toxic stress and deprivation in nutrition, protection and stimulation during the pandemic.

Save the Children International echoed the United Nation’s findings above (Ritz et al., 2020). In addition, it conducted a comprehensive study about the hidden impact of COVID-19 on child protection with tens of thousands of parents, caregivers and children aged between 11-17 years old in 46 countries. Additional findings on mental health and psychosocial well-being of children are as follows:

- Parents/caregivers reported that they observed signs of psychological distress in children: unusual crying and screaming, more aggressive behavior or violence, bed-wetting, changes of sleeping patterns, changes of appetite, and changes in emotional regulation.
- Many boys and girls reported that they were more worried, less happy, sadder, less hopeful, and felt less safe compared to before the pandemic.

Ritz et al. (2020) stated that the interruption of formal education is one of the most significant stressors for children. The longer schools have been closed due to COVID-19, the higher the reported increase in boys’ and girls’ negative feelings. However, keeping in touch with friends makes children twice as likely to feel happier, safer, and less worried. Furthermore, positive parenting methods such as spending more time with children, showing more love and affection, being more responsive to their needs, and building greater bonds with them are supportive measures to combat their negative feelings.

Ghosh et al. (2020) proposed that parents, pediatricians, psychologists, social workers, hospital authorities, government and non-governmental organizations could play an important role in mitigating the psychological ill effects

of COVID-19 on children. Parents can cultivate friendly interaction and communication with children to soothe their pandemic-related anxieties. They play a vital role in supervising children's usage of technology at home. During the lockdown, everyone stays home, and parents may read, write, draw, sing, dance, and play indoor games with their children. Parents need to role model positive thinking so that their children develop inner strength and resilience. Whenever possible, the government should resume schools. Government and non-government organizations should look for ways to support pandemic-undermined families financially, provide devices for underprivileged children to learn from home, and develop ways to censor cyber content to impede online sexual exploitation. Immunization, mental health, family health, counselling, and medical care services are much needed to support at-risk children and their families.

DISCUSSION

Servant leadership and shepherd leadership have many similarities. Both servant leadership (Brewer, 2010; Carter and Beal, 2013) and shepherd leadership (Keller, 1970/2007; Leman and Pentak, 2004) have ancient and biblical origins. The words "servant" and "shepherd" are used over 900 times (Blanchard and Hodges, 2005) and 500 times (Anderson, 1997) respectively, in the Holy Bible. In his biography, Greenleaf advocates, "servant-leadership is for people of all faith and all institutions, secular and religious" (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2021a). The same argument is presented by Swalm (2019a). It is stated on the official website of Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (2021b) that "the servant leadership philosophy and practices have been expressed in many ways and applied in many contexts". It is argued that shepherd leadership is a form of servant leadership that serves our children during and after COVID-19.

Parents, caregivers, and teachers are likely to have the most daily interactions with children at home and school. They may be the closest to the children, and many children trust these adults in their life. Their trusting relationship is the antecedent to shepherd leadership—a form of servant leadership. As shepherds, parents, caregivers, and teachers guide, provide, and protect the youngsters through and after COVID-19.

Like servant leadership, shepherd leadership is personal and relational (Keller, 1970/2007; Leman & Pentak, 2004). Shepherd leadership is visible and high touch (McCormick & Davenport, 2003). Shepherd leaders are role models who lead from the front. The ultimate goal of shepherd leadership by parents, caregivers, and teachers is the same as servant leadership: children become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous. The imagery of a shepherd is of love, care, and tenderness, but the hard work of a shepherd can also be full of sweat, challenging, and physically and emotionally charged (Anderson, 1997). These descriptions above are perfectly fitting for parents, caregivers, and teachers. A shepherd leader is characterized by patience, insight, persistence, diligence, and care (McCormick & Davenport, 2003), and these are much-needed qualities and attributes of parents, caregivers, and teachers of this uncertain time.

Moreover, parents, caregivers, and teachers work towards becoming realistic optimists and embracing a mindset of abundance. There are enough

resources for all to share. An abundance mindset leads one to be content and work together. As a result, collaboration leads to synergy, creativity, and wellness. McCormick and Davenport (2003) discussed that an exhausted shepherd could not create abundance, and the shepherd leaders need first to take care of their wellness. Rebanks (2015) suggested that experienced shepherds mentor novices. Parents, caregivers, and teachers need to be nourished in a socially supportive network where they help and encourage each other.

Mindset matters! While some people may think sheep are dumb, shepherds hold them in high esteem (McCormick & Davenport, 2003). Though vulnerable, children, in my own opinion, are the most precious asset of every community. Each child is a unique individual, not a number (Leman & Pentak, 2004). They have their SHAPE—strengths, heart, attitudes, personality, and experiences. Parents, caregivers, and teachers are there to unleash each child’s potential and nurture their character so that children experience life to its fullness.

As commented on by Keller (1970/2007), happiness is not found in material possessions. Emotionally stable children are happy and content. Figuratively speaking, children are like sheep who want to enjoy green pastures and quiet waters, as described in Psalm 23. They are sensitive to tension among siblings and with their friends. They desire to be free of hunger, fear, and agitation. Children feel secure when parents, caregivers, and teachers look out for their physical, social, emotional health and safety. With staff and rod, parents, caregivers, and teachers should guide, encourage, inspect, and correct the children. Children long for companionship during COVID-19 when everyone is walking through the valley of the shadow of death. It is disturbing to follow the daily growing number of COVID-19 cases and death toll. Parents, caregivers, and teachers should be watchful of potential predators in the physical and cyber world. Children need to be comforted when they are hurt. Healing words and acts of kindness are like anointing oil. Children need hope that this global pandemic will eventually pass and the adventure to the tableland will soon come true. In the midst of physical distancing and lockdown measures, parents, caregivers, and teachers can impress on the children that there is something good in each day. Love never fails. In their home and their class, children can find refuge with the meticulous care of good shepherds. They need to feel that they belong in their home and class community.

The comprehensive study by Ritz et al. (2020) indicated that parents and caregivers observed children displaying various signs of psychological distress. Boys and girls also reported that they were worried, unhappy and sad. They felt unsafe and hopeless. Lucado (2001) described negative emotions and behaviors—discontentment, weariness, worry, hopelessness, grief, fear, loneliness, disappointment, doubt, and homesickness—as burdens that shepherd leaders help their followers to unload. The hallmark of a shepherd leader is their ability and willingness to see life from the perspective of their followers (McCormick & Davenport, 2003). Parents, caregivers, and teachers can be empathetic listeners. They need to “be present”—visible and available—when they engage with their children and students. Active listening helps parents, caregivers, and teachers to evaluate the children’s strengths, needs, and stress behaviors. The purpose of communication is not to disseminate information but to make connections. These

trusted adults may not have all the answers, but they can offer listening ears, show support, and come alongside the children.

Play is a universal language of children. Play is meaningful and satisfying. Kagan (2021) recommended that parents, caregivers, and teachers spend playtime with children who show emotional distress signs. During COVID-19, playtime can be a special indoor date between a child and a trusted adult. Play helps children to process their own emotions or articulate problems to parents, caregivers, and teachers. Play facilitates preschoolers and elementary children to share their thoughts, experiences, feelings, needs, and self-concept. During child-led playtime, parents, caregivers, and teachers are there to listen with their eyes and ears without asking leading questions or making an evaluative judgement. A variety of toys—real-life and nurturing toys, aggressive and scary toys, and toys for creative expression and emotional release—are children’s words. Play effectively reduces children’s social anxiety and increases their social skills (Landreth, 2012; Mollamohammadi & Yazdkhasti, 2017).

The disruption of COVID-19 is phenomenal. McComick and Davenport (2003) encouraged shepherd leaders to use their valley experiences with the flock to develop character and examine values. This global pandemic has altered many people’s daily routines and awakened people from their sense of entitlement. It is a time for everybody to re-evaluate what we treasure and value as essential and precious. Parents, caregivers, and teachers can take the opportunities to discuss the virtues of contentment, perseverance, and patience with their children. With a growth mindset and positive mentality, parents, caregivers, and teachers will soon walk through the valley of the shadow of death with their children and arrive at the tableland to enjoy their new adventures.

CONCLUSION

McComick and Davenport (2003) stated that the shepherds and sheep do life together, and their relationship is mutually beneficial. Parents, caregivers, and teachers can be the lifelines for children who may not be affected physically by the virus, but the psychological and social impacts are highly alarming. From the various analyses of Psalm 23, the concept of shepherd leadership is vividly illustrated and can be understood easily. Regardless of faith background, the applications of shepherd leadership to parenting at home and teaching and learning at school are appropriate and timely. Shepherd leadership meets the desperate needs of vulnerable children during and after COVID-19. The ultimate goal of parenting and schooling is to guide, provide, and protect our children to become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous—the essence of servant leadership and shepherd leadership. The work of servant leaders and shepherd leaders leads to the growth of their followers.

This paper presents practical applications of shepherd leadership—a specific form of servant leadership—to parents, caregivers, and teachers. However, theoretical and empirical studies of shepherd leadership are lacking. The study of shepherd leadership is 1000 times less frequent than servant leadership. Further exploration and research of this ancient leadership style are highly worthwhile.

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