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Introduction

Act Justly

by Bonnie McMaken



My town seems nice enough. It's not exactly a scene from a Norman Rockwell painting, but the people are polite and well-educated, the landscaping is manicured, and the Starbucks coffee—thank goodness—is bountiful. The definition of safe suburban bliss. As I look closer, however, I see imperfections everywhere—in lives, families, churches, and social systems. The truth is, no place is ever quite as "nice" as I want or believe it to be.





Social Justice in Your Community

Act Justly

Even in the most unlikely settings, brokenness permeates our world and our lives. Paul, in the book of Romans, says all of creation has been groaning for redemption (Romans 8:22-23). But there's good news! In the midst of this aching, hope has pierced through in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is he who calls us to share this redemptive hope with others.

I know the weight of this responsibility can be overwhelming. Where do we begin in a world as needy and lost as ours? How do we, as leaders, guide others to pursue qualities of the gospel—justice, mercy, and humility (Micah 6:8)? It can often feel like we're taking on the world. However, the concept of living rightly and justly doesn't have to paralyze us. In fact, it can even motivate us to live the gospel in whatever context God has us.

As you pursue justice in your workplace, group, or congregation, this download will be a valuable resource. Because the term "social justice" is tricky to nail down, this download will help you identify the key issues surrounding social justice. You will learn from the authors' stories of success and failure in ministering to the "least of these." You will also gain effective tools for implementing these ideas in your community. May these articles encourage you as you faithfully minister the good news of the gospel.

Blessings,

Bonnie McMaken

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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The Heart of the Issue

“Great to Good” Churches

For those who find trying to be great isn't good enough.

by Eric Swanson

Jim Collins's recent book **Good to Great** has inspired both business and church leaders. It is a study of 28 good companies that became great as measured by their outperforming the stock market by at least seven times over a 15-year period. Countless companies are now applying the "hedgehog concept" and other principles from the book, trying to become similarly great.





Social Justice in Your Community

"Great to Good" Churches

Likewise, many churches are seeking to become great churches. Entire ministry industries exist to help that process—from fund raising, to church building programs, to worship resources, to programming. And in nearly every community, there's at least one great church, as measured by numbers and facilities.

But large churches discover a troubling secret. Size alone isn't good enough. Great or small, churches need something more than bigger numbers.

Bob Buford, author of **Half-Time**, notes that at midlife, many people discover they've built their lives around "success" only to find it empty. So they reinvent themselves to build the second half of life around "significance." Similarly, Christian Washington, former investment banker and current director of Leadership Network's MC2 (Missional Church) Network notes that many "successful" churches are now in "half-time" mode and want to move "from success to significance." What's that look like?

The Bible says, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and ... he went around doing good ... because God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Wouldn't you expect more superlatives to describe his greatness? Yet Jesus' ministry is summed up, "he went around doing good." Maybe from God's perspective, the greatest thing we can do has more to do with goodness than greatness. Some churches follow that pattern—trading "greatness" in numbers for doing the "good" that Jesus modeled.

These are the "Great to Good" churches.





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"Great to Good" Churches

And this isn't just about big churches. Two-thirds of America's churches are either plateaued or declining. Not all churches are destined to become "great." But regardless of size, they can go about "doing good."

Good churches are those that do good things. The good that Jesus did can point the way.

Ministries of Mercy

What did Jesus do? He did "good" through his ministry of mercy. Mercy is "God's attitude toward those in distress." Mercy is giving a person a fish so he can eat today. It's not attacking problems at the systemic level. It's just making someone's life better, if only for today.

It's why Jesus so willingly fed the five thousand (the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels). He didn't give them a lecture on planning ahead, or how to plant wheat for a future harvest. No, he said, "I have compassion on these people ... I do not want to send them away hungry" (Matt. 15:32).

He did not solve the world's hunger problem, but he did make these people's lives better for that afternoon. And that was good. Sometimes we are paralyzed by inaction. With the overwhelming problems that people have, we often think, *What good will this little act of kindness do?* But Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). At Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena, California, Andy Bales is well aware of the poor and homeless people in his community. Although there are nearly 1,900 homeless people in Pasadena, the shelter capacity sleeps under one hundred. The problems with "the system" are huge, but that doesn't prevent Andy and the caring people at Lake from showing Christ's mercy to those without homes.





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"Great to Good" Churches

Last January Bales held a Super Bowl party at Lake for the homeless in Pasadena. It was a day of feasting and football with 250 homeless people coming to a place of love, care, and celebration. The party did not cure their homelessness that day, but for those January hours it was a respite. This Super Bowl party has since turned into a weekly supper followed by a burgeoning Bible study.

If Bales's dreams come true, one day soon Lake will have transitional housing apartments over their parking garage, but for now, he is "doing good" by making people's lives better for the day.

Martem Tenens (later to be named Saint Martin) was born in what is now Hungary and was drafted into Constantine's army at age 15. As a tribune at the age of 18, on a bitterly cold day in Gaul, Martem came across a beggar, naked and shivering. Martem, a follower of Christ, slashed his heavy military cloak in two with his sword and gave half of it to the beggar. That night, sleeping under his half cloak, Jesus appeared to him in a dream wearing the other half and commended Martem for his mercy. "When you did it to the least of these brothers of mine you did it to me."

If we really believed that our actions toward the "least of these" were actions toward or against Jesus, would these little acts of mercy have greater meaning for us?

Every time a church gives someone water in the name of Jesus, it is a good thing, which makes visible the kingdom of God.



Ministries of Empowerment

Among those Jesus encountered were the blind, the lame, the deaf, the lepers and the demon possessed. Apart from the physical infirmities, these people faced at least two other problems.

First, they were most often unable to work and so lived in dependence on others to care for them. They were unempowered.

Second, they were excluded from the social and spiritual life of the community. They were disenfranchised. They were outcasts looking in.

Jesus comes across one such individual in John 5:1-15, a man who had been lame for 38 years. Jesus asks him, "Do you want to get well?" This question was neither cruel nor rhetorical. It was a real question because Jesus knew that if the man were to be healed, everything would have to change—he'd have to go from dependency to sufficiency. He couldn't sit and beg the next day; he'd have to get up, get out, and earn his livelihood. Every time Jesus healed someone of a debilitating illness, he was empowering him or her not just for a day but for a lifetime.

It is well known that proficiency in reading is essential to be in the mainstream of our educational and employment system. As director of urban ministries at Hope Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Eli Morris seeks to involve every member in meaningful ministry both inside and outside the church.



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Three years ago 25 volunteers from Hope paired up with 25 inner-city first through fifth graders from South Memphis. Children were tested before the program began. In the first 12 weeks of reading with these children for just an hour a week, reading scores were raised by 1.2 grades!

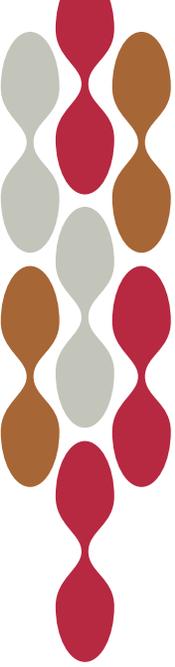
Today Hope has over 100 of its adults helping children to read. Every time you teach a child to read you empower that young person for a lifetime.

In 1987 Luis Cortes, working with other clergy in North Philadelphia, began Nueva Esperanza (New Hope) "to improve the quality of life in our community through the development of Hispanic owned and operated educational, economic, and spiritual institutions."

The economic disparities in Philadelphia are challenging. The average net wealth of a Latino family is a mere \$4,000 compared to an Anglo family's wealth of \$44,000. With 60 percent of wealth held in home equity, helping people own their own homes was a natural place for Nueva Esperanza to start. This innovative ministry has now built or refurbished more than 100 homes to sell to Latinos at cost and provided mortgage counseling to over 2,500 people. They have served more than 650 people in their Welfare to Work initiative. People in North Philadelphia are better off because of Luis and Nueva Esperanza.

Helping kids that struggle with reading, coaching the unemployed with interview training, providing job skills—these are ways some churches are making the leap from great to good by empowering others.





Social Justice in Your Community

"Great to Good" Churches

Ministries of Evangelism

Jesus also went about doing good through announcing the good news. Ultimately his agenda involved bringing people into the kingdom of God through faith. While mercy brightens one's day, and empowerment prepares a person for a lifetime, when a person comes to faith, that life is changed for eternity. Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, and many others came into the kingdom because of this aspect of "doing good."

The most effective apologetic for the 21st century will be a combination of good news and good works. Often good works is the bridge over which the good news runs.

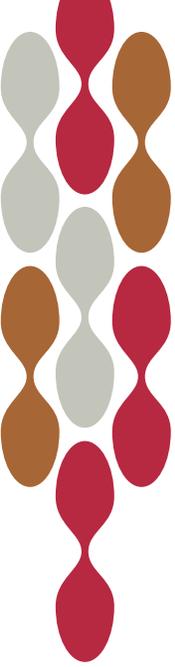
Ministries of Replication

The fourth way Jesus went about doing good was through his ministry of replication—helping transform others from followers into leaders. If Jesus wanted to change individuals he would have stuck with teaching, feeding, and healing. But because he wanted to change the world, he invested in leaders, primarily 12 disciples he trained to duplicate his good works and to preach the good news.

Before sending them out, Jesus gave them the essential components of replicable ministry—authority and instruction.

In East Los Angeles is a church called Mosaic, which is full of ministers and not just consumers. For the past four years, they have averaged one adult each month being sent out as a career overseas worker—mostly into the 10/40 window of China, Indonesia, India, the Middle East, and North Africa.





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To become a part of Mosaic's community is quite easy. One simply needs to declare that they "want to be a part of this community of faith." But pastor Erwin McManus challenges everyone in their community to become part of Mosaic's self-supported "staff." To be on the staff requires four commitments:

To live a holy life (understanding that no one does it perfectly, but to come clean when you fail).

To be an active participant in ministry.

To be a generous giver reflected in tithing.

To live an evangelistic lifestyle.

Over 400 of the 1,300 attending adults have been anointed and commissioned to be part of the church staff. McManus has multiplied his effectiveness nearly a thousand-fold by teaching and empowering these people to invest their passions, their service, their resources, and their relationships for the kingdom.

Jesus said the key to greatness really is goodness through service to others. "But whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). Not every church can go from good to great in the traditional sense, but perhaps it is in going around doing good that we become great—no matter what our size.

Eric Swanson is associate director of Leadership Network's MC2 (Missional Church) Network. www.leadnet.org This article first appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of LEADERSHIP.



Reflect

- *Do you agree that our first response should be a small act of mercy, rather than attacking problems at a systemic level? Why or why not?*
- *Reflect on this statement about evangelism: "The most effective apologetic for the 21st century will be a combination of good news and good works." Have you known this to be true in your ministry? Does this alter your previous perceptions of sharing the gospel? How so?*

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Faith in Action

Dei Laborers

Rick McKinley and the Imago Dei Community are taking the whole gospel to the whole city of Portland, Oregon, even to the margins.

Excerpted from LEADERSHIP JOURNAL

Rick McKinley lumbers onto the stage like a bear in blue jeans. The screen behind him shows an image of the Portland skyline under the canopy of Mount Hood. He prowls the platform with a bottle of water. But as McKinley begins the message, a call to "Love Portland," it's evident this bear is more Teddy than Grizzly.





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His speaking style is reflective, biblical, and riddled with humor. His sermon feels like a conversation, despite the hundreds of mostly 20- and 30-somethings gathered in the old high school auditorium where Imago Dei meets.

Emphasizing the reality of sin in the world, McKinley deadpans, "After Genesis 3, the world turns into a Jerry Springer show." The congregation laughs. "I can tell that joke every week and it still works," he says. "That's just pathetic." They laugh again.

McKinley's casual charm serves him well in Portland, Oregon, a city liberal even by West Coast standards. The importance of relationships and community is reflected in Portland's ubiquitous coffee shops and pubs. Those values are evident during Imago Dei's worship service.

After McKinley's sermon, the band plays as worshippers fill the aisles. For 20 minutes people sing as they move toward communion tables in front. Around the bread and cup, heads bow, alone or in clusters—some blond, black, gray, even pink and green. Imago Dei is an image of Portland as well as an image of God.

When I got saved, I thought repentance was something you did once. Now I know it's a gift God has given us to renew our lives daily.

But Sunday morning is only a partial glimpse. Unseen are the thousands in Portland impacted by Imago Dei who never attend a worship service. McKinley started the church seven years ago with a vision to take the whole





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gospel to the whole person. A daunting notion in a city like Portland.

Today Imago Dei is reaching the margins. Its people are serving the homeless, refugees, people with AIDS, struggling teens, single moms, and many others. Its ministry was highlighted in the influential book *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller.

It is a church on the margins, serving people on the margins, in a city on the margins.

How does Imago Dei inspire so many to reach out? "Our goal is not to create a community of volunteers," McKinley says. "The goal is to glorify the King by doing what he's called us to do. We're in a story that's been going on for thousands of years. The story of Jesus putting the world back together through the gospel."

We sat with Rick at one of Portland's bobo coffee shops to discuss Imago Dei's journey.

What's Portland like? A hard place be a church?

Portland is a very creative city, and it's really fun. It's a pub culture—the microbrew capital of the country. A bumper sticker here says "Keep Portland Weird." That's pretty accurate. Portland is a little weird. I walked out of church on Sunday and people were doing a demonstration on how to convert your diesel car to run on veggie oil.

I thought, *What in the world?* Then I got in my SUV and drove home. *(Laughter.)*





Does Imago Dei reflect that weirdness?

It has the same weird vibe. In every culture there are redemptive windows for the gospel, and we see those here. Environmental issues are important in Portland, so we can saddle up next to that for a different reason, as a biblical call to stewardship. It's the same with the arts. Creativity is a great way for us to dialogue with the culture. And Portland is a city of need, and being a church that cares about the needs of the city helps us be a good neighbor.

How did your own journey to Christ shape what Imago Dei has become?

I didn't grow up in the church. I came to Christ when I was 18, but I had trouble fitting in. I was able to fit in to pretty much any crowd—jocks, artists, punks, or stoners. Just drop me off at the party, and I'll find my way in. But this Christian crowd was one I could not figure out. It made me feel flawed to the core. Just being me wasn't acceptable enough. I had a great relationship with Christ, yet ...

How were you made to feel unacceptable?

It wasn't theological issues; I just didn't understand the culture. I remember going to a party at the Bible college I attended, where we watched *Cinderella*. I stood there like, *Are you serious? What planet am I on?* Six months after I got saved, and I'm watching Disney cartoons with Christians. I didn't want to get trashed or drunk, but dude, there's got to be a happy medium here. That world just felt so insular and protected—miles away from reality.





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Clearly, Imago Dei isn't like that. What changed?

After I got married and had kids, I started working as a youth pastor in a little church. I finally realized that I don't have to fit into the Christian subculture. That Bible college culture isn't wrong, but it's okay to like U2. It's okay to enjoy provocative films and theater and other elements of the wider culture. I've always connected well with the unchurched, and I began to see that as an advantage missionally.

Is that when you decided to plant a church in Portland?

No, my plan was to start a business in California. I couldn't do another church job. The entrepreneurial side of me was screaming. If you're working in a church and you're an entrepreneur, you feel like you're trying to run a sprint behind a traffic jam.

So how did a plan to start a business in California become a church in Portland?

I was sitting at Starbucks reading the Gospel of John and Jesus turning five pots of water into wine. That's like 180 gallons. That's a lot of wine. I thought, *Lots of Christians wouldn't be comfortable around that Jesus*. This same Jesus later tears up the temple with its religious BS.

I remembered how uncomfortable Christians were around me when I first got saved, yet Christ was pursuing me despite the fact that I didn't fit in.

I had the gospel, I understood the culture, and I understood missiology. So, I felt God wanted me to go take the whole gospel to the whole person.



So did this church reach out to people on the margins from day one?

Not exactly. Early on we were just a small group, and when we started looking at the needs of the city, we had a very honest moment. We admitted that we didn't really want to love broken, sinful people; we didn't really want to love Portland.

We prefer safe and protected lives. Most of us don't want to know about the abuse some homeless vet went through and how he mentally snapped. If I'm honest I have to admit I don't want to know he exists. I'd rather not know.

But Jesus is ruthless. He's not ignoring the lepers and the people pushed into places where I don't have to see them. He goes right to them.

That was a major turning point for us. We met every Wednesday night and repented. I'd lay out all the needs I could see in Portland, and we prayed. We didn't want to follow some methodology and get 300 people to start a church. We wanted it to be the real deal.

How long did this season of repentance last?

About six months.

That's a long time to be repenting.

You can't assume you're going to have a big emotional night of crying and the next day everyone will love the world. We're talking about transformation; you've got to stick with it.

When did you notice transformation beginning to happen?

I liken it to planting a garden; you throw seeds down and you water, but you have no idea what's happening. During that season I couldn't see anything happening. We were just trusting that God's Spirit was growing something under the soil.

Eventually something started coming out of the ground. Someone emerged who really wanted to love homeless people, and someone else who wanted to share the gospel with her friend. Not everyone responded the same way. Some started engaging in justice issues, others engaging the arts community, and some had a passion for global issues. Their hearts changed, but it was gradual.

Is repentance still important to Imago Dei?

Yeah. We do communion every week, so there's a natural rhythm of repentance. When I got saved, repentance was something you did once to come to Christ, and you repented again only if you were a bad person. Now I know it's a gift God has given us to renew our lives daily. It's a continual turning to the gospel and to the heart of God.

As peoples' hearts were changing, did you begin organizing ministries around their passions?

No. As leaders popped up, they found their expression in different places.

Churches typically create a structure and then fight entropy. A church will start a youth ministry, for instance, and if the youth pastor bails, they try to fill that slot to keep the structure going. Imago Dei isn't like that.

We are trying to create an environment and see what God births out of it. We're trying to make sure that the environment is pure: there's regular repentance, there's love for one another, there's Scripture. Out of that kind of environment come ideas for ministry that we'd never come up with.

So we never sat down and said we want to do this or that. We just fought hard to keep the environment weed-free. Out of that came one guy who decided to take his camp stove down to the street corner and feed homeless people. A group of girls felt called to adopt a low-income apartment complex. They went on a prayer walk and found a rehab center for single moms. They got plugged in there and started serving.

So ministries are not led by Imago staff people.

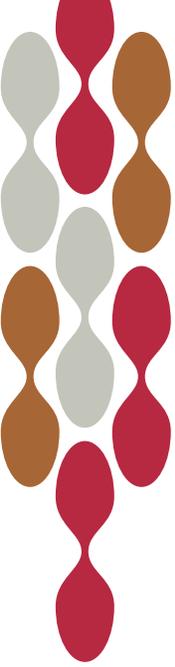
No. None of them.

Do people ever come to the staff and say, "You guys should start this kind of ministry"?

All the time, but we don't operate that way. If people grew up in a church, that's how they think it works. But what happens is the pastor starts a social justice ministry and then people think that's what the pastor does, rather than it's what we all should do. It should be normative for everyone to be engaged.

If your role is creating the environment, how do you cultivate a climate of service and mission?

First, lots of exposure. We do a missional moment every other week in worship. We expose people to the needs in the city and the things Imago people are doing to address those needs, and we invite people to join.



Social Justice in Your Community

Dei Laborers

Second, experiences. We have two or three major events a year that are intended to get a lot of people rubbing elbows with people they normally wouldn't meet. Some will stay involved afterwards and keep serving. It's not that they don't like marginalized people; they just don't know them. When you do know them, everything changes.

The guy who leads our homeless ministry would tell you that the homeless are the greatest people he's ever met. It becomes a reciprocal relationship. Typically we "need" poor people so we can feel better about ourselves, and they need us to supply what they lack. That's very different from a relationship that acknowledges you're homeless and I'm not, but we have a genuine friendship.

Third, an engagement plan. You can't just scream, "You need to go love Portland!" You have to create pathways, some steppingstones for people to get to that homeless person, that single mom, that school. That's the leader's job—helping people get from here to there.

What happens when someone comes to you with a desire to begin a new ministry?

If someone wanted to start a boys and girls club, we would say: "That's cool. Pray about it for a month, put your vision together, and then come back to us." Everybody has great ideas on Sunday, but if they come back with something on paper, you know it's something more. We then ask them to gather a team. Nobody starts without a team. If it's just one person doing it, they're going to get burned out and frustrated. If they can get two or three people to join them around this vision, then they've got a shot.





Does this system work well for you?

It isn't easy. Imago draws a lot of entrepreneurial people. They aren't necessarily asking permission to start things. A lot of churches pray that someone will step up and do something. At Imago we pray our people don't blow something up while they're serving. Our people are engaged, but it's really messy.

We let people do what God's calling them to do. We're touching people others don't want to touch. Sometimes that gets pretty gnarly.

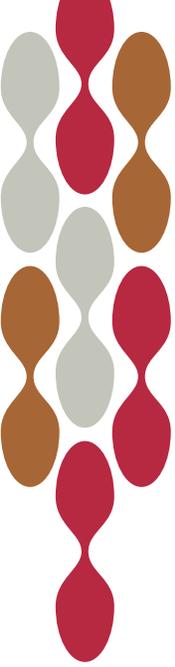
What's your role as the leader of Imago Dei? What part do you play in what God is doing here?

Preaching the Word. I am always explaining this environment. A lot of people can be serving for the wrong reasons. There's an activist mindset among young people in Portland. That's not a bad thing, but they need to remember why we are active. I'm always bringing them back to the "why" by unpacking Scripture.

With so many "activists" in Portland, are people receptive to deeper theological issues?

Portland is a fairly intellectual city. People have educated reasons why they're not believers, so we can't get away with napkin theology. We're not just teaching people how to share their faith. In the urban core, it's a different deal. They need to really learn their faith. And for seekers and skeptics, our ministry to "the least of these" validates the gospel that we preach.





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As Imago people serve in the city, do you partner with other churches and programs?

Yes, there's no way one church can do all that needs to be done. It's ridiculous to even think that way. When you're serious about community renewal and social justice, man, you have to get everybody onboard.

We've partnered with secular organizations on AIDS and tried to win a voice for Christians in that community. There's so much already being done that creating a Christian version really isn't necessary. Why reinvent the wheel? We definitely believe in "no logo, no ego."

No logo, no ego?

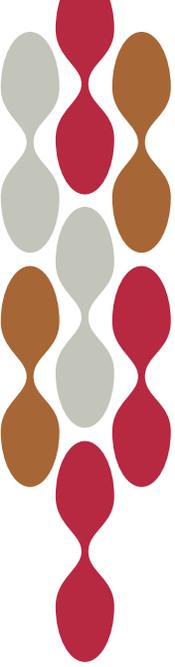
Everything doesn't have to be an Imago Dei ministry.

Do you promote outside organizations in the church, or do you focus on "Imago Dei" ministries?

They're all considered the same. There might be a refugee ministry on our website that links over to Catholic Charities. There are people doing great kingdom work in the city for totally different reasons, which is a gospel opportunity in itself, but to come along and partner with them and talk about why we're doing it—that creates great points for dialogue.

In every community across this country, there are organizations reaching out to "the least of these" who are dying for volunteers. At the same time, churches sit back and think one day we'll create mission, but it never happens. Find those already doing something in the community, and lift them up as examples for the church. We tend to be so busy building our church programs that those people aren't recognized.





What should a church expect if it begins to reach out to people on the margins?

Don't expect it to grow your church numerically. It will grow your church, but it will grow it deep. The reality is some people aren't going to get better. So the idea that they're going to mainstream into the church, become members, and start a home group is just a pipe dream. Some people are never going to get off the street. We see people get off drugs and get their lives back together, and those are great stories. But there are Christ followers who are going to be homeless. You have to know what to expect.

How do you begin to clarify expectations?

Churches need to ask, "What part of the problem can we address? And did Christ call us to fix the problem?" Transformation is an internal spiritual thing, not necessarily a socio-economic thing. And I have to be comfortable with that. I'm not here to make them better Americans. We're here to love them in tangible ways.

Do you expect people you serve to become followers of Christ?

Obviously that's our desire. We feel the greatest transformation will take place when they put their faith in Jesus. However, we don't assume that we can produce that. All we can do is create a context for that to happen where people see and hear the gospel.

What do you mean by "see the gospel"?

I guarantee there isn't a homeless person in Portland who couldn't tell you the gospel verbatim. They've had to listen to it three times a day to get a sandwich. They've heard about Christ, but they haven't seen Christ. Who will sit next to





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them while they panhandle, who will enter their world? I've had friends doing that for 15 years. That is seeing the gospel.

Why do you think many churches are reluctant to reach out to people on the margins?

It seems like ministry today has been reduced to strategy and outcomes and production. And, frankly, that is what makes you famous—developing a new ministry strategy. If you can reproduce it and sell it, you can get a book deal.

Ministry to "the least of these" is about people, and it's messy. But there are godly people all over this country who have been loving people in the name of Jesus, and I think that's real ministry.

We hear some crazy stories. Like heroine addicts leading each other to Christ. God using heroine addicts! It blows all your stereotypes. The activity of the Spirit among the marginalized is amazing. Sometimes you have to ask yourself, is God at work inside the church? Sometimes I don't know, but I do know he's at work outside the church.

Sometimes we're just reluctant to join him on the margins.

This article first appeared in the Fall 2007 issue of Leadership Journal.



Reflect

- *Respond to this statement: "But Jesus is ruthless. He's not ignoring the lepers and the people pushed into places where I don't have to see them. He goes right to them." What would our leadership look like if we radically followed Jesus to the margins and called others to come with us?*
- *McKinley mentions the importance of teamwork in reaching those on the margins. In your experience, has this kind of ministry been more significant when you work as a team or as an individual? Why do you think that is?*

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Practically Speaking

Finding Your Church's Niche

Community outreach can never be "one size fits all."

by Myron Augsburger



A desire to minister to the community doesn't automatically translate into effective community ministry.





Social Justice in Your Community

Finding Your Church's Niche

A few years ago, an organization was planning a major youth outreach in Washington, D.C. They were going to bring 25,000 young people to Washington and turn them loose to evangelize. Some of us who minister in the inner city met and agreed to send a representative to Chicago to talk with the planning committee. We cautioned them about thrusting thousands of young, white suburban people into an inner-city setting of 70 percent blacks; the cultural barriers are enormous. As a result, they modified the program to develop a more relational approach.

What applies to grand mission projects applies especially to the local church. In approaching our neighborhoods, we don't want to do something foolish or insensitive, but effectively to bring the healing and saving love of Jesus Christ.

Churches that seek to do this begin by asking two fundamental questions: "What should we be doing?" and, equally important, "What should we avoid doing?" Here are principles we've used to help answer those questions. Although our context is the inner city, the principles we use apply to churches in other settings, as well.

Attitude Check

Effective community outreach requires more than polished techniques. Meaningful outreach begins with a healthy attitude toward mission and the community. Here are three attitudes I consider essential.

- ***Serve others' needs, not our own.*** As we mature in faith, Christians feel increasingly compelled to reach out to others. Sometimes, however, in our efforts to help, we end up merely





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satisfying our need to serve rather than the community's needs.

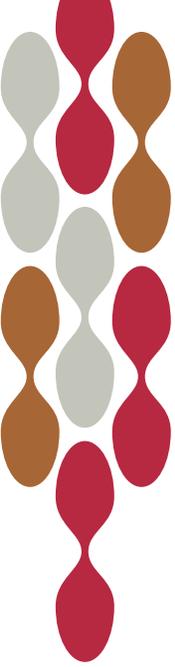
Some time ago a young man came to me for advice about becoming an evangelist. (He knew I had worked in interdenominational crusades for twenty-five years.) As we talked, it became evident that he was more driven by his need to do evangelism than an interest in the people who needed Christ. So I recommended that he first become a pastor and get to know and think with a congregation. I felt this would teach him to think first of others' needs, not his own.

Since our church wants to serve people in a way that truly will help them, we think it's important to know firsthand the community to which we minister. Therefore, as I mentioned in Chapter 1, when we started in D.C., I met with other local church leaders. Then I introduced myself to thought makers of the community and joined various community organizations.

When Esther and I moved here, we immediately started getting acquainted with our neighbors. We tried to discover how we could encourage them and what we could learn from them. We not only built bridges of understanding, we also learned about community needs from the people in the community.

When in Tanzania a number of years ago, I read an article by a Roman Catholic missionary from France; it was entitled, "A Stranger in My Father's House." He told how he finally learned to serve people the way they wanted and





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needed to be served instead of the way he wanted to serve them. That's our goal, as well.

We've also come to see that we cannot serve people without becoming concerned with all of their needs, both spiritual and physical. When we asked the question "How do we carry the love of Christ into our neighborhood?" we've discovered we have to do it with words of witness and deeds of compassion. That is the model Jesus gives us. And it is a necessary model if our evangelistic words are to appear sincere. I don't believe in the old social gospel that reduced the Christian faith to good works. But I do believe in the gospel that meets people's everyday as well as eternal needs.

• ***Have a marketplace mentality.*** A businessman in a previous congregation I served employed a number of people in his business. After reading Jesus' remarks to the rich young ruler one day, he became troubled. He wondered if he should sell all he had, give it to the poor, and become a day laborer; or should he keep his business, remain a wealthy man, use his wealth to employ people, and serve the community by being a model employer, looking out for the well-being of his workers? In his case, I recommended the latter. So, he began taking a special interest in the children of his employees, arranging scholarships for their schooling, and he offered a profit-sharing plan for his employees.

Sometimes a church cannot offer formal programs that operate out of the church's facilities or are subsidized by church money or personnel. But that doesn't mean the church isn't reaching out to the community. Often, its





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members are doing so individually and significantly. They initiate and sustain their individual ministries because of the encouragement and strength they receive at church. For example, one successful business executive in our D.C. congregation is a model of stewardship and witness. Although our congregation can't take credit for his faithfulness, he nonetheless is an extension of the church's ministry in the community. In fact, he has asked to be commissioned for his witness in business as others are commissioned for other forms of service.

By broadening our understanding of what constitutes church outreach, we get a better picture of the impact our church is having on the community.

• ***Don't dump expertise; offer it.*** Esther and I came to Washington, D.C., after spending fifteen years in college administration. Some of our younger alumni who had been working in the inner city told me, "You can't build a three-piece-suit church in inner-city Washington." I answered that I might dress in old clothes and appear to be poor, but as soon as I opened my mouth, it would be obvious that I was educated and privileged. I was going to the inner city, I explained, not to be like the people there or to rescue them heroically. I was going simply because I cared. And because I cared, I would use the benefits of my training, expertise, and experience to help the community as the people there wanted.

The temptation for educated Christians working in poor neighborhoods, however, is to haul out their arsenal of knowledge and expertise to fix the problems. But I've





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noticed that when I do that, I slap other people in the face with my privilege. On the other hand, to hide my knowledge and connections under a bushel would be selfish; such expertise can help them.

I solve this seeming dilemma by offering my expertise and letting the people to whom I minister decide if and when and how they want to use it.

Three Keys to Effective Outreach

If our attitudes must be checked regularly, so must our actions. There are dozens of techniques toward more effective outreach to the community, but three stand out as key.

- **Target the right community.** There are three "cities" in Washington, D.C.: First, the federal government, made up of the people who work in the offices of Congress, the White House, the cabinet departments, and other federal agencies. Second, the several thousand business people who commute to the city during the day. Third, the Washington, D.C., from six o'clock in the evening until six in the morning, composed of the people who struggle to survive in the confines of the official city limits. Each of these cities has its own network and interacts only sporadically with the other two Washingtons.

We had to decide which "city" we were going to minister to. In our case, located as we are in the inner city, it was not a difficult choice. We chose to reach out to those who live and work in the city, not primarily the daytime commuters or ever-changing federal government work force.





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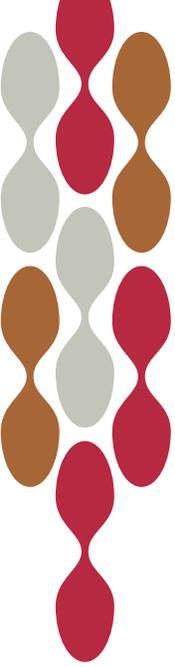
Finding Your Church's Niche

Having chosen, we now can focus our energies and intelligently evaluate our work. When people ask, "Are you making an impact on Washington, D.C.?" we don't have to apologize for not getting more bills passed in Congress, or for not having senators join our congregation. That has not been our target community. Instead, we talk about our work in the inner city and the community being formed among young professionals.

- ***Allow outreach programs to trickle up.*** We have a learning center with ten computers, and about forty neighborhood children come to use them every week. The learning center evolved from the vision of one of our church members. She and her husband, in watching the children of the area, began thinking about how they could be tutored. First, they enlisted people from our church who would be willing to tutor the children. Then, they went to the local school and asked for a list of the underachievers and started tutoring them evenings at the church. When these underachievers started achieving, the demand increased. At that point, a businessman gave us twenty thousand dollars. With it we bought computers, which we use with the students.

I could cite another half-dozen illustrations of other programs of our church that were started by concerned church members who felt called to meet a particular need. They formed groups to focus on a concern and then took steps to meet the need. That's a process we encourage. In fact, only then will the congregational boards (elders and deacons) become involved.





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Many churches, instead, wait for the administrative body to act first. Committees are assigned to carry out something the board has decided should be done. Or the pastor tells the congregation the six or seven things they ought to be doing in the community. Time and again, such projects go nowhere. That's because (1) the people have no ownership of the projects, and (2) the ideas, often generated by those away from the front lines, may not meet the needs of the people they seek to reach.

Consequently, our elders don't initiate outreach programs. Our usual pattern is to pray and wait for a concern to emerge from a group in the church. One person with a burden is not enough. But when others begin to show an interest in that ministry, the elders encourage them to develop a plan, recruit the people needed, and launch the ministry.

When I was commissioned to start our congregation, the secretary of the board with which I worked said, "Myron, you'll need to let the body of Christ that emerges in Washington determine its own character." That is exactly what we're trying to do.

• ***Know thyself.*** A church that sincerely seeks to meet community needs is faced with a unique temptation: to do too much.

Sometimes, even when a group has banded together for a particular ministry, we don't give them the go-ahead, even if the need is pressing. We're concerned about becoming overextended and ineffective. Sometimes, we simply don't have the funds to support the group's ideas. At other times, we're not sure we can staff a project over the long run.





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For example, we've put our desire for a youth coffee house on hold. It would be designed for young people in both the church and neighborhood. It would be a safe place for them to gather on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings. If designed well (neon lights, nice furnishings) and adequately staffed, it would be popular and meet a community need.

We've gone so far as to check out facilities and locations. But if we took on the project now, we could not give it our best effort. We would end up with an inadequate facility and a poorly staffed, poorly funded ministry. We and the community can do without that.

We also have dreams about creating a dentistry clinic, a counseling center, and a legal clinic. All in good time, I trust. But as much as a church wants to help, sometimes it's better to say no for a while.

Some people, of course, confront us because we're not doing something for them. I don't like to hear that type of criticism. But if our church is genuinely doing what it can, I can challenge the critic confidently.

One evening a young man came to my office. He accused me and the church of being racists. "If you were sincere about your religion," he said, "you would ..." and he produced a list of both personal and political demands.

When I could swallow no more, I said, "I've listened to you. Now I want you to listen to me." After explaining to him why I was ministering in the inner city and what the church was doing, I said, "You don't know me or this church or what





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we're about. I wouldn't have moved into this black community if I were a racist." I suggested he forget the racist rhetoric and open his eyes to who his real friends are. He didn't know what to say, but finally he said, "You've got black blood in you or you wouldn't understand me like that. I don't know how much, but you've got some black blood."

"Come off it," I said. "Cut me. Cut yourself. It's the same color blood. This isn't about race, but caring."

So, every time the community says, "Jump!" the church shouldn't ask, "How high?" If it is sincerely reaching out to the community in some ways, it can say no to things it can't do well.

The Pastor's Role: Prod and Praise

If commitment to a mission project arises from the congregation, it doesn't happen automatically. As a pastor, I am not able to do all of the outreach, but I am one of the main people who encourages it. There are three of us on the pastoral team who consider ourselves enablers of the congregation.

Preaching is an integral part of the process of finding a church's niche in the community. It's not that I tell our people what they should be doing—"Open a food closet!" or "Establish a drug clinic!" Instead, I try to present God's Word and speak about the community in such a way that people begin to ask, "What should we be doing for Christ in this community?"





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Second, I encourage people by pointing them in the right direction. When people or groups come to me with an idea for outreach, we help them find resources, encourage them, and pray with them.

Third, as a pastor, I give public support to outreach ministries. There are dozens of ways of doing this without dominating the process. For example, the pastors don't give announcements about the progress or needs of a particular ministry; it's much better if that sort of thing comes from the people involved in the ministry itself. But following the announcement, I will thank the person for the presentation and affirm the project. It helps the congregation support a project if their pastor supports it.

When and How to Work with Caesar

Sometimes as a church ministers to its community, it will run into government. Either the government is not adequately providing justice as it should (civil rights is the classic example), or the church needs the government's help to provide a service (e.g., permits and/or funds needed to open up a food closet). In either case, the church has to work with the governing authorities to meet a human need. But how do we do that effectively?

Naturally, a great deal of the answer depends on one's theology of church and state. Yet there are some practical principles we've found helpful that most Christians can agree on.

First, the church does not serve the state; we serve Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are not going to compromise our ethics or principles just to get a few dollars. The dollars





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aren't as important as our integrity. I've seen groups expend great effort to get a grant and then have the shape of their program determined by that grant. Some are tempted to do unethical things to manipulate the source of funds to their ends.

We recently received permits to renovate a building for the Christian College Coalition, but only after countless delays and red tape. Some of our people speculated that a little payola would have greased the wheels of the bureaucracy. We know that other organizations have walked their projects through without the problems we encountered, but they may have made sure "a certain expense was covered," which helped in processing the permit. There may have been other reasons for our delays, but the fact that we didn't play this game may have been one. In the end, it cost us a great deal of time, but we maintained the integrity of our ministry.

Second, we can develop relationships and encourage dialogue with people with political power. Our temptation is to depersonalize government with labels and titles, to distance ourselves and stand back in judgment. But government is made up of people, and the better we know these people, the better we understand the constraints with which they live. And the better they know us, the more genuine our interchange becomes. As I've gotten to know some of these individuals, I've come to realize many people in government struggle to do what's right. So, I don't criticize them carelessly.





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Third, sometimes we do need to confront officials. We hold convictions on justice and peace that sometimes compel us to speak. But when I confront officials, I don't necessarily do it to get the state to do what I want. I simply want the government to honor and respect the consciences of those who hold different views.

As a pacifist I was opposed to the war in Vietnam. Yet while the war raged on, I didn't write angry letters or publicly denounce the government. But along with seven others, I did visit senators and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to tell them our views about war. We made no impassioned speeches; we simply explained our position and quoted some passages from Scripture. We wanted them and President Nixon, who were talking about "peace with honor" at the time, to see that there was a higher honor yet. We also tried to show them that we spoke for a good number of the governed they represented.

We were not trying to create a pacifist government; the government has a right to have an army and protect its shores. But if our government is to be a government of all the people, it needs to understand the convictions of all of its people.

Some Seeds Fall on Good Ground

In our outreach ministries we often don't see the results of our efforts. We don't know what has happened to the family of six that came to the food closet last month. We don't always know what pregnant teenagers finally decide. And sometimes we're tempted to give up because we see the needy taking advantage of the church's kindness.





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It helps me, in such times, to remember the example of our Lord, who gave with no thought of return. I also remember that much of ministry is merely planting seeds. As in Jesus' parable, some are going to fall on stony ground, and some will grow among weeds, but the sower continues to sow. Every once in a while, we see the seed sprout and grow and bear fruit. And that reminds me that God, indeed, is at work in our congregation.

A man came by the church building one evening just as I was ready to leave. He said he had just gotten out of prison and didn't have any place to stay, nor any money. He didn't want to go, as he put it, "knock somebody off" again to get what he needed. So I talked with him about his deepest needs. I told him about Christ, and we prayed together. Then I called a friend at the Union Rescue Mission to get him a room for the night. Finally, I handed him a five dollar bill and told him how to take the bus to the Rescue Mission. He looked at me in amazement and said, "You're going to see me Sunday morning."

Well, Sunday morning came and he didn't show up. The next Sunday he wasn't there, either. Six weeks went by with no contact from him.

Then one afternoon a knock came on the church door. As I opened it, my eyes fell on a man dressed neatly in a suit, a Tiparillo dangling from his mouth. He was the man I gave the five dollars to six weeks earlier.

"Preacher," he said, "I've gotta talk with you." He came in, bubbling with excitement. "I want to tell you that Man-Up-There is as good as you said he is." He told me all about the





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job he had gotten. Then he said, "Tell me how to open a savings account. I'd like to get a car. And I'd like to get married someday, and ..." I smiled as he rattled off his new dreams.

I see him from time to time on the street, and he is still doing well, still dreaming great dreams. Of course, he has a way to go. I'd like to see his faith blossom, for instance. But I remain hopeful. And I continue to cast seeds of the gospel his way when I see him. Who knows when and where God will cause that seed to bear more fruit?

Myron Augsburger served as a pastor, professor, and college president. This excerpt originally appeared in Mastering Outreach & Evangelism.

Reflect

- *Why is it important we minister to people holistically, rather than just spiritually?*
- *In what ways is your ministry strong at reaching out? What are its weaknesses? Come up with several examples of ways to use your strengths in tangible acts of justice.*



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Biblically Speaking

Guides to the Kingdom

Why our church attends to prodigals, children, the poor, and those with disabilities.

by Brad Jersak



St. Francis of Assisi, it is said, found the sight and smell of lepers repulsive. Normally, he could spot them from afar and give them a wide berth. Yet on one occasion, Francis came upon a roadside leper and something entirely different occurred.

Compassion rose from within and Francis felt compelled to get off his horse, offer the leper alms, and embrace the wretched soul—sores, smells and all—even giving him a holy kiss!





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Climbing back into his saddle, Francis turned to bid the leper adieu, only to discover he was alone in an empty field. In that moment, he awoke to the conviction that he had encountered Christ himself in leprous disguise. His heart and ministry were altered forever. Francis became a channel of God's love to the poor and the diseased, for in and among them, he had seen the kingdom and the face of God.

Fast-forward to the present. I'm not so interested in asking, "Who are the lepers of today?" This is already well-traveled territory.

My interest is more challenging. I'd suggest that those we often regard as insignificant are not to be regarded as mere target groups of Christian charity, but rather, as mentors in the kingdom. They are guides to understanding God.

The Bible suggests that the marginalized—those the world regards as "the least of these" (in Jesus' words)—hold the keys to spiritual doors of God's kingdom that are inaccessible apart from their unlikely aid. To use Isaiah's imagery (57:14-15), the "lowly" remove boulders and obstacles that would otherwise block our way to Mount Zion.

We often imagine that by attending to "the least" (literally, "little ones"), we were doing them a favor. But when we discern the presence of Christ in them, an undercover visitation of God, we realize the least are real mentors with spiritual keys.

The biblical foundation for this begins with God's promise to reveal himself uniquely to and among the least and lowly. It climaxes in the revelation that whatever we do or neglect to





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do to Jesus' little ones (namely, the poor, naked, hungry, thirsty, sick, the stranger [literally, "the immigrant"], and the inmate, et al), we are doing or neglecting to do to Jesus (Mt. 25:31ff). In this text, Jesus creates two theological quandaries:

First, Jesus seems to make acts of service the deciding criteria for judgment day, seemingly disregarding the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone. Was Jesus really identifying good works as the true test of who enters the kingdom and who does not? We ought to wrestle with this question rather than simply using Ephesians 2:8-9 to trump the very words of Christ.

I would suggest that in Matthew 25, Christ transcends later faith-versus-works doctrinal debates with his own perspective of a "love-righteousness" that is the inevitable fruit of following him (thus pre-integrating the writings of Paul and James).

Second, in what kind of the "least of these" do we encounter Jesus? Are they specifically the Christian poor, the innocent prisoner, or the believing stranger? Might we see Jesus even in the "unbeliever"? Are we talking about recognizing the residual *imago dei* in everyone, regardless of their faith in Christ? Or does Christ mean more than that when he says, "Whenever you did these things to them, you did it to me"?

As I've pursued this second question, my understanding is that Jesus is saying: "You do not see me in others because they become Christians, but because I became





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human. When I came in the flesh, I identified with every man, woman, and child on the planet, but especially with those who know nakedness, homelessness, poverty, imprisonment, and torture. You see me in them when you remember that I literally became a peasant, a refugee, a prisoner. I live with the least, the lost, and the lowly; through them, you will meet me and come to know me, my heart, and my ways."

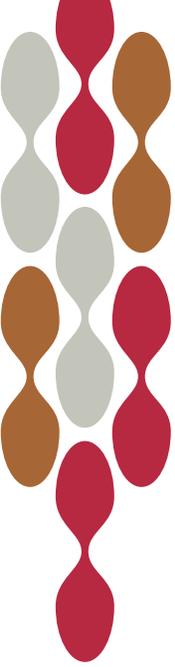
After more than pocket change

A friend of mine, Ray Loewen, learned this firsthand. A successful car salesman in rural Manitoba, he was asking the Lord, "Is this all there is? Is this really my destiny? Please show me my mission in life."

One night Ray visited a worship service in inner-city Winnipeg, an hour from his home. To get in, he had to cross over a sidewalk where glue-sniffers, pushers, prostitutes, and the homeless were loitering in the extreme cold of mid-winter. Once inside, Ray enjoyed a warm and wonderful evening of worship.

As Ray exited the building, he came face-to-face with a couple rushing down the sidewalk. The woman ran on, but the man halted abruptly in front of him. He was a horrendous sight: matted hair, deeply carved lines in his pocked face, eyes red and glazed, icicles of drool hanging from his mangled beard. He reeked of alcohol and glue. With slurred speech he demanded, "Hey buddy . . . got any change?"





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Ray started fumbling through his pockets. The fellow repeated his request more aggressively, obviously agitated by the delay. Ray, increasingly nervous, continued to rifle through his coat.

Quite suddenly, the man's eyes cleared and in fully lucid tones, he said, "Raymond, you know who I am. Hurry up and give me some change."

Immediately, Ray was swept into a vivid vision of Matthew 25. Jesus spoke from his throne, "Raymond. I even used your name. Did you recognize me?"

Pulling out of the vision, I can tell you this: Ray found some change! But the issue wasn't just an image of Jesus asking for pocket change; this was God's way of getting Ray's attention and directing him to an ongoing relationship. After that, Ray found his mission: to serve Jesus through a lifestyle of ministry to "the least of these."

In addition to selling cars, Ray was so motivated by this experience that he began his own missions and relief organization called "Build a Village." He leads teams to Central America and the Middle East where they rebuild villages that were destroyed through natural disasters or through acts of war. Ray indeed met Jesus and now continues to meet him as he "rebuilds cities and restores homes that were devastated" (Is. 58:12).

Where God's glory rests

My own convictions about meeting Jesus in "the least" were not so much an individual encounter as they were



discovered in the context of my faith-community, Fresh Wind Christian Fellowship. When we initially planted the church nearly ten years ago, a visiting prophet of solid integrity declared that God had laid a foundation of compassion in us (based in Is. 58:6-12) "upon which he would erect four pillars." Once these pillars were established, "they would become a resting place for his glory."

Brian West (as team-leader) and I (his trusty sidekick) surmised quickly that this prophetic word must be referring to us and two others—a theory that God quickly showed us was an erroneous interpretation. Over the next year, as the leadership team listened together in prayer, God progressively revealed our four pillars to be (1) people with disabilities, (2) little children, (3) "prodigals coming home" (e.g., people in recovery from addictions) and (4) the poor. All of these qualify as the "least of these" in terms of physical, social, or economic stature/status.

The Lord stressed that these folks were not our target groups ...HE is. Our goal is to reach out to and welcome the Trinity and that when we do, God will bring his friends. Conversely, to welcome them is to welcome Him; we would never need to beg Him to come.

God also clarified that we might not like some of His friends; they might even scare us. But He brings them in order to disciple us in God's kingdom values:

The disabled model for us the essence of God's heart. They are unconcerned with trivialities such as one's schooling, accomplishments, or giftedness. They restore us to



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what is central, loving God and each other. Whether they struggle with autism, Downs Syndrome, or epilepsy, they communicate repeatedly God's core questions, "Do you love me? Can I love you?" That is their bottom line. That is Jesus' bottom line.

The children are those to whom Jesus points when he says, "Unless you become like them, you will never even enter the kingdom." We try to become like them in their implicit trust, their assumption of bold access to the Father, and their openhearted prayers. They remind us that laughter and joy and play are the sounds of heaven.

The prodigals remind us that we need fresh mercy every morning and that it is available. They set us free from the pseudo- and self-righteousness of perfectionism, calling us again and again to take part in Christ's open banquet because we need it, not because we've arrived. They protect us from the futile heresy of making ourselves worthy of something that only the grace of God can open to us.

The poor have been chosen by God to be rich in faith. With Jesus, they teach us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Their dependence on God for this month's rent or tomorrow's groceries teaches us to be a sharing family and to rely on the Father's provision as they do. Their unabashed testimony is that God is good.

As these pillars began to gather and become family, I confess that it has been both messy and glorious. But God has shown us that what might seem like disruptions during the service





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(sounds of the disabled vocalizing; toddlers meandering onto the stage; the smells of someone coming off a binge or filling adult diapers) might be opportunities for his kingdom to break in.

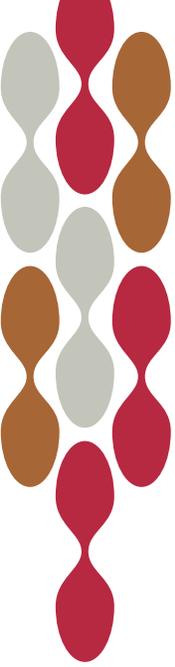
On many occasions while preaching, I have found myself competing with some commotion or another, and I'm tempted to be frustrated by the distraction and then I've felt God asking me, "What if YOU are the distraction? What if what I'm doing is NOT your words in the microphone right now?"

You see, when we stop mid-sermon to pray for a little brother who is having an epileptic seizure or a broken sister who is weeping at our communion table, or a child who wants to sing "Jesus loves me" through the microphone, what do you suppose touches people's hearts and remains in their memories years later? Is it my eloquent words and lofty ideas? Very rarely. More important still, if God is our target group, according to Matthew 25, what will most touch his heart and get his attention?

But to speak selfishly for a moment, what's in it for me is that miracle when I know, in the moment, that I am having an encounter with the living Christ through one of our pillars. I watch and wait for it. I posture myself for it. But, like Francis, usually God's appearances are a surprise.

I met Jesus in Mexico through the orphans who gathered to lay hands on me for a healing in my neck. I felt him in the 11-year-old Haitian boy with the pure white shirt and bright smile who rubbed my back while I watched in terror as corrupt soldiers bound and beat a relief-worker with clubs. I





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experienced his power overwhelm me when Kathy, a woman with one eye, no hips, and a childlike mind took my hand and prayed, "Come, Jesus."

He's served me communion through a man crippled by arthritis and an addict just coming off his latest crack crash. Jesus has anointed me with oil and power through a three-year-old native girl who had just been adopted. And he has stroked my head and held me close with the hands of many a disabled man or woman.

I've heard him preach and sing and testify through seven-year-old Nadine who has joined our regular teaching rotation.

When we make space for the least, we make space for Jesus. It's as simple and as difficult as that. This includes advocating and acting to create space for the least to belong and be safe, but more so, to be Jesus to us and among us.

*Brad Jersak is a teacher at Fresh Wind Christian Fellowship in Abbotsford, BC. He is author of *Kissing the Leper: Seeing Jesus in the Least of These*. This article first appeared in the Fall 2007 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*



Reflect

- *Identify the "least of these" in your congregation or workplace. What about in your community? Do they match the 4 groups mentioned in this article (the disabled, children, prodigals, and poor), or do they look different? How have these people disciplined you into "God's kingdom values?"*
- *Are there any ways in which you have become rigid to the idea of "letting the kingdom break in around you?" Where can you make more space for the kingdom? Your heart? Your schedule? Your finances*



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Bringing It Home

Lisa Samson's Ministry on the Margins

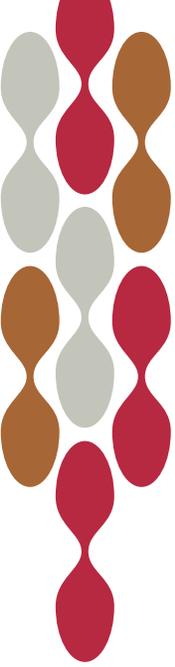


How this Christian fiction author's move away from the suburbs is shaping her heart for social justice.

Interview by Jane Johnson Struck

When Christy Award-winning Christian fiction writer Lisa Samson, 43, quips about losing her keys, or about being unable to manicure her own nails or make a decent pie crust, she sounds like fun-loving Typical American Woman. Fun-loving—as evidenced by her funky earrings and her warm, welcoming laugh—sure. But typical? Not exactly.





Social Justice in Your Community

Lisa Samson's Ministry on the Margins

That's because this author of 17 novels (number 18, *Embrace Me*, is due February 2008 from Thomas Nelson) has deviated from what many consider the norm of the "American dream." In 2005, Lisa, her husband, Will, and their three children, daughter Ty, now 18, son, Jake, 13, and daughter Gwynneth, 10, became downwardly mobile—on purpose. They felt God's call to leave their comfortable and conventional life outside the nation's capital for a lifestyle of intentional Christian community in downtown Lexington, Kentucky. There Lisa and her family regularly open their hearts and home—a genteelly rundown, 107-year-old Victorian—to be Jesus to the needy in their rough-and-tumble urban neighborhood. Lisa and Will also recently coauthored *Justice in the Burbs* (Baker Books), a hybrid of narrative, discussion, and meditation that explores the meaning of living justly wherever one resides.

For Lisa, who became a Christian at age three and lived in the "burbs" all her life, the move wasn't without its challenges. But then she discovered God had been preparing her for it all along through her husband's journey, an unanticipated health diagnosis, and an increasing recognition that justice is as important to God today as it was in Old Testament times. "A lot of people come to justice issues with a political bent," Lisa says. "But I don't have faith in politics anymore. Let's just change people's hearts. Let's help people love one another. Let's get Jesus out there."



In this interview, Lisa talks with us about how she's becoming a woman who wants to be the just and loving hands of Jesus in her neighborhood—and in the world.

What was your life like before your move?

I'd call it a typical Christian suburban existence—we lived in a nice home in a nice suburb in Maryland. My husband, Will, commuted by train into Washington, D.C., for his corporate job. I wrote Christian fiction, homeschooled our kids, and led our church's music ministry. I threw myself into volunteer work and Bible studies. I was busy trying to please God. But no matter what I did, I rarely felt closer to him.

Then, in 2004, I was diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson-White Syndrome (WPW), a form of heart arrhythmia that can cause a racing heartbeat, dizziness, fainting, and lightheadedness. Although I don't need medication for it, occasionally I still feel my heart do this crazy rhythm.

How did this diagnosis affect you?

Although there's only the slimmest chance I could die from WPW, when I was diagnosed, I decided I didn't want to waste whatever time I might have left. I took a yearlong sabbatical from writing to figure out what God wanted me to do by looking at what Jesus did. I reread the Gospels with fresh eyes—and stopped allowing myself to say "but": *But Jesus, I'm just a human. But Jesus, you didn't have a family who depended on you. But Jesus, you said the poor will be with us always.*





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Then a woman who'd been influential in my life shared with me Isaiah 58, which is all about justice for the poor, the widow, the laborer, the refugee. The parallels between Isaiah's time and ours are major! We serve the same God today; he still cares about these things.

Opening my eyes to justice issues rocked everything this American Christian woman had ever thought about life and faith and country and church.

Such as?

That the litmus test of God's approval on your life is his keeping you healthy, wealthy, and happy. This assumption was challenged when I realized those who have the least are often under the most persecution. Faithful Christians live in countries racked by genocide and famine. I had to come to grips with a God who lets his children suffer. That's when real faith kicked in, and I began to see suffering as a beautiful way of joining in Christ's suffering on the cross.

Where was your husband in this journey?

Will started caring about justice issues five years earlier, so he was already farther down this road.

What prompted the decision to leave suburbia?

We sensed God calling our family to something new, to take a step of faith. Around the same time, we met people in the most obscure places from this intentional Christian community in Lexington, Kentucky, who were ministering to the poor. When Will decided to leave corporate America to attend school, he chose Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, near Lexington. So we moved in 2005.





Did you have any reservations?

At first I struggled with moving into the city, because I'd lived in the suburbs all my life. I also worried our kids wouldn't be safe. But Will and I decided we could look at safety two ways—as physical or as spiritual. Here in the city, our kids are developing faith muscles they never had to before. Maybe we're naïve, but we're trusting God to protect them; we actually feel their souls are safer here—seeing God in the eyes of the poor—than in our old neighborhood.

Opening my eyes to justice issues rocked everything this American Christian woman had ever thought about life and faith and country and church.

What's living in intentional community like?

In a traditional church, you meet there and then go your separate ways. Church is where you go. Here church is who you are. Our community of 40-plus people gathers on Sunday nights for Communion, discussion, and prayer; our women's group meets every Wednesday evening in our home.

We run various ministries, such as a home for recovering drug addicts and a counseling center. Through my involvement with Kentucky Refugees Ministries, I carted a pregnant Russian lady to all her medical appointments. Even though we couldn't chat because of the language barrier, we just beamed love to each other!

Our members also are involved in different ministries and agencies all around the city, because we believe we don't have to reinvent the wheel; we can shine the light of Christ to the people who've been helping long before we got on board.



Can you describe your neighborhood?

It's like lots of urban areas: You walk along a nice street, then turn down a side street to find shotgun shacks and crack houses. We live in a house right next to the street with the shotgun shacks. We've watched people arrested on our lawn; we've seen drug deals going on out back. But we've never ...

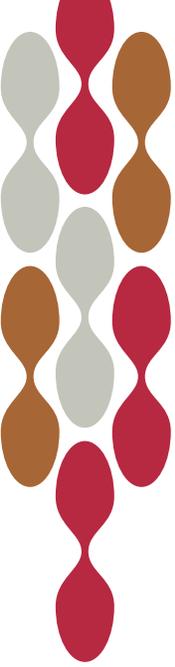
Felt threatened?

No. I believe God's blessing this house because so much ministry goes on here. My husband has the gift of hospitality. It's a hoot to welcome people into our home, to get to know other brothers and sisters in Christ. We give out food and water to people who stop by on our porch. Folks who've needed a place to stay have lived in our back bedroom or third-floor apartment. Right now a young man whose parents kicked him out of home is living in the apartment and getting his life back on track. We love him like a son now.

How did your kids react to the move?

I can't say it's been easy for them. Before, our son, Jake, was outside all the time; now we've got this postage stamp-sized lot. But we wanted our children to see us model a commitment to do whatever God calls us to do. That's more important than the public playground, the local mall, or the latest fashion.

I think we women need to branch out in our spheres of service and influence so our children can see what becoming Jesus to other people looks like. Then they can take that into their adult life.



Social Justice in Your Community

Lisa Samson's Ministry on the Margins

You're not suggesting God wants every believer to make this kind of move?

Not at all! Will and I wrote *Justice in the Burbs* because God keeps his children everywhere. If you want to be radical for Christ in the suburbs, tell your neighbors, "I'm going to be content with my house and stay in this neighborhood until the day I die." That's a crazy thought in our upwardly mobile culture.

But is that justice?

To me, saying that is, because what you're really saying is, *I'll be content with what I have; I'm going to stop consuming so much*. Too much of life revolves around consuming resources. But when I turn my thermostat down to 72 degrees in the summer, a little girl in the Kentucky hills isn't going to get clean water for drinking or bathing because I'm consuming too much coal. Everything we do has an effect on somebody somewhere.

In what ways besides offering hospitality does your family pay heed to justice issues?

We attempt to buy our food from the local farmers' market. That's loving our neighbors, the farmers. We avoid using more fossil fuel by limiting how much we drive. For instance, we decided not to drive our daughter to dance competitions when she can do a physical activity at the school within walking distance. We're ever tightening our circle of what we do—and where we do it—to get it as close into our neighborhood as possible.

I try to buy clothing not manufactured in sweatshops, or I shop resale. I'm not perfect; sometimes I go to the sale rack at Target. But we hardly just shop for fun, because if



I go to the mall, that stuff looks great. Sometimes I miss wandering around TJ Maxx, thinking, *I need a new comforter in the bedroom, and buying it.*

How do you resist those urges?

It's hard. But I don't allow myself to relish in consumerism anymore. I hardly watch television, so I'm not bombarded by advertisements.

Do you ever feel proud about how you've chosen to live your life?

Pride's a huge danger, because Satan's going to take every bit we have and ram it in our face. I struggle with sin like everyone else and have to lay it at the foot of the cross. I try instead to focus on the Lord. Because when I focus on him, I realize I need his mercy just as much as anybody else does. All I can do is pray for God to help me remember he shook me up, interrupted my conventional life, set my feet on a different path.

Recently I was at a homeless shelter cutting rot off tomatoes while making lunch. Suddenly this wave of euphoria came over me. *Wow*, I thought, *this is the work of the gospel.*

No matter where you live, if you want to feel better about your life, do more than donate money. Do more than volunteer one night a year. You get a certain satisfaction from serving others, from knowing you're in the exact spot God wants you to be.



Reflect

- ◉ *What is most thing difficult thing about living justly in our society?*
- ◉ *Sampson says, "Everything we do has an effect on somebody somewhere." Have you ever thought about justice this way? Using this ideology, what does living justly look like for you in your specific context? For your family?*
- ◉ *If you made these changes in order to live more justly, what impact would that have on the lives of those you lead? On your family?*



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Leadership Tools

Social Justice Ideas



Give those you lead opportunities to live justly in your community.

by Sue Skalicky

The Least of These

Green grass and colorful flowers are right now only a promise hidden beneath the stark coldness of winter. We make due, persevere and even learn to enjoy these frigid months, knowing that in days to come we will again feel the sun's warmth and marvel at the beauty of the earth in bloom. But for some the chill never vanishes and the dawn seems far from coming. Their storms lie in their souls, their lives resemble a barren and hopeless landscape. Each year thousands of men, women and children find themselves residing at a local rescue mission; their purpose in life





Social Justice in Your Community

Social Justice Ideas

marred, their hopes dashed, their possibilities limited. Yes, these people need money, they need jobs, and they need a home. But by and large they need grace...the grace that feeds the famishing and heals the hurting, the grace that forgives the failure and clears the criminal, and the grace that lavishes love on the lonely.

This month call your local rescue mission or homeless shelter and ask if your small group could come prepare and serve a meal for the residents. Because many rescue missions and shelters are staffed by volunteers, your offer should be welcomed. Consider serving at the mission or shelter three to four times a year. Meet briefly at your host home afterwards to share your experiences. Pray for the people you served that night. Pray for an opportunity to invite a resident to join your small group. If it is possible for a resident to attend your weekly meetings you will need to obtain permission from the Mission director and you will need to provide transportation. For everyone's protection make sure that at least two of your members go together when transporting the resident.

Jesus said in Matthew 25:35-36, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Stepping out of your familiar group setting into the presence of those who are suffering can be a holy experience for both you and your small group. Ponder these words of songwriter Chris Rice as you plan for this outreach activity, "How did I find myself in a better place?"



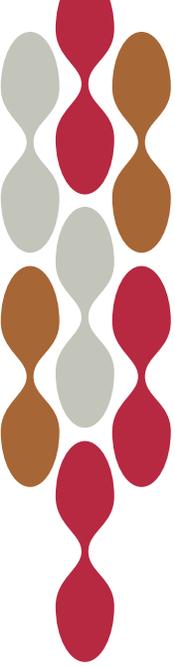
I can't look down on the frown on the other guy's face,
'cause when I stoop down low, look him square in the eye
I get a funny feeling, I just might be dealing with the face
of Christ."

*Originally published online at SmallGroups.com,
February 9, 2002.*

Recycled Outreach

A few days ago, I was caught red-handed by my 11-year-old daughter. Saving myself a few steps and a blast of sub-zero air, I opted to throw my empty Diet Coke can in the kitchen garbage instead of placing it in the designated recycling bag in the garage. What could I say? I had no good defense. Therefore, I chose to comply with my determined daughter and make the trek out into the garage. The can was thus given the opportunity to be deemed valuable instead of worthless.

God is a relentless recycler. He looks at those He has created and sees potential. He knows our value and always chooses to go the distance to offer every opportunity for our redemption. Doubtful and desperate Abram was recycled into committed patriarch Abraham. Arrogant, selfish Saul was recycled into selfless, passionate Paul, and the woman at the well was a prostitute recycled into a preacher. God did not have to take those who were ineffective, used, and damaged and miraculously mold them into devoted disciples, but He did. He still does.



Social Justice in Your Community

Social Justice Ideas

This month, make a plan with your small group to begin individually collecting aluminum cans, glass, cardboard, paper, plastic bags, and other plastic products. Set aside a few hours on a Saturday to gather these items. Also go door to door in the neighborhoods of your group members to ask for recyclable donations. Take what you have collected to your local recycling center. As a group, choose a recipient for the money you have earned (Habitat for Humanity, a homeless shelter, a crisis pregnancy center, etc.) and donate it that day, if possible. Take some time to pray for those who will be helped by your donation, remembering that no one is unfit to be recycled by God's love. Consider making recycling a habit of your small group and continue to donate the proceeds.

Challenge your small group members in the coming week to spend as much time praying for someone in need of God's salvation as they spend watching television.

Ask your group members to consider emailing an encouraging message this week to five people they know (co-worker, family member, friend, pen-pal, etc.).

Encourage those in your group to put their loose change to good use in the coming week by filling parking meters, leaving an extra tip, creating a credit on a soda machine, increasing a child's allowance, etc.

*Originally published online at SmallGroups.com,
February 9, 2005.*





Social Justice in Your Community

Article Title Here

Reflect

- *These ideas are general tips on how to get your group started. Write a list of the specific needs you see in your community and brainstorm ways your group can help meet those needs.*



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Additional Resources

Everybody Wants to Change the World: Practical Ideas for Social Justice, by Tony Campolo and Gordon Aeschliman (Gospel Light, 2006). In this book, you'll discover practical ways to begin making a difference in your community today, and helping others catch a vision for changing the world! A leader's guide makes this adaptable for group study, as well as individual reading. Jesus calls us to creatively and courageously share the good news by loving our neighbor. It's time to begin!

The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical, by Shane Claiborne (Zondervan, 2006). In *The Irresistible Revolution*, you'll be challenged by a radical Christianity passionate for peace, social justice, and alleviating the suffering found in the local neighborhood and distant reaches of the world. Live out your faith with little acts of radical love as you join the movement of God's Spirit into a broken world.



Justice in the Burbs: Being the Hands of Jesus

Wherever You Live, by Will and Lisa Sampson (Baker, 2007). In the suburban world of nice homes, neat lawns, and new cars, it can be easy to forget about social justice. But suburbanites can be a force for social justice in the world. In this unique book, you will take a journey with a young couple from the burbs as they learn to notice and act on the issues of justice that abound everywhere. This engaging narrative will help you kiss apathy and ignorance good-bye in favor of a life of concern and action.

Reaching the World, a downloadable resource from **Kyria.com**. Reaching the lost is an opportunity most Christians dream about, but for the majority it is a desire that remains unfulfilled. If you have the desire to be used globally, but don't think that you have the time or what it takes, then download this informative Life Guide. In it you will find practical ways to get involved through prayer, giving or serving. We've even included contact information and Web addresses so that you can learn more never too late to be apart of something bigger than yourself.

Reaching Your Community, a downloadable resource from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**. This Survival Guide will give you insight and ideas into how churches are currently affecting their communities with the gospel message. The articles present an array of best practices and strategic issues to help your church reach its community.



Social Justice in Your Community

Additional Resources

Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, by Ronald J. Sider (Thomas Nelson, 2005). Why is there still so much poverty? Conservatives blame sinful individual choices and laziness. Liberals condemn economic and social structures. Who is right? Who is wrong? Both, according to Sider, who explains poverty's complex causes in this new edition and offers concrete, practical proposals for change.



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