

STEPHEN VIARS

**LOVING
YOUR
COMMUNITY**

**PROVEN PRACTICES
FOR COMMUNITY-BASED
OUTREACH MINISTRY**



“What does it look like for a church to take the gospel to the streets? How can a church impact its community for Christ while remaining true to the gospel? I know of no person better equipped to answer these questions than Pastor Steve Viars. He’s walked the talk in taking the gospel to his community for thirty years as Pastor at Faith Church. Read and apply *Loving Your Community* for a theologically sound, practically proven, and narrative-rich approach to making a Christ-centered difference in your community.”

Bob Kelleman, PhD, vice president and academic dean, Faith Bible Seminary; author of twenty books, including *Gospel Conversations: How to Care Like Christ*

“If you’re tired of running the church like a cruise ship and would love to equip and launch your people back into the community, then get this book and read it with your leaders! For the past two decades I’ve watched Steve take an already vibrant church that was doing so many things well and help them exit the building, to the glory of God and the great good of the community. By God’s grace, Steve and his church family have built effective partnerships with civic leaders, judges, police officers, and social workers that have shattered the categories of what most community leaders think about Christians and the church of Jesus Christ. In a day of bitter polarization here’s a strategy for lifting up Jesus and putting feet on the gospel. God, give us more of it!”

Brad Bigney, lead pastor of Grace Fellowship Church, ACBC-certified counselor, conference speaker, and author of *Gospel Treason*

“Rarely does one find a book that balances both a sound biblical vision and practical, time-tested strategies for engaging one’s community. Faith Church has long been a beacon and testimony of what can happen when a church is truly mobilized by the Great Commission to reach the lost for Christ. As I read the book I could not help but think of the many ways I wanted to share the content with my own colleagues. Pastor Steve has provided local churches a phenomenal and invaluable resource on living out our faith in the most practical of ways. Pick up this book today and start loving on your community!”

Jonathan D. Holmes, pastor of counseling, Parkside Church; founder and executive director, Fieldstone Counseling

“For many decades Faith Church has served as a model biblical-counseling church. Now, in this book, we learn how those same biblical truths have more recently produced a church that loves its community in timely, creative, sacrificial, and sometimes controversial ways. Steve Viars engagingly blends insights from God’s Word, motivating testimonies of those impacted by Faith, and clear, doable guidance to help churches love their neighbors for the sake of the gospel.”

Robert D. Jones, associate professor of biblical counseling, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author of *Uprooting Anger* and *Pursuing Peace*

“For over fifty years I have worked in urban communities and have heard all the reasons why a suburban church cannot effectively minister in an urban community. Steve Viars and the saints at Faith decided to believe God rather than the voices of critics. For thirty years God has been doing an amazing work through Faith’s God-dependent, Bible-guided, practical ministries within their surrounding community and beyond. I know Brother Steve and the people at Faith. I have seen the fruit of their labor. If you desire to rise above cursing the darkness and bring light to your community in a loving, gospel-centered, practical way, read *Loving Your Community* today. Your heart will be refreshed, your love will increase in wisdom and knowledge, and your faith will be strengthened.”

Dr. A. Charles Ware, former president of Crossroads Bible College; speaker; founder and executive director of Grace Relations

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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

To John, Tony, and Michael

A philanthropist, a political leader, and a community
organizer

A powerfully effective community service team

CONTENTS

Cover [1](#)

Endorsements [2](#)

Half Title Page [4](#)

Title Page [5](#)

Copyright Page [6](#)

Dedication [7](#)

Introduction: Taking the Gospel to the Streets [11](#)

Part 1: The Biblical Foundation of Community-Based Ministry [17](#)

1. *Loving* in the Name of Christ [19](#)

2. Meeting *Your* Community's Pressing Needs [35](#)

3. Caring for the Welfare of Your *Community* [52](#)

Part 2: The Practice of Community-Based Ministry [65](#)

4. Biblical Counseling: Sharing Hope with Those Who Are Hurting [67](#)

5. Accessible Facilities: Opening Your Buildings to Neighbors in Need [80](#)

6. Instructional Classes: Showing the Practicality of God's Word [95](#)

7. Restructured Ministries: Including Others in Everything You Do [111](#)

8. Outreach Events: Making Big Statements to Celebrate God's Glory [126](#)

9. Restored Neighborhoods: Bringing New Life to Distressed Areas [141](#)

10. Community Centers: Constructing Your Next Building with Others in Mind [156](#)

11. Residential Treatment Programs: Demonstrating God's Power to Change Lives [172](#)

Part 3: The Challenges of Community-Based Ministry [191](#)

12. Answering Common Objections [193](#)

13. Getting Started [206](#)

Epilogue: Pictures Are Powerful [221](#)

Notes [231](#)

Back Ads [235](#)

Back Cover [238](#)

INTRODUCTION

Taking the Gospel to the Streets

It was the end of a very long, hot day. A friend and I were participating in the annual RAIN ride—short for “Ride Across Indiana.” Cyclists start at the Illinois border at sunrise and ride their bicycles straight east to the Ohio border in one day, a distance of just over 160 miles.

Seasoned participants often talk about the quality of the rest stops. Spread out every thirty miles or so, local volunteers and small communities take great pride in preparing a delightful assortment of iced beverages and high-energy snacks for the riders. Cyclists’ families and friends also use these designated places to meet their loved ones and cheer them on to the finish line.

The atmosphere is electric because of the convergence of civic pride and athletic accomplishment. There is nothing quite like getting off your bike and having a complete stranger hand you a cold drink and an energy bar along with a pat on the back and an encouraging word. The various stops along the route even have friendly competition between communities to see which can serve the riders best.

On this particular afternoon, as a group of us were coming to one of the final stops, I spotted a beautiful church building with a large parking lot. As a pastor myself, I wondered if any of the members of that congregation would be joining their friends and neighbors to serve the athletes and their families. I started making mental connections between a vacant church parking lot on a Saturday afternoon and a host of people needing a place to park for a few minutes to serve and celebrate with the ones they love.

As the scene came into clearer focus, I saw a man dragging a sawhorse down the church driveway with a homemade sign hastily affixed to one end. He was on a mission, for sure, and my first thought was, *I hope that sign does not say what I think it does*. Sure enough, I reached the spot just as he was erecting his instructions: “No Parking Allowed Here.”

In all fairness, I suppose the church may have been preparing to host a giant event in a few minutes and simply could not spare any parking spots for these neighbors in need. But honestly, I highly doubt it. The more likely explanation is that he had fallen victim to an attitude and philosophy that seems to affect many

churches regarding the way they think about sharing what they have with others in their communities: “*Say no unless you have to say yes.*”

But is that what Scripture tells us to do? Paul told the legalistic Galatians, “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:9–10). Here’s my point: wise churches look for every opportunity to share love and resources with those around them.

Say Yes Unless You Have to Say No

We ought to be guided by the principle “*Say yes unless you have to say no.*” The Lord is pleased when his people serve others in ways big and small. Often, more profound ministry interactions begin with a simple expression of grace and kindness.

At this particular church, someone may have objected to a mob of bikers leaving trash all over the church grounds just before the Lord’s Day. Others might have fretted because the bathrooms wouldn’t be pristine when the church folks arrived the next morning. But is that really important? Is it possible that worship on Sunday would be sweeter if we had to step over a few empty water bottles that had been distributed in Jesus’s name?

We Christians can be incredibly insular and shortsighted. Our focus so frequently becomes, How is this going to affect our comfort, security, and convenience? In truth, we would all do better to focus on serving and loving others regardless of the price that has to be paid.

The tragedy here is the impression this ambivalence and apathy gives to a lost and dying world. Many in our culture have concluded that God does not love and care about them. Little wonder, when his children are busy crafting “No Parking Allowed Here” signs. It might be time for us to try a new approach: *Say yes unless you have to say no.*

“I Am Willing; Be Cleansed”

Contrast this church’s approach to the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth. Right after the Lord concluded the Sermon on the Mount, we learn that “a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, ‘Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean’” (Matt. 8:2). At that moment, there were all sorts of reasons

why the Lord could have denied this request. Perhaps he was tired after a period of teaching. The previous verse reports that large crowds followed him, so was there really time to help this diseased man? Plus, the leper's condition may have been contagious and dangerous. In beautiful simplicity, Matthew says, "Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, 'I am willing; be cleansed'" (8:3).

There is tremendous power in that brief statement. Jesus extended his hand to this person. He touched a leprous man. Then he said words that forever changed the man's life: "I am willing; be cleansed." The Savior of the world said yes to a dear man in need.

Where Saying Yes Might Lead

Last night, an elderly African American woman stopped by the construction site of our new urban community center. As she gazed at the mural a street artist was painting on the outside corner of the main entrance, she smiled.

This woman's face was featured in the artwork, along with the faces of about twenty area residents of various ages, ethnicities, and physical abilities. When the artist finished the mural, he overlaid the images with the words "BETTER TOGETHER."

Several months ago this matriarch of our community told me that seventy-five years ago black children were not welcome in our city's public park. So a group of African American leaders decided to build a small neighborhood center. To help fund the center, she and her friends made paper flowers to sell around the courthouse. One of her earliest childhood memories is when a daintily dressed white child came by and said to her mother, "Look, mama, there's a n—."

Now that aging neighborhood center is becoming one of our project's twelve nonprofit partners. It took my friend a lifetime of living with indignities large and small, but she's glad we're making a statement about her and everyone else in our community—we are better together.

That is the question before us: *How should churches and individual Christians relate to local communities?*

Let's Go on a Journey Together

In this book, I'll help you rethink how you position yourself in your community. Scripture lays out a theology of community-based outreach that is robust, and

new ministry models are rising up in the US and around the world to creatively live out and proclaim the Good News.

In the first three chapters, we'll turn to God's Word and lay a foundation for our efforts. Along the way, we will examine the theological reasons for loving your community by organizing our thoughts around the three key words in the book's title:

- LOVING in the Name of Christ
- Meeting YOUR Community's Pressing Needs
- Caring for the Welfare of Your COMMUNITY

The remainder of the book will contain proven strategies for community-based ministry. The success stories I share picture men and women from many different vocations, a variety of life stages, and diverse ministry settings. I love discussing these opportunities with God's people. Due to the life-changing impact of community-based ministry, I often have the privilege of hosting men and women from extremely rural to highly urban settings who come to our campuses to see what the Lord is doing.

I have organized the material to begin with ideas that are more easily achievable in the short term. Our experience has been that as these smaller initiatives bear fruit to God's glory, our hearts have been stimulated to try the more aggressive initiatives discussed in later chapters.

By the end of the book, I hope you have a better understanding of what the Word of God says about relating to your neighbors so you will be challenged to think creatively about serving your community—right here and right now. And I hope you have a toolbox filled with proven, practical ideas, many of which you can implement right away.

May we all find more opportunities to “*say yes unless we have to say no*” for the glory of God.



PART 1

**THE BIBLICAL
FOUNDATION OF
COMMUNITY-BASED
MINISTRY**

1

LOVING IN THE NAME OF CHRIST

We all struggle to know how to relate to the men and women the Lord has placed around us. I've served at the same church for over thirty years and I've watched this play out for me and the people in our church family in all sorts of ways.

As Christians, how should a young family interact with the unmarried couple and their two children who just moved in next door? Is it best to bake them a plate of cookies and welcome them to the neighborhood? Should they host a cookout for everyone on the block as a way of introducing their friends to this new family? Or should Christians be wary of such individuals? Perhaps they should be judgmental because the couple is unmarried. Maybe they should forbid their children from playing with the new kids. Is it time to call the fence company?

What about the middle-aged Christian woman who is having lunch with a female coworker who recently married her lesbian partner? When this colleague confides that her wife has just been diagnosed with colon cancer, what does Christianity look like in that moment? How does it sound? How does it feel?

We also face the issue of social concerns. Whether we live in a large city or small town, we see the effects of drug abuse, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, crime, poverty, ethnic tension, and a seemingly endless array of community challenges. How should followers of Christ think about such issues? More importantly, how should Christians think about the people—men, women, boys, and girls—who are suffering as a result of these kinds of social problems? Is it acceptable to just avoid that part of town? Should we fear getting our hands dirty? If we do get involved, what is the nature and purpose of our activity? Should we go it alone or collaborate with others? Can partnerships be built with other nonprofits or with the government?

Churches also have to make more formal decisions about how to function in a culture that is often apathetic and sometimes even hostile to our beliefs. What in the world is God doing? Are there any opportunities for ministry in all of this?

Are there any responsibilities? What about the endless political and culture wars? Should we pick a new battle every day? Is the church of Jesus Christ called to be another angry, cynical political action committee? These questions have to be faced week in and week out by church leaders as we try to help our congregations navigate these fascinating yet confusing days in which we live.

The Reality of Competing Priorities

There are no easy answers here, especially because there are different ways of thinking about these matters in light of the Word of God. On the one hand, as Christians we sincerely want to make a difference with our lives. We are on a mission given to us by our Lord himself. Dying to ourselves and taking up our cross and following him is essential and fundamental to our faith (Matt. 16:24).

This God-given purpose is described in multiple ways in God's Word. We are told to "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). The thought that we could ever relate to another person in a way that glorifies (gives the right opinion of) God is an incredible privilege and sacred trust.

Scripture refers to us as "ambassadors" of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20) and directs us to be "lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). Powerful metaphors like this call us to engage with the community around us in ways that are thoughtful and proactive. God's calling should affect the way we think about the new family next door, about the coworker facing a devastating diagnosis, and about all the social challenges destroying lives and families.

On the other hand, God calls his people to be holy and separate. Scripture is filled with warnings about how our relationships will affect our own souls and eternal destiny. We are told in both the Old and New Testaments to "come out from among them and be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17 NKJV; cf. Isa. 52:11). Holiness, by its very definition, means to be set apart—positionally the moment we trusted Christ and practically as we "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). This concept is so important that Peter affirms that Jesus shed his own blood in order to make it possible (1 Pet. 1:18–19).

Perhaps you have heard the saying that balance is that elusive point we pass on the way to our next extreme. That is certainly true in trying to discern the Christian's proper relationship to the world in which we live.

The Importance of Getting It Right

Thoughtful Christians recognize that this is far more than an intramural debate. There are vital spiritual issues at play here, and addressing them properly is crucial to serving the Lord effectively.

Scripture is clear that we are engaged in a cosmic battle that God has allowed to be played out on the earth he created. Paul told the Ephesians that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). We are not just talking about empty stomachs, abusive fathers, and needles filled with drugs. As the Reformer Martin Luther famously penned, “this world with devils filled” threatens “to undo us.” In whatever ways we deem appropriate, choosing to engage in the challenges of the world around us is to step into a battle with the very forces of evil.

There is also the issue of the centrality of the gospel itself. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost,” Paul affirmed (1 Tim. 1:15 ESV). Church history is filled with examples of people who ignored the needs of their community and missed opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. At the same time, others launched head-on to meet social needs but lost the purpose of proclaiming Christ as their foundational focus. As a pastor, I am absolutely convinced that both the purity and efficacy of the gospel is at stake.

Overcoming Wrong Extremes

Part of the challenge is that God’s people often have interacted with our world in ways that are ineffective, confusing, and even damaging to the cause of Christ. Such interactions have included the extremes of hatred, apathy, and self-righteousness.

Hatred

Though as a pastor it’s hard for me to say this, I have sometimes wondered if the church is a hiding place for some people whose hearts are filled with hate. The vitriol of their public involvement discredits the message they seek to proclaim. One of the earliest books of the New Testament affirms:

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is

earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13–18)

As I look back over my ministry these last several decades, I am convicted by James's words. There have been too many times when what I said or wrote was something other than peaceable, gentle, and full of mercy. There is no place for hatred in the life of a follower of Jesus.

Apathy

Early in my ministry, an editor of our local newspaper told me that people don't care about a problem or issue unless it affects them directly. I resisted the notion that this could possibly be true of Christians.

However, I have reluctantly come to believe that he was right. Many Christians, especially those who tend to be conservative in their theology and practice, have abandoned the public square.

Often this is simply because of the pace of modern life. Our families need to be fed, clothed, and driven to the next soccer game. Electronic devices need our attention—at least that is the way it appears. Our lawns need to be manicured and church programs need to be staffed.

Rarely is there much bandwidth left to interact with those in our communities who are hurting. Isn't that the government's job? Or someone else's responsibility? While Christians rarely come right out and say it, an investigation of our checkbooks or our schedules would reveal that in the final analysis, we really do not care about the needs of those who live around us.

Self-Righteousness

Another ingredient in this toxic brew is the church's tendency to believe we are better than others. We speak about those who are jobless or homeless as if they wouldn't be in that condition if they worked as hard as we do. What about a man who lost his job because he served in the military overseas and is now having trouble assimilating back to civilian life? What about the woman who is homeless because she and her children fled an abusive man and are now living in the family car in a parking lot downtown?

One of the fundamental questions each of us has to answer is this: Do you believe you are intrinsically better than those who are struggling in your community, or are the strengths and successes in your life the result of God's

grace? Churches need to consider whether they have positioned themselves as fortresses of self-righteousness or havens of grace.

Thankfully, these extremes can be overcome. You and I can honestly evaluate our attitudes, words, and choices, and if necessary, take steps to change. We can become more of what God desires.

Highlights from an Intimate Conversation

Just before going to the cross, Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room to provide his final instructions before his death, burial, and resurrection. His words, captured in John 13–17, are some of the most tender and passionate of anything recorded in Scripture.

Jesus made it clear that his desire was not for his children to be taken out of the world (John 17:15). He explained that we have a job to do—described in this passage as being sent *into* the world (17:18). And there is no place for hatred, apathy, self-righteousness, pride, indifference, anger, or any of the tendencies that have too often characterized the way the people of God have related to others. Even a cursory reading of the passage demonstrates that the controlling theme is how the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ makes it possible for his redeemed people to relate to others in love. In a word, what is desperately needed inside and outside the church is that we would be known for our *love*.

A Divine Love

John, who would later be known as the Apostle of Love, begins his account of these events with this summary: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Those of us who are contemplating what it means to love our communities can take heart in the fact that in doing so, we are simply following in the footsteps of our Savior. He modeled this same emphasis in the way he treated others, including us.

A Sacrificial Love

The disciples, like everyone else at the time, walked on dusty roads in open sandals on their way to eat a meal where they would be reclining in close proximity to one another’s feet. Often a room like this would include a servant

who would wash everyone's feet before the meal. This time, there was only a basin of water and a towel.

This presented a dilemma for Christ's followers because the disciples had been engaged in an argument about who was greatest among them and who would have the highest positions of honor in Christ's future kingdom. Certainly no one would take a step backward and bow to wash another person's feet. To their surprise, Jesus "got up from supper, and laid aside His garments, and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded" (John 13:4–5). Jesus went on to say, "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (13:14).

What a beautiful picture of what it means to love others "to the end" (13:1). If you're interested in learning how to relate to your community well, you would be wise to think long and hard about this beautiful illustration of godliness. At that moment, Jesus had every reason to be disappointed in and express righteous anger toward his self-centered disciples. Instead, he looked at the condition of their dirty feet and he washed them.

Opportunities to love our neighbors come in many shapes and sizes and often require very little if any financial investment. For example, our church is located in a snowy climate, so our pastor of student ministries has trained a small army of young men and women in our youth group and Christian school to be prepared each time it snows. They have compiled a list of people who live near our campuses—single moms, senior citizens, veterans, persons with special needs, and many others—whose driveways and sidewalks they shovel (free of charge) every time there is a need. Their efforts have been highlighted by our neighbors on social media sites, so anyone in need can simply contact our church. We found that our teens thoroughly enjoy serving in this way and are willing to do so at all hours of the day and night. There truly is joy in loving others and following the footsteps of our Savior.

An Exemplary Love

The Lord then said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). This command was not new in the sense that the disciples had never heard it, but different because Jesus's pending death, burial, and resurrection would provide access to a kind of personal relationship with God that would empower them to love others in an entirely superior way.

Christ's next words are crucial for every one of us to absorb: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35). What an incredibly convicting statement. As a leader, you should give some thought to questions such as, What are we known for in our communities? How are we relating to one another and to our neighbors? How have we positioned ourselves?

It is equally challenging to think about the question from the opposite perspective. When our neighbors think of us, what words come to mind first? Is it that we love them? Or is it something else entirely?

Some may argue that Jesus was only talking about the way the disciples related to one another. However, keep this crucial principle of hermeneutics in mind: we interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. Jesus had previously taught them much about loving others, including their neighbors and even their enemies. The context of this discussion was their mission not only to the other eleven (soon to be ten) men in the room but also to the ones Jesus would later describe in prayer as "those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20).

The concept of loving our communities is not simply a book title or a clever campaign slogan. It stands at the very center of what Jesus wants us to be known for in the cities and towns in which he has placed us. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love . . ."

An Expectant Love

The disciples undoubtedly found Christ's words troubling on many levels. So Jesus turned their attention to heaven, telling them that in his Father's house there are many dwelling places (John 14:2). This means that those who believe in Christ through the disciples' words will someday share eternity with him and with them.

What greater motivation do you need than the privilege of being used to make an eternal difference in the life of someone else? People will not come to Christ because of a Christian's hatred, anger, pride, self-righteousness, or apathy. But they might come because of your love.

A Supernatural Love

I have been in enough conversations on this subject over the years that I can practically hear the objections: "But my neighbors are hard to love." "This culture is too far gone for such methods." "My community is just too dark."

Jesus anticipated these responses from his disciples. So he turned their attention—and ours—to what he would accomplish through his work on the cross. He told them he would “ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever” (John 14:16). The Holy Spirit takes up permanent residence in those who repent and believe in Christ. This Spirit begins cultivating marvelous fruit in the life of every believer, including the characteristic of love for others (Gal. 5:22–23).

The Lord also explained the miraculous union we have with both him and the Father. We actually are like branches growing out of a supernatural vine, tended by the heavenly Father himself (John 15:1–7). It is now possible for us to abide in his love (15:9).

This makes the challenge of loving our communities far more achievable. When we simply focus on the depth of the problems around us or the weakness of our own ability to love, the task can seem unattainable. Christ wants us to open our spiritual eyes and see the potential of abiding in his love and relating to others in ways that are fruitful and glorifying to him.

As we consider how to position ourselves in our communities, we should think carefully and prayerfully about Jesus’s words in this passage: “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love” (15:8–9).

An Obedient Love

Some might respond to this line of reasoning with the objection that they do not really feel like loving their neighbors. They feel like ignoring them, criticizing them, or being repulsed by them. Let’s be honest: likely many of us have battled this kind of attitude from time to time.

Jesus anticipated this response and countered with the repeated explanation that biblical love is an expression of obedience: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word” (14:23). “You are My friends if you do what I command you” (15:14).

It is highly likely that much of what the Lord wants us to do in relating to the people in our communities will go entirely against the grain. Loving others, especially when they are radically different in a myriad of ways, is entirely counterintuitive. But often authentic Christianity starts with a choice to obey God even when it is hard.

A Realistic Love

Our Lord did not sugarcoat his admonitions in this passage. “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:18). That would be some slogan for your next community outreach recruitment banner!

But is that not the true test of whether we truly love someone—that we seek to serve them and meet needs *in spite of* the way they might choose to speak about or treat us? Love that is instantly reciprocated is merely convenience or self-service. But when it sacrifices even in the midst of mistreatment, then it begins to look like the love of Christ.

An Anticipatory Love

Jesus then turned his eyes toward heaven and uttered words that were stunning and instructive. Speaking of his disciples and of people like you and me, he told the Father, “I do not ask You to take them out of the world” (John 17:15). Please consider all the persons in your community who do not know Christ. Layer on all the tendencies and habits that you find irritating, frustrating, and disgusting. And then remember this: Jesus prayed specifically that you and I would find ourselves in this very kind of situation.

Then Jesus said, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (17:20 ESV). Finding ways to relate to your community with Christlike love could result in a harvest of amazing spiritual fruit.

Our Experience at Faith Church

Our church is a little over fifty years old, and we have always been conservative in doctrine and practice. In the past, we had a tradition of being fairly separated from our community.

Twenty years ago we began asking if that particular approach was effective. More importantly, was it *biblical*?

That began a journey of soul-searching, Bible study, and openness to new ways of thinking about life and ministry. The controlling question has been: *What would it look like if we worked harder and more creatively at loving our neighbors?*

Looking for answers to that question has produced an incredible number of opportunities to serve those in need. Not long after we constructed a new campus

near an interstate, we let the Red Cross know that if they ever needed to use our facilities for disaster relief, we would be happy to help. That willingness was tested one Saturday evening when a major snowstorm turned the interstate into a parking lot. The Red Cross mobilized their staff and we provided a team of volunteers to assist them. Our building began filling up with hundreds of stranded travelers who were stretched out on cots and blankets in our classrooms, offices, and gymnasium.

But the crowds kept coming and we were practically out of room. So the executive director of the Red Cross, our former senior pastor Bill Goode, and I met just outside our brand-new auditorium to discuss whether we should stop letting people into the building. As we all looked over at an auditorium filled with freshly padded pews, I asked, “Could we just let people come in and sleep on the pews?” I will never forget Pastor Goode’s response: “Those pews sleep several hundred church members every Sunday morning, why not several dozen weary travelers on a Saturday night?” Pastor Goode had been integrally involved in the construction of that auditorium. I admired the way he wanted to share it with anyone in need.

Though we had a tradition of being separated from our community, now community-based outreach ministry is our passion. We sincerely desire to love our community.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. How would you chronicle your quest for properly interacting with your community? How and in what ways can you relate to what has been presented thus far?
2. In reference to the extremes of hatred, apathy, and self-righteousness—have those characteristics ever been true of you? Do those tendencies especially surface with a particular kind of person or situation? If so, in what ways and in which situations?

3. What aspect of biblical love toward your community comes most naturally for you? What aspect is hardest? On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rank yourself on the matter of loving your neighbor? How would you rank your congregation?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Describe and discuss some of the ways your congregation tends to get it right when it comes to loving your community. What are some of the success stories? How can you build on them?
2. Describe and discuss some of the ways your congregation tends to get it wrong when it comes to loving your community. What are some of the failures? How can you avoid them?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rank your congregation's ability to love your neighbors? What are the implications of your analysis?

2

MEETING YOUR COMMUNITY'S PRESSING NEEDS

We often fall into the trap of believing, “If only I resided in this particular city, then it would be easier to love my community”; or “If only I ministered back in the good ole days, then these principles would have been more achievable”; or “If only I lived around people who were more with it or better resourced or more like me, then serving them would come more naturally.”

We would do well to ask why our sovereign God has placed us in our communities. The apostle Paul affirmed that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17:26). The question before us is: Do you love *your* community, right here and right now?

An Age-Old Challenge

For the last two thousand years, the church has found itself in places filled with people who were difficult to love. One example is a pastor named Titus who was sent to lead a group of churches on the island of Crete. Paul reminded this young minister that “one of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’” He went on to make the candid and astounding observation, “This testimony is true” (Titus 1:12–13). And while sometimes these kinds of behavior must be met with stern rebuke, especially if such persons claim to be representing the Lord, the overall tone of Titus’s ministry was to be characterized by good deeds. This concept is a dominant theme throughout the entire book. Even if the Lord placed him on an island of self-proclaimed liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons, Titus and the churches he was leading had to find ways to love *their* communities.

Focusing First on the Ways YOU Need to Change

It is instructive to observe that even though Paul was honest about the weaknesses of the men and women of Crete, his initial focus in Titus 1:5–9 addressed the desired character qualities of leaders *inside* the church. “It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God,” Peter would similarly explain (1 Pet. 4:17).

It is fascinating to consider the qualifications for pastors in Titus 1. God wants leaders who are giving careful attention to the spiritual vitality of their marriages and families. We are to be “above reproach” and “not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled” (1:7–8).

Because this list identifies plenty of areas in my own life that still need careful attention, I honestly do not have much bandwidth left to focus on the perceived sin of my neighbors. Hate the sin and love the sinner? How about spending more time hating my own sin and focusing on the way God stands ready to help me change and grow?

Recently I had a cup of coffee with a gay friend of mine. This man and I have obvious differences in our views on the topic of human sexuality—we both know that. But I came away from the conversation appreciating the many positive character qualities in my friend and challenged to work on tendencies I need to change.

Our friendship started because both of us write occasional editorials in our local newspaper, and on one occasion we found ourselves taking opposite sides of a question our community was wrestling with. At some point we decided to meet and talk about the issues. Our conclusion? Let’s invest more time talking *to* one another and less time talking *about* one another. That approach has served us well. Through these conversations, I have improved as a pastor and a member of our community. Am I saying that because of my dialogue with a local gay leader I have learned things about my own heart and life as a pastor that needed to change? Absolutely. God has used him in my life. Coming to that conclusion has helped me grow in love for my community.

If you tend to be judgmental about the speck in your brother’s eye while simultaneously ignoring the log in your own (Matt. 7:3), you will invariably struggle to love the people around you. You will also miss many opportunities to grow in your own spiritual maturity and be less prepared to make the difference Jesus desires.

Taking Time to Learn about the Most Pressing Needs

There's a second reason you and I should spend very little energy ranting about the perceived weaknesses of those around us. It is not only because we have plenty of growing to do ourselves, but also because God has called us to focus on meeting the needs of men and women in our communities. Consider the following verses from Titus:

- “They [false teachers] profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and *worthless for any good deed*” (1:16).
- “[He] gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, *zealous for good deeds*” (2:14).
- “Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, *to be ready for every good deed*” (3:1).
- “This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God *will be careful to engage in good deeds*. These are good and profitable for men” (3:8).
- “Our people *must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs*, so that they will not be unfruitful” (3:14).

The Lord placed each of us in cities and towns where there are needs in practically every direction. There are people who are hurting and suffering in *your* community. Two questions flow out of this theme from the book of Titus:

- How much evidence is there that *you* care about the people who live in *your* town at this particular time and place?
- How much time and attention are *you* giving to engaging in good deeds to meet pressing needs?

A Defining Moment at Faith Church

Several years ago our church faced a critical decision. By God's grace we had grown so we were offering three worship services each Sunday morning. Multiple services present a fair amount of challenges, so we were planning to construct a new, larger auditorium. After all, isn't that what churches do?

Our architect and general contractor prepared drawings and projected the facility would cost nine million dollars. As our leadership team of approximately fifty elected people reviewed the final plans, we looked at each other and asked, “Do we really want to spend that much money on a building that is going to sit vacant for six and a half days a week?” After a lengthy pause, one of our deacons asked, “If we didn’t do that, what would we do?”

Eventually someone said, “What if we showed love to our neighbors?” The next person asked, “How would we do that?” We stared at each other until someone said, “We really don’t know. Maybe we should ask our neighbors.”

The Need and Desire to Learn

Paul told Titus that Christians must learn to engage in good deeds (Titus 3:14). That starts by having a clear understanding of the most important needs of the people in your community. Each ministry setting is different; therefore, the way you live out Titus 3:14 should be tailored to what is specifically occurring in your town.

Some readers might be able to honestly say that they already have a solid understanding of the most pressing needs of the people around them. Many of us, however, should probably acknowledge that we have some learning to do.

Time for a Listening Tour

If you sincerely want to learn about the pressing needs in your community, you would do well to schedule appointments with key community leaders. Start with your mayor or city council members. Ask to meet with the prosecuting attorney, local judges, and the police chief. Take your local public school officials to lunch or initiate a dialogue with the probation department. We also found that the leaders of our Child Protective Services had a wealth of information to share.

By all means spend time with the leaders of local nonprofits and look for gaps in services. For example, we have learned much from the director of our local United Way and many of the long-standing community service groups.

It is important to bring as much diversity to the table at this point in the process as possible. For example, just last night I was in a conversation with a group of young, energetic Hispanic leaders. I was amazed at how much I learned by simply asking a few questions and then sitting back and letting them educate me about all sorts of strengths, challenges, dreams, fears, and hopes of the Latino population in our town. It was a delightful and informative experience

that required very little investment on my part—other than the willingness to listen.

The question we often ask is some derivation of, “What are the greatest unmet needs in our community that a church like ours might be able to meet?” or “How can we best show love in this part of town?” In our case, everyone knows that we are a conservative church that follows the Word of God as our guide for faith and practice. But we have never had a community leader who was unwilling to take time to educate us about ways we can serve.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Meeting with Law Enforcement to Identify Needs and Service Opportunities

As part of the process of listening well and wisely to our community, Faith Church invited a local law enforcement official to speak to us about identifying community needs. Here's a snapshot of what he taught us . . .

If a church wants to get started in loving their community, it's important that they understand that community, and that's going to mean they're going to have to get out of the pews. . . . If you don't have vast knowledge of a community, its wants, its needs, its hurts, then it's very difficult to be effective in addressing those needs or those hurts. It'd be very difficult for one person to go out and learn or actually grasp that knowledge.

That's why it's important that—much like we don't go it alone in law enforcement, we expect our citizens to be involved—church members need to understand they don't have to go it alone, they can come to law enforcement. We can point them to hot spots where there's activity that maybe again having some sort of an athletic program or after school program will give kids a reason to stay in school.

That's just a small example, but it's important that we share that information. It may even mean that a law enforcement officer is going to have to take an opportunity to meet with church leaders and address them and again have a real talk, if you will, about what's going on in the community.

The Value of Community Surveys

When our leadership team came to the conclusion that we really needed to ask our neighbors to help us learn the best ways to show love in our community, we mailed out a community needs survey. We explained that we were in the process

of strategic ministry planning and asked them to help us identify the most pressing needs. The survey was four pages long and had a series of four to five questions in each of these areas:

- Childcare
- Youth
- Singles
- Families
- Sports and recreation
- Seniors
- Challenges
- Education
- Finances
- Counseling
- Events
- Enrichment

Most of the questions allowed for a numerical ranking (4-High Importance, 3-Important, 2-Some Importance, 1-Not Important, 0-Don't Know). We also provided space in each category for anyone who wished to provide more of an essay-type response. Lastly, we asked the respondents to give us demographic information about themselves (age, family status, education, etc.) if they were willing to do so.

We were thrilled to receive hundreds of thoughtful responses. We next sent the results to a statistician who entered all the data and demographic information into a spreadsheet. As soon as we saw the results, we knew we had hit gold. By God's grace, through our neighbors we learned specific, detailed information about the most pressing needs in our community. The delightful thing for us was that we arrived at these answers together with the men and women who lived all around us.

I would encourage you to craft a needs assessment survey for your community. Or better yet, consider assembling a design team of men and women from a variety of ages and life situations to be sure your survey is as diverse as possible.

Please do not be overly concerned about creating the perfect tool. Your neighbors will be thankful that you are at least trying to listen to their views about the greatest needs in their part of town. Be sure to include several

questions that are open-ended so that even if you forget to ask about a particular area, they can fill in the blanks.

Also, have a group on deck to read and summarize the responses. In some cases, the initial survey could lead to follow-up discussions with select respondents whose input was especially thoughtful.

Prepare yourself for a few responses that are unkind or exaggerated. Reading community input surveys is like eating chicken—you have to enjoy the meat and discard the bones. Some of what you hear may hurt a bit. However, listening to those outside our normal social circles can yield important concepts as we seek to know and do God's will.

Real-World Implications for Facility Design

In our case it became very apparent there wasn't a need for another large church auditorium that would sit dark and unused most of the week. That is not to say it would be wrong to pursue such a project in your ministry setting. But we were convinced it would have been wrong, or at least ineffective, in our town.

Our neighbors told us about the need for safe and affordable childcare. They were especially concerned for single moms who needed infant care so they could return to school or the job market. Others raised the issue of jobs training and food and clothing for those out of work.

A sizeable number raised the need for resources to stabilize and strengthen families. Still others discussed activities for singles, especially those who had suffered a divorce and were now trying to navigate joint custody or other hardships that come from marital breakup.

Many of the surveys focused on youth. Our neighbors asked for dedicated programming for after school, on weekends, and during the summer. The thoughtful observation was also made that when students are given extended breaks like at Christmastime, it places pressure on working families who would be greatly served by winter-break ministries.

There was also a clear emphasis on the importance of serving our local veterans and senior citizens. Stories were told of widows struggling with depression or veterans dealing with the challenges of assimilating back into life after a deployment.

Our friends also raised the question of community athletics. They requested a community gym, fitness center, indoor walking track, and indoor pool. They spoke about how challenging it was to find outdoor fields for baseball, softball, and soccer. Someone suggested a neighborhood walking trail, fishing pond, and

dog park. A few people even pointed out that there was no professional-grade skate park anywhere in town.

This new understanding of our neighborhood led us to entirely change our building plans. We decided to abandon the idea of constructing a church auditorium and instead work collaboratively with our neighbors and community leaders to design and build a community center. We would have never come to this conclusion had we not taken the time to ask those around us to tell us their most pressing needs.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Providing Your Community “A Little Taste of Heaven”

Pastor Kim Dickens, Hope Chapel Outreach

Pastor Kim Dickens offers this testimony regarding the impact of Friday Family Fun Night at Faith . . .

I have the privilege of serving as the senior pastor of Hope Chapel Outreach, an inner-city church made up primarily of African American men, women, boys, and girls. Many of our members are progressing out of homelessness, addictions, domestic violence, or unemployment. We sometimes struggle to make ends meet financially, but we praise the Lord for his faithful provision.

Part of the Lord's blessing is how the resources of the Faith Community Center are available to the people of our church family. We especially enjoy taking a vanload to their Friday Family Fun Nights each week. Our kids are able to play basketball in the center's gym or swim in the indoor pool. Our adult members can sit and watch the kids and enjoy time together.

We love having a safe place for our children and families to spend time together and to spend time with others in our community. Finding affordable and wholesome activities for a church family is not easy these days. It is a blessing to me as a pastor to have these kinds of resources available to us. Seeing the smiles on the faces of our children and hearing the laughter in their voices makes all the difference in the world.

We also deeply appreciate the way we are welcomed and loved along with everyone else—regardless of the color of our skin. This is especially important because of all the racial tension that exists in our country and in our world. Friday Family Fun Nights are a little taste of heaven, and from where we sit, the love of Jesus working in our neighborhoods tastes really good.

Understanding the Power of Mentoring

Paul also pointed Titus to a resource often overlooked in many churches: older people who can mentor those who are younger (Titus 2:1–7). Instead of sitting around complaining about how “those Cretans” are living, how about designing life-on-life programs that allow younger persons to learn from the wisdom and experience of men and women who have been around the track a few times?

Older women were challenged to develop relationships with younger women for the purpose of encouraging them to love their husbands and children (2:4–5). Likewise, older men were admonished to “urge the young men to be sensible” (2:6).

At Faith Church, we are finding a growing number of people who, by God’s grace, have reached a stage of life where their children are grown and they finally have more expendable time in their schedules. Many of these men and women are making themselves available to mentor members of our community in all sorts of ways. But the key is believing that this is *our* community. It is the town where God has placed *us* at this particular stage of life. Why not “in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds” (2:7)?

The Goal Is to Point Others to the Savior

If you are familiar with church history, then you might wonder if I am advocating some sort of social gospel where meeting physical needs has replaced the clear proclamation of the gospel. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, the well-worn statement still holds: people often do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

We want individuals in our community to constantly have reason to ask questions like, “Why did you do that for us?” “Why did you build that for us?” “Why did you make that available for us?” The answer to each question is simply and sincerely, “Because we love you . . . because we love you . . . because we love you.”

We hope that at some point in the relationship our neighbors might eventually have a genuine reason to ask, “Why do you love me?” I believe that if we can get a neighbor to have a genuine reason to ask that question, then they are halfway to the kingdom. Because then we can simply respond by saying, “Because God loves you, and we would be delighted to discuss how he demonstrated that most supremely by sending his Son to die for our sins.”

This was the point Paul turned Titus's attention to at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people of His own possession, zealous for good deeds. (2:11–14)

But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (3:4–6)

I'm not advocating some form of moralism where we show love to the people in our towns with the hope that behavior modification will occur with the end result of community revitalization. Ultimately, men and women in every culture and every community need to acknowledge their need of a Savior and place their faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. But often the best platform for that conversation is an occasion of first showing love.

Being a Godly Citizen

It is shocking that Titus was told to “remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed” (3:1). How in the world could followers of Christ function that way under godless political leaders? Part of the answer is they recognized that they had been sovereignly placed and it was not their role to spend the bulk of their time focusing on the failures of the government.

This is one of the reasons why Faith Church spends practically no time talking about politics. Too many churches and Christian groups have become little more than angry political action committees who position themselves in their communities as the self-appointed critics of their secular leaders. Often such individuals have little interest in loving their neighbors and meeting needs in their communities because they are so busy pointing out all of society's faults.

Remembering the Challenges We Brought to the Community

It is impossible to love the people in our community if we carry ourselves with pride and self-righteousness. This is why Paul reminded Titus, “For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and

pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared . . .” (3:3–4).

Some churches have essentially positioned themselves as proud fortresses of criticism of or indifference to the needs of those around them. There almost seems to be an attitude toward unsaved neighbors that says, “We don’t want *those kinds of people* around here.”

What is missing in that approach is a recollection of all the ways we have failed in the past and continue to fail in the present. If any aspect of our lives or families is in a better position than those around us, it is solely by the grace of God.

Avoiding Needless Controversies

Titus is told to remind Christians “to malign no one” (3:2) and to “avoid foolish controversies” (3:9). Cable news outlets and social media seem to love nothing better than to provide a daily dose of controversies and opportunities to malign those with whom we disagree.

If followers of Christ are not careful, we can become so agitated about the latest community argument that our love and concern for others grows cold. In a culture like Crete, where admittedly many were “liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons,” Titus and his church members could have selected a new argument each and every day. But they would have distanced themselves from the people in their community instead of loving them. They would have lost the power of “your” in *your* community.

Sincerely Desiring to Learn to Do Better

You would do well to carefully meditate on the way this important book ends: “Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful” (3:14). That is a clear and compelling command about the way you are to function in your community. *Your* community—the one where our sovereign God has specifically placed you.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE
IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. How would you describe your attitude and feelings toward your community? Think of recent conversations and choices that explain your answer.
2. Why do you think the Lord has sovereignly placed you in your particular city?
3. How much time have you spent seeking to learn what the pressing needs are where you live? What specific action steps could you now take?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you rank your church's level of engagement in meeting pressing needs in your community? Is there evidence that you love *your* community?
2. What is some of the low-hanging fruit? Are there needs that could be met now with little or no financial investment?
3. Which principles from the book of Titus is your group already following? Which ones need more work? What is the logical place to start—the next step you could take as a congregation to minister to *your* community?

3

CARING FOR THE WELFARE OF YOUR COMMUNITY

In his classic book *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. recounts a scene from the 1991 film *Grand Canyon*. In a misguided attempt to avoid a traffic jam, an attorney finds himself crossing a series of streets that become darker and more deserted by the minute. At the worst of times and places, his expensive sports car stalls. After he calls for a tow truck, five gang members surround his car and threaten his life. Just in time, the tow truck driver arrives, and when the gang's leader protests, the driver takes him aside to give him a five-sentence introduction to sin:

Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without askin' you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here.

Plantinga goes on to observe:

The tow truck driver is an heir of St. Augustine, and his summary of the human predicament belongs in every book of theology. For central in the classic Christian understanding of the world is a concept of the way things are supposed to be. . . . They are supposed to include peace that adorns and completes justice, mutual respect, and deliberate and widespread attention to the public good.¹

But we all know that is not reality for many of the people around us. Landlords won't fix the plumbing. Children sell drugs on the corner. Bullets rage and infrastructure crumbles. It's not the way it's supposed to be.

That leads followers of Christ to at least two crucial questions. First, should it bother us that people in our communities often suffer because things aren't the way they are supposed to be? When children go to school with empty stomachs. When women flee homes because of domestic violence. When houses crumble and families disintegrate. Should it bother us that some of our neighbors are facing such struggles?

Second, are there any opportunities to make a difference? Should we want and even expect that the conditions for everyone should improve wherever a follower of Jesus Christ goes? What is our community-wide calling?

What happens when the gospel hits the streets?

Longing for a Taste of Shalom

Plantinga continues his discussion of sin by speaking of how the Old Testament prophets “kept dreaming of a time when God would put things right again.” It would be a “new age in which human crookedness would be straightened out. . . . The foolish would be made wise, and the wise, humble.”² Then the groaning creation will be redeemed by the Creator so that deserts bloom, mourning turns to laughter, and violence becomes peace.

Plantinga’s beautiful vision compels us to join God’s eternal mission:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than just peace of mind or cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.³

Our view of eschatology (the doctrine of the end times) will determine how and when we believe such promises will ultimately be fulfilled. But shouldn’t the people of God delight in being peacemakers (Matt. 5:9) and long for a measure of *shalom* for their friends and neighbors in the here and now?

When a Christian stops on the side of the road to help a young mother fix a flat tire, he is functioning as an instrument of *shalom*. When a widow bakes a plate of cookies and delivers them to the neighborhood skate park, she is doing far more than transferring flour, sugar, and chocolate chips; she is bringing *shalom*. We should grieve when we see an absence of peace in our towns and be on the lookout for opportunities to repair, restore, and replace what sin has ravaged.

Beginning with Our Heavenly Father

Evidence abounds that God graciously bestows his goodness upon all people. Consider for example the beauty of creation. “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps. 19:1).

Even in a world laboring under the effects of the curse, practically everyone has the opportunity to enjoy a sunset or marvel at a moonlit sky. God's universal blessings show his love for every person.

Jesus affirmed this principle in the Sermon on the Mount while teaching the shocking notion that his followers should love their enemies. Why? "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45).

Is it possible that one of the reasons the church of Jesus Christ does not care about everyone in the community is because we have concluded that some people are evil and therefore undeserving of our love and concern? Are we willing to bless *every* person in our community?

Perhaps we should redouble our efforts to find distressed conditions around us and seek to glorify God by making things the way they were meant to be. Several years ago our mayor called and told us there was a building downtown that needed to be demolished. It was unsightly and had become so dangerous he was concerned it might collapse and hurt somebody. His question was simple: "Could the church get some people together and tear that building down?"

My first thought was, "I'm so thankful a community leader would think of us when something in our city needs to be improved." I told him, "Mayor, we're Baptists. If we're good at anything, it's tearing things down."

I recruited people from our church to get the job done. When I announced the project the next Sunday, I encouraged anyone who wanted to help to sign up. We had so many people volunteer that we actually had to ask some of them not to come. I've found church members love to be involved in projects that improve conditions for everyone in town. In so doing, we choose to be like our gracious Father.

Affirmed in a Crucial Covenant

The emphasis on improving conditions for everyone is seen in God's call of one of the most pivotal characters in the Bible. Genesis 12 records the marvelous promise known as the Abrahamic covenant. The Lord instructs Abram, a childless man, to leave his relatives and familiar surroundings and go to a distant land. God then reveals the shocking promise that he plans to make a great nation out of Abram, to bless him, and to make his name great. And God goes one step further by affirming that "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

In Genesis 15, the Lord formalized the covenant, which became the basis for the establishment of the nation of Israel. He even changed the patriarch's name in Genesis 17 from Abram ("father of many") to Abraham ("father of many nations"). From the very beginning, God's plan was that his nation Israel would exist to bless not only their own people but "all the families of the earth."

Not surprisingly this principle was enshrined in Old Testament law:

- "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 22:21).
- "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger" (Exod. 23:9).
- "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong" (Lev. 19:33).

God instructed his people to be like him. Instead of living in a way that was insular and nationalistic, he wanted Israel to care for the welfare of those outside the family of God.

Scripture emphasizes how Israel's compassion and holiness impacted all the nations of the earth. We frequently read words like:

- "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will worship before You" (Ps. 22:27).
- "That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations" (Ps. 67:2).
- "All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and they shall glorify Your name" (Ps. 86:9).
- "So the nations will fear the name of the LORD and all the kings of the earth Your glory" (Ps. 102:15).
- "I will give thanks to You, O LORD, among the peoples, and I will sing praises to You among the nations" (Ps. 108:3).

We would do well to examine the resources God has entrusted to us—time, giftedness, relationships, and financial resources—and consider how much we invested in the past week in blessing the families of the earth. Is there evidence of genuine and practical concern to bring about a heightened sense of shalom for everyone in our communities? What does it mean to *love our communities*?

This lesson was powerfully demonstrated to me again last night. After returning home from a meeting with our pastors and deacons where we prayed

for a number of community outreach ministries, I sat down next to my fireplace and reflected on how wonderful it was to approach God's throne of grace on behalf of our city and ask the Lord to help us show love for every person in our town. Moments later I received an email from one of our college students who had served at one of our neighborhood centers downtown. While he was spending time with urban children and helping them with their homework, one young girl approached him and asked how to become a Christian. He had the privilege of showing her how to start a relationship with God through trusting in Jesus.

That is the power of shalom in action. It started because this young man wanted to bring a sense of peace and joy to an urban neighborhood through simple things like spending time, sharing knowledge, and sparking joy. That led to an opportunity to bring shalom to a young girl's heart. In that moment, as he chose to be a blessing to the families of the earth, a portion of the Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled.

Does it always happen this way? No, and we are content to leave the ultimate results to the Prince of Peace. However, there is no true shalom of the soul without a personal interaction with the Savior who died to bring about reconciliation with God. Redemptive conversations about eternal matters often grow out of attempts to bring peace.

The Focus of Those in Exile

The Bible emphasizes this same theme hundreds of years later during the time of Israel's exile into Babylon. There was a running debate between Jeremiah and some of the other prophets about the length of time many of God's people would spend in exile in a foreign land because of God's judgment on their idolatry and unbelief. The false prophets proclaimed the time would be two years. Jeremiah stated that it would be seventy. He also had sage advice for them while they waited.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. "Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare." (Jer. 29:4-7)

Several years ago, our city contacted us about buying a dilapidated neighborhood bar. At one time, it had been a popular watering hole for factory

workers and locals looking for a cold beer and a good time. But then the factories closed and the houses deteriorated. Eventually the bar went bankrupt and the property went back to the city because of unpaid taxes. The roof fell in, the windows were broken, and rats as large as a person's shoe took up residence. It was a hot mess for sure.

We bought the property from the city for one dollar—and frankly, we overpaid. But I've always believed a church ought to own a bar, especially if it can be transformed into a neighborhood amenity. With funding from the city, a local car plant, and our church family, we demolished the building and replaced it with a neighborhood center and community park. Now the local kids come after school and on the weekends to play games, receive mentoring, and hang out with university students and other volunteers from our church. By God's grace, an eyesore has been transformed into an asset, and the neighbors could not be happier. Seek the welfare of the city.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Travis's Story: Meeting the Needs of Community Teens

As a result of our community survey, we learned about the need for a safe, wholesome place for teens who loved skateboarding. Travis (name changed for privacy) was one such teen. Here's his story . . .

Travis was just your average skateboarder who loved the thrill of standing on his skateboard and looking at a new jump. His joy was contagious as he would zip around on his skateboard attempting tricks he would land only a fraction of the time. His love for skating was multiplied when Faith Church decided to build the Lafayette Community Skate Park for community teens.

As a young boy, Travis helped carry boards and talked with the workers as they built the ramps that would eventually fuel his love for skating. In the summers, he spent his entire days skating at the park. During the fall and spring, he rushed home from school and hurried to the park to skate until it closed. In the winter, he shoveled the snow off the ramps so he could skate.

Countless times, the volunteers and staff who worked at the skate park presented him with the gospel. Travis asked deep questions and even attended youth group, where he listened and engaged with the lessons.

In the spring of 2017, Travis was tragically killed in an automobile accident. The community was saddened, his fellow skateboarders were mourning, and his parents were overcome with grief.

Shortly after Travis's accident, his dad called and asked if donations could be made to the skate park for anyone who wanted to give a gift in Travis's name. Despite his grief, his dad said, "Thank you for building this skate park. He spent a ton of time here and that helped to keep him out of trouble. Travis loved the skate park."

The Incarnational Ministry of Christ

Not surprisingly, the one "greater than Abraham" was the ultimate and perfect blessing to the families of the earth. In Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, he tells of the day Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth and stood up to read from the Old Testament.

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set free those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17–21)

We see these words illustrated throughout the Gospels as Jesus feeds the hungry, clothes the poor, heals the sick, and even raises the dead. Not everyone who was loved in these ways took the additional step of believing in him as their Messiah, but many did. The relationship often began when the Lord showed love and met needs for people regardless of their ethnicity, lifestyle, wealth, or social status. It was *shalom in action*. No wonder he is called the Prince of Peace.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What is the evidence in your heart and life that you care about the conditions of others in your community?
2. How has reflecting on the stories of Abraham, God the Father, and Christ Jesus impacted your heart as you have contemplated your concern for others?
3. What would growth in this area of life look like for you? For your church? What impact might it have on bringing shalom into your community?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you gauge the level of shalom in your town?
2. What are the greatest kinds of needs and their location in your community?
3. How would you rate your group's current level of concern for your community? What shalom-building activities do you currently have in place? What shalom-building activities might God be leading your church to initiate?



PART 2

**THE PRACTICE OF
COMMUNITY-BASED
MINISTRY**

4

BIBLICAL COUNSELING

Sharing Hope with Those Who Are Hurting

Recently we had the opportunity to serve at a community Thanksgiving dinner hosted on a Sunday afternoon by a secular nonprofit in town. We purposely were working behind the scenes and simply trying to lighten the load for our friends and neighbors who had been providing this event for decades in a low-income area of our city.

It was delightful for me as a pastor to watch dozens of our church members and students from our Christian school interact with guests from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds. The leaders of the nonprofit seemed especially thankful that the senior pastor would join the volunteer team, so they quickly dressed me up in an apron and hairnet and assigned me to dish out the turkey and dressing.

On my way to the serving table, a young man approached me and said, “My heart is full of rage and revenge—can you help me?” He was desperate and wide open to whatever I could offer. That is what this chapter is all about: the strategic importance of providing faith-based counseling services to the men and women of your town.

One of the greatest needs in many of our communities is a place where people can sit down with a trained, compassionate individual and discuss their problems. We live in an impersonal world where Google, electronic devices, and Facebook friends have replaced authentic relationships and meaningful conversations.

At the same time, the level of family dysfunction, drug and alcohol addiction, emotional distress, abuse, and an entire array of social problems are at all-time highs. Ask most mayors, judges, prosecutors, teachers, law enforcement officers, and social workers and they will tell you the need for counseling is dire.

This situation has been greatly exacerbated by the transition in counseling from “talking psychology” to “biopsychology.” Twenty-five years ago, the average person seeking counseling would sit down with someone on a weekly basis to talk about their struggles. This was often funded by medical insurance. The crisis in our health insurance system has resulted in fewer companies than ever before being willing to pay for a traditional psychologist. Now the norm is biopsychology where, after a discussion with a physician lasting only a few minutes, a prescription is given for some sort of psychotropic medication. While this approach sometimes provides a level of temporary relief, people in our communities are often left longing for a relationship and extended conversation.

Over forty years ago, Faith Church launched a community-based biblical counseling ministry. Our former pastor, Bill Goode, and a physician, Dr. Robert Smith, saw a need and opportunity to help men and women in our church and community find answers in the Word of God for the challenges they were facing. They received their training from John Bettler, one of the early leaders in the biblical counseling movement and cofounder of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) in Laverock, Pennsylvania.

Goode and Smith informed our church family that if they or their friends, coworkers, neighbors, or loved ones had some sort of difficulty they wanted to discuss from the perspective of Scripture, the two of them were available to provide counseling sessions in modest offices in the church basement on Monday afternoons and evenings.

They spoke of providing soul care, spiritual mentoring, or godly friendship. Not surprisingly, all the available appointments were filled by interested people in our community. The leaders then began training other godly people to be certified and deployed them to other available office spaces.

Today we have thirty-two counselors consisting of many of our pastoral staff members, several physicians, and a marvelous team of godly people who serve together at two locations in our community. Each week, eighty to a hundred hours of biblical counseling are provided free of charge to hurting people in our town. There is no question that if the Lord sovereignly moved me to another church, one of the first ministries I would lead the church family to start would be a community-based biblical counseling ministry because of the wonderful opportunity it affords to love your community.

Why the Church Is Perfectly Positioned for Community-Based Counseling

There are several reasons why a church is an ideal place to provide community-based counseling services.

The Right Motivation

Often people who need counseling the most can afford it the least. None of the counselors at Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries are paid. They earn their living in other ways. That allows us to make the services available free of charge.

This immediately puts the counselee at ease for all sorts of reasons. No one has to wonder if the counselor is prolonging the number of sessions for any sort of profit motive. Counselees also find it very easy to believe that their counselors love them and want to help them succeed. That is not to say a similar environment cannot be created in a fee-based system, but when money is taken out of the equation, ministry flows more naturally and powerfully.

This kind of ministry is a good example of careful community positioning. When people in our communities are struggling in some way, we want them to remember, “There are trained men and women at the church who would be delighted to sit down and talk with me about what is happening.” That can have a powerful impact on those who live and work around us.

The Right Source of Truth

Every counselor of every stripe has to deal with the issue of epistemology—how do you know what is true and false regarding the counsel being given? The challenge with the field of psychology is that because it is the softest of sciences, the discipline produces a proliferation of truth claims and approaches as opposed to consensus. This leaves counselees and counselors alike scratching their heads over what principles to believe and practice.

Biblical counselors carefully listen to the stories of the men and women who come to see us and then compassionately point them to truth from the Word of God. King David extolled the beauty and efficacy of Scripture when he wrote:

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;
In keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–11)

There is no book written by a human being worthy of this kind of description. The church is designed to function as “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). What better way to fulfill that calling than to make God’s Word available to friends and neighbors who are hurting.

The Right Goal

Every counselor also has to decide the goal of counseling. How do you define success? How do you decide who is right and who is wrong in the endless arguments and fights that counselees bring to the table? How do you determine when the formal process should be concluded?

Biblical counselors believe that God’s goal for all of his children is to make us more like Jesus Christ. To that end, “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ” (Col. 1:28).

This is a goal that we can confidently expect God the Father to bless. We are not using human principles and methodology in our soul care to produce temporary relief or selfish ends. Often the counseling process results in a person realizing that the problem that brought them to the counseling room is actually just a symptom of a far greater issue—their separation from God. That provides a marvelous opportunity for the counselor to compassionately speak about the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the free gift of salvation available in and through him. Each year we see dozens of people from our community place their faith in Christ through the counseling ministry. The angels rejoice and our heavenly Father is glorified each time this occurs.

This goal is also liberating for Christians in counseling. Often a person is frustrated because they are working to change another person or the prevailing circumstances. When a counselee comes to understand that our sovereign God can use struggles and even the failures of others as a means to help them grow in Christlikeness, their entire life focus changes. In turn, they can expect God’s blessing as they are taking steps to be more complete in Christ.

The Right Source of Hope and Power

Change comes “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). One of the most delightful ways a church can show love to

people in their community is to connect them with the Holy Spirit. Husbands and wives can build their marriages in the power of the Holy Spirit. Parents seeking answers as they shepherd the hearts of their children can tap into supernatural enablement. Even the simple act of praying in the counseling room can have a tremendous impact on an individual struggling with anger, worry, fear, or depression.

At Faith Church, we generally have forty to sixty individuals and families on our waiting list at any given time, although we have never advertised our services. The ministry is simply and powerfully shared by word of mouth around our community. The results speak for themselves as the Holy Spirit uses his Word to help men and women become more like God's Son.

The Right Setting

The church makes an ideal place to love our communities through counseling. We are "the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15); as such, we have an entire family of changed and changing people who stand ready to befriend each person who walks through the door of the counseling center. Often there are other individuals in the church who have faced similar challenges and can encourage and inspire the counselee who is just beginning the journey. There is also a small army of people who are ready to pray for each person in counseling or just show love on all sorts of practical levels. Unlike secular counseling centers, where clients are sometimes told by their therapist, "If you see me outside of counseling, act like you do not know me," biblical soul care in a church invites relationship on multiple levels immediately and powerfully.

The church is also a place where counseling occurs at a variety of levels. The counselee hears Bible teaching on Sunday that reinforces what has been taught in the counseling sessions. The person also has the opportunity to participate in small-group Bible studies or mid-size Adult Bible Fellowships. There is a sense in which counseling is occurring in all sorts of ways on all sorts of levels. As a result, the process is much more effective than a typical counseling setting. It is a marvelous way for a church to love its neighbors.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Meeting the Needs of a Husband and Wife through Community-Based Counseling

A Wife's Perspective

My husband and I met in high school and dated three and a half years before marriage. Our relationship was pretty rocky at times. My husband and I were very hard workers and we had big financial goals. Early in our marriage, we both worked two jobs. We would only see each other after 11:30 p.m. and then we started the days over. I felt very lonely and became very discontent in the marriage. I was always searching for someone or something to make me happy.

We started secular counseling that his parents had suggested. Their methods were all about what you feel, what you hear, and what you want. It really didn't teach us much.

Trouble started again, even to the point where I tried to take my life. A coworker told me about Faith Church and their counseling ministry. My husband and I were living apart. I was in counseling about three months. I still struggled. I knew I wasn't giving it all to God. I'm sure my counselor wanted to bang his head against the wall. I started coming to church with the children and attending an Adult Bible Fellowship in November.

My marriage was still in complete shambles. My husband had asked me for a divorce. I knew he was very definite in his decision. We had made plans to take our nine-year-old daughter to a birthday slumber party and then stop by our home and go over all the details of the divorce. God had other plans. I never made it home. Two miles from my home, I was in a serious car accident with my daughter. My husband, knowing I could not care for myself, moved me back into our home. This was the most difficult time in my life. Although I had not been attending Faith Church very long, they brought us meals for our family for an extended period of time. The cards and letters I received from throughout the church family were astonishing to us. The love for our family really impacted my husband. Shortly after, he began going to church with me. The Lord just began to convict him, and one Sunday morning he admitted his sin and placed his faith and trust in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He also started attending biblical counseling sessions with me. My husband grew and changed so much, as did I. Even after the weeks in counseling ended, he asked to continue more.

We still struggled in our new Christian life and when we needed guidance. Faith was there to teach us from God's Word the changes we needed to make to please the Lord. I can even remember being in a big argument and my husband called the pastor late at night, and he came to our house to counsel us.

A Husband's Perspective

The community of a faith-based counseling ministry was vital to changing my life and marriage. Faith's counseling ministry helped me and my family apply God's Word to the challenges we were facing. Without the direction of Bible-based counseling, we would have continued to try to rely on secular resources, which had encouraged us to deal with our feelings, wants, and needs, rather than focusing on God and what God's plan is for our lives.

As you can tell by the story my wife has shared, biblical counseling not only saved our marriage, but it also saved both of us. If ever there was a couple whose marriage should not have made it, it was ours. By the grace of God, we just celebrated our forty-first

wedding anniversary. We have a joy and peace in our lives that we could never achieve before. Without the power and love of Jesus Christ we learned about through the biblical counseling available in our community, none of this would have been possible.

This Is Rather Low-Hanging Fruit

Churches wishing to begin a community-based biblical counseling center are probably much closer to getting started than they realize because there is a sense in which a biblical church is a counseling center already. The question is how to receive training and certification necessary to connect the church's existing knowledge and resources with people around them who are struggling.

Opportunities for training are more available than ever before. At Faith, we offer a program on Mondays that provides both classroom lecture and live case observation. We also host a Biblical Counseling Training Conference each February that frequently draws over two thousand attendees from around the United States and many foreign countries.

A number of churches, colleges, and seminaries are now offering biblical counseling training. More masters and doctoral programs have started, many of them online, to meet the growing need and interest.

Outside certification is available from organizations like the Association for Certified Biblical Counselors. The process is rigorous, but it is important that if the ministry is going to be conducted in Jesus's name, it is provided with the highest level of competence and skill possible.

Several excellent books have been written in recent years that walk church and parachurch leaders through the process of launching and leading biblical counseling ministries. Among these are *Equipping Counselors for Your Church* by Bob Kelleman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), and *Building a Church Counseling Ministry without Killing the Pastor* by Sue Nicewander (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2012).

A Compelling Vision

Imagine if in your town, when people are struggling in some way, their natural response would be to think, "The church down the street will help us with that. They have members trained and ready to serve, and I know others whose lives have been dramatically changed by going there." Surely that would be far better

than being known for what you are against or who you are mad at. Let's love our communities by offering resources to those who are hurting.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What is your response to the notion of loving your community by participating in a biblical counseling ministry? Are you excited? Apprehensive? Does it seem impossible, easy, or somewhere in between?
2. Do you think the Lord might be calling you to this kind of community ministry?
3. What kind of training and certification would be necessary in your case? What would it take to make that happen? Should you pray and ask God for direction? Should you seek the counsel of friends, loved ones, or your established church leaders?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Are biblical counseling services currently available in your community? Are there enough in place to meet the need?
2. Do you think the Lord might be calling your church to this kind of community ministry?
3. Is it possible that a group of people from your church could receive training together? What about pursuing a certification process together? Could launching a community-based biblical counseling center better position your church to love your community?

5

ACCESSIBLE FACILITIES

Opening Your Buildings to Neighbors in Need

A number of years ago, our community was rocked by the news that several infants had been murdered in a relatively brief period of time. Our town was especially shocked to learn that in each case the lives of these little babies had been taken by an abusive parent or caregiver.

Our local media rightly focused on these stories as many of us responded with grief and bewilderment. “How could this happen here?” and “What can be done to prevent this from happening again?” were frequent questions.

A judge in our juvenile court, along with our town’s community foundation, proposed a series of community-wide forums on child abuse and neglect. Their goal was to assemble a group of experts to address this topic from as many perspectives as possible.

I was somewhat surprised to receive an invitation to join the panel of speakers. The judge later made it clear that in her view child abuse and neglect often have a moral component. She knew of our church’s biblical counseling efforts and wanted a faith-based opinion represented in the discussion.

When I arrived at the first forum, the room was completely packed. Every seat was taken and people were standing in every available space along the walls. Purdue University was there to host a live radio broadcast, and our local cable station filmed the event with the promise to air it multiple times over the next month.

Many community leaders spoke about the subject from their frame of reference. When my turn came to speak, I opened my Bible. No one turned off my microphone or suggested I stop. It was a marvelous example of where community-based outreach ministry often leads. One opportunity—in this case biblical counseling—led to the privilege of sharing Scripture with a community grieving and searching for answers.

I realize some people might respond by saying that would only happen in a conservative Midwestern town. Actually, because we have a Big Ten university in our community, our town's cultural indicators consistently trend to the left. Positioning yourself with compassionate, community-based counseling resources opens an amazing number of doors, sometimes in delightfully unexpected places.

That evening impacted me in all sorts of ways. Perhaps the chief effect was being reminded repeatedly about how many of the issues that feed into child abuse and neglect could be addressed by a church simply offering its existing facilities for community uses throughout the week.

I encourage you to create a list of all the land and facilities the Lord has already entrusted to your church or nonprofit agency. Perhaps it is a small piece of ground with a modest building, or it may be a large campus with spacious facilities. Regardless, list each space along the left margin of your piece of paper or spreadsheet.

Next, place a seven-day hourly schedule on top of your facility and determine how many hours in a given week each space is used effectively for service for Christ and how many hours it sits vacant. Then think back to your community needs assessment (chap. 2) and determine how many of those opportunities you could address in the building you already have.

Infant and Child Care

One theme that was raised at our community forums on child abuse was the need for safe, affordable childcare. Single moms spoke about how hard it was to find a reliable caregiver while trying to land a job or complete a degree program. They told about how they reluctantly left their baby with a boyfriend or untrained person because they felt like they simply had no other options.

As I sat and listened, I thought about how our town has over 125 churches, practically all of which have nurseries. And more to the point, practically all of which have nurseries that sit vacant six and a half days a week.

I suppose we could pontificate about how young couples should have thought through the responsibilities of raising a child before they got pregnant, but it is highly likely that they have already heaped enough guilt and shame on their young souls. What they need from the church is not judgment and self-righteousness. They need the same response the people of God received from our forgiving Savior—a loving hand extended in grace.

Our church started an infant care program to serve single mothers in our community. We also have a preschool to serve working moms. Sure, it would be great if these moms could stay home with their babies. However, that is not the reality for a significant percentage of moms in every town. The question the church has to answer is, “Do we have a resource—in this case a nursery facility already built and equipped to serve this particular age group well—and are we willing to share it with our neighbors in need?”

Date-Night Babysitting

Some might respond to the previous illustration with a concern to strengthen the relationships of young parents in your community. How could you use your current facility to serve such men and women?

One possible answer is to offer free babysitting once a month and allow young parents to get out and spend time together as a couple. You can ask people from the church to come to the nursery or children’s ministry rooms and rock babies or read books to toddlers. A simple act of kindness like this will not cost any money but could reap significant dividends.

Perhaps one of the young couples would be interested in going to dinner with an older couple to talk about parenting. Maybe they would think more seriously about attending church with their son or daughter. A friendly act could lead to a discussion about the church’s counseling services. But here’s the key point: you already have the rooms. The church family is going to pay to heat and cool them whether they are occupied or not. Why not look for creative ways to love your community?

Parties

Many of our neighbors have the occasional need for a place to host a birthday party, an anniversary celebration, or another event that brings many of their friends or loved ones together. What is a person supposed to do when they need a space larger than their living room?

The answer in more affluent settings is often to rent a room and cater the food. That solution makes sense for people who have plenty of financial resources. But what about for the majority of hardworking families who struggle to make ends meet?

Is it possible this is one way we can love our neighbors? Most of our church buildings have vacant rooms that could easily be used for these purposes. Sure, it will take extra effort to draft the policies, schedule the spaces, and address whatever challenges such activities create. But I strongly believe we want to conduct ourselves in such a way that our neighbors often find themselves thinking, “I can get help at the church for that because they love me down there.”

Homeowner Association Meetings

Many neighborhoods have some kind of homeowner association (HOA). If yours doesn't, organizing one might be an easy opportunity to have a positive spiritual impact in your town.

Some communities have existing centers where the HOA can conveniently meet. However, many do not. Would it dawn on your neighbors that your church would be happy to make space available for them?

If the Lord gives you the opportunity to serve your neighbors in this way, seek to serve them with your very best. “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Instead of just reserving a room on the calendar, recruit a volunteer who can meet the HOA participants with a pot of coffee and a plate of cookies. Be sure the room is clean, set up neatly, and at the right temperature. It is amazing how even little acts of kindness lead to conversations about more important issues. The controlling thought ought to be, “That room is either going to sit vacant tonight, or we are going to find a practical way to use it to show love to our neighbors.”

Senior Programming

Most of us have senior citizens living all around us. Many are widows who struggle with inactivity and loneliness. Why not start a walking club for seniors who can walk around the halls of the church building, especially during times of the year when the weather makes it difficult to walk outside?

At Faith Church, we have found walking tracks to be a marvelous way to get to know the widows who live in our community. While we have chosen to construct literal tracks, the same purpose can be accomplished in unused church hallways throughout the week. It is fascinating to watch conversations unfold between area seniors and the members of our church. Oftentimes, by the fifth

lap, the neighbor is talking about how lonely she feels. By lap ten, she may share that she is struggling with discouragement and depression. That is when the church member asks if our neighbor knows that we have a counseling ministry. “I couldn’t afford counseling” is generally the response, to which the parishioner says, “Our counseling ministry is free of charge to everyone.” A few laps later, our neighbor confides, “But I would be uncomfortable going by myself.” That is when our member says, “I’ll be happy to go with you.” A potentially life-changing counseling session may occur simply because we tried to find ways to use our God-given facilities seven days a week.

Jobs Training

What happens when a new employer comes to town and wants to hire and train dozens or perhaps hundreds of new employees before their facility is finished? We have yet another opportunity for the church to offer its meeting rooms to serve a business in the process of making the community a better place.

That raises a very important question that every church will have to consider: “Would we ever allow our church auditorium to be used for purposes other than a church service?” I realize this is a controversial topic, and I am sure not everyone will agree with Faith’s approach. We believe that unless an activity is illegal or immoral, we are happy for our church auditorium to be used for all sorts of community purposes.

As I write this chapter, we are preparing our building to be used for a large funeral for a community leader. His family’s church is too small to properly serve the anticipated group, so the funeral home asked on behalf of the family if they could use Faith’s auditorium. Our answer was, “Absolutely!” We are thrilled to love our neighbors in this way, especially during a time of such significant need.

Police and Fire Department Training

Our local service agencies are often looking for places to host training events. It is not unusual to drive by one of our campuses and see dozens of police cars or fire department vehicles. Serving in the police or fire department is challenging work. We want our local officers to know that we care about them and want to serve them any way we can.

Often this leads to ministry opportunities when an officer is in the middle of a domestic violence case or there is a significant house fire. They already have a relationship with us because we shared our facilities, so it is more likely they will think of us when suggesting spiritual or material resources to the family in need they are trying so desperately to serve well.

Graduations and Concerts

The overall point of this chapter should be clear: *find ways to get people into your building and then love them in the name of Christ*. My staff has heard me say many times, “These facilities were very expensive and built by hardworking church members. Let’s find so many great ways to use them that we never have to turn the lights off because we are so busy sharing what we have with others.”

Another opportunity we have found is large group gatherings. Even though we run a private Christian school, our public schools and homeschool groups know that they are welcome to use our auditorium, classrooms, gyms, or kitchens to further their purposes as well. They often take us up on that offer, especially when they are hosting a concert, competition, drama, or graduation.

I am amazed to watch the goodwill that has developed because of these simple gestures. We have solid working relationships with our public school superintendents and their respective staffs. They know that while we follow a different philosophy of education at our school, that does not mean we wish to be involved in mean-spirited competition with them. Instead, we wish to love them because they are our neighbors.

This has also enhanced our relationship with other churches. Homeschool groups are often made up of families from many churches. They know Faith Church will serve them in whatever way we can.

As of this writing, we even have another church meeting in one of our gyms on Sundays. Their previous landlord changed the purpose of his building and asked this congregation to leave with very little notice. The pastor asked if we would host them in one of our gyms until they could find a new, more permanent location.

We were delighted to do so. Sure, it results in some parking challenges. The restrooms are more crowded and some of our Sunday morning servants had to be deployed to help with sound, technology, and other ministry details. However, I have been approached by multiple people in the community who expressed how meaningful it was to see churches sharing their resources with one another.

Community Forums and Debates

Often our town is in need of a large space to have a “community conversation” of some kind. *Say yes unless you have to say no.*

During the 2016 presidential election, one of the candidates called us on short notice and asked if one of our gyms would be available for a rally. I realize that some churches would prefer to avoid such activity, and I understand why. For us, our town needed a place large enough to meet together, so we said yes. And to be clear, we would have answered the same way regardless of the candidate. We have the room. We are willing to share it with our neighbors.

We were also contacted by our local TV station when they were looking for a place to hold a series of debates between the candidates for sheriff and prosecuting attorney. Again, we said yes. In each of these events we did our very best to serve our neighbors with grace and excellence. We believe if we do that with our buildings, we are better positioned to serve those around us when more significant spiritual needs arise.

Probation and Work Release

If I have not made you uncomfortable yet, perhaps this suggestion will accomplish that end. What about all the people in your town, especially juveniles, who get in trouble with the law and are sentenced to community service? Would you ever allow your building and your staff or volunteers to serve these neighbors in need?

Before answering, please consider three groups of people involved. First is the judge, prosecutor, or whatever government official is responsible to ensure the offender’s hours are completed. It is very difficult to find places willing to organize meaningful work for such individuals.

Second is the parent involved. Frequently, young people in trouble come from single-parent homes. That parent, often the mom, is stressed out from the pressures of trying to raise children alone. Now she has a son or daughter facing possible jail time if some other adult does not step in and help. Why not someone from the church? How hard is it to schedule a person who can wash windows, mop floors, and clean toilets alongside this troubled teen? We have had countless parents express a sigh of relief when someone from the church is willing to step into that mentoring role.

Third is the juvenile offender. They know they messed up again. They know they are in trouble. They know they deserve consequences. What happens if

someone from the church surprises them with grace? Interacts with them in love? Blesses them with time?

Yes, this particular suggestion ramps up both the risk and the commitment. But it also creates powerful ministry moments that can be life-changing. And what does the community see? A church that truly loves its neighbors.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Hector's Story: Community Service That Touches the Heart for Christ

My name is Foster Toft and I serve as a pastoral intern at Faith Church. Part of my responsibility is working with our Community Service Ministries in collaboration with our local probation department. In this ministry, people from all over our county have the option to complete their community service hours at one of our community centers located in our town, or at various other nonprofits.

Hector (name changed for privacy) was a student at Purdue who loved partying, hanging out with friends, and the freedom that came from being away from home. Hector was an extroverted, fun-loving, good-spirited student who had many friends in his fraternity and was popular among the college crowd.

In his first year of college, Hector's mom passed away from cancer. His dad fell into depression, and Hector fell into a life of drinking and drugs to numb the pain. Hector blamed God for his problems and ended up getting in trouble with the law. He was issued forty hours of community service by a local judge and needed to get it finished to graduate from college. He called Faith West Community Center and asked if he could serve at our facility to complete his hours.

Hector started working at our community center where he was surrounded by Christian college students who volunteer throughout the week. Hector was extended the hand of friendship and asked questions about his life, family, and how we could serve him. This type of friendship confused him; he was not used to genuine love and genuine interest in his life. He didn't need to get drunk to be liked, and the folks here welcomed him in.

Hector proceeded to tell a volunteer about his life, his problems, and how grateful he was for real people who cared. Hector is still in touch with us today and comes back to visit the community center. Six months after he finished his service hours he was greeted by name by one of the workers at the front desk. Hector said, "I can't believe you care for people this much. You remembered my name."

This type of ministry impacts me greatly because people come to you with burdens and opinions of how they view community service and what they think the experience will be like. Most people have had to do community service hours at some point before coming to us, and they are expecting to be put to work and looked down on for their actions. Instead, we as the church can treat them differently. We can change the way they look at

believers, who they are convinced look down on them for the lives they have lived. Engaging in community service ministries enables churches to love and counsel broken people who need to know that someone cares for them and most importantly that there is a God who loves them.

Family Homelessness

For those who would say, “I want a real challenge in thinking about more creatively using our church building,” I think I have one: addressing family homelessness.

I hate that phrase, “family homelessness.” I hope you do too. Especially when we consider that often a family is homeless because they are fleeing some form of domestic violence.

That means that many of us live in communities where last night a mom and her children slept in their car. Where I live, the temperatures often plummet at night. Yet the sad reality is, being cold is better than being abused.

So here’s a question: What is happening in your church building . . . at night? For most of us the answer is, “Absolutely nothing.” (Suggestions like these often raise questions about liability, legal issues, insurance, security, and so forth. Chapter 12 will address these legitimate questions and concerns.)

Several years ago, a group got together and sought to match homeless families with available church facilities. We rotate the responsibilities, so we generally serve one week per quarter. During that week, families are brought from their day shelters to our church building around dinnertime. They are met by a group of volunteers who provide a warm meal and help set up cots in our Sunday school rooms. After dinner, they do homework together, play games, or talk about life. Then the moms and their children enjoy a warm, safe place to sleep. A van picks them up the next morning after breakfast and the process begins all over again. I sleep better at night knowing that fewer children are sleeping in their cars.

It’s Not That Hard

The ideas that we have discussed in this chapter require very little if any expenditure of funds. Many times what is needed is a change of heart and focus. Catalog the needs that exist in your part of town, and think creatively about how your existing facility could be used to bless those around you.

Then make a list of all your land and the specific rooms in each of your buildings. Overlay this information with a calendar that shows how often each room is used and how often it is available. You may be surprised how much bandwidth you have to serve others with the resources the Lord has already given you. Once you have the reputation of being a church that loves your community in tangible ways, the opportunities to do so will become regular, powerful, and potentially life-changing.

You don't have to start with something challenging like family homelessness. Perhaps in your case it would be better to begin by allowing a room to be used for a birthday party or a neighborhood meeting. Then move up to a larger group forum or training event. But please don't forget—there are children who will be sleeping with their moms in their cars tonight. And you have a warm church building . . . that will be absolutely empty.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. How do you feel about your church building being used in the ways described in this chapter? What excites you? What concerns you?
2. You probably have given money to help build or maintain your church's buildings and grounds. Are you in favor of these assets being used in these ways? Why or why not?
3. Do you care that there could be moms with children sleeping in their cars in your community tonight? What is going to be happening at your church building tonight?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you rate your church on the issue of using your facilities to love your community?

2. What is some of the low-hanging fruit you could pursue in order to take positive steps of growth in this area?
3. What ideas resonate with you? What ideas would you consider to be unreasonable or off-limits? Please explain and discuss your answers.

6

INSTRUCTIONAL CLASSES

Showing the Practicality of God's Word

My goal thus far has been to encourage you to think about the multitude of opportunities to show Christ's love to those the Lord has placed around you. On purpose, I have emphasized ideas and initiatives that would require very little expenditure of money. Instead, we have focused on the importance and power of a changed heart and a mind-set that thinks creatively about how best to meet the needs of your neighbors.

Community-based outreach ministry can be accomplished on a variety of levels, and in future chapters we will discuss ideas that require a higher level of expenditure. However, building momentum for large community development projects begins with small wins and modest investments of money. When the church family sees the effects of such endeavors on both their neighbors and their own hearts, it becomes far easier to garner support for larger endeavors.

Another one of those easy wins is designing classes that offer biblical and practical truth to your neighbors—at the times of day and using delivery systems that work best for them. For many years at Faith Church we had a traditional Wednesday evening lineup with a Bible study and prayer time for adults and age-graded children's activities. We also held monthly congregational business meetings at the end of that time slot where all the children came into the auditorium so their teachers could participate in whatever decisions were being made.

As our counseling ministry taught us more principles about how the discipleship process actually works, we chose to make our children's ministries more focused on the application of Scripture and service as opposed to additional lectures and lessons. We concluded that we had placed too much emphasis on being hearers of the Word and not enough on being doers of the Word (James 1:22). We learned that as we made this transition, more parents from our community began to send their children because they appreciated the

emphasis on practical life application. We also found that our teachers increasingly asked to be excused from the business meetings; they preferred to spend time helping children make real life changes, especially because now they were building relationships with young people and their families from our surrounding neighborhoods.

This development led us to question whether it was also time to revamp our adult ministries on Wednesday evenings. What would happen if we made this evening less about the church body and more about serving those around us? At that moment, Faith Community Institute (FCI) was born (<https://www.faithlafayette.org/fci>).

The community-wide child abuse forums discussed in chapter 5 taught us that there was a tremendous need for practical classes about parenting, conflict resolution, anger management, and communication. It was not enough simply to highlight the horror and prevalence of child abuse in our town. We needed proactive, positive, practical training for young moms and dads. Who better than the church to offer such instruction? We have the facilities. We have nurseries for childcare. We have kitchens if we decide an evening meal before the classes is helpful. We have a ready supply of teachers. But most importantly, we have the Word of God and the Spirit of God that through the power of the gospel can bring about genuine life change.

We organize FCI very much like our local community college. Classes are offered on Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 8:00. Free childcare is available along with a low-cost meal for those who would prefer to eat on-site before class. The classes are short in duration, lasting anywhere from four to twelve weeks. We use teachers with special passion and experience for their particular topic.

The classes are offered in a semester format. An attractive brochure is printed and mailed to the neighborhoods around our church. We make the materials available to our church members and encourage them to invite a friend, neighbor, or coworker. We also encourage people to spread the word using whatever forms of electronic media are available to them.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Marci's Story: Meeting the Needs of Hurting Community Members

Marci (name changed for privacy) was going through a very messy divorce that involved abuse spanning forty-seven years. This is her story of how Faith Community Institute ministered to her in her time of need.

"I was beside myself, exhausted, and in need of support and community. I learned about the biblical counseling ministry and also the Wednesday evening Faith Community Institute classes, and I got involved in both."

Marci joined the Wednesday evening class designed to help people going through a divorce respond to their situation with a biblical, Christ-centered focus. Marci was able to walk alongside others who were looking to the Lord to help them in their difficulty.

"My son had passed away while I was married, and because of the controlling behavior of my husband, I was not allowed to attend any grief counseling at that time or even have the memorial service I wanted to. On top of that, a close friend had recently passed away, compounding my unaddressed grief."

Marci also took part in another class offered on Wednesday night designed to help men and women in the community process their grief with the comfort available in Christ.

"I was extremely isolated, and in the past I was not allowed to have any friends come over to the house; but when I went to my Wednesday evening class, and the class broke up into small groups, it felt like I was sitting with people in my living room."

She desperately needed community and the love of Christ. That room was more than just four walls; it was a safe place to grow closer to the Lord with others who loved her.

"Through these community classes offered at the church, I have grown spiritually, physically, and emotionally. I am no longer bitter about my abuse, and I do not hate my ex-husband, but I pray for him to know Christ."

Through this growth of trusting God's goodness amid trials and suffering, Marci is now focused on serving others in our community's Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program.

"I want to help anyone I can by sharing my story."

There is no end to the kinds of classes that might be of interest to your neighbors. If you decide to perform the kind of community needs survey described in chapter 2, you could include a series of questions to determine the topics that would especially help those who live around you.

We have loosely organized our classes around the following categories. For a fuller description of individual classes, you can visit <https://www.faithlafayette.org/fci> and click on the title of a current class to learn more about it.

Marriage, Family, and Parenting

The Word of God is filled with rich, practical truths about the family. Many men and women in our communities have never seen a Christian home in action and are unaware that the Bible has principles to address challenges that crop up in even the best of homes.

A local church can easily fill this void for two reasons. First, the number of excellent resources is growing each year as gifted, experienced authors produce blogs, videos, podcasts, and books on the family from a distinctively biblical perspective. Second, you undoubtedly have people in your church whose families are blessed by God as they seek to use Scripture to guide their relationships. If you are taking the time to read this book, it is likely that you are such a person. You may not consider yourself a teacher, but classes like this are often presented in formats other than straight lecture. Godly individuals or couples can guide discussions after the group watches a video or listens to a podcast. Your example and experiences may have a far greater impact on others than you would initially believe.

Some of the general classes we have taught under this heading include Loving Your Wife; Strengthening Your Marriage; Being a Husband of Valor; and This Is My Beloved (from the Song of Solomon).

There is also significant interest anytime we offer instruction about parenting. Some classes that have been especially well received are Parenting Infants and Toddlers; Anger Management for Parents; Single Parenting; and Special-Needs Dependents.

We also try to stay attuned to topics that reach out to people in our community who may be hurting. These include courses such as Marriage and Infidelity, and Life after Divorce.

Financial Management

One of the best-kept secrets about the Word of God is the significant amount of information it contains about handling money. For example, Scripture is filled with principles about earning money by developing a godly work ethic. The Lord also gives us instruction about saving and spending what he has entrusted to us. The beauty is that the Bible helps us understand these matters ultimately from the perspective of the heart.

Yet how many people in our communities have grown up with very little training in how to navigate this important aspect of daily life? Spiraling debt and uncontrollable spending place crushing pressure on individuals and families all around us.

It is very simple for even a small church to offer classes that address these issues. We have offered FCI titles such as The Practice of Finances; Biblical Resource Management; and The Heart of Finances.

Over time, people from our community have requested instruction on specialty topics. So we have developed additional studies on End-of-Life Planning; Basics of Social Security and Medicare; Financial Investing in Turbulent Times; and The Legacy Journey.

The beauty of this approach is that it often allows an entirely different kind of leader to emerge from the church family. God has blessed most congregations with people who have learned to manage money wisely and well. Those folks may never sing a solo in church or teach a Sunday school class for three-year-olds. But an adult class on a subject they clearly understand might be right up their alley.

Another powerful aspect of teaching subjects like finances in a local church setting is that there is a ready pool of mentors for class members from the community who would like personal oversight and accountability.

Computer Education

Younger people in our church are flabbergasted when I tell them I typed my college term papers on an actual typewriter. They sit spellbound as I spin yarns about evil professors who would not even allow one correction on a typed sheet. “What’s correction fluid?” they ask. Then, as I explain my experiences with what was then emerging computer technology, they look at me as if I am joking. They have never heard of floppy drives or monochrome monitors.

Logically, it is a very short walk from such conversations to the core principles in this book. Since younger people know more about computers simply because they grew up with them, why not parlay that knowledge into meeting a significant need of many older people in our community?

I love walking by a classroom where a young professional is patiently teaching people from our town basics of computer education. We often pack classrooms for courses like Windows Basic Training; Introduction for Microsoft Office; or Best Uses for Your Smart Device.

Our neighbors have also expressed strong interest in topics like Computer Security; How to Keep Your PC Fast and Virus-Free; and Mobile Computing. Local companies express thanks when we offer classes geared to workforce development such as Digital Skills for the Digital Workforce; Intermediate

Excel; and Intermediate PowerPoint. Parents are especially concerned about internet safety issues and appreciate classes like Keeping Your Kids Safe Online.

I realize some people might push back by asking whether such activities are really part of the church's mission. That is a fair question. But fundamentally what does it mean to love our neighbors? Often it begins with identifying a need or opportunity and seeking to meet it in Jesus's name. Teaching a community class on how to use email might seem trivial unless you are a grandparent living far away from your children and grandchildren and would be delighted if someone showed you how to send a message to your loved ones.

Often simple acts of kindness like this begin relationships that lead to conversations on larger issues. That has to be better than the church sitting quiet and empty on Wednesday evenings, doesn't it?

Life Skills

We encourage all our members to think about abilities they have learned over the years that might be of interest to those who live in our ministry parishes. Our teachers are essentially saying to our neighbors, "I care about you and would love to spend time on a weekly basis sharing something delightful that God has already taught me." Some of our musicians have offered classes like Acoustic Guitar, and Playing Piano for Worship. Our photographers have taught Smartphone Photography, and Photography and Photo Editing. The cooks put together a class titled Culinary Basics. Another team devised a class on Basic Self-Defense.

There are multiple mentalities developed as this process unfolds. On one hand, it impacts people from our church because they are developing hearts seeking to creatively find ways to love our neighbors. I love it when a church member comes rushing across the foyer with a smiling face, a glimmering eye, and a sentence that begins with, "Pastor, do you think people would be interested in me teaching . . ."

The other effect is on our neighbors themselves. When they see church members offering life skills classes, they start truly believing that the church is a loving, safe place that cares about them.

Bible Study Classes

Not surprisingly, FCI also has a generous offering of instruction on the Bible. I have been surprised how many people in our town who know very little about the Word of God also have significant interest as long as the classes are taught in an understandable, practical way. Some of our most popular classes in this category have been Reasons to Believe; Origins of the Bible; and Comparing World Religions. There is often genuine hunger on the part of our neighbors to have a fair presentation of these basic ideas.

We also have had a measure of success when emphasizing big-picture ideas such as The Bible and Its Themes; Overview of the Old Testament; Overview of the New Testament; and Tracing the Argument: The Logic of the Bible. Basic biblical topics are also popular, such as Christian Life Essentials; Godly Decision Making; Knowing God; and How to Study God's Word. Over time you will be able to layer on classes in more advanced Bible study topics. We have even generated community interest with titles like Difficult Questions; Seeing Jesus in the Prophets; and God's Sovereignty in Salvation.

We have some people in our congregation who especially enjoy church history. Why not turn them loose and see what happens? That team has developed courses in History of the Reformation, and Pivotal Individuals in Church History. You never know what might capture a neighbor's attention.

Often what happens is a person from one of our neighborhoods "tries us out" by taking a class on computers, life skills, or finances. When that is a good experience, they will then decide to try one of the offerings that is more biblical or theological in nature. Sometimes the process takes years, but loving our community is a lifelong pursuit.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

John L. Sands's Story: Community Classes Making an Eternal Difference

Dustin Folden, Faith Church Pastor of Discipleship and Extension Ministries

Today I had the privilege of officiating the funeral of one of our dear church members, John L. Sands. This experience reminded me yet again of how thankful I am for our Faith Community Institute (FCI) classes.

John Sands was a brilliant scientist with a PhD in organic chemistry. He worked on a variety of projects over his career and earned a number of patents. For example, he and his team of researchers developed a bromine-based chemical for swimming pools and

consulted with Disney World in the care of their facilities. He also worked on fire retardant DE83 and the development of sucralose, commonly known as Splenda.

After John retired, he had more time to contemplate life's most important questions, many of which eluded his chosen profession's ability to answer. It was at that time he saw an advertisement in our local newspaper for the FCI classes we offer on Wednesday evenings for people in our town. He first attended the Comparison of World Religions course and later one titled Reasons to Believe, both taught by one of our physicians. After the second class, John placed his faith and trust in Jesus Christ as his only hope of heaven.

John and his wife, Marjorie, who already knew the Lord, eventually became delightful servants at Faith. They began working together in our church's Ministry Resource Center. Later, John began teaching an Adult Bible Fellowship and was chosen by our church family to serve as one of our deacons.

All of this occurred, humanly speaking, because he and his wife saw a notice in the paper inviting them and others in our community to come to church to learn. Marjorie told me the other day, "After John retired, he wasn't traveling as much and did not have the rigors of scientific research. He just didn't have a purpose, and taking those classes was when he found his ultimate purpose in knowing and glorifying God." Days like this make me glad for the privilege of loving our community in every way we possibly can—including through FCI classes.

Counseling and Personal Mentoring

In chapter 4, we discussed the potential power and efficacy of launching a community-based biblical counseling center. Because Faith Church has been offering such services to the people in our town for nearly forty years, we have developed somewhat of a reputation as a place that seeks to serve men and women who are hurting and struggling in some way.

The upshot of that kind of ministry is a natural curiosity on the part of community members wishing to have a similar impact. Sometimes even people with no church home or background are intrigued to learn principles to assist a troubled person in their sphere of influence.

This becomes easy for our counseling teams in the sense that their weekly ministry opportunities produce content that can be easily packaged into an FCI class.

Some of the offerings are very basic, such as The Process of Biblical Counseling; Uprooting Anger; The Basics of Family Counseling; and Understanding Biblical Heart Change.

We have medical doctors who teach on Medical Issues and Biblical Counseling; The Heart of Addiction; and Intimate Issues in Marriage for Women. Just as with the other categories, invariably students will begin

requesting instruction on more advanced topics. We have discussed Dealing with Depression; Cultural Issues in Counseling; and Rejoicing in the Midst of Trials. We also seek to provide hope and help for family members of those who are struggling by discussing Hope for Families of Addicts, and Family Support for Extended Relatives of Those Who Are Addicted.

Just the other day I reviewed the press proof of a brochure outlining our next round of Faith Community Institute classes. This information will be disseminated throughout our town electronically and through printed catalogs circulated in our newspaper and distributed by church members to friends, coworkers, family members, and neighbors. I wonder how many people will see the classes on counseling and mentoring and be surprised that God's Word has answers and direction for such practical topics. It will be interesting to see who the Lord draws this time around. Yet, even for those who choose not to attend, a powerful message has been sent: God cares about those who are hurting in our community, and when you are ready, we would love to help you learn powerful, life-giving truth.

Significant Suffering

As a pastor, I spend a lot of time in the average week thinking about those in our town who are hurting and how we can connect them to God, his Word, and his people. It pains me, sometimes literally, to consider men and women suffering alone in our neighborhoods.

We offer DivorceCare and GriefShare classes that come with a packaged curriculum and a set of DVDs. Whether you choose to use these packaged programs or not, the topics they address are particularly relevant in our culture.

We have also found that classes for those struggling with cancer are especially well attended. Occasionally I have the privilege to address those groups, and it can be very sobering to spend time with such people in the throes of extreme suffering.

Classes Specifically for Men or Women

While many of our classes are coed, we have also learned that some people enjoy spending time "just with the guys" or "just with my girlfriends." Wednesday evening provides a nice break in the week, an opportunity to take a breath from the busy pace of life.

For men we have taught Iron Sharpening Iron; Serving with Honor; Strategic Leadership; and Men of Faith Core Values. These classes are generally taught by one of our deacons or other lay leaders. Usually friendships are formed that lead to additional involvement in one of our men's small groups.

For women we have offered A Woman's Priorities; Friendships; A Woman's Relationship with God; The Beauty of Biblical Womanhood; and Women Discipling Women. I am very thankful for the significant number of godly, mature women who are able to teach these subjects well. There are a number of women at our church today who would say their first contact with Faith was taking one of these classes that piqued their interest in spiritual things.

Community Service

My experience as a pastor is that many men and women, both inside and outside the church, sincerely want to make a difference in our town. However, many wonder what the first or next step should be.

Basic classes like Practicing Hospitality and Godly Neighboring can be very helpful and exciting for such persons. Those can be followed by more advanced topics such as Connecting Our Neighbors to Resources, and Insights into Poverty.

We sometimes bring in instructors from the community to help us with specialty subjects under this heading. For example, our team taught a Cost of Poverty Simulation that was life-changing for many of the students who participated.

Showing Love to Your Community

I love driving up to one of our campuses on Wednesday nights and seeing the parking lots and foyers packed with excited people coming to study and apply the Word of God together. I am also thankful for the many laypersons who are able to use their background and life experience to teach practical classes for people in our community. The beauty is, it costs practically nothing to offer these classes because we already have the building, the teachers, and the necessary infrastructure in place. It is just another easy way to show love to our community.

I would encourage you to review these lists and identify classes that you or others in your church family could easily offer because of your skills, passions,

knowledge, and life experiences. You can do this. In many cases, a community institute could be organized and offered quickly and easily for a church looking for effective ways to love the community. Why not give this idea a try and see what the Lord chooses to do?

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What is your overall response to the idea of using the church building to teach community-oriented classes?
2. Are there subjects that you would be willing and able to teach in your setting?
3. Are there topics that would be especially appealing to you or the people you know?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. What obstacles might prevent your church from offering classes like the ones described in this chapter?
2. What subjects do you think would be especially appealing to your neighbors?
3. What blessings could result for your church from this initiative?

7

RESTRUCTURED MINISTRIES

Including Others in Everything You Do

Thus far I have challenged you to adjust the way you think about your church building. Why not make your facilities available for the people in your community seven days a week instead of using them exclusively for church activities?

Now let's seek to take that important mentality one step further. How about looking at all your staff members and programming through the lens of loving your community? I encourage you to review all your existing ministries and ask: What would that ministry division or specific program look like if it was more outreach focused? Do the same for your staff or key volunteers. How could that person's job description change from only serving people in the church to also loving people in your town?

If we are not careful, Christians and churches can become incredibly inbred. Pastor Robert Lewis expressed this concern in his helpful book *The Church of Irresistible Influence*. He told of how the Lord blessed his congregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, with dramatic numerical growth in their first ten years of existence. Then a congregational survey revealed the sobering reality that, after participating for four to five years in a small group, an essential aspect of the church's discipleship ministry, many members reported they felt "unchallenged and stifled."¹ Those are two of the last words church leaders want to hear from those they are trying to serve. The members went on to explain that while they were often told they were being equipped, the self-focused nature of what they were receiving made them wonder out loud, "Being equipped for what?"²

This was an aha moment for this young church. The leaders discussed what the church family was trying to express and came to this conclusion:

If we continued on our present path, we would likely create a style of ministry that we would one day regret. We would eventually function as a refuge from the world, a sort of Christian “club” that exhausted itself trying to keep its members happy. We would become focused on our own inward needs. We would probably measure our success, not by the true biblical standards of courage and faithfulness, changed and changing hearts, and an irreplaceable impact on the world through good works, but rather by other things: personalities, numbers in attendance, entertainment value, money, and facilities.³

Exactly. Loving our communities does not come naturally. It is very easy to fall into the trap of viewing church and even our relationship with the Lord through the lens of “What is in it for me?” Such an approach to living falls far short of the exciting, missional outlook God has created each of his children to pursue.

At Faith Church, we decided to do a top-down audit of every ministry, looking for opportunities to adapt some of what we were doing to be more focused on loving our neighbors. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to have events, activities, and ministries designed solely for Christians. However, that can easily get out of balance where an inordinate amount of attention is being given to those who already know the Lord. In many cases, it is easy and valuable to transition certain events and activities to become more community focused.

Church Leagues or Community Leagues?

In some churches, one of the most exciting aspects of each spring is the launch of the area church softball league. Teammates pore over possible rosters and strategize about how to win the coveted league trophy. Others brood over the ump’s missed call that allowed the Presbyterians to beat the Methodists in last year’s championship game. Or stories are whispered over off-season coffee discussions about the Baptist elder’s profanity-laced rant at the Assemblies of God deacon who slid into third too aggressively.

Our church family have often heard me half-jokingly say that I believe many church athletic leagues are of the devil. That is because they take our attention off our God-given mission and provide an incubator for behavior and attitudes that displease the Lord.

At Faith, we decided long ago that we would not have athletic leagues designed singularly for Christians. Instead, we offer community leagues. Many churches have a large enough piece of property to have a softball or soccer field. Some churches even have a gym. There are often youth and adults living right around us who do not have access or resources to play in a friendly community

league. It is very easy to launch such programs. We have found that our neighbors are not looking for pristine fields and high-dollar programs. However, dozens and sometimes hundreds of neighbors will turn out for a youth soccer program on Saturday mornings or an adult volleyball league on Tuesday evenings.

The people in the church who participate really do not care about winning or losing, at least not as a primary goal. The focus is on creating a loving, welcoming environment for each of our neighbors. The joy of beginning a relationship with someone who lives right around the church property is far better than hoisting the league trophy.

Church Picnic or Community Picnic?

For many years, Faith held our annual all-church pig roast each Fourth of July weekend. It was an epic event where several of the men in our church stayed up all night roasting hogs to perfection. This was augmented by an endless number of sides and desserts prepared by our church members and served up after the morning services. It was a highlight on the church calendar.

As our church grew, the event became unwieldy. Roasting hogs for a few thousand people is a lot different than for a few hundred. We quickly ran out of refrigerator space for all the sides. But most importantly, so much attention was placed on preparing a delicious meal that little bandwidth was left for inviting others.

Several years ago, we decided to turn the event on its head. We started calling it a community picnic, with the focus on inviting our friends and those who live right around our church. We simplified the meal and hired an outside caterer to provide the food so we could focus on loving our guests. Honestly, I sometimes miss the smaller gatherings and all that freshly grilled pork. However, the fact that the transition has helped us find another way to love our neighbors makes the adjustment more than worth it.

Church Children's Pastor or Community Children's Pastor?

I am very thankful for the way our staff has embraced the concept of community-based outreach ministry. We do not see this as a particular staff member's job; loving our community is everyone's job.

One upshot of this philosophy is that our pastor of children's ministries does not view himself as simply being responsible for the children of Faith Church. Instead, he accepts a level of responsibility for the children of our "parish"—those who live around our respective campuses. Even for a smaller church that may have laypersons overseeing children's ministries, the same mentality can still be cultivated.

Let me introduce you to Trey Garner, Pastor of Children's Ministries at Faith Church. I appreciate the way Trey is leading his area of ministry to love our community in as many ways as possible. Here are some of the ways that is true.



Several years ago I (Trey) began viewing my role as including ministry to the children of our parish instead of just the children of our church. I want to become a friend to the people in the neighborhoods around our church so that when their family or their children have a need, whether physical or spiritual, one of their first thoughts is, "I wonder if Faith could help us." Several years ago, I realized that if families were going to connect the dots between their concerns and our church's resources, they first had to know that we care about them and their children.

Getting Started

Building awareness of our desire to serve required us to establish a stronger presence in the lives of our neighbors. We needed more face time with families, so we began doing a few simple things. When our campus served as a polling site for our county, we staffed a table that offered information about our children's programs and a variety of other church ministries. At the parent meetings held before the start of our community youth sports leagues, we staffed another informational table that also offered free coffee and donuts. At these meetings, I asked to briefly (in less than two minutes) thank parents for getting their kids involved in the league. This gave me the opportunity to get more face time with our neighbors while offering to provide them with more information about the programs we offer for families. Simple things.

Coaching Neighborhood Youth Leagues

In addition to taking these steps, I started looking for ways to get more directly involved in the lives of neighboring families. One natural way to do this

was to begin coaching my son's soccer team. In the five years I've coached soccer, our family has had the opportunity to build relationships with forty different families, many without any affiliation to a Bible-believing church. We have hosted these families in our home, and some have begun participating in our children's ministries.

Having a Presence in Local Elementary Schools

I also started spending time as a volunteer at the public elementary school that serves many of the subdivisions surrounding our church. For the past several years, I have had the privilege of spending an hour per week in the classroom of kindergarten teacher Carly Summers, who attends another evangelical church in our community.

Every time I serve in Carly's classroom and walk through the hallways, I encounter dozens of children with whom I have some level of relationship. Some are Carly's former students; others attend Faith's weekly ministries. Many have participated in our annual Vacation Bible School, several were on one of my soccer teams, and a number have participated in a program we call Winter Break at Faith.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Carly Summers's Story: Let Your Light Shine

Here is Carly's perspective on Trey's involvement with her students.

Trey has been visiting my classroom for the past few years as a participant in our community's Read to Succeed initiative, a program that partners local volunteers with elementary school classes to help students develop their reading skills. The students always look forward to Trey's visits. He is always greeted with smiles, waves, and hugs. All the students raise their hands, hoping that it will be their turn to work with him. They love working with Trey, no matter their academic level. He pushes the kids that are already excelling, encouraging them for their hard work. He works most often with the students that have not yet met some of the introduced concepts. He has a great way of meeting them at their level. Trey always gets the students to try harder without becoming discouraged. Many students 'level up' in their reading groups with him.

They also work on writing with Trey. When they come back from working with him, they are always so proud of what they have accomplished.

Even though Trey does not discuss scriptural truth in our public school setting, there is definitely a light about him that the students absorb. Many of the students ask me about his job. Most are familiar with Faith because our school is so close. They know Pastor Trey as a person that they can trust to help and support them. Each student that works with him comes back into the classroom feeling more confident. It has definitely been a blessing to share my students with him. I know that many students are very grateful to him as well.

Winter Break Youth Programming

The Christmas season is certainly a joyous time of year, but sadly, it also creates significant hardships for parents who cannot take time off from work while their children are out of school. In some cases, working families spend as much money on childcare as they make during winter break.

To help these families, we launched Winter Break at Faith, a program through which we provide activities for children in kindergarten through fifth grade at a cost of only five dollars per day. Each day is filled with games, crafts, holiday movies, snacks, singing, and Bible lessons. It is like a full-day, wintertime VBS.

Over the past couple of years, the Lord has allowed us to serve close to two hundred children through the program. Some have parents who must work over the holidays. Others have parents who want to get their kids away from a video screen during the break. Regardless of parents' needs, we are thankful for the opportunity to build relationships with our neighbors.

You may wonder, "How do you staff this ministry at Christmastime?" While several church employees are involved, at least 50 percent of our staffing comes from willing volunteers from our church family. Some are students home from college; others are parents who do not have to work and choose to get their kids involved in the program. Several are teens who want to do something productive for the Lord while they are out of school. Is it easy getting volunteers? Not always. But time and again the Lord has provided, and the rewards of this ministry far outweigh the challenges.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Parents' Stories: Winter Break at Faith

Here is what some parents have to say about Winter Break at Faith:

"Winter Break has been a huge blessing to us for several years. It can be so hard to find childcare during school breaks and this has helped ease that burden in a big way." (KG)

"This program has been a huge blessing to us. We don't have a solid childcare plan since my mom's passing, so this helps us so incredibly much." (CB)

"We come over winter break and my daughter looks forward to it almost as much as Christmas! Thank you for your fantastic program and a reasonable price!" (TW)

"My kids had a blast! And I love them coming home with faith songs on their lips!" (HH)

I love the fact that Winter Break at Faith is making a positive impact on the lives of our neighbors. Each day, we spend concentrated time teaching the children from the Scriptures, but we also emphasize the principles we learn in those sessions throughout each day. After a day or two, the kids begin to understand that this whole "living for Jesus" concept is a serious thing. During our last winter break, eight different children chose to embrace Christ as Lord, and we praise him for drawing them into his family.

There is no question that the Lord is blessing our meager efforts to get involved in the lives of our neighbors. It is my hope that as we keep investing in the relationships that we have already established, more and more neighbors will begin to view our children's ministries as the go-to resource for their kids and that we may continue to see additional persons won to Christ.



Church Youth Pastor or Community Youth Pastor?

Now let me introduce you to another one of our staff members, Pastor Johnny Kjaer. Johnny gets community-based outreach youth ministry. By God's grace he has transformed our student ministries into being a "loving our community machine."



I'm Johnny Kjaer and I'm fired up about using community-based outreach to win and disciple area teens. A transformational moment occurred for me several years ago when I was driving a vanload of teens back from a serving trip in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Our young people had worked with a new church-planting team focused on showing love to their neighbors in simple, practical ways. We distributed water bottles, cleaned up vacant lots, performed

maintenance projects at area parks, and just showed the love of Christ to the new church's neighbors in any way we could. This was far different than several of the international mission trips we had taken the past several summers, and I wondered how our tired teens would respond to the change.

I was deep in thought when out of the quiet, one of the teens commented that of the three trips she had completed with our youth group, this had been her favorite. That surprised me because I remembered that almost exactly a year before, this young lady had been jumping into waterfalls in Jamaica. When I asked her why, she replied, "This whole trip was spent serving others instead of looking for fun things to do as a tourist." I wrestled with these two thoughts: *What if we did this on every trip? What if we served others even in our hometown?*

After much prayer and guidance, we decided to change the direction of our trips from fun-oriented with a splash of service to service-oriented with a splash of fun. Don't get me wrong; we still have a blast the whole time, but our mind-set has changed. Two key passages influenced this decision. In Matthew 22:37–39, Christ followers are told to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind. The natural result of that is loving others well. As we teach our youth group teens about loving God well, we are also providing practical opportunities for application. Based on 1 Timothy 4:12, we changed our youth group name to 4:TWELVE to remind us of the exhortation for youth to be an example in all areas. As one of our teens told me, "We don't need youth group to learn how to go bowling together. We *do* need help in learning how to serve others better."

Teaching Teens to Meet Needs in Our Neighborhoods

One practical way we implemented this was through taking on low-cost, regular, community-loving service opportunities for our teens. For example, we started a free mowing service for anyone who cannot afford to pay or cannot physically do it themselves. We also advertise free snow removal for anyone who fits those same qualifications. There is nothing like the smile of appreciation from a single mom, a senior citizen, a veteran, or a person with disabilities who has just been served, and the even larger smile from a young person experiencing the joy of serving the Lord and others. These types of activities have proven invaluable for multiple reasons.

First, it has opened the community's eyes to our genuine love for them. Because we've formed relationships with people as a result of mowing their lawns regularly, I've had several from our "mowing list" contact me to come pray with them before surgeries, and we've taken the teens to visit with others

who were struggling. Second, this has helped our teens learn how to recognize needs of people all around them. I love to hear stories now of how teens regularly care for those around them, even without it being a sponsored youth group event. Third, no lesson exists that I could ever teach to the youth group that will resonate more than the experiences I share with the teens as we serve our community together. We have conversations that challenge our hearts when we want to quit, and we get to talk about their real-life difficulties.

Mission Trips to Our Jerusalem

As a result of this mind-set change, we now annually hold our main summer trip in the city of Lafayette. For ten days, we do community ministry throughout the day and stay at the church at night. From cleaning up neighborhoods, to having quality teaching, to training our teens to lead neighborhood Vacation Bible Schools, our mission is loud and clear: *We don't have to go somewhere exotic to serve the Lord. We can serve him right here.* Yes, international missions is important, and we want to teach our teens how to love the nations, *but our heart of service and loving others needs to start right here.*



Looking at Ministry through the Lens of Community

I encourage you to invest time in doing a thorough audit of all the activities and ministries you are involved in, looking at them through the lens of what could and should change for you to be more outreach focused. Make a list of what you are currently doing. Next to each item, using a scale of one to ten, evaluate the degree to which it is focused on loving others. Note what changes could be made, large and small, to make that activity more effective in loving your community.

Then perform a similar audit of the many ministries and activities of your church using the same process. Is it time for the church league to become something else? Is this the year to revamp the annual hog roast? Should your key lay leaders or paid staff begin thinking less exclusively about the church family and more about the parish? Maybe the best next step is not starting something new. Perhaps it would be wiser to refocus some or even most of the resources you already have.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What percentage of your week is spent loving members of your community in simple, practical ways?
1. Do you think about church and Christianity through the lens of what it gives you or how it equips you to serve God and others? Please explain your answer.
1. Are there any ways you can and should improve in this area of your life? What might that look like? What are the logical first steps? Who could you contact to provide more guidance and accountability?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you rate your church on the issue of being either inward focused or outward focused?
2. Do the average ministry leaders view themselves as being responsible for people inside the church family or for those living in your neighborhoods?
3. What is your ministry parish? What is it like? What are the needs? How could your existing ministries become more outreach focused?

8

OUTREACH EVENTS

Making Big Statements to Celebrate God's Glory

In his bestselling books *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins discusses the value of establishing “BHAGs” (Big Hairy Audacious Goals). He says, “A BHAG engages people—it reaches out and grabs them in the gut. It is tangible, energizing, highly focused. People ‘get it’ right away; it takes little or no imagination.”¹

While Collins is admittedly writing from a secular perspective, should not followers of Jesus Christ attempt significant, challenging, and stretching projects as we seek to love our neighbors? Why should a secular businessperson be more excited and aggressive about making a profit than the church is about serving our neighbors and accomplishing the mission the Lord has given us?

At Faith Church, we have found that launching large community-focused events has been a cornerstone of our outreach strategy. As you read, I would encourage you to make notes in the margin of similar steps you could take in your ministry context.

Two of our most effective BHAGs have been the Lafayette Passion Play at Easter and the Lafayette Living Nativity at Christmastime. We named them after our town instead of our church. Both events require a relatively significant amount of time, effort, and financial investment. However, because we have always offered them to members of our community free of charge, they provide a marvelous opportunity to communicate to our neighbors that we love them.

Anytime we have conducted a community needs survey, the people who live around our campuses have told us they desire free or low-cost activities that are family friendly. This is especially true around the holidays when children are out of school and parents have more time off work.

The Lafayette Passion Play

Each Easter we rent our city's historic downtown theater, the Long Center for Performing Arts. We selected this neutral site for anyone from our town who might not yet be comfortable stepping foot inside a church building.

The program is a depiction of the last days of Jesus Christ on earth coupled with a contemporary vignette that helps the audience see the relevance of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus to their lives today.

We generally keep the biblical portions of the story the same each year, with scenes focusing on the triumphal entry, the upper room discourse, the Last Supper, the betrayal in the garden, the trials, and of course the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. These scenes are based on actual text from the Scriptures spoken by costumed members of our church family and interspersed with corresponding music from a multigenerational choir of church members also in costume.

Our people also write a new contemporary vignette each year to keep the presentation fresh. Over the years, we have used vignettes that are humorous, serious, and everywhere in between. It is not unusual for several thousand people from our community to attend each year. Consider some of the benefits of hosting the Lafayette Passion Play.

It Tells Our Community We Are Listening

One of the greatest compliments one of our neighbors can give us is saying "You listened to me." If they are asking for affordable activities for their friends and families, especially around the holidays, that is yet another opportunity to *say yes unless you have to say no*.

Our Families Can Serve Together

Many church activities, by their very nature, are age-graded, and rightly so. Community outreach events like the Lafayette Passion Play allow entire families to serve together in a way that can potentially make an eternal impact in someone else's life.

As a pastor, I love watching a man singing in a costumed choir alongside his wife and children of various ages. Or seeing one parent with some of the smaller children working on the makeup crew while the other parent is with the older children hoisting sets or working in the tech group. Hearing stories of those same

families joining hands around the dinner table and praying for their outreach efforts gives everyone a joint purpose that is compelling and life-changing.

This also allows children from single-parent homes to rub shoulders with other families for friendship, mentoring, and church family life at its very best. Memories made at events like this last a lifetime.

It Supports the Local Arts

Like many community theaters, our Long Center often struggles financially. Our church's Passion Play is their largest annual customer, bringing in much-needed revenue to support other arts programs throughout the year. We want our church's financial activity to be a blessing to others in our community in as many ways as possible.

It Allows People in Our Church Family to Utilize Their Unique God-Given Gifts and Talents

In 1 Corinthians 12 we find the marvelous and sometimes even humorous comparison of the church family to a physical body. Paul encourages us to imagine our eyes telling our hands they are unnecessary, or our heads making a similar statement to our feet. The core principle is encapsulated in verse 18: "But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." Community-based outreach ministry allows people who may never preach a sermon or sing a solo to use their gifts and abilities to serve the Lord.

I have been amazed to learn all sorts of things about our church members as we serve and work together. Like the sweet lady who comes to church on Sunday wearing her dress and high heels then showing up on set-construction day with her tool belt, nail gun, and safety goggles, ready to get after it. Or the quiet, professional engineer who is playing tricks on the other people on the sound crew like a junior high boy. Or the senior citizen who hardly makes a peep at church going onstage and belting out her lines like a seasoned actor on Broadway.

The relationships that develop by serving together in these kinds of community outreach ministries are delightful and lifelong. Paul actually goes on to make that very point by saying that the Lord gave the church members diverse gifts "so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now

you are Christ's body, and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:25–27). As a pastor, I love watching the unity that results from our church family teaming up and loving our community in creative ways.

It Is a Logical Step of Connection for Other Ministries

The Passion Play is very clearly focused on presenting the gospel—the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the free gift of new life that is available through trusting in him. Some of our other community ministries are less direct on purpose. However, loving our neighbors in less formal ways provides an opportunity to invite our friends to presentations like this one at Easter.

You Can Do This!

Even if your church family is relatively small, be assured that just a few people can pull off an event like this. Many community theatrical productions are accomplished with fewer than twenty actors and support cast. Yes, it will cost money to make the costumes, buy makeup, print brochures, and rent an outside facility if that is what you choose to do. It might stretch your church family to give and serve in this way. However, focus on the beauty of the message with a desire to communicate with excellence, and see what the Lord chooses to do.

Many of your neighbors will love the fact that you provided a meaningful activity for them and their friends and loved ones to attend around Easter. Next year some of those same individuals could be in the Passion Play cast or support crew because of the impact this life-changing message had on the direction of their lives.

The Lafayette Living Nativity

Several years ago, our staff members conducted a biblical counseling training conference at First Baptist Church in Slidell, Louisiana. At one of the breaks, church members told us about an outdoor event they provided for their city called The Living Nativity. We were so intrigued that we decided to have several of our staff members fly back the following Christmas to see the ministry in action. After one evening, we were hooked. It was exciting to see cars lined up waiting to view the sets. Watching the church family enjoy serving together at

that time of year in a way that was making a significant impact in their town was electrifying.

Making the Decision

We decided right then and there that we were going to ask our church members to launch a similar ministry in Lafayette the following Christmas. Admittedly, it was a huge undertaking for us. While a living nativity can be as small or large as a church seeks to make it, we decided to go as large as we possibly could. The planning team proposed that we create twelve full-size sets depicting various aspects of the Christmas story, beginning in the Garden of Eden and culminating at the second coming of Christ. There would be sheep, donkeys, and camels, and literally hundreds of costumed actors. Because of the cold wintertime weather in Indiana, we suggested that there be two interchangeable casts, one outside serving for thirty-minute shifts while the other group was inside warming up and enjoying a cup of coffee or hot chocolate. We also wanted to provide two options for our guests, so they could receive a CD that narrated them through the twelve sets as they stayed in their vehicles, or they could walk a roped-off path and listen to single narrations of each set at their own pace.

I can still remember when we made the presentation at the first business meeting of the new year. Sure, it was an aggressive goal. We were asking our church family to serve in all sorts of ways and raise an extra \$20,000 to fund the effort. However, this BHAG was just like the ones Jim Collins described in *Built to Last* because our people “got it” right away. While our congregation posed thoughtful questions, and rightfully so, they then overwhelmingly approved the motion.

Getting Down to Work

Preparing for the Lafayette Living Nativity that first year consumed much of our church’s expendable administrative horsepower. We had to design and build the sets, which required weekly work nights and Saturday mornings throughout most of the year. Those occasions turned out to be delightful opportunities for people of all ages and occupations to serve together.

Another group sprang into action to make the costumes. Care had to be taken because the team had to consider how to dress people who would already be wearing several layers of clothing as protection from the harsh Indiana winter. It was also interesting to see the Lord provide in amazing ways as we served

together. One of our members became aware of a curtain factory that was discontinuing some of its patterns. They provided all sorts of fabric at a discounted price. Yes, many of our actors wore some very unique patterns out on the sets those first few years, but that just added to the enjoyment of it all.

Then there was the question of where to find the animals. Most churches have either members or local contacts where they can find sheep and donkeys. However, where do you find camels? It is a lot easier than you might think. We learned of a private owner less than forty miles from us who had a collection of exotic animals and was happy to rent them to us. This is another one of those ways that the Lord often provides as you step out in faith to serve him.

And advertising was easy. As soon as our community heard we were going to do this, it seemed like everyone was talking about it. The newspaper ran multiple stories and our local TV station featured it on several of their broadcasts. Many people were intrigued that we had no intention of charging admission. Our response was that the entire message was about the free gift of salvation available because of the birth and subsequent death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. We did not want to confuse that message in any way with making money.

The setup days were an absolute blast. I still have pictures in my mind of a physician from our church hanging off scaffolding to construct a scene while next to him a factory worker held the material in place. The laughter was infectious because the Lord was allowing us to accomplish something exciting for our community together.

The First Night

We thought we might have a hit on our hands, but we were completely unprepared for the response. Even though Faith's campus has frontage on a state highway, the lines created a fascinating bottleneck. Our traffic workers did everything they could to get everyone off the road safely and efficiently, but we still had wait times of over an hour. What surprised us was that many of our neighbors viewed this as part of the experience. They came with bowls of freshly made popcorn and all sorts of Christmas treats. Seasonal music was playing and they were having mobile parties in their cars as they made their way through the line. That first year well over ten thousand people from our community attended over the course of six nights. Even now, nearly thirty years later, we regularly have between six thousand and ten thousand people attend.

You Can Do This Too!

Yes, a living nativity is a BHAG. However, the great thing is, outreach events such as this are like accordions. They can be reduced or expanded based on the resources available at the time. Even if there are only a couple of actors around a manger with a sheep or two, a powerful message of love and hope can be communicated to those who live around you. Your neighbors will appreciate your efforts to show love to them in a format that is enjoyable for them and their families.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Dave Foley's Story: Serving in the Spirit

It is amazing to look back and see how many of our church members were first introduced to Jesus Christ or our church through one of these BHAG-type community outreaches. Part of the privilege is then watching the Lord integrate someone new into the church family through serving in the very ministry that brought them to Faith in the beginning. Here is just one example of how that happened.

I was visiting Faith Church as a new Christian in the fall of 2013, when sign-ups for scene setup of the Living Nativity were announced. Not sure what to expect, I signed up. What would I find at setup, I wondered? How would these church members act outside of a Sunday service (Eph. 4:11–16)?

Setup morning was below freezing. I arrived to see neatly staged piles of painted plywood and foam scenery panels surrounding all sides of the church. These fourteen scenes depict key moments of God's interaction with mankind, from the Garden of Eden through Christ's return.

Inside the church gym, we were given general instruction, received our assignments, and were prayed over. Our team was to assemble Scenes 1–3: the Garden of Eden, the Burning Bush, and the Annunciation. Despite the early morning and cold temperatures, I had not yet heard any negativity, but rather lots of positive greetings, friendly laughs, and could feel a sense of anticipation to begin work (Col. 3:23).

Work went well for several hours until our team was halfway finished with Scene 3, a large set with about a dozen scene panels. We had accidentally constructed the scene several feet in the wrong direction and at the wrong angle. As we were cold, sore, and tired, this would've been the most likely time for tempers to flare or blame to be assigned (Rom. 3:23). While we pondered how best to proceed, the sounds of construction, occasional laughter, and gently given instruction continued on around us, as other workers toted panels, set ballast bags, climbed ladders, and set their scenes.

With a collective sigh and a few laughs at our own incompetence, we knew we had to basically tear down most of our work and start over. No harsh words were spoken. No

foul language, fits of anger, or thrown tools. No blame that we should have read directions more carefully. Just a renewed resolve to work more diligently and finish our task well.

That was a new experience for me. Never in my life had I been around a group of individuals who worked in less than ideal conditions, had a setback, and then did not in any way react in a way that would dishonor God. God's Spirit is active with this church family. The fruit of the Spirit was on display in a very real sense (Gal. 5:22-23) in its members. That morning was the deciding day for me that I would make Faith Church my home. It also significantly impacted my early walk with Christ.

Starting in 2015, God blessed me with the privilege to serve him in the Living Nativity as the scene setup coordinator. This has allowed me to have an even deeper knowledge of the sacrifice and service that so many hundreds of individuals give to our Lord every year (2 Cor. 2:15), honing my appreciation for my brothers and sisters in Christ and for all that the Lord continues to do for and through our church family.

Coming by the Thousands

Looking back, these two BHAGs were critical steps in the development of our church family's interest in learning to love our community. We were all thankful and surprised at the way the Lord chose to bless our efforts. We hoped that people would come by the hundreds, but we never dared to dream about them coming by the thousands. It was clear to us that our neighbors were more than willing to respond to our efforts to love our community.

You can do this. With God's help and enablement, you and those the Lord has placed around you can begin (or continue) to design and host signature outreach events that become the talk of the town. And when the talk of the town is focused on the good news of Jesus Christ, that is a very good thing.

To help you get started, our team has created a link to the script we use: <https://www.faithlafayette.org/livingnativityscript>. This will keep you from having to reinvent the wheel as you launch this community-based ministry.

This May Provide an Opportunity for Collaboration

I recognize that some readers might hear ideas like this and decide for any number of reasons that their church could not attempt such an initiative on any scale. It could be your church is too small at this point in your history or that you are busy with other ministries. If that is the case, the answer might be to team up with several like-minded churches and together offer a presentation similar to the

ones described here. Such an approach would undoubtedly add a level of complexity and challenge to the project, but it could also provide huge dividends as your town watches multiple congregations working together.

Ultimately, It's about the Message

This morning as I was preparing to finalize this chapter, my personal Bible reading plan directed me to 2 Corinthians 5. In that chapter, Paul reminds us of the marvelous privilege we have to be ambassadors of the good news of Jesus Christ. He told the Corinthians:

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18–20)

What I love about events like the Passion Play and the Living Nativity is that while on the one hand our neighbors are very thankful that we host them each year, on the other hand they are clearly and explicitly gospel saturated. Many times my family and I have stood outside on a cold December night along with hundreds of other church members, marveling at the long lines of cars filled with people waiting to see and hear a clear presentation of the gospel through the Living Nativity. Or we've entered the Long Center on a spring evening when the theater is packed to the rafters with neighbors who have come with their friends and families to experience and learn more about the last days of Jesus Christ on earth.

Someday we will all stand before the Lord and give an account for our stewardship of the responsibility and privilege of being ambassadors of Christ. Yes, events like this cost money, take time, and even involve a measure of risk. But knowing that you have done your very best to love your community by urging everyone to be reconciled to God through Christ's finished work on the cross makes all the effort worthwhile.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE
IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What is your response to the concept of seeking Big Hairy Audacious Goals as part of the way a church conducts ministry? Does that concept resonate with you? In your mind, is it biblical?
2. Have you ever been involved in a church attempting a major outreach event? Describe your experience.
3. As you think about the gifts and abilities the Lord has given you coupled with the needs and opportunities in your community, what major ministry initiative could you possibly spearhead? What are the logical first steps?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you rate your group on the issue of pursuing big outreach goals? Please explain your answer with specific, practical examples.
2. Brainstorm five to ten possible BHAG ministry initiatives for your church family to attempt together.
3. Discuss biblical examples of men and women who took the Lord at his word and accomplished significant things in his name. Why did the Lord include stories like that in his Word? What impact can and should they have on each member of the group?

9

RESTORED NEIGHBORHOODS

Bringing New Life to Distressed Areas

In the previous chapter I mentioned bestselling author Jim Collins and his emphasis on the value of setting challenging goals. Another crucial concept in Collins's writings is the significance of an organization or business achieving breakthrough moments. He uses the illustration of a giant flywheel that has to be slowly and carefully turned on its axis until eventually its own momentum makes it spin faster and faster. He says:

The flywheel image captures the overall feel of what it was like inside the companies as they went from good to great. No matter how dramatic the end result, the good-to-great transformations never happened in one fell swoop. There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no wrenching revolution. Good to great comes about by a cumulative process—step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel—that adds up to sustained and spectacular results.¹

At Faith Church, one such flywheel moment occurred when we received a strategic call from our city.

A Significant Breakthrough: Our City's Invitation to Restore Neighborhoods

Over the years, we have tried to find ways big and small to serve our town. We want our local leaders to think about us as a community resource to tap when needs and opportunities arise.

One day our city's director of economic development, Dennis Carson, called and asked our team to go on a tour with him. Dennis is an extremely talented man who cares deeply about every square inch of our city. He challenged us to

assemble a team of six to eight leaders and pick him up at city hall in a van. He proposed that we drive up and down the streets in our city together, going block by block north to south and south to north.

The method behind Dennis's madness might make more sense if you understand the geography of our community. At that time our primary church campus was on the east side of the city. Since Purdue University is on the west side, with the courthouse in the middle, many of our team members were used to driving east to west in our city. Generally we were either going downtown for some reason or over to the university campus. Dennis's point was profound—we could live in our town for decades without really knowing about the living conditions of many of the city's residents.

As we drove block by block, I felt a growing sense of shame. While we have many beautiful areas in our city and do not face the same urban decay of some larger cities, there are plenty of distressed properties. I was especially bothered by homes with children where there were signs of dangerous porches, leaking roofs, or other conditions that are unacceptable in a community like ours—or any community.

Thankfully there were many efforts underway to make community improvements. Habitat for Humanity was hard at work and accomplishing great things. Neighborhood associations, informal groups of residents, and individual property owners were involved in renewal efforts.

But Dennis Carson's point to us was this: the city needs more help—lots more help. The reason he was talking to us was not simply about home renovation. He challenged us to consider acquiring and renovating distressed properties and then providing mentoring and counseling to low- to moderate-income persons who could eventually become effective homeowners.

An Opportunity for Introspection

Because we had a history of involvement in the community, our flywheel already had the momentum of saying yes to opportunities and successfully following through.

You may want to ask yourself, “Does our church have a reputation for saying yes to opportunities in the community? Does our church have a track record of following through on community projects?” If not, start small to get that flywheel moving, and before you know it, your church will start to attract bigger opportunities.

Another Opportunity to Say Yes

We were thrilled with our city's invitation and got down to work. Not only did the flywheel generate momentum with community members who were seeking good partners, but successful, God-honoring projects also generated momentum and confidence within the church. Because we had already, by God's grace, tackled smaller projects well, we had positive expectations and excitement for larger projects. With God's help, we knew we could do it! And you can, too, if you start small and build on successes.

Investigate the Challenge

To my shame, I had never thought much about the problem of urban decay. I felt a lot like the religious leaders in Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan who were too busy to stop and help a person in need.

Our team came to the conclusion that this mentality was unacceptable and displeasing to the Lord. We then took the step of inviting a city employee and member of our church, Adam Murphy, to educate us on the issues.

Adam explained that urban neighborhoods are constantly changing. People move in and people move out. In neighborhoods where more people wish to move out than move in, disinvestment can result. Property standards decline. Home maintenance is deferred and owners decide not to invest in their properties. As people choose to live in other areas of town, homeownership rates and property values decrease and schools may even close as families prefer to live on the fringes of town.

Over time, urban sprawl can create a "donut hole" effect downtown. The city slowly dies from the inside out. Adam told us that city officials hoped Faith would step up to help restore distressed properties and prevent this donut hole effect from spreading.

The city also provided us with detailed maps of our downtown area and pointed us to the clusters of greatest need. It was very easy for us to learn about the most pressing challenges that existed in our community.

I would encourage you to reach out to your city officials and request a similar training session. Many communities have an economic development leader or social service team who would be happy to meet with representatives from your church. You could also contact other nonprofit leaders in town who are doing similar work. The point is that often the first step in restoring neighborhoods is educating yourself and your team about the greatest needs.

Identify a Passionate Leader

I can imagine a pastor or a busy ministry leader reading these words and cringing at the thought of adding yet another task to an already overflowing workload. My experience is that when God is calling a church to a new kind of ministry, he will provide the leadership and resources.

In our case, the answer came in the person of Lori Walters. Lori and her husband, Jeff, have been faithful members of Faith for decades and have served in all sorts of leadership roles. Lori has a very interesting gift mix because her degree is in engineering, which gives her the ability to carefully track details and processes, yet she also has an extremely compassionate heart for people in need.

We asked Lori to consider leading our church's neighborhood restoration efforts. She and Jeff faithfully prayed about our request and believed it would please the Lord for her to accept this position. I later asked Lori to explain the thought process behind her decision. She said:

God has been faithfully preparing me for this season of life by growing a heart and passion in me for people who are struggling. He did this in various ways, but the significant ones were by friends who challenged us to step out of our comfort zones and walk alongside people who were in crisis, pastors who encouraged us to serve in the community, and publications like *World Magazine* that showcase how believers all over our nation creatively minister to the hurting.

One big excitement in this kind of work is in the imagery it provides. As we are busy restoring houses and neighborhoods, it points to the ultimate restorative work of Christ. In addition, as one follows best practices in community development work, you concentrate on doing life alongside people. This focus allows one to practice incarnational living—to be the hands and feet of Jesus—and builds such rich soil in which relationships can grow. Being one of God's representatives in the city of Lafayette is an amazing privilege.

Do you have a Lori Walters in your church family? Perhaps it is a retired contractor who still has some tread on his tires. However, it may be someone who has few construction skills but whom God has given a giant heart for people in need. It could even be a team of men and women with a diverse group of talents who could lead your neighborhood revitalization efforts together. I would encourage you to raise this question at your next leadership meeting and prayerfully ask the Lord to help you identify the best person or team.

A Transformational Model

Finding projects is usually the easy part. Most communities have an area of town that is distressed in some way. It might only be one particular home on a certain block, or it might be entire neighborhoods. The model feels very counterintuitive

because you are essentially looking for the worst house on the worst block in town. It is the house hated by everyone else on the block. The one that has fallen into disrepair and is dragging down the property values of all the other neighboring homes. The one you know you are going to have to invest some time and money in.

In our case, here's what the process looks like in real time. We buy such a house and often first send in a group of teenagers . . . with sledgehammers. That generally gets everyone's attention. People up and down the block wonder what those crazy young people are doing in the "drug house" or the "fire house." They even suspect some sort of possible illegal activity. Of course, the real reason the teens are there is to begin gutting the property. I have found that young people love this kind of work. They can do it together and in a way that really makes a difference.

Say Hello to Mrs. Migilicutty

At noon the teens go outside and have their lunch on the lawn. That is when they meet Mrs. Migilicutty—the elderly next-door neighbor who has been watching the kids' every move from behind her living room picture window. She is prepared for the worst when she marches over to learn what these wild young'uns are doing in the neighborhood.

Imagine Mrs. Migilicutty's shock when she hears the teens are from an area church. They are not there to cause trouble—they are there to fix up the house next door. The teens then start talking to her and learn that she's lived on the street for over sixty years. She and her husband raised their children there, and in its day the neighborhood was a great place to live. But now her hubby has died and her children moved to the coasts. So she is alone and frightened as she sees the deteriorating conditions around her. That is why she is thrilled to hear what the young people are doing.

The kids also find that their new elderly friend has several challenges at her own home. Her bushes are overgrown and the porch needs a coat of paint. She is stunned when the teens offer to help her as well. Of course, they don't know how to trim bushes or paint porches very well, but with Mrs. Migilicutty's eyesight, it will not matter anyhow. And now she has some new friends.

Next Saturday when the teens return, Mrs. Migilicutty is ready with a fresh plate of homemade cookies and a smile. She also mentions the veteran down the street in need of a ramp built to his front door and a single mom on the next

block whose roof is leaking. Pretty soon the youth pastor is on the phone, calling for reinforcements from the singles group and the retired men's Bible study.

Perhaps more importantly, other neighbors begin coming out of their houses and looking for projects they have neglected for too long. The "let's clean things up together" spirit begins spreading, and now the entire block is being renovated.

This Is Achievable

Practically any church or group of churches could do this. I would encourage you to take the steps I have outlined. Educate yourself and your team about the nature and depth of the need. Identify the logical leader or leadership team in your church. Contact someone in your city's redevelopment office or a local real estate agent and ask them to help you identify a distressed property. Pool your resources, purchase it, and renovate it at whatever pace and scale God allows. Then prayerfully identify a person or family who is in need of housing and work with them at whatever level is necessary. It might mean establishing a graduated rent program. It could mean weekly visits to review budgets and address challenges or conflicts that have arisen in the family. What would happen if every church in your town sought to do this with at least one property?

The same mentality could be applied to local parks or distressed commercial buildings. The more Faith Church thought about restoring neighborhoods, the more we delighted in that aspect of living and demonstrating the power of the gospel.

The Power of Collaboration and Wraparound Services

One reason churches can be so effective at neighborhood restoration work is that we can also provide an array of wraparound services for the people in our communities. It is much more than renovating a distressed property. It is also facilitating relationships, teaching classes, providing mentors, and offering the hundreds and hundreds of other resources available by being part of a local church.

We have also learned the wisdom of collaborating with others instead of trying to do it all ourselves. Solomon's admonitions that "two are better than one" and "a cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Eccles. 4:9, 12) are especially relevant in neighborhood restoration.

Is the Lord calling you to this kind of work? Imagine blessing a single mom, a widow, or a veteran by making an upgraded home available to them. That just might be the flywheel you have been looking for.

A Powerful Tool to Consider: Starting a Community Development Corporation

Eventually our city asked us to take the step of formally launching a community development corporation (CDC) and teaming up with them in this important work. That is not to suggest that a church would have to go this direction in order to work at neighborhood revitalization. But a CDC can be a powerful tool because of the available funding streams, the opportunities for community collaboration, and the privilege of serving with and alongside city leaders.

I vaguely recalled hearing the phrase “community development corporation,” but I had never taken the time to investigate how it worked. In retrospect, it is fascinating to me that it was actually the leaders of our city who asked us to consider starting one. The community officials in your area may or may not want churches to partner with them in this way. However, I would encourage you to investigate the concept further and then ask your mayor, city council, county commissioners, or the appropriate agency what they think.

Find a Best Practice Model

Lori Walters has now become the executive director of our Faith Community Development Corporation. One of her initial steps was identifying others who were far more experienced at this type of work. We believe in “borrowing brains” whenever possible. In our case, we found an amazing CDC just an hour away on the east side of Indianapolis, the Englewood Community Development Corporation.

We assembled a team and scheduled a site visit to see what the team at Englewood is doing in their part of God’s harvest field. It was eye-opening, exciting, and inspiring. Some of the specific ways we are trying to serve Lafayette today came directly from that trip. The staff spent the better part of a day with us and answered dozens of questions. It was all very new to us but also in the sweet spot of where we believed the Lord was directing our church family.

I would encourage you to visit Englewood’s website at www.engagewoodcdc.com. Recently, I asked everyone on our Faith staff to spend

at least thirty minutes browsing the site and then circulate five to ten observations to the rest of our team. This is a sampling of what stood out:

- Great list of affordable housing and community services
- Good before/after pictures of revitalization
- Interesting ideas like book reviews/recommendations and herb garden
- Seems to be a mini-clearinghouse for community services
- Creative ideas: rooftop yoga, indoor soccer, and rooftop hockey leagues
- Provide summer jobs for area teens
- Have established a youth running club
- Evident that they love their neighborhood
- Well organized with significant strategic planning
- Know the history of their neighborhood and serve in light of that history
- People of various ethnicities working together
- Seeking to make Indianapolis a beautiful city
- Foster unique partnerships that bring the city together
- Strong emphasis on the arts and horticulture
- A place for people of all ages to be able to grow and live in community
- Amazing array of housing options
- Allow neighborhood businesses to advertise on their page
- Provide low-cost bookkeeping services

This is just a sampling of the hundreds of observations our staff made about Englewood CDC. We are thankful for marvelous people who have gone before us and blazed new ministry trails.

Focus on Existing Assets

One important lesson I have had to learn, at times the hard way, is to view our community through the lens of the assets it contains that can be built upon, as opposed to simply focusing on the needs and problems. I tend to be a fixer by nature—specifically identify the problem and then brainstorm possible solutions. In many areas of life that works very well. My lawn mower does not care if I chide it for its tilted mower deck.

However, coming into a new part of the city as an outsider involves earning the right to talk about problems. That means the flywheel requires many small kicks before it picks up momentum on its own. It also requires focusing on the assets the neighborhood already has and letting the neighbors themselves discuss the needs and problems. The conversation can then be steered to how existing assets can be strengthened and expanded to address the challenges. That subtle shift in attitude can make an incredible difference in the way others perceive your efforts.

Partner with Existing Agencies Whenever Possible

In most communities, there are already a number of social service providers doing many good things around town. Often it is best for a church to find ways to support and strengthen what is already being done as opposed to always going in and starting something new. This is especially true if what the church is contemplating will result in the needless duplication of services.

For example, in a town like ours with a major university, we do not need another organization doing disaster relief in times of fire, flood, or tornadoes. But we do need churches who will help the Red Cross accomplish its all-important work.

This kind of collaboration comes with a significant amount of challenges. I plan to address many of these in the final chapters of this book. But always “going it alone” will not serve you or the community well.

Is This Your Flywheel?

Seeking to restore homes and neighborhoods profoundly affected our church family. We have a congregation that is now more economically and ethnically diverse. Our longtime members are establishing transformational relationships with people they otherwise would have never met. This kind of work is changing us—and it is changing our community. Jim Collins was right—it is “a cumulative process—step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel—that adds up to sustained and spectacular results.”

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE
IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What do you think about the concept of restoring neighborhoods? Is this another way for you to glorify God by loving your community?
2. Do these kinds of activities appeal to your heart? Why or why not?
3. What skills, passions, and experiences has God given you that could be used in this type of work?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. What areas of your community come to mind when you think of places in need of restoration?
2. What public official or community leader could you invite to come educate your team about the needs that exist? Who from your team will take the responsibility to make that contact?
3. Go online as a group and visit www.inglewoodcdc.com. Scroll around the site together and make as many observations as possible about what you see. Is the Lord calling you to similar work? What are the first three steps you need to take to get started?

10

COMMUNITY CENTERS

Constructing Your Next Building with Others in Mind

When the average church designs its building, a committee is established and sometimes an architect is engaged, but the focus is on the needs of the church. Significant attention is placed on the sanctuary—its size, type of seating, sound and lighting systems, and temperature controls. Then the children’s ministry folks are assembled, and sometimes months of discussions ensue about the size of the nursery, the decorations for the children’s ministries area, the security of the check-in system, and so forth. Next come the leaders from the teen department, followed by the singles group, and on and on. It is not unusual in this day and age for a substantial amount of discussion and deliberation to even occur over the issue of the “coffee ministry.”

Two important observations need to be made about this approach. First, often no time is spent considering the needs of the community. There are no discussions at all with the local homeowners association, or neighboring nonprofits and social service providers, or public schools, or individual men and women who live on the church’s borders. Not even sixty seconds in a process that can take months if not years for the church to complete, while Christians focus almost entirely on their own wants and needs.

Second, when the facility is done, it usually sits vacant for over 90 percent of the week. Should it surprise us that the world questions the genuineness of our love when so much of our focus and resources are devoted to ourselves?

Here is the challenge: design your next building specifically for the community first. And then use those same spaces for church programs and ministries as a secondary purpose.

Because Jesus Went about Doing Good

I believe wherever the church goes, the conditions for everyone should improve. Perhaps that is best encapsulated in a delightful summary of Jesus's ministry given by Peter in a pivotal time in the development of the church. The event is laced with overtones of racial reconciliation because God has just allowed Peter to lead a Gentile named Cornelius to place his faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. That was a sea change for Peter as he began to more fully understand that the gospel of Jesus was for people of all ethnicities. His next words are powerful:

Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good." (Acts 10:34–38)

What an incredible summary of the ministry of Jesus Christ. I'm not suggesting that is an end in itself—in fact, Peter goes on to speak about Christ's death, burial, and resurrection in the subsequent verses. But an important starting point in community-based outreach ministry is identifying conditions that are bad and going about doing good.

Getting on Base: Bringing New Life to a Distressed Building

There are multiple ways a church can build a community-focused facility. One option that can be a game changer for a struggling neighborhood is to find a vacant, dilapidated building and renovate it for community use.

In chapter 3, I mentioned an opportunity we were given by our city to purchase the Kooler Keg Bar and transform it into a neighborhood park and recreational center—the Hartford Hub.

Bringing New Life

At one time the Kooler Keg Bar was a neighborhood landmark. Factory workers walked there to devour one of their signature tenderloin sandwiches for lunch or to have a cold one after a long hard day. Even employees from Purdue University would slip over to the Kooler Keg.

As the suburbs flourished, the factories closed, and the interstates bypassed the city, the Kooler Keg and the surrounding neighborhood started to decay. Homes that had previously been well kept became rentals owned by distant and sometimes irresponsible landlords. Crime and drug use increased, and eventually

the Kooler Keg went out of business. The neighborhood landmark became a community eyesore.

At some point the ownership of the bar fell to the City of Lafayette because of unpaid taxes. Then it sat for years attracting rodents, mold, and even a few squatters who took up residence in the dilapidated structure.

Do you have a similar building in your town? The one that is a community eyesore? The one that is dragging down everyone else's property values? The one everyone hates? What would "going about doing good" look like in that situation?

A Pretty Good Deal

The city offered to sell us the Kooler Keg for one dollar, which was about ninety-nine cents more than it was worth. Our mayor asked us to turn a negative into a positive.

Isn't that exactly what the gospel does on every level imaginable? We should be the ones known for bringing hope, help, and healing to every aspect of community life. We just go about doing good.

After taking possession of the property, we surveyed the neighbors to learn more about the needs that existed in that particular part of town. At first it was challenging because many of the residents were renting their homes or apartments and often led a transitory life. They also wondered, and rightfully so, if they could trust us because our skin color was often different and we came from another part of town. But over time they began asking about a safe, well-equipped neighborhood park along with a neighborhood center where the children could go after school and on the weekends to receive homework assistance and have fun activities. They wondered if the building could also be available for birthday parties, community classes, mentoring and counseling programs, and other activities that would strengthen families and neighborhoods. That's how the Hartford Hub was born.

You Could Do That

A local architectural firm took an interest in the project and provided all the design work at a significantly reduced cost. The city council voted to give money, as did a local automotive plant—knowing full well that our church would own and operate the center. Sure, a few progressives grouched about money being given to a faith-based organization, but most people rolled their eyes because of the obvious need. And it certainly wasn't like a lot of other

groups were standing in line to make it happen. Our church family quickly raised the rest of the funds. One lesson I've learned over the years is that many Christians love this kind of restorative work—it resonates with something deep in their souls.

I wish you could have been there on the day we broke ground. It was wintertime, so we put up a tent and constructed a dirt box just outside it with loosened soil since the ground was frozen. We placed gold shovels next to the box. Our contractor tied three ropes to upper-story windows of the Kooler Keg. We had the neighbors, the mayor, area businesses, and all sorts of people from our church on hand. At the appointed moment we had a brief ground-breaking ceremony around the dirt box. Then we grabbed the ropes and symbolically pulled the old Kooler Keg to the ground.

In remembrance of the Kooler Keg's better days, the youth group prepared tenderloin sandwiches. The mayor and the neighbors loved that touch and talked excitedly about the transformation that was about to take place.

What struck me most about that experience was what happened next. As I came out of the tent, dozens of neighborhood children were playing in the dirt box with the gold shovels. Finally something fun was going to happen on that dilapidated corner of their neighborhood.

Get Your Sewing Machine Ready

Once the building and neighborhood park were completed, we sent volunteers to spend time with the kids and their families after school and on weekends. And that is the key by far—*spending time*. One college student taught young people how to assemble and program a robot. Other volunteers helped with homework or played basketball. We also offered faith-based counseling and classes on jobs training and financial management. We were just going about trying to do good, and remarkable things happened.

The question each church and congregant needs to ask is this: Are we doing good with the facilities we renovate or build? Perhaps the building committee needs a larger vision to have a more balanced approach to facility design.

One day a church member asked if the kids at this new urban neighborhood center would like to learn how to sew. As she was a former counselee of mine, I knew this woman struggled with social anxiety. The transformative power of the gospel in this woman's life was a clear demonstration of how Jesus goes about doing good at the level of the soul. However, her question was one of those times when I wasn't sure how to answer tactfully, because I truly didn't think urban children would have any interest in learning how to sew.

A few weeks later I received pictures of a large group of boys and girls huddled around a woman whose skin color was different than theirs and who was decades older than them. They joyfully and attentively watched what she was doing on her sewing machine. Subsequent pictures showed these young people proudly displaying items they had sewn themselves.

That was a humbling lesson for this pastor to learn. There is still a lot about urban ministry I do not know and understand. But I know this: never underestimate the power and efficacy of one person simply spending time with another person.

Where's Your Bar?

Practically every town has a Cooler Keg. It might be an old house, a bankrupt business, or a vacated factory. Most cities have dozens, if not hundreds, of such properties on their rolls and would love to have someone renovate them. It really does not take much to acquire a property, develop a ministry plan, assemble the funding, and make it a reality. After all, we are serving the resurrected Savior of heaven. He can and will do amazing things if we trust him to do so.

This past Sunday I greeted all sorts of marvelous individuals at church, including a number of people we have met at the Hartford Hub. Going about doing good isn't an end in itself. The Lord uses those kinds of activities and interactions as a launching pad to draw people to himself.

Last summer I spent an afternoon picking up hamburgers, brats, onion rings, baked beans, watermelon, ice cream, and all the sides for an exciting pool party and picnic at our house. Our guests? Forty kids and leaders from the Hartford Hub. They even threatened to throw me in my own pool—and I told them if they want to try that, they better bring more friends. Though I regretted those words before the sun went down, I was thankful a group of urban teens wanted to spend a Friday night hanging out at the pastor's pool. Loving your community produces delightful results.

Hitting a Home Run: Building a Community Center

What might follow a small construction project like the Hartford Hub? Our answer has been to build a large stand-alone community center.

I've learned I would much rather deliver a sermon in the same space where community members were playing basketball earlier in the week than a space

that has sat dark and unused. A passionate, meaningful, well-attended, and life-changing service does not require an expensive worship center.

Many, if not most, churches already have a worship center as a core part of their facility. Praise the Lord for that. But what are you going to do if the Lord blesses your community outreach activities with additional people? More specifically, what are you going to *build* next?

The model we are pursuing in our corner of God's kingdom work is to construct community centers focused on loving our neighbors throughout the week and that we can use for worship services on Sundays.

Listening Carefully to Your Neighbors

Many communities have already conducted some kind of needs assessment. Check with your elected officials and local foundations for the latest versions, and carefully study what needs the people in your town have identified. Consider hosting input nights and focus groups. Questions such as "What are the greatest needs that exist in our part of town?" or "How do we do a better job of serving our community?" are easy discussion starters. I would encourage you to go into those conversations prayerfully and humbly, with the distinct belief that the Lord will teach you something important about ministry.

Designing Creatively

We were amazed at how many of the ideas our neighbors raised could be accomplished in a facility we could utilize for Sunday services with little modification. For example, our neighbors asked for infant care and preschool services. We could do that throughout the week and use the same spaces for our nursery and youth Sunday school classes on the Lord's Day. They asked for meeting rooms for birthday parties, weekday classes, and community forums. Spaces could be provided for those activities throughout the week and then used for Adult Bible Fellowships on Sundays.

Faith East is very similar to a YMCA facility. We made it separate from the other buildings on our campus because we want our neighbors to feel comfortable as they come and enjoy the various amenities and programs.

The building has two gymnasiums for community athletics, multiple meeting rooms, a large preschool, and an indoor playground for small children. We also included a fitness center, indoor swimming pool, locker rooms, and a special area for teenagers. Our neighbors encouraged us to have a clothing closet and food pantry for those struggling financially, as well as a community cafe, and we

were happy to include such spaces. On the land adjacent to the facility, we also installed a professional-grade skate park, outdoor athletic fields, and a community park with walking trails and fishing platforms.

Enjoying the Fruit

The number of opportunities to interact with neighbors went off the charts after we built this first community center. It was far easier to get to know our neighbors as a result of having spaces where we could spend time together throughout the week. We have had many opportunities to connect people to our counseling ministry or one of our church services. That process often starts with a relationship of love, serving, and meeting needs.

Refining the Process: Faith West

After Faith East was stabilized and growing, we looked to the other side of town. We had always desired a ministry presence in West Lafayette near Purdue University, a Big Ten school with forty thousand students, many from nations around the world. The challenge was financial because property in that part of town is very expensive.

While the community center concept is not first and foremost about money, the truth is, this concept can open up new funding sources for ministry. Empty buildings do not generate any cash flow. However, community ministries throughout the week, even when very conservatively priced, can frequently offset facility costs.

The Lord allowed us to purchase an ideal location near the entrance to the university. As we learned about the community's needs, we were amazed that our new west-side neighbors had similar concerns to those expressed a few years earlier by the people who lived around Faith East.

They asked for a community gym because indoor recreational space was so hard to find. As we developed the business plan, we determined that the community ministries throughout the week could pay for a substantial portion of the building's utility costs. For example, we have a local fencing club that rents the gym on Wednesdays—in the identical place where I preach God's Word on Sundays. They are thrilled to have access to such a great space. And I'm happy that their involvement offsets the cost our church has to pay to use the gym for worship.

In response to the desires of our neighbors, we built Faith West with community meeting rooms, because Purdue students often struggle to find places

to discuss group projects they are assigned. We in turn use those same rooms for the biblical counseling ministry we make available to that part of the community on Mondays. The building has a large preschool that serves our neighbors throughout the week but then is used for our children's ministries on Sundays. We have a fitness center, locker rooms, and 119 apartments for university students.

We also invited those who live around us to have a say in the height of the building, the location on the site, the colors, and the installation of outside amenities such as a children's playground and a community walking trail.

Another significant lesson we learned was the power of collaboration. Our neighbors asked us to consider having a restaurant at Faith West. We didn't have the horsepower to do that well, so we contacted a local businessman who owned several restaurants and asked if he wanted to lease a space in our new center. It was a risk for him to be associated with a project owned by a Bible-believing church, and it was a risk for us because we did not know how successful a restaurant would be.

By God's grace, it has been a match made in heaven. When the restaurant's tables are all filled, guests flow into our community center spaces to eat. Many of our own activities are enhanced because there is a great place to eat under the same roof.

Most importantly, Faith West has allowed us to have a ministry presence at the entrance to a major university where our focus is on loving our neighbors well. Many of those who live right around the facility consider it to be *their* community center, which is precisely what we hoped would happen. We love it when a neighbor comes in with a friend, points to a particular room or amenity, and says, "That was my idea." We want our neighbors to have many reasons to say things like "You listened to us when designing this project" and "That church over there really loves us."

Going Downtown: The Northend Community Center

Our community leaders challenged us to take the community center concept we had implemented in the suburbs and implement it on the north end of town, a delightful section of the community that was experiencing urban distress.

The lesson we learned about the power of collaboration when installing a restaurant at Faith West motivated us to meet with several secular nonprofits and ask about building a community center together. Faith would retain ownership and operational responsibility, but our partners would have dedicated spaces they could build out however they wished to advance their mission.

With guidance from the city and the United Way, twelve nonprofits joined the Northend Community Center project, including Big Brothers Big Sisters and Meals on Wheels. We also have an entity offering Head Start programs for preschool children, the Tippecanoe Senior Center providing senior programming, Family Promise working with homeless families, and Car Works providing low-cost auto care for single moms, families in distress, senior citizens, and veterans. Two of my favorite partners are the Latino Center for Wellness and Education, and the Hanna Center, which has been serving our African American population and other minority persons for seventy-five years.

We also provide a cluster of shared amenities, including a large gymnasium, an indoor pool, a fitness center, a co-working studio where students can do their homework and small businesses can have space to work during the day, community classrooms, a shared staff lounge, a shared copier room, a walking track, and even a rooftop street hockey court.

We are so excited about the project that we have moved all of our church offices to this facility along with our biblical counseling center, our seminary, and our community development corporation. We believe this will be an incredible opportunity for doing ministry for Christ in the heart of our community seven days a week.

You Never Know Who Might Be Impacted

Not long after we opened Faith East, a fifth-grade teacher from a public school called me. She explained that each year she asked her students to write a book. She found the subject one of her students wrote about fascinating: Faith East Community Center. I recently caught up with that young man, and here is what he had to say.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

A Fifth Grader's Story: "Fun at Faith!"

I grew up in a Hispanic household near Faith's east-side campus. The church constructed their first community center when I was in elementary school.

In fifth grade, our teacher at the local public school encouraged us to write a book about a topic that was meaningful to us. I chose to write on the subject of "Fun at Faith." I spoke about how much I liked the pool, the skate park, and the gyms. It was just a safe,

enjoyable place for me and other kids from the neighborhood to go after school and on weekends.

Looking back, I chuckle at how of all the things I could have written about at that time in my life, I chose to describe a church's community center. I think more than anything else, I just appreciated the way we were treated when we came into the building. The staff and volunteers made us feel like they cared about us as individuals and they wanted us to come in after school and on the weekends and have a good time.

Now I'm a young adult and into my first career. I am thankful for all the people in my life who guided me into making healthy life choices. I could not be where I am today without them. And I really appreciate how as a boy growing up in the neighborhood, when I was looking for something to do, I could always go have fun at Faith.

You Can Do This

Some of this might sound a bit outside the box. The path the Lord has for you and your ministry might be entirely different from ours. However, loving your community is an adventure that can produce marvelous fruit to the glory of God. It might even be the subject of your neighborhood fifth grader's next book.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What is your personal response to what you are reading? Are you challenged? Encouraged? Something else?
2. When you think about what you would like the Lord to accomplish in and through you between now and the end of your life on earth, how much of it involves community ministry?
3. Could the development of some kind of community center be part of the fulfillment of that dream?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. List the ten most distressed buildings in your town. Do you know who owns those buildings? Who in the group could find out? How much do you think each of them would cost?
2. Is there a logical place in your town that could use a community center? Perhaps a separate building on your existing site (like Faith East)? Or a new building on a new site in a suburb (like Faith West) or an urban area (like the Northend Community Center)? How could your next building be more about your neighbors and less about you?
3. Distribute sheets of paper and draw out possible uses of those buildings. What community needs could be met under those roofs? Who are the logical collaborative partners? What role could gospel-centered ministry play?

11

RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT PROGRAMS

Demonstrating God's Power to Change Lives

Several years ago, I talked with a local sheriff about the pressing needs he saw in our community. While he was grateful for the church groups who came through the jail to offer Bible studies and prayer meetings with his prisoners, he said it would make an even greater impact to “stand at the back door and meet the inmates when they are released.”

Often these individuals have burned many of their bridges and are alienated from family and other support systems. Their criminal record also makes it harder to find employment. All of this leaves them ripe to return to the very people, places, and patterns that resulted in their incarceration in the first place.

As we talked, it became clear the sheriff was not just spouting off impersonal statistics about recidivism. He cared about these men and women who had been under his care for many months, and in some cases years, and it troubled him to see them again as repeat offenders. His next question was both a challenge and a plea: Can the church help?

A Battle in Every City

My guess is that wherever you are, whether in a large city or the rural countryside, drug and alcohol abuse, along with other addictive behaviors, are on the rise. Quick internet searches will reveal statistics that are overwhelming. Local political, nonprofit, or hospital foundations may also publish annual health needs assessments. I encourage you to carefully study this kind of data, particularly looking at the statistical gap between those needing treatment for

substance abuse and those for whom treatment is readily available. The numbers are staggering, especially when you consider that often the persons who need help the most can afford it the least. Please allow our sheriff's question to deeply and prayerfully penetrate your heart: *Can the church help?*

Here's the challenge—begin praying, dreaming, and planning to open a residential treatment program in your town for men and women struggling with addictions. Perhaps you can do this as an individual church or a group of congregations working together. Every ministry context is unique. Whatever the case, helping people overcome substance abuse and other forms of addiction might be one of the most powerful ways you could love your community and demonstrate the bright light of Christ's redeeming grace.

Building on Your Existing Counseling Ministry

I have been involved in the biblical counseling movement for over thirty years, and I'm excited about the number of people and churches around the world who are taking steps to get involved in biblical counseling. The thoughts in this chapter are a way to expand on a biblical counseling ministry.

If you have made your counseling ministry available to the community, you have probably come across individuals who are in need of far greater care than just a counseling appointment one hour per week. They may have been recently released from jail. They may be homeless or unable to keep a job. Perhaps they have a horrible story of abuse and are suffering in all sorts of ways. In short, these individuals would benefit greatly from a residential program that provides decent housing, daily mentoring, a job, and an opportunity to reset spiritually, physically, emotionally, mentally, and relationally. Can the church help?

A Delightful Way to Serve Women in Need

Consider the women in your community who are struggling with some sort of addiction. Often, these women have stories of horrible abuse. Usually something happened, and often repeatedly, to create a context in which binge drinking, drug abuse, or self-harm practices began.

Just Like Our Savior

Our Lord's interactions with women in the Gospels is fascinating. For example, he went out of his way to interact with the adulterous Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). Practically every descriptive word in that sentence would have given the average Jewish male in that culture a reason to avoid her. However, Jesus engaged her in a marvelous conversation about life-giving water that would satisfy her deepest thirst.

On another occasion, a group of men brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery and suggested she should be stoned (John 8). Oddly, they forgot to bring the man. The men were dumbfounded when Jesus said, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7). Just like every single word in the Bible, each word in that sentence matters a lot, in this case especially the pronouns. The "he's" need to treat the "her's" with dignity, respect, and concern.

As our counseling ministry developed over the years, we realized that some of the girls and women we served had been victimized in unspeakable ways. We were shocked and saddened to hear the ways some wicked men had treated these women. We began dreaming and praying and planning for a home where we could provide comprehensive, compassionate care.

Following the Lord's Leading

At Faith Church, we believe in dreaming. We are not a museum, where we have God under glass while we speak in hushed tones about the great things he used to do. Of course we celebrate his mighty deeds in the past, but we also affirm that he is alive and at work in his world and his people today. Therefore, we prayerfully anticipate the ways he might seek to show himself among us. We believe the Lord was honored when we cried out for him to help us serve at-risk women.

I will never forget the day a local foundation contacted us about this desire. It was already a busy time for us because we were constructing our first community center and also launching our free church-based seminary program. However, the foundation leader explained that she too had been praying about helping someone start a faith-based residential treatment center for girls ages fourteen to twenty-eight struggling with unplanned pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, and self-harm. She said she was coming to the conclusion that Faith Church should be the church to make this dream a reality.

At first I balked at the idea because current projects had already tapped us out financially. This foundation leader persisted, suggesting that because we already had a church, a school, a counseling center, extra property, and a soon-to-be-

completed community center, we would be the ideal entity to assume this responsibility.

Finally, she talked me into at least investigating the cost. So we visited several best-practice models and wrote a brief feasibility study that showed that a facility capable of serving twenty-four young women at a time would cost \$1.25 million to build. We also explained that even if we had that kind of money, we still would not take on such a large responsibility unless we also had half the operating budget for the first ten years committed in advance—another \$1.25 million.

We explained that our research gave us 2.5 million reasons why we couldn't launch a residential treatment center. You can imagine our shock when the foundation essentially said, "Fine, we would like to give you \$2.5 million."

That began the beautiful story of our Vision of Hope (VOH) ministry. (Learn more about VOH at <https://www.faithlafayette.org/voh>.) When our local newspaper announced the gift on their front page, the local juvenile judge sent me a message using her government-issued computer that said, "Praise the Lord!" Finally, our town would have a resource that could serve at-risk girls in a faith-based environment and a beautiful residential setting.

When a local contractor heard what had happened, he offered to provide all the labor for the project free of charge. That allowed us to devote the entire construction grant to the materials alone. The gentleman also told us that he wanted to make the building unusually beautiful to be sure that when the young women walked through the front door, they knew we loved them and were eagerly waiting to serve them with compassion and excellence. For many of our residents, this is the first home they have ever had without abuse, hatred, and violence. God allowed our dream to come true in an astounding fashion.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Heather Starkweather's Story: "But God . . ."

My name is Heather Starkweather, and I have served as a biblical counselor at Vision of Hope for over ten years. What I love about this ministry is the opportunity to be a part of God's work in the lives of hurting women. Women come to Vision of Hope broken. They are broken by the way they have been sinned against. Broken by the results of living in a sin-cursed world—enduring suffering from events like tornadoes, health problems, and many types of traumatic experiences. They are also broken by their own sin and the consequences that result. But God . . .

We see these words in Psalm 73:26, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Having the privilege of witnessing God's power as women find healing, hope, and freedom through Christ is amazing!

Biblical residential care is unique. Not only do we meet for counseling once a week, we also get to live life alongside these women each day. We have the advantage of seeing their interactions with staff, interns, volunteers, and each other. We see how they make good choices to love God and others, and we see times when they choose sin.

This allows us to serve them even better during our counseling times because we can talk through the situations we have seen during the week. It is so exciting when we are able to celebrate their victories and praise God because he enabled them to walk in faithfulness.

Focusing on the Heart

We have the privilege of systematically using God's Word to help each of these young women recognize and change behaviors at the level of the heart. Drinking, abusing drugs, cutting, or bingeing and purging food are symptomatic of what is occurring in the soul. That is why Solomon said, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23).

We use a phased approach where our residents begin in a highly controlled environment. They are not allowed to have cell phones or leave the facility unsupervised. We immediately begin intensive training along with individual and group counseling. The women also begin life skills and vocational training. Our residents have regular chores around the house and are expected to learn to interact with the other young women in a godly, appropriate fashion. This phase is provided free of charge, although their families are invited to provide monthly support if possible and appropriate.

Phase 2 begins after a young woman has achieved the appropriate milestones in her recovery, usually after six to twelve months of care. At that point, she begins to have additional freedoms, including increased unsupervised interactions in our community. We expect our residents at that point to get a job in our community and to begin paying a small amount for their room and board. They continue to live in the home and receive ongoing intensive counseling.

Phase 3 occurs when a resident is ready to move out of the home and either into some kind of apartment in our community or back to her hometown. This is when the greatest risk of recidivism occurs, so we continue to provide regular counseling, either in person or using some kind of video conference program. If she has returned home, our goal is to also include a church in her area as part of the long-term care plan.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Kaitlin Wright's Story: Capturing Christ's Hope-Filled Vision

My name is Kaitlin Wright, and I came to Vision of Hope (VOH) in June 2010 because I was struggling with anorexia, depression, and self-harm tendencies. What I found at VOH was life! I can only credit Christ with giving me my life back, but he used the staff and interns at VOH to show me who he is and what his purpose is for my life.

Before coming to VOH, my life was a cycle of attempts to find happiness, security, and love however it best suited me—through addictions and creating myself into the image I thought others wanted me to be. At VOH, I found what it means to love and trust a perfect Savior and what it means to glorify him with my life because of what he has done for me.

Today, I am no longer a slave to what other people think about me or who I want myself to be. I am content to worship and enjoy a God who created me for that purpose. I am happily married and serving in both my local church and community—and sharing what God has done in my life so others can find the same hope I found.

What I would like to say to anyone who is prayerfully considering a ministry like this is that God is in the business of changing lives, and he uses places like VOH and people like the staff and interns to speak life into hopeless people. He used this ministry to show me biblical answers to the problems I was dealing with, and to do it in a safe and secure environment filled with people committed to following Christ and sharing his hope with others. The structure of a residential program became a necessity for me, and I am so thankful for the servant hearts that lead the VOH ministry.

Immersed in the Love of the Body of Christ

One of the most powerful aspects of the program is that the VOH building is located on our Faith East campus. The young ladies attend church with that particular congregation and develop meaningful relationships in worship services and especially the Adult Bible Fellowship (Sunday school class) they attend. We want them to know that we all recognize our need for spiritual growth and we are happy to join hands with them and grow in Christ together.

I love watching the older, more mature women in our church build friendships with our VOH residents. They either come to the home and spend time making crafts or trying out new recipes, or have the young ladies to their homes for all sorts of social activities. This is why the local church is the ideal place for a residential treatment program—because of the power of Christ-centered redemptive relationships.

In a Context of Serving

People involved in addictive behaviors are often consumed with pleasing themselves. As they work on addressing issues of the heart in counseling, we also teach them to begin using their hands to serve the Lord and others. They perform custodial work at our community centers. They mow the lawns for everyone who lives in our adjacent senior living community. They take care of all the landscaping around our community park. They also volunteer for an almost endless array of serving opportunities that come up around our church week in and week out.

Over time, these young ladies become a very important part of our church family because of all of the ways they joyfully serve others. They learn that the long-term satisfaction of properly serving is far better than the short-term thrill of an addictive high.

Celebrating the Victories

When a young lady is ready to graduate, we make a big deal to commend her for her work and to praise the Lord for his faithful and steadfast love. The graduate's friends and family often attend along with the other residents, staff, board members, and people from our church family. A local jeweler even designed a special ring that we present to each graduate as a reminder to continue following the Lord in the days ahead.

Why Not You?

I wonder how many readers might have a similar dream. Please remember this—what we are talking about in this chapter is scalable. At Faith Church, we chose to serve twenty-four young ladies at a time because that seemed like the appropriate number for us, but there is nothing stopping you from having a similar ministry to two or three people in a single-family home. The entire prospect might appear daunting at first, but the Lord blesses those who seek to trust him for marvelous ministry opportunities. Watching the Lord miraculously transform a young woman's life makes it all worthwhile.

A Powerful Way to Help Men Get Back on Track

I can almost hear some readers saying, “But what about something for men?” I am familiar with this response because I began hearing it almost as soon as the Lord allowed us to launch Vision of Hope. There is no question that many communities would be well served by a faith-based addictions recovery program for men.

Because God Provides

Our counseling center brought in men who were struggling with drug and alcohol abuse. Though we weren’t experts, we knew that if we were going to develop a residential treatment ministry for men, we would need another piece of property, because residential programs for men and women on the same site is a recipe for disaster. Therefore, we asked the Lord to provide a different piece of property if that is what he wanted us to pursue.

One day, a family from outside our church asked to meet with us. They explained that they had recently sold a business and they faced a significant tax liability unless they made a sizeable charitable contribution to some nonprofit organization. They had watched us over the years and wondered if we would be willing to accept a gift of a one-hundred-acre farm that had already been zoned for sixteen duplex-ready lots, along with a partially restored barn dating back to the 1800s and an existing single-family home. They went on to explain that they would also need to give additional cash in order to offset their tax liability.

We prayed about it—probably for about three seconds—and decided the Lord would be pleased. The property, known as Bethany Farms, is about twelve miles from our Faith East campus, which is an ideal proximity for the kind of men’s ministry we envisioned. We chose the name Restoration Men’s Ministry to encapsulate our hope and prayer for this endeavor. (Learn more about Restoration at <https://www.faithlafayette.org/restoration>.)

It Is Still about the Heart

Just like with our women at VOH, the core issue with men is to get to the heart of their addiction. The focus is not simply on the drugs, alcohol, or pornography. Instead, those behaviors provide an opportunity to explore what is occurring in a man’s thoughts and desires. We practice biblical soul care, not behavior modification. That is why we are so thankful for the sufficient Word of God that is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Creating a Strong Work Ethic

People struggling with addictions also often lack a strong, biblical work ethic. To that end, after an initial six-week assessment and intensive counseling process, our Restoration men begin working second shift at a local pallet factory. Their wages are paid to the ministry to offset their room, board, and program expenses. They also begin to learn the discipline of working hard, the joy of being held accountable to produce a certain amount of product each shift, and the importance of following orders from one's boss. This is all new territory for our guys, but they know in their hearts that it is exactly what they need.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Greg Wetterlin's Story: Service and Sacrifice for Their Savior

My name is Greg Wetterlin, and I had the privilege of working with Faith Church to launch Restoration Men's Ministry. What I love about working with men in addictions is that almost all of them come in with a goal of getting sober. But they learn rather quickly that we don't talk about sobriety very often. We talk about pleasing the Lord and living to glorify our Savior, Jesus Christ. The men who really grab hold of the vision found in Scripture for living to glorify Christ are men who recognize that sobriety is a by-product of living for Christ. Husbands and fathers who have graduated from the program leave excited not only about sobriety but about serving and sacrificing for their spouse and raising their kids in the nurture and admonition of the Lord!

Men who have done nothing but consume resources and use people around them leave Restoration wanting to be plugged into the local church in order to serve others and to work hard to be able to give and support the church and its various ministries. I love that!

God created men to lead and influence others for his glory. The men coming into the program typically haven't been leaders (definitely not in a positive way), haven't been servant-oriented, and haven't been sober. I love that they do not just leave sober yet still poor leaders and selfish. Rather, they leave as leaders, servants, and sober, all for the glory of Christ!

Jobs Training

While the intensive counseling and work ethic components are critical parts of the process, another important ingredient is jobs training. Ultimately, if someone

is going to be able to earn a living wage in our culture, they need to learn a trade or marketable skill, or develop the skill set necessary to start their own business.

This is why the Restoration Men's Ministry began several sustainable businesses where the men can work before their second shift responsibilities at the pallet factory. For our first endeavor, we purchased a portable sawmill and installed it in the barn. Our guys also built a wood-drying kiln and outfitted a complete woodshop on the second floor of the barn.

Local tree-cutting companies now bring us their unwanted logs so our men can cut them up, dry the wood, and then in some cases install it on jobs calling for a reclaimed wood application. Our new Northend Community Center has several reclaimed wood walls that are powerful reminders of the change the Lord can make in a person's life.

We have also started a commercial tree nursery at Bethany Farms. Our men planted over two thousand trees in our first year of operation. They are learning the basic financial and organizational principles necessary to start and sustain a business.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STORY

Joe Fornwall's Story: God Is Sufficient

My name is Joe Fornwall, and I came to Restoration in January of 2017 because I was struggling with opiate addiction. By that time, I was estranged from my wife and children and facing the likelihood of losing my family forever.

What I found at Restoration Men's Ministry was truth. There was no secret formula or magical program, because only God's truth can transform a life in a way that makes a difference for eternity. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and Restoration Men's Ministry is dedicated to teaching the truth of Christ through the study of Scripture.

A foundational principle from Scripture that I embraced while at Restoration is that God's grace is sufficient for me and his power is perfected in my weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). As I look back now at a decade of drug abuse and self-destruction, I am truly thankful that God allowed me to go through it. Because of my struggles, I could see more clearly my desperate need for a Savior—causing me to cry out to God to forgive and redeem me. Because of my weakness and sin, I can now see the perfection of God's power in the way he has so radically transformed someone like me. The program helped me examine and change areas of my heart that fueled my addictions. I have learned that every counseling problem is ultimately a theological problem.

Today, by God's grace, I have been restored to the Lord, my wife, and my children. Sitting around the dinner table and seeing my beautiful family is living proof of the power of God to restore lives that were broken. To God be the glory—great things he has done.

Amazingly, Restoration even hired me to help lead our new Restoration Sawmill and Hardwoods—a business we started to sustain the ministry. God has given me the opportunity to work with the men in the program and teach an occupational skill that prepares them to secure a good-paying job after graduating from our program. Now I have the ministry of encouraging them with the same encouragement God has given to me (2 Cor. 1:4).

To anyone who is considering entering a ministry like Restoration to receive help with your addictions, I would like to encourage you that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly more than you could ask or think (Eph. 3:20–21). His power is made perfect in our weakness, and I know that Christ through the power of his Word can change your life because he changed mine. If you believe God is leading you to start a similar ministry, please follow his calling. A family just like mine may be in your future, and I hope you will be ready to serve them well.

Mentoring by Older Men Still Full of Sap

Psalm 92:12–15 contains a delightful picture of godly men in their old age:

The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree,
He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
Planted in the house of the LORD,
They will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still yield fruit in old age;
They shall be full of sap and very green,
To declare that the LORD is upright;
He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.

As a pastor, I have loved watching some of our older men volunteer out at Restoration. We have stockbrokers who teach finance classes and physicians who provide in-depth faith-based counseling. There are engineers who work alongside the men in the woodshop and plant managers who help the residents cut brush on the farm. It is life-on-life discipleship with men who may be getting old but are still “full of sap and very green” on the inside because of their love for God and his people.

Again, Why Not You?

You may have dreamt about this idea over the years as well. Just like with Vision of Hope, a men’s program such as Restoration is scalable. Maybe you and your church family are at the point where you could care for one man. Why not get started then? Usually the Lord blesses people who are already moving in the right direction. What I have learned over the years is that when the Lord desires

to unusually magnify his character and works among you, he can and will do it in ways that will take your breath away. To God be the glory, great things he has done.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Have you ever thought about starting some kind of residential treatment program for people in your town struggling with addictions? Write down what you have dreamt about over the years.
2. What are the greatest obstacles to accomplishing this dream? How could those obstacles be overcome?
3. What are the first steps in moving forward? Why not you? Why not now?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. As a group, research the statistics in your area related to addictions. What are the greatest needs?
2. Should you care about these needs? Should the church? Do you?
3. What are the first steps in moving forward as a group? Why not you? Why not now?



PART 3

**THE CHALLENGES OF
COMMUNITY-BASED
MINISTRY**

12

ANSWERING COMMON OBJECTIONS

I understand and respect that the approach to ministry I am advocating in these pages has the potential to raise all sorts of questions. Even if these ideas are resonating in your heart, you may have other members of your team who are not quite convinced.

In many ways this book is the culmination of over thirty years of praying and thinking and working at how to most effectively lead a church family in these fascinating days in our culture. I realize some of these ideas may be brand-new to you and your team, and it will take time to process this through the grid of your understanding of the Word of God.

I have also had the privilege of meeting with many teams who travel to our town to tour our facilities and talk about ministry together. The questions below are the ones I have heard most often about community-based outreach ministry.

What about All the Liability?

Every church usually has one member who seems to devote their entire existence to worrying about all the ways the church could be sued. You probably know the person I have in mind. They never smile. They love the word “no.” They can point out the ways someone might get hurt and all the ways a proposed ministry could fail. I have sometimes wondered if such a person will not be happy until they are allowed to put a chain around the doors of the church so no one will ever be allowed inside. Their mantra seems to be, “Say no unless you have to say yes. We will never get sued, our reputation will never be damaged, and no one will ever be hurt—because we are not doing anything.”

Here is my strong belief about a person like that: Do not let them have more influence than they truly deserve. Of course, we should be as careful and wise as we possibly can; but practically everything in life carries some level of liability.

Effective Ministry and Reasonable Risk Go Hand in Hand

Do you remember the stewardship parable in Matthew 25? I mentioned it briefly back in chapter 8 because its principles have played a critical role in the development of our ministry philosophy.

It is very important and helpful to observe carefully what Jesus explained about the first of the two faithful stewards in the passage. “Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents” (Matt. 25:16). I love how this man got to work right away. The worn-out saying “When all is said and done, there is usually more said than done” should never be used to describe the people of God. There should be a sense of urgency that characterizes the way we seek to accomplish our God-given mission because there are eternal issues at stake.

Please also notice that the man took his talents, a form of money in Bible times, and traded them. In other words, he *invested* them by taking risk in the marketplace. The tense of the verb also suggests that this was not a one-time windfall. He traded them over and over and over. He was able to attain a marvelous result over time because he was willing to assume a reasonable level of risk.

At our community centers, we have “Family Fun Nights” when our neighbors can come and use our indoor swimming pools and other amenities free of charge. These activities are so popular that on cold evenings, it is not uncommon to have so many people in our pools that you can barely see the surface of the water. Yes, we have trained lifeguards, and we do everything possible to keep everyone safe. However, is there risk? Absolutely. But seeing the smiling faces of children and singles and families in our community, hearing the sound of joy in their voices, and anticipating more significant spiritual ministry in their lives in coming days makes it all worthwhile. We want to love the people in our communities in as many ways as possible, and we are willing to assume a certain amount of risk in order to make that happen.

Practice Full Disclosure

Injuries and lawsuits often occur because of a lack of clear communication up-front. As Christians, we should be very concerned about telling others the truth in a forthright manner, especially when it involves someone from our community considering one of our services or ministries.

For example, at our community-based counseling ministries, we have a series of forms that explain the exact kind of counsel we provide. Our counselors

explain their training and certifications at the beginning of the first session so there are no surprises.

The same is true with the community classes we offer. We want our advertising to be clear so no one feels like we offered one thing and provided something else.

We try to be up-front about the nature of our community athletic leagues. We explain when a certified referee or coach will be present and when we are just using volunteers. If a fee is involved, we tell people where their money is going.

Buy the Appropriate Insurance

Risk can almost always be offset with insurance policies. Whether personally or in any of the groups to which we belong, it is possible that someone could be inadvertently injured by something we did or did not do. Our compassion for such an individual would move us to have the appropriate insurance in place to provide for their needs.

At Faith Church, we have found that companies that insure school systems are a better fit for our insurance needs. Sure, our agent had a bit of heartburn when we built our first skate park, and I thought he was going to set his hair on fire when he heard that we were building a rooftop street hockey court. However, over time he has become one of our biggest fans because he appreciates the ministries and resources we make available to the underserved people in our town. He even advocates for us now with national insurance carriers to find the best rates and coverage. Do not let the fear of risk stop you from doing what you believe the Lord wants you to do. The cost of an insurance policy is minor in the grand scheme of most ministry budgets.

Consider a Legal Reorganization

This particular step may not be necessary if you are just starting in community-based outreach ministry, but if that is your situation, you may want to file it away for later. At Faith Church, we have fourteen separate legal organizations. The goal is to separate our assets from our risks because, unfortunately, we do live in a litigious culture.

What that means for us practically is that we have several different property holding companies. The overall principle is that any entity that does ministry has no assets and any entity that has assets does no ministry. We are certainly not trying to be deceptive in any way, but we want to carefully protect the resources we have been given. The same is true when it comes to financial assets. We keep

all our long-term cash in our foundation instead of sitting on our ministry balance sheets.

An attorney and accountant can help you when the time comes to take this step. Sometimes it might be as simple as creating a new LLC before you begin your counseling ministry. This is a relatively inexpensive and simple step to take. If nothing else, it might give some of your more conservative church members greater comfort as you move forward in serving your community.

Is This Just a Reinvention of the Social Gospel?

Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the founders of the social gospel movement, was a Baptist pastor who, along with some friends, founded a group called the Brotherhood of the Kingdom. They were appalled by the poverty, crime, and social inequities of their time. They especially decried the sense of apathy on the part of many segments of Christianity that focused on individual salvation of the soul but not the societal improvement that should result.

In 1892, the Brotherhood of the Kingdom called for a redefinition of the biblical concept of the kingdom of God. They believed the church's highest calling was to improve societal conditions for everyone, regardless of their relationship to the Lord as individuals.

To achieve these aims, devotees of the social gospel proposed radically new theological ideas. Rauschenbusch did not view Jesus's death as an act of substitutionary atonement. Instead, he came to believe that Jesus died to substitute love for selfishness as the basis of human society. He taught that the kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming life on earth into the harmony of heaven.

What I am proposing in these pages is *nothing* like the social gospel. Community-based outreach ministry is an attempt to show love to our neighbors because it glorifies God and because it provides a platform on which the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone may be effectively proclaimed.

I agree with Rauschenbusch's concern that many followers of Jesus Christ do not seem to care about the needs of their less fortunate neighbors or the social injustices all around us. However, the solution is *not* to redefine the gospel. Instead, it is to create compassionate platforms for addressing social need *so that* the gospel may be clearly and powerfully proclaimed.

Early in my ministry, I made a promise to our church family: I will try never to lead us in any aspect of community-based outreach ministry that ever

compromises or confuses the gospel. And I have sought to let that promise guide me, and guide us, on this journey.

What keeps us on track, we hope, is spending significant amounts of time meditating on the Word of God, especially the way Jesus Christ functioned during his earthly ministry. He often began by meeting a physical need of some kind to demonstrate his compassionate and powerful character. However, he rarely stopped there. Throughout the Gospels, we see him using the platform of compassion as an opportunity to speak about eternal truth and then call men and women to repentance and belief. The most fundamental need of every human being is to establish and cultivate a personal relationship with God through the atoning work of his Son. That must always be our highest aim and ultimate goal.

What about All the Biblical Allusions to Fighting, Separating, and Avoiding?

There is no question that God's Word calls on us to love others in all sorts of ways. Occasionally, that involves taking a strong stand against unrighteousness. Paul told Timothy to "fight the good fight" (1 Tim. 6:12). He instructed the Corinthians to "come out from among them and be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17 NKJV).

However, we believe in the process of interpreting Scripture in light of Scripture. In other words, we compare one passage in the Bible to other passages with the goal of achieving biblical balance in all things.

Some of God's people seem to be always looking for the next fight or the latest issue over which to separate. It appears that is about the only note on their pianos. Such individuals rarely if ever have any positive impact in their communities. Their angry, unbalanced vitriol soon becomes another shrill voice in a divided and divisive culture.

I confess—I tend to be argumentative by nature. On far too many days, I act like I am the smartest person I know. A passage of Scripture that regularly convicts and directs me is 2 Timothy 2:22–25:

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.

I have found that the more I try to focus on community-based outreach ministry, the less interested I am in the current battle that may be raging in politics, sports, or theology. However, on those rare occasions when a stand has to be taken, having placed a higher value on loving our community tempers my tone and provides a platform of credibility.

The Possible Fruit Is Well Worth the Risk

Last fall our pastors, deacons, and seminary interns—a group of about sixty to seventy individuals—held our first monthly meeting in our new Northend Community Center. There have been a few times this year when I have questioned my sanity. Why did I agree to write this book on community-based outreach while simultaneously leading our church family in our largest construction project to date? However, as I watched the scene unfold at the new community center, I'm glad the schedule worked out this way because it allowed me to share my thoughts while the experiences were fresh in my heart and life.

Instead of entering a dark, quiet building for a leadership meeting that would focus on reports, graphs, statistics, finances, and problems, our team walked into a community center that was teeming with people from our town. There were ministry opportunities everywhere we looked. The gymnasium was filled with urban youth playing basketball on a frosty Midwestern evening. Ninety percent of the teens were ethnic minorities. A group of elderly neighbors walked around the elevated walking track, getting their after-supper exercise and socialization before turning in for the night. There were families playing with their small children in the PlaySpace, a large indoor playground in the center of the facility, and others playing pool or doing homework in the co-working space.

As the meeting began, I asked our team to share a prayer request or a praise that was on their hearts at this historic point in the life of the church. What I loved was that our leadership group was not talking about budgets, politics, the evil of the world, or some minor theological skirmish that could needlessly divide us and sap our strength and vitality. Instead, person after person spoke about ministry to people in our community and asked us to cry out to the Lord for wisdom about how to best serve and represent him. They expressed thankfulness for this new community center, along with the recognition that we desperately needed the Lord's help and enablement as we sought to serve our new neighbors.

This first part of the meeting culminated when one of our younger deacons, a successful businessman, shared how earlier that day he passed a homeless man

sitting on a bench. Our deacon casually asked the man how he was doing as he walked by, and the man responded with something like, “Not so well.” This deacon walked a few steps and then thought, “There’s a ministry opportunity.” So he went back and asked if he could sit down. The homeless fellow poured out his heart about a trial he was facing. With tears in his eyes, the deacon told us he had the opportunity to invite the man to church, to talk with him about Jesus, and to discuss principles from Scripture that might help the man take steps in a more positive direction.

During the course of the conversation, the topic of our new Northend Community Center came up. This homeless man was totally dialed in to the new facility and the resources available, and he was planning to check it out. The deacon’s point was, he was glad to be part of a church that contains resources and services that even the homeless community is discussing. We want to be a church that is known for loving the people in our community.

We went through the next part of the meeting as quickly as we could. Like any leadership team, we had to deal with finance reports, ministry updates, and even a proposed constitutional change or two. But then we got back to what really fires up our hearts—ministry to hurting people around us. We decided to divide into smaller groups and prayer walk around the facility, stopping at strategic places to cry out to God in thanksgiving for the mission he has given us and the joyful news of the gospel to proclaim.

My prayer group had a dentist, an engineer, a business owner, and a seminary intern. We started out on the rooftop hockey court where we peered over the ledge and looked at the new Family Promise facility that serves homeless families. In the providence of God, a little girl was pulling a tiny suitcase up the sidewalk with her mom to find shelter from the cold. Our guys were moved by that living picture of what loving our community really looks like. We stared at each other with tears in our eyes and then prayed for wisdom and strength to serve moms and little children—many who are trying to escape violence and abuse—with compassion and grace.

Then we moved back inside to the gym where all of these urban teens were playing basketball. They were still trying to get their minds around why a church would build a large gymnasium and make it available to them for free—and we were trying to get our minds around the best way to serve them in the name of Jesus. We asked the Lord to help us be leaders in racial reconciliation in our community, to be peacemakers, and to be a bright light of the love of Christ. The guys in my group could not stop talking about how invigorating it is to try to love our community well. They also expressed amazement at the way the Lord

has blessed us with new facilities and opportunities as we have walked this path together.

Here is the point: our team had to work through all sorts of challenges to get to this place. We had to answer the objections that kept coming up in our own minds. We discussed, debated, and called out to the Lord for help over and over. If that is where you find yourself today, then that is a very helpful and exciting place to be. But please do not let the objections and the challenges cause you to abandon the journey, the vision. I have worked my entire ministry life, humanly speaking, to enjoy experiences like the one I had that night. The thrill, delight, and sometimes even sheer terror of being right in the middle of trying to love your community well is worth struggling through the process with your Bible, your friends, and God.

How about You?

Is it possible that you have allowed one or more of these objections, or others like them, to stop you from more aggressively and faithfully loving your community? Is it also possible that God's Word has an answer to that objection?

Each one of us has to decide what principles we will allow to guide and motivate us in life. All I know is, I sure enjoyed spending an evening with a group of church leaders where we celebrated a new array of community ministries and literally wept as we prayed for God's help in impacting our neighbors with his truth, love, and grace. I am glad for the many conversations we had over the years to deal with objections. However, I am especially thankful that we did not allow any of those objections to stop us from taking the steps we believed the Lord wanted us to take to love our community well.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. What objections listed in this chapter have been a concern in your heart?

2. What other objections do you have that might prevent you from loving your community more?
3. What biblical and/or practical solutions are there to the items you are concerned about?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How would you evaluate your team in terms of willingness to take risks?
2. Regarding the two faithful stewards and the one unfaithful steward in Matthew 25, which example is most illustrative of your group? Please explain and discuss your answers.
3. Is it time to lay aside certain objections and get busy loving your community more effectively? What might that look like in your life and ministry context?

13

GETTING STARTED

I encourage you to think more creatively about community-based outreach ministry. For some, interacting with this material may have felt like taking a drink out of a fire hose. Sometimes there is a fine line between challenging someone and overwhelming them.

In this final chapter, I'd like to help you organize the process of taking the next steps. I believe in the principle of "straight-line administration," in which you accurately identify where you are and specifically determine where the Lord wants you to go—and then take the most direct course possible with the least expenditure of time and resources. In what follows, I have tried to map out a strategy to help you get started.

Please also keep this in mind: perfectionism is often the enemy of accomplishment. I would far rather participate in a B+ initiative that actually is fulfilled over an A+ idea that never gets off the ground. I have always viewed the cluster of human need in our town like opening the door to a very cluttered garage where practically anything you do is going to make it better. With that in mind, here are a dozen next steps you can take toward greater community impact for Christ.

1. Write or update your mission statement and core values. Do you have a personal mission statement that summarizes what you believe God wishes you to accomplish with your life or this particular period of your life? Does your church or nonprofit organization have one? Do you and your organization have written core values?

If so, how long has it been since you reviewed these statements? What process do you have in place to keep these key ideas before you and everyone with whom you work and serve? Is your decision-making process tightly tethered to your mission and core values?

I have organized my office so that while I work at my desk, I am always looking directly at a framed copy of our church's mission statement. We ask each of our church members to memorize the statement, and I jokingly tell them

from time to time that if I call them on the phone at 2:00 in the morning, they should be able to recite our mission.

When making decisions, we often ask how a particular activity or idea fits into the overall accomplishment of our mission. There are some initiatives we pursue relentlessly because they are at the core of our mission, while there are many others we simply do not pick up on because they would represent mission drift.

If you or your organization do not have a mission statement, or it has been a long time since you updated it, this is the place to start. I would encourage you to lead a series of meetings, lessons, or sermons on the core subjects you believe should inform and direct why you exist. Consider how the topic of community-based outreach fits into your purpose.

Do your very best to make this a grassroots approach where many people have a hand in crafting the statements. Often the best idea resides in the heart of the shyest person in the room. Find nonthreatening ways for everyone to share their thoughts and beliefs. Yes, this method will take far more time than a top-down announcement or declaration from a few key leaders—but the eventual quality and buy-in will be well worth it.

In our case, “The mission of Faith Church is to glorify God by winning people to Jesus Christ and equipping them to be more faithful disciples.” Our core values are:

- Growing Stronger: We believe that God has a plan for every Christian’s growth and that he wants godly lives and families built.
- Reaching Out: We believe that a changed life enables us to reach those without Christ in a way that is faithful and creative.
- Serving Together: We believe that God wants us to challenge and equip our members to serve him, and that he wants every member serving.
- Meeting Needs: We believe that our church should address community concerns by doing good works *and* sharing biblical truths.
- Strengthening Others: We believe that God is pleased as we seek to strengthen other pastors, missionaries, and key leaders.

The topics I covered in these pages fit under the heading of “meeting needs.” Embedding these activities in an overall comprehensive mission and understandable statement of core values has helped keep us on track.

2. Offer a series of lessons, sermons, or Bible studies on community ministry to those you are called to lead. If you took the time to read this book, you are

probably a leader in some way. That does not mean you have an official position or title, but it does mean that you think creatively about how to serve the Lord.

Throughout Scripture, God uses men and women who are leaders. This morning in my personal Bible reading, I was studying the life and ministry of Jeremiah. I marveled at his willingness to lead even when there was a significant price to pay. Being a leader can be both a blessing and a curse.

One of the mistakes I have made too often in ministry is expecting others to come to conclusions after a thirty-minute discussion when it took me months or years to come to those same positions. Such an approach is selfish and unwise. I have learned that a far better way to serve others is to patiently teach principles from the Word of God and then prayerfully ask the Lord to help us come to similar conclusions and convictions as a church family.

In your case, overcoming the challenge of getting started may have less to do with *doing something* and far more to do with *teaching something*. Some of the projects I have described in these pages are the culmination of over thirty years of ministry and even more years of faithful ministry by my predecessors.

There are many passages in the Bible that would be effective for a series of lessons or discussions. One I have found particularly helpful is a verse-by-verse study of the book of Titus. While Paul is honest about the challenging nature of the Cretan culture where Titus has been left to minister, one of the repetitive themes is that “our people must learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14). An example of a sermon series on this book is available at www.faithlafayette.org/titus.

3. Meet with community leaders to learn their perspectives on the greatest local needs. You do not want to launch a new community initiative that is ineffective because it misses the mark of what your community needs. The old adage “Measure twice, cut once” comes to mind. Most of us need help to determine how our good works could be most beneficial.

Your local conditions will determine the best process to follow. Do you or does anyone from your church have an established relationship with a community leader? If so, that is probably the ideal place to start. Find out if the person prefers formal meetings, lunch appointments, or a quick cup of coffee.

Go with a humble learner’s attitude. It is likely the person you are speaking to has beliefs and positions on various social issues that are different from yours. The point of these conversations is not to debate an issue. Churches and Christians who position themselves as know-it-alls on every subject will be shut down and shut out very quickly. I have often started conversations with various community leaders by acknowledging my own apathy, indifference, and

ignorance about community needs over the years. I explain that I am trying to be more pleasing to the Lord by marshaling our church's resources to address local concerns, but I need help to identify the pressing issues. I also thank these men and women for the way they serve our cities, often far better than I ever have. My experience is that if we humbly ask others for help, even people who hold a dramatically different worldview are willing to communicate with us.

Be prepared to be tested. It is reasonable for local leaders to be wary of Christians, especially if we are new to community service. Your first assignment may be to clean the latrines at the public park. If that is the case, I would advise you and your team to clean them with all your might to the glory of God.

Be sure to follow through on promises. Community leaders are often pragmatic people. We have found that many in our town are willing to look beyond the fact that we are Bible-believing Christians if they know we can get things done. Yes, you have to be careful, respectful, and submissive as you serve. However, eventually you will find people of all different cultural belief systems calling on you because you are a trusted and effective community partner.

4. Survey your local neighbors. Survey your immediate neighbors to educate yourself about their perspectives on community needs. Work with your team to tailor this principle to your specific ministry context.

Many neighborhoods use some kind of social media platform to stay connected. You could create an online survey and provide the link to your neighbors. Invite them to follow-up meetings with the goal of creating a neighborhood action plan.

In other locations, social media is not nearly as effective a connection tool. A luncheon for senior citizens or a chili dinner for working parents may be a far better approach where you live.

In our ministry context, the Lord gave us five different campuses in five very different socioeconomic regions of town. The way we communicate with each group is dramatically different even though all our campuses are in the same county. You may have to try different approaches before you find what works best for you. However, do not let an attempt that yielded few results discourage you. A meeting with only a few key people might yield an invaluable ministry idea. Even if many neighbors do not choose to respond the first few times around, the fact that you are trying will communicate an important message.

Train and deploy a committee to synthesize the survey results and identify the greatest needs your neighbors have expressed. If possible, circle back around with particular respondents to gain additional insight into what they communicated. Reaching out to a neighbor and saying, "You expressed a

concern for at-risk teenagers in our neighborhood on your survey—could we meet for a cup of coffee so you could help me understand this issue more fully?” could yield solid gold on all sorts of levels.

5. Assess your current strengths and weaknesses. A passage of Scripture that has especially motivated and encouraged our church family over the years is 1 Peter 4:10: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

If you looked at our current array of community ministries, the selections are not only because of the community needs we have discovered. We have also tailored our strategy to take advantage of the way the Lord has gifted our church family.

For example, at our new Northend Community Center, we have a separate facility called Car Works. We provide reliable, low-cost automotive repair for single moms, families in distress, senior citizens, veterans, and others in need. The building is located right next door to Family Promise, the third facility in the Northend development, which provides shelter and services for homeless families—people who are often in need of reliable transportation. Car Works also provides job training for urban youth. The reason we started Car Works is not only because of the demonstrated need, but also because we had men and women who are skilled in the area of automotive repair and passionate about community ministry. If God had not blessed us with those people, we would not have launched this ministry.

Even if you are serving with just a small group of people, 1 Peter 4:10 is still true. The key is listing the ways God has gifted you and the other members of your group. As you do this, be prepared to be surprised as you learn things about your team you may have never known.

On the way to my office this morning, I walked by one of the rooms at the Northend Community Center called the Innovation Corner. We designed it as a place where people can make a mess as they offer various community services. It has a concrete floor and metal tables, and we invite our members to think of classes and ministries they could launch to serve our new Northend neighbors. I noticed advertising signs that have been posted there for upcoming events—one for a neighborhood veterinary clinic, another for a Saturday repair cafe, and a third offering affordable hair care. If you asked me right now, “Who is leading those events?” my answer would be, “I have no idea.” Apparently some people in our church family possess these skills and are offering events that make the best use of their particular abilities. The point is, those gifts are out there, and

making them available to your neighbors in need could result in relationships and conversations that bear eternal fruit.

6. Determine the size of your ministry parish. At Faith Church we often say, “Walk before you run.” You cannot be all things to all people. While we care about every person in our community, we believe the Lord has given us special responsibility to those who live right around our five campuses.

After you have ascertained community needs and available resources, take out a map of your city with your church clearly marked. Then prayerfully ask the Lord where you should focus geographically. It may be four blocks directly around the church building. It may be a place in the inner city where the greatest concentration of community needs exists. There is not a right or wrong approach. The point is to focus your efforts.

7. Bathe your planning process in prayer. As you consider each step of community-based ministry, it’s important to faithfully pray for the Lord’s guidance and blessing. We found that it’s often best to assign an entire group to focus on prayer. Yes, everyone involved should pray at each step along the way, but there are often “prayer warriors” among us who are gifted for prayer. They may not be the ones to lead the efforts to repair cars, cut hair, or treat animals, but they can joyfully and faithfully pray for those who do.

8. Brainstorm possible initiatives. I cannot overstate the importance of this one.

By now, you may have started a list of the greatest community needs. Next to that, you should have a list of the gifts and resources available to you.

Now it is time to write down as many creative ideas as you possibly can. For example, if your neighbors expressed a concern about safe, affordable childcare—what specific programs can you launch to address that need?

At this point, don’t worry about whether an idea is good or not. That will come later. What you’re seeking is a list of possible initiatives to address the needs that have been identified. Sentences that begin with words like “maybe we should . . .” and “what about . . .” and “could we possibly . . .” are ideal.

As a leader, it’s up to you to create an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts, so you’ll need to explain that the brainstorming session is not a place for ridicule and judgment. Have fun with brainstorming. Do not be afraid to dream. Encourage each participant to be as specific as possible and to tether their ideas to what the community said concerned them most.

Also, be careful not to rush this part of the process. It may take weeks or months of discussions to produce the best results. While every ministry context is different, at Faith we have had times when the process yielded several hundred possible ministry initiatives. In a few cases they were some of the most outlandish ideas I have ever heard, but many are ministries we currently have in place today because a person was willing to dream.

9. Select the three to five initiatives that are the best fit for you at this time and place. This is often the most rewarding part of the process. It is amazing how, when a diverse group of people looks at a list of potential ideas through the lens of their mission, the demonstrated community needs, and their available gifts and resources, the best initiatives become apparent to the entire body.

We use a process of multi-voting. We give our church family a list of all the possible initiatives we have developed. Then we ask them to rank the top ten based on what would be the most logical and efficient use of resources. We encourage the church family to review our mission to ensure their votes are aligned with what we believe God wants us to do.

The cream will rise to the top. I cannot tell you how many times I have marveled at the collective wisdom of the people of God. This can also have a unifying effect on the church family as you see the hand of God guiding you.

Of course, the possibility exists that someone's "pet project" may not make the cut. We prepare our church family for that possibility. However, we tell them that this is not our "last rodeo." I am always delighted when one of our members whose idea was not selected still digs in and supports whatever the larger group chose as the highest priority. Often God rewards that kind of faithfulness by leading the team to choose what was important to that individual in the next planning cycle.

10. Enlist a team of willing servants. When I discuss community-based ministry with other church leaders, one of the objections I frequently hear is whether there will be enough people to staff new community ministries. In our experience, community-based outreach ministry is often attractive to church members.

For example, our youth groups took a dramatic step forward when they decided to spend less time entertaining themselves and more time serving the community. There are only so many pizza parties and bowling outings before Christianity starts feeling stale and boring. That is not the case when the teens are sent in to gut a distressed house in a troubled neighborhood. Or when a team of young people can go clean up a community park. We've even found that our

youth group loves getting together on snow days and driving around to shovel the sidewalks and driveways of neighborhood senior citizens, singles, and veterans.

Our families find community service a marvelous way to help their children take their eyes off themselves and their often petty concerns. After serving meals at the homeless shelter, it is harder to complain about what mom just made for supper.

We see similar results with older folks in our church family who have raised their children well and finally have room in their schedules and budgets. There are only so many rounds of golf you can play or fish you can catch before life becomes depressing and meaningless. Churches have the privilege and the responsibility to deploy people into meaningful service opportunities. An increased focus on community-based outreach can be exactly what is needed to invigorate an entire church.

11. Formulate a partnership strategy. If the Lord grants you favor and effectiveness in community ministry, other groups may contact you and ask to partner in some way. Or, as you move forward, you may identify a need that another organization is already addressing and in which working together makes the most sense. While you cannot anticipate every scenario, I encourage you to begin discussing potential partners and formulating a set of guidelines to direct your decisions.

We decided early on that we would never partner with others in a way that compromised our biblical beliefs. We want to be honest and up-front with everyone in our community about who we are and what we believe. That does not mean that we impose our views on others as a condition of our service. As Lori Walters, the executive director of our community development corporation, once said, “Our faith motivates why we serve, but it does not limit who we serve.”

In general, we prefer to collaborate with another organization as opposed to starting a new ministry. Disaster relief is one example. We could have chosen to start a separate entity to serve people who are the victims of fire, flood, or similar community challenges. But we prefer to work alongside the Red Cross in our community.

We also do not accept funding that in any way limits our ministry, because we want to be able to pray and share biblical truth whenever appropriate.

Over time, your strategy will mature as new questions come up. Though you cannot anticipate every issue, spending some time to begin the discussion provides an opening for additional conversations later.

12. Determine what you would do if the Lord blessed you with additional resources. Throughout this book I have suggested a process that is practical and achievable. Most people don't hit a home run in their first turn at bat. Go slow, be methodical, and see what the Lord chooses to do.

However, I always encourage all our team members to have a dream list in their back pocket. If the Lord sends a donor along who asks, "What do you believe the Lord would want you to do if you had more resources?" that person would not have to ask the question twice. Be satisfied and thankful for the ministry the Lord has entrusted to you, but honor him and his power by respectfully and regularly asking him to increase it.

How About You?

So what's next? I hope you now have a clear set of action steps and that you will begin taking them right away.

I am absolutely convinced that Christians and churches becoming more involved in community-based outreach ministry is essential to accomplishing God's plan in his world. I encourage you to move forward in that direction with hope and passion.

APPLYING TRUTH TO LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Where do you see yourself in the process discussed in this chapter? At the beginning? Already done? Somewhere in the middle?
2. Which of these steps do you believe will be easiest to accomplish in your ministry context? Which will be hardest? Why?
3. Which of these steps should you take next? What might that look like for you?

Questions for Group Discussion

1. What does your group think about the process outlined in this chapter?
2. What needs to be added or subtracted to best fit your ministry context?
3. Who from your group is the logical person to take responsibility for the various steps? What is stopping you from making assignments and getting started? Are there others you should bring onto the team to be sure this process is launched well?

EPILOGUE

Pictures Are Powerful

For me, one of the exciting and fulfilling aspects of community-based outreach ministry is meeting like-minded individuals who are also thinking and praying about this subject. A model of ministry is only effective to the degree to which it can be reproduced in the hearts and minds of others. As Paul instructed Timothy, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

I would like to conclude by introducing you to two of my friends and co-laborers in ministry. I have chosen one who serves in the United States and another who serves outside this country. When I first met both Shannon and Kike, I was amazed at how the Lord was leading us in similar directions. It was almost as if we had been reading one another’s mail. We each wanted to impact our communities with the gospel in deeper and more powerful ways. We wanted to serve as pastors seven days a week. And we longed for an approach to ministry that would be more glorifying to God.

I hope you enjoy their stories. Beyond that, my prayer is that as you read about how the Lord has used community-based outreach ministry in their unique mission fields, you will be more convinced and inspired to take similar steps as soon as you possibly can.

Community-Based Ministry in the United States

I (Shannon Lovelady) have the privilege of serving as the lead pastor of Southern Hills Church in Carrollton, Georgia. We believe the mission of the church is to make disciples who make disciples. There are over two hundred churches in Carroll County, Georgia. Every Sunday morning, thousands of people gather in these facilities to learn, worship, and serve. However, come Monday morning, the same buildings that were so alive just hours before are now dark and quiet. This reality had gnawed at me for years!

When I stepped into my lead pastor role in 2013, I dreamed of something more than just an occasionally used church building and began sharing this

dream with our elders. Little did I know that something bigger than I could ever envision was on the horizon.

Our team decided that one of the first logical steps was to launch a faith-based counseling center for our church members and people in our community. We saw that as a way to expand our ministry into the lives of people throughout the week and to make better use of our church building. Since I knew very little about counseling and was extremely busy in other ministry details, I asked my wife, Natasha, to research what conferences and training programs might be available to help us. After a thorough Google search, she told me about a church in Lafayette, Indiana, that had an extensive community-based counseling ministry with a weeklong training conference each February.

In February 2014, Natasha and I, along with one of our elders and his wife, attended our first Biblical Counseling Training Conference at Faith Church. I knew I was hooked in the very first session when I heard Steve Viars explain that in their way of thinking, counseling was simply a subset of discipleship that helps people find answers from God's Word for daily challenges and struggles. He used terms like "concentrated discipleship" and "accelerated discipleship" to describe their counseling approach, which fit perfectly with what the Lord had been teaching me about the core mission of Christ's church. I was also intrigued when Steve spoke about how they were using biblical counseling as an outreach tool.

After that first session I took a step that was unusual for me—I sought Steve out and asked if he would have dinner with me and our elder while we were in town. In the providence of God, Steve had an opening, and two nights later we were sitting in a restaurant talking about how biblical counseling could be a useful tool in the development of our ministry.

That week we also toured the Faith East community center. I told Steve that since we were located in a college town, I would love to design a similar building geared for college ministry. Steve looked over and said, "Would you like to see a building like that?" I said, "What do you mean?" He explained that the Lord had recently led Faith to construct a project they called Faith West near the entrance to Purdue University. He even offered to drive us across town that same evening and show us around.

I wish you could have seen the look on our faces when our elder and I walked into that building. God's grace was so evident that evening as we saw the Lord had obviously been leading Faith Church and Southern Hills in very similar directions. Faith West is a community center that houses a gymnasium, preschool, meeting spaces, fitness center, cafe, and college student housing. What sets this community center apart is that it is owned and operated by the

church and even holds church services on Sundays. The idea of college apartments had never crossed my mind, but the entire concept was perfect for our town, with the University of West Georgia being such a huge part of our community. Now I had a working model to help guide what we believed the Lord wanted us to do.

In November 2014, I returned to Faith West along with individuals from our church and community to show them what I believed God had placed on my heart. Returning to Georgia, we created a team of community leaders and church members to thoroughly investigate the viability of a project like this. As we continued to meet, plan, and share the vision, our dream grew. However, the goal was always the same: to radically serve our community.

To be good stewards of what God had given Southern Hills and to better carry out the mission of the church, our church family sought to build a community center that would be used by the community every day of the week. In November 2015, the Southern Hills family committed to giving \$1 million toward the City Station project, and we reached that goal in December 2016. With the financial backing of the church, the Solomon Foundation, and generous community members, City Station opened its doors in July 2018.

Because City Station is strategically located on the community walking/biking trail less than a mile from the University of West Georgia, the community has convenient access to the center every day of the week. Community members can stroll in or park their bikes on the bike rack and use the restrooms or get a cup of ice water in the lobby.

City Station houses various features to attract and serve people from all walks of life. There are multipurpose rooms available to the community to reserve for meetings and events, seminars, receptions, birthday parties, and study groups. Southern Hills also uses the smaller meeting rooms to provide free biblical counseling to anyone seeking assistance. Throughout City Station, we offer free high-speed Wi-Fi. Community members can get a free coffee in the lobby and enjoy it in one of the seating areas. The gymnasium provides six basketball goals for full-court or half-court games. The gymnasium is open to the community for free and averages between forty and fifty visitors every day. The game room houses video games as well as an indoor playground, which the community is welcome to use. There is also an outdoor playground and a large green space for playing. In addition to a staff employee, members of our church serve at the welcome center, greeting community members, giving tours of the facilities, and answering questions. Our congregation is getting to know members of the community they would have never met otherwise.

Within City Station, we strategically incorporated four entities we believe benefit the community at large. Our fitness center offers programs centered on being good stewards of our bodies. While working out, individuals are building healthy relationships, which we have seen produce real life change.

With the only Christian, extended-day, state-licensed preschool in town, we attract families who see the value of providing a Christian education as well as families who need more flexibility with their schedule.

The Mustard Seed Cafe is managed by a missionary from Nicaragua whom Southern Hills has partnered with for ten years. The cafe offers high-quality meals at affordable prices in a relaxed environment. The cafe provides another nonthreatening entry point, allowing the community to rub elbows with our church family and make our building feel like home before they even come to a service.

The top two floors of City Station house sixty full-time college students. These students agree to live by biblical standards, serve an hour a week in the community, and be active members of a local church. Each apartment of four has a designated mentor to provide intentional discipleship. We have partnered with two campus ministries at the University of West Georgia (Christian Campus Fellowship and Campus Outreach), whose staff work with the mentors in discipling their peers. City Station provides a place for these students to make their faith their own.

Affordable childcare is available for those who are visiting City Station. Couples can enjoy a date night in the cafe, or a parent can work out in City Station Fitness while their children are cared for by our staff.

With all these things under one roof, we have unique opportunities we never could have imagined, like the spontaneous puppet shows a housing resident performed for the preschool. We strive to serve the community influencers as well as the broken, the struggling, and those looking for answers. Ultimately, we want to see all types of people coming together in community, and City Station provides such a place.

City Station is also unique in that Southern Hills, the Church at City Station, has moved from a permanent facility to a facility that requires us to set up and tear down for our own programs and services. Even though we own it, we are merely managers. City Station is a true community center and was not built for our comfort. Multiple times a week, we set up the gymnasium for our youth and adult services, the large meeting rooms for our elementary programs, and the preschool for our preschool programming. There is not a space sitting empty! Southern Hills has committed to being “mobile” to better serve the needs of the

community. Our volunteers have stepped up and are willing to do all this to accomplish the mission: to make disciples who make disciples.

This vision and project ultimately belong to God. There is no way we could have accomplished this on our own. He has been going before us, paving the way, and we believe City Station will ultimately be a place where our community experiences the good news of Jesus Christ.

Community-Based Ministry in Another Country

I (Kike Torres) serve as the pastor of Horizonte Church in Queretaro, Mexico. Several years ago, a few members of our leadership team became familiar with biblical counseling. The Lord blessed our church with many men and women who placed their faith in Jesus Christ, but we needed a more systematic and biblical way to disciple them.

In February 2013, we attended the Biblical Counseling Training Conference at Faith Church in Lafayette, Indiana (<https://www.faithlafayette.org/bctc>). Though the weather was much colder than anything we had ever experienced, we loved the training we received because it was both theologically sound and intensely relevant to everyday life. When we returned to Mexico, we began to provide biblical counseling to the members of our church family and saw tremendous results.

However, we yearned for something more. Our community has many men and women who do not know the Lord and are struggling in all sorts of ways in their personal lives and families. At Faith Church, we saw that they used biblical counseling as an outreach tool. We began praying and asking the Lord to allow us to build a facility where we could offer biblical counseling services to members of our community.

This was a very large prayer request because land and property in our city is very expensive. However, our God is a big God and he provided an opportunity to purchase a house directly behind our church that we could transform into a counseling and community center.

In order to make this project possible, our church family spent many, many hours pouring concrete, running plumbing and electrical lines, painting, and decorating. We were overjoyed the day we were able to open our doors and make this resource available to the men and women in our city looking for answers to life's most challenging questions.

It has been six years since we attended our first Biblical Counseling Training Conference. Now, by God's grace, we have trained forty church members who

are offering regular counseling sessions to the people of our community. These are often individuals and families who do not have a church home. At first they're resistant to attending services on Sunday. However, after they accept the gospel in counseling sessions, they understand that the same biblical truth they hear in the counseling room is also being taught in our church. Now we have many baptized church members whose first contact with us was the community counseling ministry.

We are also exploring new ways to serve the people in our city. This year we began a new addictions recovery ministry for men. This is a very large need in our community and we are just getting started. However, two of the men recently became followers of Jesus through this ministry. We are excited to think about how the Lord may choose to use these efforts in the coming days.

The Lord has also allowed us to partner with Faith Church to begin a Biblical Counseling Training Conference in Mexico. We are thrilled to host more than five hundred people from Mexico and other Latin American countries who come together to learn how to serve our communities better.

The apostle Paul told Timothy to "always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5 ESV). Biblical counseling and community outreach ministry have helped me as a pastor, along with the rest of our staff and church family, to put this verse into action. Though it's easy to be saturated with the day-by-day church agenda, we need to remember that part of our job description as Christians is to have an evangelistic impact in our community.

Yes, it is true that we don't have all the financial resources that some of our brothers and sisters in the US possess. However, God is blessing our heart's desire to love our community with whatever resources have been entrusted to us. Therefore, my admonition to Christians around the world is, go and *love your community* because Christ came and loves you and me.

NOTES

Chapter 3 Caring for the Welfare of Your Community

[1.](#) Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 7–8.

[2.](#) Plantinga, 9.

[3.](#) Plantinga, 10 (*italics in original*).

Chapter 7 Restructured Ministries: Including Others in Everything You Do

[1.](#) Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 29.

[2.](#) Lewis, 29.

[3.](#) Lewis, 29.

Chapter 8 Outreach Events: Making Big Statements to Celebrate God's Glory

[1.](#) Jim Collins, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 94.

Chapter 9 Restored Neighborhoods: Bringing New Life to Distressed Areas

[1.](#) Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 165.

Stephen Viars (MDiv, Grace Theological Seminary; DMin, Westminster Theological Seminary) has served as a pastor and biblical counselor at Faith Church and Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries in Lafayette, Indiana, since 1987. He is a frequent speaker at conferences, colleges, and seminaries in the United States and abroad. In addition to overseeing the staff and ministries at Faith, he also serves on the boards of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, the Biblical Counseling Coalition, Vision of Hope, and the Faith Community Development Corporation. The author of *Putting Your Past in Its Place*, he and his wife, Kris, have been married since 1982 and have three children and three grandchildren.

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STEPHEN VIARS has served as a pastor and biblical counselor at Faith Church and Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries in Lafayette, Indiana, since 1987. He is a frequent speaker at conferences, colleges, and seminaries in the United States and abroad. In addition to overseeing the staff and ministries at Faith, he also serves on the boards of the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, the Biblical Counseling Coalition, Vision of Hope, and the Faith Community Development Corporation. The author of *Putting Your Past in Its Place*, he and his wife, Kris, have been married since 1982 and have three children and three grandchildren.