
Meet the Need First: Looking for ways to engage our neighborhoods

The three questions—

Why? A pastor in a county in NC saw a statistic that 50% of his county didn't go to church. He was shocked. In his prayer time, he told the Lord, "God, everyone I know goes to church." He felt the Lord answer, "That's right. Everyone you know goes to church." We need to structure new ways to have unlikely friendships, or we can end up just spending most of our time with very decent "church people." Why should we spend time reaching out to people in need in our community? **Because the Living Word of God tells us to do so**, especially to those who are under-resourced. Many of the hot-button issues Christians deal with today are important. But to be honest, some of the issues only have about eight or nine verses in the Bible that address that subject specifically. On the other hand, there are over two thousand verses in the Bible talking about the poor and helping the poor.

Jesus is clear on this matter: "When you have a party, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they can't pay you back" (Luke 14:13-14).

Sometimes it is important to stop to start. Taking some time to "wallow in the Word" can give some help in taking the first steps. "God is at work in you to want and to do his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). According to the Bible, something is already happening in you now. We may not think we have the gifts to engage our community, but we all have something, just like the little boy who had a lunch that eventually fed thousands. Or perhaps we have had a difficult time in some area of our lives, and then our own troubles can become our ministry, because we understand. And we often remind ourselves that it is not just meeting the need; it is meeting the need first so that we can give God a chance to move in more people beyond our normal sphere of activity.

With Whom? Make it fun. Who are the people you can talk to as you pray about the next steps? Is there someone in your church who seems to have stirrings to do some kind of ministry with a compassion component? Is there someone in your community who is under-resourced that you can take to lunch? That person will give you a different perspective on what is needed in your own neighborhood than a community official. Sometimes the under-resourced bring tremendous strengths to a new ministry. No community is immune to need--there is heartbreak in the shadow of every steeple. Is there someone you hadn't considered that you could talk to and learn from? Are there people who are already doing work in your community that you could listen to?

The Bible says we are to be led ("All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" Romans 8:14). Perhaps one of your conversations will bring a "leading" concerning the next step. Being with other people sometimes helps us "see the unseen." Notice that we asked "With whom?" This is an important mindset that we all need to work on. Jesus helps us break out of the donor-client mentality. Jesus lets the scoundrel Zacchaeus be his host and provide the meal. Jesus asks the outcast Samaritan woman for water before he shares anything else with her. We don't want to just do things for people, we want to structure outreach so that we are doing things with people.

How? One woman put it this way— "Start soon, start small, start with what you've got."

Start soon. Jesus was the master of unlikely friendships. From blind Bartimaeus to the scholarly Nicodemus to the Roman centurion to the woman at the well, to zealots and tax collectors and lepers and prostitutes, Jesus kept showing that our expected borders are giving way. Jesus chose us too, and said, "I have called you friend." Is there one person you could cultivate now to help you learn more?

Start small. We don't have to start by building a hospital. We may just have coffee with one person and know their name. Food is a great beginning place. We say "Don't give food to people, eat with them." Expecting people to come to church is too much. We need to go where people are already gathered. It just makes sense. The Bible says "Do not despise the day of small things" (Zechariah 4:10).

Start with what you've got. That little boy had two sardines and five hamburger buns, and see what Jesus did with that. We all have something to offer. Compassion ministry doesn't just involve people with some special gifting. Here are over seventy local ideas that might spur your heart and thoughts: <https://baptistsonmission.org/mission-projects/local-ideas-servenc>

Look for people who can help you. Self-starters may also emerge. For some six-minute videos that use "upside down principles" in starting new ministry, see <https://courses.sendrelief.org/courses/how-to-strengthen-communities/>

One last word—perseverance on our part is sometimes underrated. People have relapses and setbacks. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that an under-resourced person will thank you. We are often to serve as bridges, and, well, bridges get walked on. Reaching out to our community in new ways will probably cost more than we thought, but the work is worth far more than we could ever imagine...
