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THE MOTIVE

► Becoming a community-minded church means obeying God’s Word in seeking the spiritual and social welfare of those for whom Christ died. In dependence on His Holy Spirit, the church is called to blend the truth of the gospel with the Great Commission in local church ministry. But how does that look on paper? How does a church become a *community-minded church*?

Church Branding

Knowing who you are as a church in your community is linked to what you may do for your community—and why you do it. If people in your community were to describe your church, what would they say? When you see the golden arches, you think of fast, tasty, and affordable food. When you drive by Wal-Mart, you think of it as the one-stop shopping store for all your needs at a reasonable price. When members of your community drive past your church, what are they thinking? How would they describe your church? How would they complete this sentence: “That’s the church that _____.”?



As a woman and her young daughter exited one church, the pastor asked if they enjoyed their time. The young girl smiled in reply as she showed him what she was given in children’s church. She raised a balloon in one hand and candy in the other. Her mother added, “Yes, we have never been treated with such love.”

“Do you live in this area?” the pastor asked.

Pointing in the direction of a neighborhood close by, the mother said, "We live over there."

"Oh, you live in the neighborhood behind the church?"

"No," she answered. "Let me show you." She led him toward a dumpster located behind the church. As they approached the dumpster, the young girl pointed and said, "There, we live there."

The pastor's heart almost collapsed when he looked behind the dumpster and saw a makeshift shelter assembled out of plywood and cardboard. "You live here?!"

The mother and daughter both nodded their heads yes.



Thankfully, most churches in America have made foreign missions a priority. However, we need to make it even more of a priority, especially with such atrocities as the worldwide HIV and AIDS pandemics. It is easier to reach across the seas than across the street. It is easier to serve in someone else's backyard than pay attention to who lives in our own. Like the mother and daughter who live behind the dumpster, our own cities are plagued with people who have great needs of their own and are waiting for us to reach out and help.

Why Church Matters

Pat F. Fagan, a fellow in Family and Culture Issues for The Heritage Foundation's William H. G. Fitzgerald Center, discusses the correlation between church and society:

The importance of the church in society cannot be understated. It is more than a building for weddings, funerals, baptisms, and committee meetings. It is a body of believers who are consumed by the need to lift up the fallen in the name of Jesus Christ. What other organization has the mission and capacity to link volunteers, resources and care to meet every social need?¹

Pat Fagan has a point. The church is in a unique position unlike any other organization. It has the daily opportunity to meet every social

need, many of which have no other means of being met. In keeping with this thinking, social scientists have made interesting discoveries about the impact of the local church in several areas, including its worship. They found that religious worship

- stabilizes marriage
- reduces cohabitation
- affects income and poverty
- affects crime
- affects abuse

The need for the church to continue its ministry is prevalent. Deuteronomy 24 lists three reasons for extending grace toward the poor, and why it should be a top priority in the church (vv. 18-9):

- It is a commandment.
- It is an expression of thanks to God.
- It is the key to experiencing God's blessings.

There are over four hundred scriptures like these that are devoted to serving the needy, yet a relatively small number of churches actually make a conscious and determined effort to invite the needy to their services. Jesus set the priority: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). We are reminded that a changed heart results in a changed lifestyle. And in most cases, a changed lifestyle will greatly reduce many of the social ills that plague society. With this standard in mind, how does the church reach out to the community?

Developing a Community-Minded Church

Challenge your church to have compassion for the needy. A woman carrying groceries from an outreach center was invited to attend a local church. Her declines were numerous:

I have nothing to wear.

Life is hard enough just trying to make it through each day.

I have no way to get there.

There is no one for me to sit with.

Everyone will stare at my tattered clothing.

Yet even with all of her excuses, the woman was finally convinced to attend the service on the following Sunday. As a result, she committed her life to Christ and now faithfully attends church.

Our world is filled with individuals just like this woman. They have no sense of acceptance among the Body of Christ because of their poverty. Their lack of material goods—food, clothing, shelter, or transportation—often causes them to be avoided or even rejected by those who are more fortunate.

These left-behind groups of people are exactly those whom the Lord challenges us to seek:

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?”

The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:37-40).

These often-quoted words of Jesus illustrate the heartbeat of God for those left behind by the world at large. The Body of Christ needs to be taught to fully obey the words of Jesus by conscientiously seeking to reach the poor.

Churches with limited people and funds face a real dilemma: How do we seek the one lost sheep in our community and, at the same time, adequately feed the ninety-nine sheep who regularly attend and tithe? How can we tithe 10 percent of our income when we can barely pay our bills? The answer is that our faith and obedience to the Lord lead to multiplication. God will bless any local church that takes seriously His mandate to minister to the needy.

Two biblical examples underscore this point. In Deut. 24, God is preparing the Israelites to dwell in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. He says to them: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands” (vv. 18-9).

God is reminding the Israelites that He will bless them in their new land, but they should not forget the less fortunate. He even gives them instructions to leave a portion of His blessings to them, in keeping with the biblical practice of leaving some of the unharvested produce for the widows and fatherless to glean. This is vividly portrayed in the Book of Ruth. The widows and orphans were the outcasts of their day, but God wanted to ensure that in the new land of opportunity and abundant resources, no one would be left out.

The need to minister to the poor was not forgotten in the New Testament either. Here Jesus emphasized the need to minister to those who are often left out: “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14).

Model outreach. A chiropractor once said, “I spend very little money on advertising because my clients know how much pain they were in and how good they feel after I treat them. I just encourage them to tell others who share their same needs.” This should be the mindset of every Christian: finding others who need the forgiveness, hope, and fulfillment they have found in Jesus Christ. The local church

is motivated to offer compassionate ministries because it is comprised of people who model the care they have already received.

In John 4, the Samaritan woman was so moved by her encounter with Jesus that she beckons her village to “‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him” (v. 29). John adds a postscript to the narration: “Many . . . believed . . . because of the woman’s testimony” (v. 39).

New Christians, many of whom are wounded healers, are the most compelling instruments for reaching the unsaved and unchurched. Their zeal for Christ and their web of existing relationships make their influence the most fertile ground for building the Kingdom.

Studies have shown that new Christians begin to shed their non-Christian friends after a couple years. But church leadership should teach them otherwise. Leadership—and new Christians, for that matter—should be asking, Who needs what you just found? How can we help you reach those individuals?

Jesus didn’t wait until His disciples were mature followers and had earned a degree in apologetics before sending them out to further His Kingdom. He knew the clock was ticking; He knew He needed to send Peter to his fishing buddies and Matthew to his business partners.

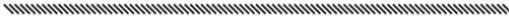


At one church there was a zealous new Christian named Judy. It was always a thrill for the pastor to look down from the pulpit and see Judy sitting with a row of friends that she had brought to church and led to the Lord. That row became known as Judy’s Row. Her life’s passion was to find others who needed what she found and then point them in the right direction.

Once, a fellow churchgoer jokingly asked Judy about the people she brought to church. “Why do you bring so many people to church?”

Judy looked puzzled. She responded, “Isn’t that what the Bible says to do? I want my family and friends to be as happy as I am.”

This contagious disease could be called Bringerism. It usually begins with one infected layperson or leader—and then it spreads. What would happen if Christian leaders were to model Bringerism? The pastor’s row would no longer be where he or she sits alone before the sermon; it would be filled with people who have been brought to church.



Persevere. Unfortunately, few churches are committed to the long haul of reaching and discipling the outcasts because they require work and can disrupt the serenity and insulation of normal church life. Frankly, the church that makes a decision to be a community-minded church will have to get out of its comfort zone.

When a church begins to reach out to the needy families and the homeless, there will undoubtedly be some in the church to express concerns.

I don't want to sit next to a homeless person that hasn't showered for a week.

Homeless people don't understand how to behave in church.

Homeless people talk too loud. They sing too loud. I don't like loud people.

In truth, when you aggressively reach out to the people nobody wants or pays attention to, there will be times where it will seem as though you are teetering on becoming dysfunctional. It will seem as though everyone is dumping on you. But, if you ask, God will strengthen you. He will give you patience and compassion when you are reaching out to those whom society has discarded.

Mark, the Gospel writer, tells about a woman with an incurable blood condition. She reached out and touched Jesus as He walked in front of her.

“Who touched my clothes?” Jesus asked (Mark 5:30).

“The woman . . . trembling with fear, told him the whole truth” (v. 33). The woman was trembling because, according to Jewish law, her

ceremonial uncleanliness would spread to anyone whom she touched. How desperate this woman was for Jesus to heal her—so desperate, she risked spreading her supposed contamination. Yet, Jesus didn't reject her; He healed her.

As community-minded churches, it is important that we ask ourselves, how close can the unclean and the outcasts of our day get to us before we back away? How can they experience the loving, unconditional embrace of Christ if we are not even willing to sit next to them? The church should persevere; it should keep doing what Jesus said, despite what others may say.

Refrain from profiling people. The Pharisees said to Jesus: "You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth" (Mark 12:14). The Pharisees were onto something. Matters of race are at the center of public discussion today, whether the topic is education, health care, or law enforcement. The mandate given to the Church supersedes all debate, replacing it with the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Believers must search their hearts for all traces of long-held prejudice, asking God to remove it and to replace it with His love for all people. To effectively touch people materially and spiritually, we must look at them with the same love that sent Jesus to the cross for us.

In the same way, societal rank should not keep us from reaching others with the love of Christ. Some parents don't want their children exposed to kids that live in troubled areas. Yes, we should be vigilant when ministering in areas where there is a greater propensity for crime. But, to fear and ostracize someone because of the neighborhood in which he or she lives is counter-Christ. Jesus is always working to affirm an individual's value and dignity, and when we say, think, or do anything contrary to this, we are attempting to tear down what He is building up.

Begin programs to develop life skills. For many churches, reaching out to the poor means an all-expenses-paid, round-trip bus

ride to the church for Sunday services. Some have added food pantries and clothing distribution programs. These are certainly moves in the right direction and should be applauded as good first steps. Yet, a growing number of holistic churches understand that discipleship requires practical programs to address a person's complex and diverse needs.

Remember Jesus' words to the Pharisees: "Woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them" (Luke 11:46). Unlike the actions of the Pharisees toward their followers, discipleship means reaching people where they are and helping them work through life's challenges. It's more than providing sustenance and helping them attend a church service or Bible study; it's helping them develop life skills.

If we don't offer mentoring and accountability, our listeners may come to believe that Christianity is merely a list of rules to follow. Just distributing free food can move them deeper into a welfare mentality and further away from sustainability. The community-minded church is the first to say that people need Jesus *and* a job. One of the most spiritual things you can do is offer job training and placement, financial literacy, and after-school programs for youth.

Isaiah 61 speaks of those who inhabit ruined and devastated places, and who receive the Good News and are discipled to bring renewal to their world: "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations" (v. 4).

Use social programs to plant churches. As we peer into the future, many church plants will begin building their community with social programs before they evolve into a church. Social programs such as food pantries, medical clinics, day care, after-school programs, and job readiness will pave the way for the birth of new congregations.



In 1988, Vaughn and Narlene McLaughlin moved into a depressed area of Jacksonville, Florida, to plant The Potter's House Christian Fellowship, a church designed to meet the needs of the *whole* person. Today their converted Bell South building, called the Multiplex, houses nearly twenty for-profit businesses, including a café, a credit union, a beauty salon, a graphic design studio, and a Greyhound Bus terminal—all started by church members who lacked capital but held a dream. Another building serves as an incubator for two dozen new businesses. The Multiplex also houses a 500-student Christian academy. In addition to their ministries of economic empowerment and education, they also have nearly twenty-five other ministries, such as a prison ministry, youth ministry, Big and Little Brothers, and free car repair.

The Multiplex also has a team of 250 volunteers who look after things in the city, even if it means simply sweeping the streets of Jacksonville. Though an outstanding preacher, Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin always considers ministry as what happens outside the church. His philosophy says it all: If you are not making an impact outside of your four walls, then you are not making an impact at all.

In 1999, Bishop McLaughlin was named Entrepreneur of the Year by Florida State University. Is it any mystery why the city and its leaders have so wholeheartedly embraced The Potter's House?



The questions McLaughlin repeatedly asks in his ministry are the questions that churches in all kinds of neighborhoods should increasingly ask themselves: Would the community weep if my church were to pull out of the city? Would anybody notice if I left? Would anybody care?

The question, How big is your church?, should be replaced with, How big is the impact you are having on your community? Every other measure is interesting, but not relevant. Let's refuse to be impressed by numbers alone. There are many ways to engage the community

and make an impact—the only bad way to engage the community in service is not engaging it at all.

Piggyback on community days for outreach. Why should the church reinvent the wheel? Each month there are special days already celebrated by communities. By using these days, the church has the opportunity to position itself as the center of the community. Moreover, this gives the church reasons to practice Bringerism. (See Resources: A Year of Community for a detailed listing of month-by-month holidays the church can champion.)

Churches with limited resources don't have to go it alone. Many of these community events can be done in partnership with other churches and businesses. Use adequate resources to find equipment and supplies for these events throughout the community. God has placed your church in your community not to fill a corner, but to work with other churches, to be the nexus of activity and news in the community, and, like the tabernacle, to be strategically placed at the center of society. God expects nothing less!



John sliced his finger while repairing his car. His wife, Melinda, rushed him to the nearest hospital to have his finger treated as quickly as possible. When they arrived, John walked into the hospital while Melinda waited patiently in the car.

As John entered the emergency ward, he was confronted with two doors. The sign above one door read "Men" and the other read "Women." John walked through the door labeled "Men" and discovered that on the other side, there was another set of doors. This time one of the doors was labeled "Injury Above the Waist" and the other was labeled "Injury Below the Waist." He chose the correct door—above the waist—and proceeded on his way.

But, John was confronted with yet another pair of doors: one labeled "Serious Injury" and the other labeled "Not-So-Serious Injury." He

walked through the less serious door and found himself back out in the hospital parking lot.

John walked back to his car to where his wife was waiting. She looked at the shock on his face and the untreated wound on his finger.

“John, what happened? Didn’t they help you?”

“No,” John quickly replied, “but they sure are organized!”

The hospital’s mission was to help people in need. It had a beautiful building, adequate facilities, and a qualified staff. It was organized with the latest strategies in crowd control and people flow. Yet, when it came down to fulfilling its mission, it let the people in need fall between the cracks.



In the same way, if we are to sound the alarm that Jesus is returning and that now is the time for salvation, we must build relationships with our neighbors and be involved in our community.