

GETTING THERE FROM HERE: STARTING COMPASSION MINISTRY IN YOUR CONGREGATION

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Like many Christians, you long to make a difference in the world. You believe in God's plan to restore broken lives and rebuild troubled neighborhoods through local mission that blends evangelism, relief services, advocacy and community development. Whether you are a pastor, ministry staff, or lay member, you desire your church to become a vessel for the healing, transforming presence of Christ in your community.

But, like many churches, your congregation may find it challenging to put its faith into action. It's easy to be overwhelmed by all the needs and discouraged by the obstacles to mobilizing the church for ministry. Many 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 doesn't just happen; it takes vision, purpose and planning. *Vision* is the conviction that God is calling the church in a particular missional direction. A sense of *purpose* unifies the congregation around the goals of God's kingdom. *Planning* lays out the steps the church will take to fulfill its purpose by achieving the vision.

How does a church pursue these essential ministry 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 distinct phases that most churches experience along the way. Each stage includes five action points. Some of the points under each phase may follow in sequence; others may develop simultaneously.

As you read the following, ask yourself: Where is my church now 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

Timothy J. Keller in *Ministries of Mercy* emphasizes the importance of taking time to prepare the congregation for ministry:

Let's think of the church as a garden (as does Paul in 1 Corinthians 3). How do we get tomatoes from the garden? By rushing out on the first day of spring and throwing seeds out onto the ground? No, we must prepare the garden carefully for the seeds. . . . In the same way, ministries of mercy will only spring up if the church is prepared for them. . . . Fertilize and "dig up" until the congregation is ready!

Faced with a compelling need, the first impulse of many Christians is to launch a program. But programs, if disconnected from the church's larger purpose, can lose their spiritual center and drift 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 for the long run by building ministry on the foundation of mature leadership, loving church relationships, spiritual vitality, and familiarity with the community's needs and assets.

C *Prepare the leadership team.*

The most fertile seed bed 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* (1998), "Leadership begins when a God-revealed mission captures a person." Help church leaders become "captured" by God's mission 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 ministry efforts.

C *Prepare the congregation.*

Local mission is not just the work of a pastor or committee. The whole congregation is called to share the Good News of Christ, to show compassion to those who suffer, and to work for justice. However, not everyone in the congregation may be ready to embrace the vision for outreach. Lay the groundwork for new ministry initiatives with training that explains the theological basis for evangelism and social compassion. This can include sermons, Sunday school classes, special training events, and ministry "field trips" that expose members to exciting ministry opportunities. Building the congregation's spiritual vitality and relational health is another prerequisite for effective outreach. As Matt. 22:37-39 tells us, loving God should go hand in hand with serving others.

C *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 ministry programs and explore your church's strengths and weaknesses for a new ministry venture. A self-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 self-study task group to gather information about the congregation in a variety of areas pertaining to mission: 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).

C *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 that God is already at work in the community. The first step is to define your community of ministry — whether a specific neighborhood, an ethnic group, or a special needs population. Become familiar with its demographics, culture, systems, assets, and needs. Employ different means of getting to know the community: walking and driving tours, census data, door-to-door surveys, interviews and focus groups. By networking with

other community agencies and leaders, you prevent redundancy of services, build bridges of understanding and respect, and plant the seeds for ministry partnerships.

C *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 help 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 transforming power of the Spirit. In the second stage of ministry development, the church discerns a specific vision for compassion ministry and becomes organized 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 and begin to take action.

C *Seek God's vision for ministry.*

Using the information from your studies of the church and community, generate a list of ideas for potential ministries. Is there a particular area of need or population that your church feels drawn to address — such as inadequate housing, at-risk youth, families on welfare, or immigrants? Where are the gaps in services? What doors seem open at this time? Prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit's guidance to 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. 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.

C *Share the vision with the congregation.*

Once a direction for ministry has been discerned, help the congregation foster a sense of 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 imaginatively captures the essence of your mission; *special events* such as a worship celebration, mission conference, retreat or concert focused on outreach; *educational programs* such as a Sunday School series on the issue your church plans to address; and *special guests* from the community or from other ministry models who can share their story. There is a saying: "Teach me, and I forget; show me, and I understand." Show people what the vision means by organizing hands-on *ministry demonstration projects*, or mini-mission trips that expose church members to compassion ministry in low-risk, high-impact ways. For example, if your church feels led to address housing needs, plan a Habitat for Humanity work weekend or a tour of area homeless shelters.

C *Organize for ministry.*

"Plan the work and work the plan," as Barbara Williams Skinner puts it, for strategic implementation of the ministry vision. Develop a ministry plan that details the proposed ministry project (what kinds of services or activities the ministry will entail, what resources and partners it will require, how it will be organized and led) and the action steps needed to make it happen (who will do the work of following through on the proposal, when it should start, how other church staff or systems will be affected). If starting a new ministry, decide whether it will be administered directly by the church or a separately 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. Church structures should serve the church's mission, not the other way around.

C *Gather ministry resources and partners.*

Ministries require assets of funds, space, personnel (staff and volunteers), and sometimes special equipment (e.g., a van or medical equipment). Intangible assets, such as the skills and experience of retired church members, or personal connections with business leaders, are also valuable. Your church self-study should identify the resources the church has to offer to a ministry program; also research what can be marshaled from outside sources. Hiring the services of a professional grant-writer and fund-raiser may be a good investment. For human resources, consider creative 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?

C *Rally the congregation around the ministry.*

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 to capture people's hearts and move them to action. A spiritual gift inventory is an essential tool in awaking the ministry potential of your congregation. Personally invite members of the congregation to participate in the ministry in ways appropriate to their gifts, interests, and ministry and life experiences. Offer clear volunteer job descriptions. Training can help prospective volunteers overcome hurdles of inertia, inexperience, and insecurity. In particular, provide evangelism training that prepares volunteers to share their faith with sensitivity and confidence in the context of the compassion ministry.

Stage 3: Sustaining the Vision

Even after a ministry program is underway, 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 local mission is an unfolding transformational process as God matures, refines, and prunes His people for His purposes.

C *Address fears and conflicts.*

No matter how compelling the call to compassion ministry, visionary leaders will inevitably encounter resistance to change. Trying something new often generates anxiety and dissent. Help the church realistically assess the costs and benefits of the ministry. Reduce strife by working to maintain a healthy balance between outreach and worship, discipleship, and fellowship. Respond to conflicts and concerns in constructive ways, using the tensions to help the church reassess its 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.

C *Build ongoing accountability.*

Develop a set of criteria for assessing ministry efforts. Is the ministry demonstrating effectiveness in achieving program 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 ministry mentors, evaluate whether ministries are holistic, effective, and faithful to your unique calling. Besides looking for ways to improve your ministries, recognize the good work done in Jesus' name by your congregation (2 Cor. 9:12). Faithful ministry calls for celebration! Consider planning an annual worship service that glorifies God for the fruit of your church's compassion ministry, and rallies the congregation's ongoing support.

C *Develop new leaders.*

As the ministry grows, so do demands on church leaders. Avoid burnout by identifying and training new leaders in order to meet expanding program needs. Invest in the next generation of ministry by working with youth to instill a mission-focused mindset. Work to empower emerging leaders in the community of ministry as well. Cultivate relationships with current and potential board members.

C *Maintain a fresh vision.*

Don't get stuck in a rut. Continually adapt priorities and projects in light of the changing congregational and community context for ministry, while affirming your core mission. Help those involved in the ministry 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 faith and mission.

C *Keep growing.*

Keep looking for ways to take your ministry to the next level. If your church sponsors a soup kitchen, 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 through Bible studies, prayer circles, and friendship evangelism. Connect with ministry models — other churches or parachurch agencies with a compatible vision — that can provide your church with counsel, expertise, and encouragement as you move forward in mission.

So how do you get started? Discern where your church is now in terms of these three stages. Perhaps all of your church's energy is focused inward. In this case, your church needs to work on the first stage steps of teaching the theological foundations for local mission and cultivating a commitment to service. Perhaps your church has a heart for compassion ministry, but momentum has faltered for lack of direction and organized support. This calls for the second stage process of seeking God's vision and rallying the congregation's assets around a specific venture. Or perhaps your church already supports a ministry program that has outlived its effectiveness, more out of habit than conviction. This may lead you to engage in the stage three objectives of holding ministries accountable and seeking a fresh vision. Wherever your congregation is now, the key point is to commit yourself by faith to take the next step in reaching your community with good news and good works.

In each stage, three qualities are key to effective ministry development: prayer, participation, and patience. First, remember that mission is God's work, and God works through prayer. Prayer empowers us to do good works, guides our ministry decisions, frees us to witness, and renews our hope in the face of obstacles. It is very helpful to designate prayer partners to lay every step of the ministry development process before the throne of God. Our efforts glorify God when they are bathed in the prayer, "May your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Second, soliciting broad participation from the congregation will enhance the process. We suggest forming a Ministry Vision Team, a core group of members — both clergy and lay — who together can discern God's vision for the church in mission and take action to see the ministry plan come to fruition. A vision is strongest when it is not imposed "top down" but is allowed to percolate through a group. Volunteer management expert Marlene Wilson expresses the axiom: "People are most committed to plans *they* help make."

Similarly, involving people from the community targeted for outreach will enhance your ministry's credibility and long-term sustainability. In *Restorers of Hope* Amy Sherman explains the importance of getting "insider" input into the ministry planning process:

Participation by residents in the design and implementation of the outreach assures that the ministry will belong to the community. Pray that God would raise up people eager to partner with your church. And then invest in those people, building strong friendships characterized by openness, willingness to listen and learn, and mutual respect.

Patience is a third critical ingredient. Dr. David Apple reflects on the lesson in prayerful patience he learned in his decade of developing mercy ministries at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia: "We're dealing with a three-mile-an-hour God, and I'm in the fast lane." In his early years at Tenth Church, he was impatient to start ministries and sometimes used the Bible to bludgeon people with his ideas about what needed to happen. But he gradually learned "the discipline of active waiting" and came to put his trust in the transformational power of the Spirit instead. In time, God raised up other mission-minded leaders, and Tenth Church now supports a spectrum of fruitful compassion ministries.

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. You might just bring your community closer to God's wholesome ideal of justice and *shalom*. In Christ, every church is ordained to "bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Let this promise sustain your congregation in its first steps on the journey to compassion ministry.