

Tool #14: Community Ministry and Our Spiritual Life

"He [Josiah] defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 22:16)

It takes faith to step out in service to others. But participating in holistic ministry is also one of the most powerful ways to strengthen faith. Acting on our faith makes it come alive (James 2:15-17).

How can the experience of sharing God's love in word and deed enrich our spiritual life?

- It yields new insights into the Scriptures as we see them brought to life in our ministry experiences. When we practice compassion, we more fully appreciate that we serve a "compassionate and gracious God" (Exodus 34:6).
- It allows us to enter into God's heart of mourning for sin and brokenness. We realize in greater depth the deadly power of evil, and the even mightier power of the cross.
- It brings us closer to God's passion for justice. When we minister to people who lack access to quality, affordable health care, housing or education, we join with Jesus and the prophets in the cry to "release the oppressed" (Luke 4:18).
- It confronts us with areas in our own lives where we need to repent and seek God's transforming grace: lack of faith, materialism, all forms of prejudice, hardness of heart, laziness, the idolatry of comfort, a shame to confess the gospel.
- It strengthens our faith by giving us tangible evidence of God's hand at work, while at the same time demanding a deeper level of trust and dependence on God.
- It drives us to draw closer to Christ through prayerful reflection on our experiences, and closer to others in the body of Christ through shared service.
- It allows us to be blessed by brothers and sisters in Christ among those we seek to bless, who offer prayers of thanksgiving on our behalf (2 Corinthians 9:12-14).
- It helps us discover and develop spiritual gifts we might not otherwise have known about: compassion, hospitality, evangelism, intercessory prayer, administration, healing.
- It opens our eyes to God's healing, redeeming, transforming power in the world, and deepens our appreciation for our own salvation.
- It prevents our faith from becoming self-centered and shallow by expanding the scope of our discipleship beyond our personal relationship with God.
- It encourages us to learn from those who are economically poor but spiritually rich: how to have contentment in scarcity, joy in adversity, and faith in times of struggle.
- It shows us a new perspective on Jesus as we encounter him in the faces of those who suffer from poverty and distress (Matt. 25:37-40).
- It impels us to hunger for the beauty, goodness and peace (*shalom*) of God's kingdom, and to pray with new passion: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).
- It leads us to worship God when we see that the darkness in the world cannot overcome the light of His love (John 1:5).

Questions for reflection

- a) Which of the above fruits of ministry participation have you personally experienced? Can you think of other ways that "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6) reveals to us the character and actions of God, or strengthens our relationship with God?
- b) Since knowing God is intertwined with doing the work of God in the world, how could the church be more intentional about incorporating opportunities for service into its discipleship programs?
- c) What more could your church do to nurture the spiritual life of community ministry volunteers? How can the church help volunteers connect the word of God with their works of love?