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Getting There From Here: Starting Compassion Ministry in Your Congregation

By Heidi Rolland Unruh and Philip N. Olson

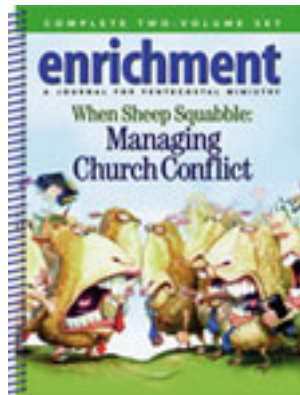
You believe God desires to restore broken lives and rebuild troubled neighborhoods through outreaches that blend evangelism and relief services. You desire your church to become a vessel for the healing, transforming presence of Christ in your community. But, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the needs and discouraged by the obstacles to mobilizing the church for ministry. Questions arise: What kind of ministry should we do? Will the congregation support it? Where can we get funding and staff? How do we get started? What steps will take us to the next level?



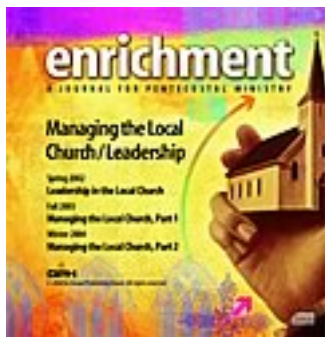
Effective outreach takes vision, purpose, and planning. **Vision** is the conviction that God is calling the church



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in a particular direction. **Purpose** unifies the congregation around the goals of the Kingdom. **Planning** lays out the steps to fulfill the vision.

How does a church pursue these essential ingredients? No church will travel the same path to effective local outreach. Each congregation starts in a different place, has a unique makeup and character, and ministers to a particular community context. While there are no simple 1-2-3 steps to compassion ministry, there are three stages that most churches experience along the way and each stage includes five action points. Some points under each phase may follow in sequence; others may develop simultaneously.

As you read the following, ask yourself: Where is my church in this process? Where do our strengths and weaknesses lie? This will point to what your next steps should be.

Stage 1: Laying The Foundation

Think of your church as a garden (see 1 Corinthians 3). You must carefully prepare the soil for the seeds. In the same way, ministries of mercy will only spring up if the church is prepared. Faced with a compelling need, the first impulse of many churches is to launch a program. But programs, if disconnected from the church's larger purpose, can lose their spiritual center and drift

Sidebars...

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toward secularization.

Compassion ministries that are not grounded in a supportive, healthy congregation are less likely to be effective and self-sustaining. So the first critical stage is to take a step backward from the **task** of developing social ministries to focus on the church's **identity** as a body of believers called to follow Christ's example of service and to share God's love with the world. A church's ministry should flow from the center of its faith. Strengthen your church's commitment to outreach by building ministry on the foundation of mature leadership, loving church relationships, spiritual vitality, and familiarity with the community's needs and assets.

Prepare the leadership team.

The most fertile seedbed for ministry is a team of clergy and lay leaders who share spiritual passion, a common commitment to and theological framework for local mission, and positive working relationships. C. Gene Wilkes writes in **Jesus on Leadership**: "Leadership begins when a God-revealed mission captures a person." Help church leaders become "captured" through teaching, mentoring, role modeling, and exposure to other model ministries. Work through any conflicts among the leadership team related to mission. Prayerfully recruit and nurture people who can lead new efforts.

Know your congregation.

What your church **does** in ministry should grow out of who you **are**, taking into account your unique identity, history, and leanings. A congregational self-study can assess current programs and explore your church's strengths and weaknesses for a new venture. A study also takes the pulse of your church's spiritual maturity, commitment to outreach, and openness to change, which can help pinpoint training needs. Organize a task group to gather information about the

congregation in areas pertaining to identity, history, membership, theology, programming, leadership, organization, resources, spiritual life, relationships, and partnerships. Study methods include interviews, focus group discussions, and/or a survey. (A sample survey is posted in the downloadable tools section of www.Network935.org. Also, see sidebar "Self-Study Reflection Questions.")

Prepare the congregation.

Not everyone in the congregation may be ready to embrace the vision for outreach. Lay the groundwork with training that explains the theological basis for evangelism and social compassion. This can include sermons, Sunday School classes, training, and field trips that expose members to exciting opportunities. Build the congregation's spiritual vitality and relational health.

Assess the community context.

Effective ministry depends on accurate information about the context for ministry. A community assessment brings into focus the problem areas that need to be transformed, as well as the ways God is already at work in the community. The first step is to define your community — whether a specific neighborhood, an ethnic group, or a special-needs population. Become familiar with its demographics, culture, systems, assets, and needs. Employ walking and driving tours, census data, door-to-door surveys, interviews, and focus groups. (See sidebar "Tools for Community Study.") By networking with other community agencies and leaders, you prevent redundancy of services, build bridges of understanding and respect, and plant the seeds for partnerships.

Nurture a commitment to outreach.

A major hurdle to overcome in many churches is the dominant understanding that the church exists to

serve the needs of its membership. Leaders must guide the transformation toward becoming a mission-oriented church. This means cultivating a commitment to reaching out beyond the walls of the church as a central expression of the congregation's faith and worship. Provide training and activities to help overcome barriers of race, class, and ability that may separate your congregation from the community.

Stage 2: Unleashing The Vision

A vision is a portrait of the future that your church is called to help bring about through the power of the Spirit. In this stage the church discerns a specific vision for compassion ministry and organizes to achieve it. This vision builds on your congregational identity to respond to the needs and opportunities in your community context, out of a desire to share the love of God in word and deed. Once your church has a Spirit-anointed focus of ministry, you can then form a strategic plan to take action.

Seek God's vision for ministry.

Generate a list of ideas for potential ministries. (See sidebar, "What Can Your Church Do?") Is there a particular area your church feels drawn to address — inadequate housing, at-risk youth, families on welfare, or immigrants? Where are the gaps? What doors seem open at this time? Narrow your focus to one or two areas. Develop a vision statement that identifies specific goals for ministries the church will develop over the next few years. (See sidebar "Tips for Developing a Vision Statement.") Decide whether this vision calls for starting a new program, revising an existing church program, or partnering with the program of another church or agency.

Share the vision with the congregation.

Once a direction has been discerned, help the congregation foster ownership of the vision.

Communicate the vision consistently, clearly, and creatively. Ways of doing this include: a **mission statement** which encapsulates the vision; a **logo** that captures the essence of your mission; **special events** such as a worship celebration, missions conference, retreat, or concert focused on outreach; **educational programs** such as a Sunday School series on issues your church plans to address; and **special guests** from the community or from other ministry models who can share their story. For example, if your church feels led to address housing needs, plan a Habitat for Humanity work weekend or a tour of homeless shelters.

Organize for ministry.

Develop a detailed plan (services or activities the ministry will entail, resources and partners it will require, how it will be organized and led) and the steps needed to make it happen (who will follow through on the proposal, when it should start, how other church staff or systems will be affected). Decide whether it will be administered directly by the church or a separate incorporated nonprofit. Learn from best practices to guide your planning and avoid reinventing the wheel. In addition, assess whether current church structures help or hinder the ministry plan.

Gather resources and partners.

Your self-study should identify the resources the church has to offer to a program — funds, spaces, personnel (staff and volunteers), and any special equipment you might need; also what can be used from outside sources. Hiring the services of a professional grant writer and fund-raiser may be a good investment. Consider possibilities such as internships or shared staff. Create systems for recruiting and supervising volunteers. Develop relationships with other groups who share common goals, as identified by the community assessment. Who is already doing good work in the community, and how might you collaborate?

Rally the congregation.

Recruit and equip church members to connect to the outreach plan in practical ways. Emphasize that each member is called and gifted for ministry. Blend statistics, stories, Scriptures, principles, and appeals that capture members' hearts and move them to action. A spiritual gifts inventory is an essential tool in awakening the ministry potential of your congregation. Personally invite members to participate in ways appropriate to their gifts, interests, and ministry and life experiences. Offer clear volunteer job descriptions. Training can help volunteers overcome hurdles of inertia, inexperience, and insecurity. Provide evangelism training that prepares volunteers to share their faith with confidence.

Stage 3: Sustaining The Vision

Even after a ministry program is under way, the task of mission is not complete. A ministry vision requires effort to be sustained, lest it become a passing fad in the life of the church. God's mission always beckons a church, in the words of Aslan in the last book of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, to advance "further up and further in." Just as our individual calling to be holy leads us into a lifelong journey of sanctification, the church's call to mission is a transformational process as God matures, refines, and prunes His people for His purposes.

Address fears and conflicts.

Visionary leaders will encounter resistance to change. Trying something new will generate anxiety and dissent. Help the church assess the costs and benefits. Working to maintain a healthy balance between outreach and worship, discipleship, and fellowship can reduce strife. Respond to conflicts and concerns in constructive ways, using the tensions to help the church reassess priorities and paradigms. We

recommend the book by Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, ***Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey***, which outlines in more detail the process of reorienting a congregation toward mission. (See sidebar "Obstacles to Ministry Development.")

Build ongoing accountability.

Develop criteria for assessing efforts. Is the ministry effective in achieving goals? Are resources being used efficiently? Are relationships being cultivated between volunteers and those receiving services? Are people coming to new or renewed faith? With feedback from the congregation, the community, and the mentors, evaluate whether ministries are holistic, effective, and faithful to your calling. Recognize the good work done in Jesus' name by your congregation (2 Corinthians 9:12). Plan an annual worship service that glorifies God for the fruit of your church's compassion ministry.

Develop new leaders.

Avoid burnout by identifying and training new leaders. Invest in the next generation by working with youth to instill a mission-focused mindset. Cultivate relationships with current and potential board members.

Maintain a fresh vision.

Continually adapt priorities and projects in light of the changing congregational and community context, while affirming your core mission. Help those involved connect their service with their faith by providing opportunities for spiritual reflection and retreat. Continue to submerge ministries in prayer and seek the ongoing anointing of the Holy Spirit. Prevent an erosion of vision by building in requirements that board members and key staff embrace your church's mission.

Keep growing.

Look for ways to take your ministry to the next level. If your church sponsors a soupkitchen, perhaps this can evolve into a cooking school that prepares people for culinary jobs. A tutoring program may lead to a partnership with the local public school. Ministry to immigrants may spark a letter-writing campaign concerning immigration policy. Also continue to grow in your relational and spiritual depth. Expand opportunities for those served to encounter God's love; for example, Bible studies, prayer circles, and friendship evangelism. Connect with other churches or parachurch agencies with a compatible vision that can provide your church with counsel, expertise, and encouragement.

Conclusion

Start small, if need be, but get started. Don't put ministry on hold until the congregation fully embraces the vision. If you want to light a fire in the congregation, "Action is oxygen," advises one pastor. Get prayed up and then get going. In the process your congregation might just bring a life-giving word or touch to someone who needs to experience the mercy of God. In Christ, every church is ordained to "bear fruit ... that will last" (John 15:16). Let this promise sustain your congregation in its steps on the journey to compassion ministry.

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