

Setting the Sheep on Fire

Ignite a Mission Passion in Your Church

By Shane Bennett

Nibble, nibble,
amble, wander, nibble,
nibble, BWOOSH!

Since returning to my Hoosier roots about a year ago, I've rediscovered an ancient enjoyment: fire. Particularly, setting stuff on fire. In many places we've recently lived, starting fires was either unwise or illegal. But in Indiana, burn away! Just down the road from some of my recent fires there lives a winsome little flock of sheep. While I've never set them ablaze, the imagination does wander.

Jesus often referred to the ones who follow Him as sheep. If you've spent much time around the woolly masses, you might not find the comparison particularly complimentary. But Jesus used the term with warmth and tenderness. Think with Him about His followers who gather with you in your church. Think about their love for Jesus. Think about how much you'd like them to share your vision and passion for God's kingdom. Think about setting those sweet little sheep on fire for the nations!

Helpful Accelerants

In some parts of the world, all you need to start a fire is a little carelessness. But in Indiana, where it either just rained or is about to, you'd better have an accelerant (charcoal lighter fluid for beginners, and gasoline for those lighting their last fire!). Church sheep are the same. Occasionally (Haley's Comet occasionally), you run across a sheep just waiting for someone to say, "You. Morocco. Go!" Usually it takes a more thoughtful invitation if we want folks to go to the least reached parts of the planet. You need the right accelerant to ignite damp sheep. Here are a few.

1. A Picture of What's Possible

Most people groups in, say, Iran have not met someone like them who loves Jesus. Why? Because it's so tough for us to imagine (a) how that might come about, and certainly (b) how the average believer in America, or any other non-Iranian country for that matter, might do anything about it. If we want to set sheep on fire, we need to work hard to show three things: what a Jesus-planet might look like, what it might take to get there, and how each sheep might move things along.

You are model number one. If you care about the world and would invite others into that passion, show it in your life. John Wesley, a father in the faith for many of us, reputedly said, "I set myself on fire and people gather to watch me burn." Want to set sheep on fire? Be sure you're more than just smoky yourself. Pray for the nations. Befriend foreigners in your midst. Give money to carry the gospel into other cultures. Always be ready to live for years among a people group who will first see Jesus when they see him in your life.

We also need to help people see how their particular life can make a difference. David Livingstone might be an inspiring example, but most people will think, "David Livingstone? Right. I don't even measure up to David Hasselhoff!" We need to show how normal people get hooked up with a beyond-normal God to actually shape the future.

We need to help people connect the dots: This little light of mine (who I am, what I can do, what I love) was designed to shine on a specific part of the planet. Sometimes the equation is easy — “I’m a dentist and petroleum engineer who speaks Arabic. Where in the world could God use me?” But sometimes it’s not so easy to solve. We can serve as matchmakers and opportunity brokers, helping others find their place in God’s mission world.

2. Solid Education

Good, biblical information delivered with excellence is breath on the embers of world vision. Sometimes it’s the very thing needed to make smoldering sheep burst into flames. I think you’ll agree that we don’t get the complete global picture from a combination of high school history and CNN. We need to look deeper. You and I can help people in church learn what God is up to from the Bible, through recent history, to present day. But let’s do this with a healthy sense of humility and restraint, not implying that we’ve got God and his mission all figured out. God is at work in more ways than we can imagine. Like Papa says in *The Shack*, “Mack, you have no idea what I’m doing right now.”¹

With the fourth edition just coming out, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*² remains the Cadillac of mission education. Increasingly, long-term missionaries around the planet say they’re there because of *Perspectives*. The costs of this course are high in both money and time, and be warned: don’t take *Perspectives* if you’re really happy with your life right now.

Perspectives’ sister course, *Encountering the World of Islam*,³ provides a timely introduction to Muslim worldviews and to how followers of Jesus are to love those who love Muhammad.

For ongoing mission-related insights, consider subscribing to the electronic version of *Mission Frontiers*⁴ and *Missions Catalyst*.⁵ These give (respectively) a monthly and a weekly dose of mission information and encouragement. In other words, fresh kindling for your sheep peeps.

3. Fiery Films

I love the possibilities given us by our present access to media. Time was, if you wanted to hear Spurgeon preach and you didn’t live in London, you were looking at significant saddle sores or seasickness. Now, if you want to hear Spurgeon, you have to solve the riddle of time travel. But if you want to hear many of today’s best speakers, you just pull up to Panera Bread, mooch some bandwidth, and download great messages.⁶

I also love that our library has dozens of foreign films. Showing sheep a movie from the perspective of another culture is a subversive tactic to help them think in new ways. Sometimes a well-told story accomplishes more than eighteen logically tight sermons. For example: *Salaam Bombay*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, and *In America*. (None of these movies are totally suitable for kids. And please read online reviews before showing them at the Ladies’ Mission Circle Monthly Luncheon!)

4. Get the Sheep Out of the Barnyard!

It turns out that actual conversations are even better than watching movies. And one of the best ways to set sheep on fire is to help them build relationships with people from unreached groups. If we have passion for the unreached, let’s find ways to help interested sheep connect in loving ways with other barnyard friends. or “sheep from other folds” as Jesus liked to say.

Think right now: What immigrants or refugee communities live within three hours of your church? I live in one of the most strikingly mono-cultural, rural areas of the United States. But

even from here, we can hop a van and visit Burmese (the largest community outside of Southeast Asia), Somalis, Meshketian Turks, and Bosnians. All without staying overnight, and certainly without a passport or a plane ticket. If this seems like an intriguing, but “out-of-my-league” idea, check out the *Crossing Cultures* workshop from Caleb Resources.⁷ This day and a half long seminar will teach you how to bridge the cultural gap and befriend immigrants and refugees in your own town. You’ll learn what to do, then an experienced coach will hit the streets with you to put your new skills into action.

5. Emphasize the Shepherd, Not the Needy World

The trick with sheep, like charcoal for steaks, is to get them to burn long and hot. You want the mythical “bed of coals,” not a quick flash that leaves you with a whiny, naked sheep. One accelerant that usually generates quick, but short-lived, flames is desperate need. And the world is not short on it. The trouble is that other people can usually trump your desperate need with theirs, and the fire dies out. I accomplish more by focusing my motivation not on need, but on a smart and good Shepherd who is working out a wonderful plan for the reconciliation of all things, who has been at this work for a long time, and who has pledged His good name on its completion.

Pesky Fire Retardants

Let’s be honest, some things are tough to ignite. Think of wet socks. Unless you get them dried out, even a whole box of matches won’t do any good. The same goes for sheep. Sometimes you have to first dry them out. (And while you’re at it, hide the fire extinguishers; because as soon as a sheep begins to smolder, someone’s going to start spraying.)

1. Soaking Fear

Fear hinders the kingdom of God in a million ways. I fear pain. I fear failure and the comments of my peers. I fear people who are not like me. I fear that maybe the story isn’t as I’ve always told it. God deliver me. Deliver us all.

Fear kicks in as soon as the average sheep begins to feel the warmth of a spark of vision for God’s work among unreached nations. Immediately, a command pops out from their elementary school past: Stop, drop, and roll! “If I give myself to this, I’ll fail. I don’t have the stuff. God doesn’t use people like me.” Or, “If I go this way, I’ll become someone I don’t want to be, someone who’s intolerant, rude, imperialistic, a dowdy dresser. Oh my!”

It’s a wise ovine arsonist who can employ God’s Word and His grace to sop up fear. Sometimes, slight mockery is appropriate: “C’mon, don’t be a baby. They’re Muslims, not crocodiles, for heaven’s sake.” For others, we need to realize that our message of “Yes, God does use people like you” is competing with 18 million previous messages that said, “You are worthless and not very attractive.” We should not be surprised if it takes several big towels to clean up the mess.

2. Drippy Thinking

If you’ve held a lighter under a sheep or two (I’ve made a career of it.), you have heard some drippy thinking: “Why go far away (either geographically or ethnically) when so much needs done here?” “We can’t afford it.” “The world’s dying anyway, why bother?” If we really think things end up with a faithful (very) few finally getting rescued from the onslaught of godless people and cultures, it’s no wonder we don’t rally to missionary vision and engagement. Huddling and holding on is far smarter.

Drying this puddle requires a sharp mind, a deft tongue, and a kind heart. Maybe “smart as a snake and innocent as a dove” is a good way to approach it. And do approach it. Each of my three examples above has solid biblical responses — but that won’t matter if we don’t build trust and take the opportunity to voice them. If you’ve built trust and could use some help with the “solid biblical responses,” check out “Common Excuses” at www.jesusplanet.info.

3. Oozing Busyness

It’s depressingly difficult to torch a sheep who’s already overwhelmed with the activities of his life. If you’re not American, this may not apply to you. But for those of us who are, let’s admit it: we have a cultural sickness that has equated value with frantic busyness. Got free time? You’re a slacker. Not feeling stressed by job/life/spouse/church/kids/schedule? You’re not really trying. We’re sick, I’m telling you. Now, it’s easy to sit on whatever perch is yours and point out how other people could be less busy. My favorites? Quit watching TV. One activity per kid. God help me: don’t do everything at church. The ones I don’t like? Slow down on reading/writing blogs. Sleep a little less. Say no to an occasional thing I’d like to do.

But whatever it takes, if we don’t ease up on the busyness, we’ll never burn for Jesus among the nations. We’ll die tired, frustrated, and, perhaps, far short of the mark. If you’re trying to heat sheep, do your best to live a life that’s full and focused, but not enslaved to frantic busyness.

Fire Hurts

Now in real life, fire is painful for our farmyard friends. Same is true in this metaphor. My pastor once said, “Here’s a one-sentence definition for ministry: You die so someone else can live, then they kick you in the head.” Dang.

We’ll pay a price to set our churches ablaze for God’s global purposes. But we sheep, we were made to burn. It’s in our hearts, our DNA. And when we do, God is honored, we’re fulfilled, and someone somewhere is illuminated. So, with lighters in hand, go forth. If you see smoke, take hope. Where you see embers, blow on them gently and fan them to flame. Where you see full-on fire, shout encouragement and get out of the way!

About Shane

Since 1987 Shane Bennett has been advocating for missions by launching short-term research teams, teaching *Perspectives* classes, and speaking at churches. Shane coauthored *Exploring the Land*, a guide to researching unreached peoples, and has written numerous articles. After working in Europe for three years, he now speaks and writes for Frontiers, an organization focused on extending God’s blessing in the Muslim world. He lives with his wife and five kids in Indiana. Shane would love to help you set your sheep on fire. Learn more at www.jesusplanet.info or contact Shane at shanedar@gmail.com.



¹ William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 183.

² *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, www.perspectives.org.

³ *Encountering the World of Islam*, www.encounteringislam.org.

⁴ *Mission Frontiers*, www.missionfrontiers.org.

⁵ *Missions Catalyst*, www.missionscatalyst.org.

⁶ <http://snipurl.com/3k3rs>.

⁷ *Crossing Cultures* workshop, <http://snipurl.com/3c332>.