

Our Church Wants to be in Ministry with the Poor Now What Do We Do?

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The Bible has over 2,000 references to the poor. They must be important to God, and they should be important to us. Many still need to hear about our Savior. Many others already know Him and need to know that their sisters and brothers will stand with them. They have to make choices in their lives that we can barely imagine. All too often they must choose between food, rent and medicine.

Truly effective ministry with the poor requires commitment and a willingness to make yourself vulnerable to a little heartache along the way. But don't worry. You will also experience times of great joy and see the Hand of God at work.

In this document I hope to give you some food for thought in finding your place in ministry with poor people in your community. I will attempt to show you what to expect, how to conduct your research, and how to take the first steps in turning your plans into a life-changing reality for "the least of these".

What to Expect

1. The situation won't change for most of the people you serve.

In all of those fundraising letters, we hear about the amazing successes that happen through the efforts of a ministry. It warms our hearts to see someone's life transformed. I don't doubt these wonderful events happened. I have seen dozens of my homeless friends get off the street and into a new life. Yes, I can tell those stories, too. They aren't only good for fundraising letters, but they fuel the fires of ministry and drive us to continue to invest in the lives of people who are in a very different place than we are.

Notice that I said dozens. Also realize that over the past 20+ years we have served thousands of homeless and poor people. Most of them will die without ever moving out of their station in life. They are trapped. Sometimes they build the trap themselves through addiction, criminal activity, or simply a desire to drop out. In other cases mental illness, lack of education, lack of basic social skills (and the desire to learn them) keep poor people where they are.

Most homeless people will die homeless. But they still need love. Most people trapped in poverty will die trapped in poverty. Love them anyway. When you design your ministry, you will want to create an environment where people can climb out of poverty. Just remember that most people will never get to the top. But you can still be a bright spot in their lives for a

moment or a lifetime. You can still offer encouragement, comfort and the love of Christ. Never underestimate the importance of those offerings. They may be the balm that can literally save someone's life.

2. Some people will take advantage of you.

If you are going to work with homeless and poor people, you will be conned. There will be people among the population you are serving who don't need the help, and you will be helping them. It's OK. You will have to go through these con artists to reach the poor souls who have real needs. You will also be enabling some people who have the ability to rise above their situation but lack the desire. Don't be so worried about someone taking advantage of you that you close the door of ministry to someone else who truly needs your help.

David was a homeless drug addict who also happened to be a brilliant con artist. He got me more times than I care to admit. I never shunned him, although I finally gained some wisdom and stopped falling for his cons. I never resented what he did and accepted it as a cost of doing ministry. Now he is one of my best friends. I would trust him with my life and the lives of my family. By the way, he is no longer homeless and has learned how to apply his superior "people skills" to lead a productive life.

3. Prepare for disappointment.

People will let you down. They will fall off the wagon, quit their jobs for no good reason, get arrested... well, you get the idea. You will know you are in real ministry with the poor when your heart gets broken. Disappointment will come from those you serve, but it may come from you. Sometimes you will have to say "no" because you don't have the resources to fill a very real need, or something comes up and you can't be there when that poor person was expecting you. For me, the greatest heartaches have come when I have let someone else down.

You may think you can avoid this problem by not getting to know the people you serve. You can follow the pattern of many ministries and hand out food, say "God bless you" and leave. A very real need exists for this type of ministry, but even here, you won't avoid heartache. Sometimes just seeing the conditions in which human beings must live is enough to tear you apart.

Disappointment and heartache will be a part of your ministry, but there will also be joy as you build new friendships and take delight in the knowledge that you are walking in the center of God's will.

I crawled under the bridge near the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Gino was lying in a bed that had been hauled under the bridge. His once bold face was now gaunt and drawn. He was dying of AIDS. Despite his brother's pleas to move in with him, Gino insisted that since he had made his bed on the street for over a decade, it was only fitting that he would die there. My heart was torn apart as I watched this man who had become my friend quietly face death. A week later he was gone. My only solace was in knowing that he faced an eternity with Christ.

4. Prepare to see the Hand of God at work.

If you get involved in the lives of the poor, you will see miracles, and you will see the hand of God at work.

Bob, a lean, quiet man in his mid fifties, had struggled with alcohol for decades and was homeless in Washington, DC for most of the past 30 years. But in May 2007, Bob's life took a radical turn. He and a group of his friends were sitting in the small plaza adjacent to New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (where Abraham Lincoln worshipped while in the White House). They could only afford a six pack of beer between them and were passing cans around the circle. When the beer can got to Bob, he held it in his hand, looked at it and said, "I'm tired of this. I don't want it anymore." He had taken his last drink. Within seven months he was off the street. Thirteen months from that day he was in his own apartment with a full time job and has not desired a drink since. Five years earlier, Bob had become friends with Esther, an eighth grader at the time, and an active youth in TOP. She prayed for him and encouraged him. Bob told me that Esther's friendship was one of the things that has kept him sober. He couldn't let her down.

I could share other miracles we have seen over the years. When you serve poor people and invest yourself in their lives, God will honor your efforts by showing up in wonderful ways.

5. Prepare for a change of heart.

We often begin ministry with the poor with the assumption that we will do all the giving and the people we serve will do all the receiving. Nothing could be further from the truth. In Luke 6:38, Jesus describes how things work better than I ever could: "Give and it will be given to you good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be placed in your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." You will learn, you will receive more than you give, your stereotypes of poor people will be blown away, you will find wonderful, unexpected friends and you will experience God's pleasure.

6. Don't sweat the numbers.

You've done your research. You have contacted the population you want to serve and told them you are coming. When you made your "promotion trip" 30 people were at the location where you plan to serve. You get there on your first day of ministry and there are only 3 people.

The above situation is not unusual when you begin a new ministry. A lot of the promotional strategies that work well within the church are less predictable outside the church. Here are a few key things you must do if you are going to be successful.

- Be patient.
- Be flexible.
- Be faithful.
- Be prayerful.

One of the biggest adjustments new volunteer leaders for TOP have to make is to this reality. Things don't always work out the way you plan. In the above situation, instead of lamenting the small turnout, rejoice in how you are able to help those three people. Real ministry with the poor is not about numbers. It's about impact. It's about making a difference in someone else's life. If the 20 volunteers in your group have only two people to help, think what an impact you can have on them!

Where Do We Begin?

Step 1: Pray

The very first thing you should do is pray. Your church should set aside a season to ask for God's wisdom and direction for your outreach. It should be a part of the prayer time of every worship service, Bible study, small group gathering, Sunday school class, family and individual of the congregation. I highly recommend a prayer vigil of at least 12 hours, preferably 24, be included in the process. Never enter into this type of ministry without bathing it in prayer. Ask for wisdom and claim the promise of James 1:5-6 in your prayers over this ministry. God's wisdom often confounds our own, and I have found it is always best to be on the same page as God.

Step 2: Research

Find the answers to the following questions to help you define your ministry:

1. Where are the pockets of poverty near our church? The answer to this question is obvious in many communities but not as easy to see in others. Good sources of information are the local department of social services, people who might stop by your church asking for assistance, other churches and pastors in the area, local home repair organizations, Meals on Wheels, area agencies on aging, the Salvation Army and the police. Some of the people you will deal with may not be cooperative. That's OK. There are other ways to find the need.

You can go "cruising" for ministry opportunities. Parks and areas under bridges, mobile home parks, patches of woods, low budget motels, subsidized housing, and rural areas "back in the hollers" are all worth investigating. Poor people may be centrally located in a community or scattered about in small pockets and individual residences throughout the county. Looks can be deceiving. A house can look nice and neat on the outside, and be unlivable on the inside. A neatly dressed, clean shaven man sitting in a park may be homeless. So if you approach someone you see sitting in the park often, break the ice with a question that doesn't assume he's homeless. After an introduction and some small talk, phrase your question like this: "I've seen you in the park a lot. Are there many homeless people who hang out here?" Many people who are homeless have no problem telling you about their station in life and will often prove to be the most valuable sources of information you can find.

2. Who is God calling us to serve? Your research should be focused on discovering the right combination of whom and where God wants you to serve. If there is a place where people hang out in the mornings waiting to be picked up for day labor, stop by there and chat with them. If you see homeless people hanging out in a park, strike up a conversation.

It's a good idea to keep some gifts handy. Homeless people appreciate bus passes, gift certificates to fast food restaurants, etc. Take a gift or food basket to a low income person or family living in a mobile home, apartment complex, motel or house, and then spend some time talking to them and asking questions. Make sure you tell the person you are talking to who you are and what you're planning to do. Below are some questions that can help you figure out how to start:

- How long have you been here?
- How many people do you know around here?
- What is the financial situation for most people in your community?
- Do any other churches or groups provide any assistance to you?
- Do you or anyone you know here receive any assistance from government (federal, state, county, city programs)?
- What are some things you need to get by that you are not getting now?
- What do you think it would take to help you move up the ladder to a better life?
- What are some of your most pressing needs?

The answer to the last two questions can speak volumes to you on how to design your ministry. While it is good to seek information from the "experts" I have always found that the best information comes from the people we serve. We may glean information from official sources on what they think people need, but if the people you serve don't agree, they won't respond to your efforts.

You may find the people you want to serve by locating the best places to serve or vice versa. Or you may need to try both research methods to get the best answer. This isn't a complicated process, but it's not necessarily easy, either. Patience and prayer will win out in the end.

Safety in Research

In all of your research, as well as your ministry, safety should be a central concern. The research phase is actually where the greatest risks occur because, in order to find people to talk to, you may have to go into areas where you won't take a group. Here are a few things to bear in mind:

- Don't go into unlit, hidden places after dark.
- Don't do this alone. A team of three people should be the minimum when you are going to where poor and homeless people live.
- Be sure others know your schedule and where you are going.
- If you approach an area and see illegal activity of any kind, turn around and walk away. You can come back later.
- When you first meet homeless and other low income people, make sure people know you are from a church and what you are trying to do. Not only does this afford you greater protection, but it will really cut down on the time it takes to get answers.

Lastly, in your dealings with others, exercise the highest level of integrity. Be honest and keep your promises. This last point isn't really about safety. It's about being the best witness you can be for Christ.

How Will You Serve?

Once you have prayerfully chosen what group(s) of people you will serve, you must decide how you will serve them. Let me note that you should remain flexible in this area. You may start at one level of involvement, but find out that God is calling you to another level. Below are questions for which you should seek the answers before you begin:

What level of contact will you have with the people you plan to serve? As I mentioned before, there are several levels of contact you can have with poor people. I will cover the ends of the spectrum. Chances are, your ministry will end up falling somewhere in the middle.

- *You can limit your contact to what it takes to meet physical needs.* At this level of contact you can serve more people. If you did your research well, you will be meeting very real needs. A soup kitchen, mobile meal program, clothes closet, food pantry are all ministries that generally fall into this category. I don't want to diminish the importance of this level of service. Poor people need help to survive. They routinely have to choose between food, medicine, rent and transportation. Just be sure you maintain enough contact so that you can do the best job of meeting the most pressing needs.
- *You can get very involved in the lives of a smaller number of people.* There is a host of things you can do at this level of contact. The people you serve will become like family. You may provide housing, a car, job training, teach life skills (money management, parenting, health and nutrition), baby-sit their children so they can take a class, or bail them out of jail. Your emotional investment and risk are greater here, but you have a better opportunity to transform lives.

At TOP, we fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. Some of our groups are in ministry every month and form real and deep relationships with homeless and poor people. The teens take food, clothes and other necessities of life and spend time getting to know the people they serve. They offer encouragement, discover deeper needs, and listen to the stories and trials homeless and poor people share with them. They may find that a homeless man wants to reunite with his family. We can provide the transportation. Another person may need to purchase minutes for a cell phone so she can be contacted about a job for which she applied. Somebody else may be ready to move off the street, but needs help with a security deposit, furniture and house wares. Other groups do their "TOP Trips" once or twice a year. Those youth are able to meet physical needs and provide a bright spot in the lives of the poor with whom they are in ministry, but have less opportunity to be agents of transformation.

Andre had been sober for six months, but was still on the streets. As a group of TOP teens was talking with him, they found out that he had gotten a job at a bagel bakery. While he was excited about the job, he was afraid he would oversleep. He had to be at work at 4:30 am. So we got him an alarm clock. Two months later, he was off the streets.

What are others doing? A central part of your research is to find out what other services are available to your target population. When you design your ministry, you want to avoid duplication (although not all duplication is counterproductive). Compliment what others are doing instead. You can serve folks in different ways. Contact the other churches or agencies whenever possible. You can accomplish a lot more working together than you can on your own.

Shortly after we started our ministry to the residents of low budget motels in Winchester, we found out that another church was bringing hot meals on Sunday and Wednesday nights. We felt no need to abandon those motels and move to other areas. Instead, our groups that serve on those days bring snacks and other items such as clothes, groceries, paper goods, diapers and toiletries. These are all needs we discovered when we conducted our research and during our early trips. We also work to maintain communication with other church in order to meet special needs of the people we serve.

What are ministries doing in other areas? Don't reinvent the wheel if you don't have to. The Internet is a great tool for researching other ministries. It could be that someone in another region is doing exactly what you want to do. You may want to contact the people in charge of those ministries or visit them to get more details.

A group of churches and faith-based organizations in Winchester began searching for ways to serve the local homeless population. It was obvious to them that the city needed more shelter space in the winter. Richmond, Charlottesville and other cities were running similar programs, so the Winchester group was able to shorten their learning curve substantially by studying how churches in other cities dealt with the problem.

There are as many models for ministry with the poor as there are poor people. Below are TOP's current outreaches (we're always adapting these and developing new ones), which will give you some ministry ideas:

The Street is TOP's outreach to urban homeless people. It began in Washington, DC in 1987 and is active in Richmond and Newport News and Winchester. Participating youth groups serve homeless people in parks and homeless shelters. Staff members evaluate ministry sites for safety and to ensure that they provide an environment conducive to personal interactions between the teens and homeless people. TOP teaches youth groups how to prepare food, clothing, and toiletries for the homeless and provides leadership to outreach sites.

The Urban Neighborhood Outreach (UNO) - TOP is developing a holistic approach to ministry in low income neighborhoods by providing home repairs, children's programs, life skills classes (including computer skills, money management, nutrition and parenting), Bible studies and more. The pilot program is being conducted in Lynchburg, VA.

Impact the Valley (IV) on the surface looks like a typical week-long mission event where volunteers conduct home repairs for low income families. But with IV, we go a step farther by setting up work days throughout the year with the families we serve.

Motel Ministry – TOP has just begun ministry to people who live in low budget motels. In

many ways it is similar to The Street, but we provide groceries, diapers, detergent and paper products in addition to the items we normally offer through The Street.

In all of these ministries, we provide opportunities for volunteers to interact with their clients. We encourage the formation of closer relationships than just the “server and the served.” When we learn about a special need, we try to meet it. To that end, TOP has created two special funds.

Stepping Stones provides funds to help clients obtain valid photo ID. The greatest unmet need for this type of assistance has been with those who work with prisoners, ex-offenders and homeless mentally ill persons.

Kelsey Kares is named after Kelsey Orndorff, who lost her life in a car wreck in 2008. She had been active in TOP since she was nine years old and had a passion for Christ and the poor. To create a legacy for her, we re-named our Direct Aid Fund in her honor. Through Kelsey Kares we provide direct aid for transportation, specialized work clothing, assistance with rent, utilities and groceries. TOP provides assistance directly to poor and homeless people or works through youth groups. In 2009, we have helped prevent eviction for 15 families and helped two homeless people transition off the street in addition to our regular help with other special needs.

Feel free to contact TOP for more information on these ministries or for help in getting your own outreach off the ground, even if you don’t have any youth.

Other models of ministry include things like a food pantry, soup kitchen, clothes closet, children’s programs, after-school mentoring and tutoring, etc.

The research never ends.

To be honest, the research in your ministry never really ends. You are constantly learning new things about the people you serve and about how you can improve. In our early days of taking clothes to homeless people, we found out that there was a critical shortage of underwear. We never would have thought about it.

Throw a Party

If you are working in a community of people, and not with isolated households, this approach is a great segue from research to ministry. The idea comes from Sandy Creech of Charleston Outreach in South Carolina. They minister in subsidized housing complexes. They begin their ministry by throwing a block party complete with music, children’s activities, free food and door prizes. To receive a door prize, residents have to fill out a survey that helps those in ministry find out what the real needs are. We have used this model in both The Street and UNO with great success.

Getting Started

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

There comes a point where it's time to launch your ministry. A little organization and preparation goes a long way to getting your church started right. Most of what I have below is not new. It applies to lots of different situations.

Recruit volunteers – Find the people who have a passion for what you are doing. When things aren't going as planned, they are the ones God often uses to keep everybody else on track.

Prepare materials – There are a number of ways to assemble the materials for your ministry. You may need to raise money to buy what you need or you can do it through obtaining donated items from members of your church. Be creative. If this is an ongoing ministry, you will need to develop a long term plan for providing the food, clothes, building materials, etc. for what you are doing.

Start Small – If home repair is your ministry, start with one house. Use that experience to give you the knowledge and ability to expand in the future. For ministries where you serve groups of people, start with just one location. Spend more time with those folks, learning how to be effective in your outreach. Remember: It's not about numbers. It's about doing your best to show others the love of Christ.

Trust God – The Holy Spirit leads us perfectly, but we don't always follow perfectly. We often get sidetracked by our own agendas or sometimes we just "don't get it." Cover your ministry in prayer every step of the way. Spend time listening to God. Then do your very best to obey. Remember to pray for the details.

We learned a long time ago to always pray for parking when we go to Washington, DC for ministry. On one trip we had a record NINE cars, trucks and vans headed to Franklin Square, just a few blocks from the White House. The whole group prayed for parking before we left, and I prayed all the way down. If we could find spots for all those cars around the square that afternoon, it would be a small miracle. When we approached the park on K Street, I saw some empty spaces. I thought that this was promising, but figured that at least three or four of the vehicles would have to park somewhere else. I pulled into the empty area and pulled up as far as I could. By the time we had turned off our engines, all nine vehicles were parked in a line behind me, and I wasn't even illegally parked in the bus zone!

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive treatment on how to start a ministry with poor people. It may provide enough information for you to move forward. If you have questions as you begin this great adventure of faith, feel free to contact us at Teens Opposing Poverty.

God's grace to you,

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