

Seeing Real Solutions

Sometimes good intentions aren't good enough. Last July an animal rights activist released 40,000 mink from a mink farm in Stearns County, Minnesota. No doubt, the animal rights activist had the best of intentions, wanting to stand up to what he felt was animal cruelty and release these mink into the wild where they belong.

The only problem was that these mink were domesticated and not equipped to survive in the wild. Within a day, 15,000 of them died of heat, stress, and dehydration and many more died over the next couple of weeks. What's worse is that the majority of the mink that died were babies that hadn't yet been weaned from their mothers.

Now I want to believe the best about the activists. I suspect that if they would had known the actual result of their action, they would have been horrified and probably would have tried a different approach. We often don't blame people for good intentions, but the even the best intentions need to be paired with clear-thinking.

The reason I bring this up today is that I believe the Church is full of people with good intentions. It's full of selfless people filled with compassion who want to be helpful and want to share their faith through words and actions. We have good intentions, but we're often not very effective in making a long-term difference in people's lives and many who study these things say that we can sometimes do more harm than good.

We're in the fourth week of this series called Mission in Focus where we hoping to chart a new course for how we do outreach and evangelism. The church is called the body of Christ, which means we are called to continue the work of Christ. And what was the work of Christ?

Of course, Jesus says things like, (referring to himself) **"The son of man has come to seek and to save that which is lost."** (Lk 19:10) But also, when John the Baptist was in jail and had doubts about Jesus, he sent his people to confirm that Jesus was who he said he was, the Messiah. Jesus said this, **"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor..."**

The ministry of Jesus was spiritual, but it was also material, so the ministry of the Church is spiritual, but it's not just spiritual. Spiritual and material aren't separate, so the church's mission is both to feel souls and feed stomachs. God wants us to be whole—spiritually, personally, socially, and materially. These areas aren't separate, they interact to create a whole person. And because the spiritual, physical and material are so interconnected the best way to minister to someone's spirit is to find the areas of life where they're struggling. Personal, social and financial struggle are often a sign of a wounded spirit. That's why we can't just automatically meet a financial struggle with a financial solution.

There's a book called "When Helping Hurts" that describes many of the ways well-intentioned people do harm to the people we're trying to help. This book, among others has been instrumental in helping us chart a new course for how we do outreach.

So, as we prepare to get involved with Together for Good and Prison fellowship, I want to talk briefly about some of the ways we hurt people even when our intentions are good. I would highly recommend you read "When Helping Hurts" or a book called Toxic Charity by Bob Lupton. These ideas have had a profound influence on our approach to outreach and evangelism. I'll mention four.

First, we hurt people when we define them by their problems. It might take a while, but we need to change our language a little—maybe stop saying things like, "we're called to serve the poor." They are people who are experiencing material poverty.

I know to many of you it sounds like semantics, but when we define people by their problems, we unintentionally communicate that they aren't capable and that's all they'll ever be. When society treats people like charity, we shouldn't be surprised when people act like charity. It's not about their character. If you continually had people tell you you're helpless, you would believe it too.

There are many organizations, including the church, that can give people money, and sometimes that's necessary and helpful. But only the church can offer people wholeness through the Gospel. What's so transformative about the Gospel message is

that it starts with, *“You were created in the image of God and because of that, you have incalculable worth.”* If our primary message to people is, *“You are God’s masterpiece and you’re so valuable that Jesus gave his life for you. I know you’re in a hard place now, but let’s walk this together so you can be who God says you are.”* That’s life-giving and identity shaping. Don’t define people by their problems.

Second, we hurt people when we remove the need for initiative. We’ve talked before about how one important characteristic of being made in the image of God is that God has entrusted us with the responsibility to be co-rulers and co-creators. That means we’re created to contribute to the world in meaningful ways. That doesn’t always mean a career. It could be as a stay-at-home parent, friend, confidant, or mentor.

That’s why, when we welcome someone into our community, one of the first things we want to do is to help them see the skills and gifts they have to contribute. It’s not that we want to take advantage of them, but because their skills and gifts build up the community and enables people to live into their identity of the image of God.

So, if you’re leading a ministry, don’t think you’re bothering people when you ask them to serve. You’re not bothering them, you’re *valuing* them. This is a mindset shift for us, but it’s one that’s necessary to build the community and to build people.

Another way we hurt people when we’re trying to help is *when our motivation is what makes us feel good rather than what actually does good.* Good feelings are more

about us than they are about *them*. This can be a big issue with short-term mission trips. People sometimes get addicted to them because they make you feel like you're doing a lot of good AND meeting people from other cultures is awesome!

But let's take a hypothetical here. Let's say we want to take 10 people to Africa to construct a church building. That trip would cost the team a total of somewhere around \$30,000. A church building will cost somewhere around \$5-10,000 to build there. So, sheer economics, says we've just made the church cost three times what it should.

Not only that, but in materially poor countries, typically the greatest need is not handouts, it's jobs. So, what we've done is paid \$30,000 to send often unskilled laborers to do lower-quality work than the skilled block-layers or roofers or painters, taken their jobs and done nothing to develop the local economy. But it feels really good!

There are times when emergency aid is needed—when there's an emergency, like a hurricane or tsunami, a sudden disability. But there's a difference between emergency needs and chronic needs. Emergencies need emergency solutions, but chronic problems need development. Applying emergency solutions to chronic problems creates dependence. People in chronic, on-going poverty don't need handouts, they need people to walk with them.

Last one: We do harm *when we don't have a good plan*. And I want to camp on this the rest of today, because this will be critical for us as we change how we think and how

we reach out. Good intentions aren't enough. If we're going to do this well, we need to do it together. This is the same problem the early church ran into. If you have your Bible, turn with me to Acts, chapter 6.

In the book of Acts we find that one of the critical ministries of the early church was caring for widows and orphans. There was no social security or social programs, so if a woman or child didn't have a man to support them, they would have to beg or starve. So, Acts 4 says, **"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had... And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them."** (32-34) So, let's pick it up at chapter 6, verse 1. [read 6:1-7]

The early church was experiencing growing pains. They *wanted* to feed everyone, but they didn't have the structures in place to do it. The problem wasn't with the want-to, it was with the how-to.

We live in a day when people mistrust structure and organization—other than Apple and Google. People believe government, corporations and institutions are impersonal and heartless. And certainly, there are many examples of companies that put profits first and do great harm to people.

But some people just believe that systematizing something, makes it insincere or meaningless, or even unspiritual as if being led by the Spirit means doing things without

planning. But *organizing well is a compassionate act and a spiritual gift*. The gift of administration is just as much of a spiritual gift as the gift of tongues or faith or prophecy. Blessed are the detail people. Amen?

The fact is that in any group, you have to think about how to make sure things are fair and people don't get forgotten. When things are disorganized, performance won't meet expectations. And when performance doesn't meet expectations, those who aren't being served will become disillusioned and will assign bad motives. *Hurting people experience poor organization as apathy.*

There have been several times over in my 20 years of ministry, where a person or a family was hurting and the church didn't do a great job of reaching out and supporting them. The truth is, people cared a lot, they just thought someone else was reaching out. While the problem was organizational, they translated it as, "no one cares."

That's exactly what was happening in the early church. The church had a reputation, in fact it says right there in the Bible in chapter 4, "*there were no needy persons among them.*" Well, now a little more than a chapter later, there are needy people. Verse 2, **"The Greek speaking Jews complained against the Hebrew speaking Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."** Performance didn't meet expectations and notice that the Greek speaking Jews didn't

just ask for better organization, they essentially accused the Hebrew-speaking Jews of favoritism. It was dividing the church.

So, what did the Apostles do? Well, they held a vision-casting event and said, “You guys must not care about the Greek-speaking widows. You need to learn from Jesus and have more compassion!” Is that what happened? Nope. Why? Because the problem wasn’t “want-to,” it was “how-to.”

So, the Apostle’s said, *“We should never have left such a huge responsibility to ordinary lay-people. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”* So, they got their hands dirty and served the Greek speaking widows themselves. Is that what they did? Again, nope. Why? Because they can’t do everything. The distribution was important but if the disciples spent time on that, they would have to neglect the ministry they were called to.

It’s commonly said that in any given church 20% of the people do 80% of the work. Maybe it’s true here, I don’t know. But many watching while a few do the work isn’t what the Bible intends for the church. The problem is that some people get burned out, others don’t feel connected, and people fall through the cracks.

OK, so they didn’t try to ramp up the motivation and they do it themselves. What did they do? Verse 2, **“The Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.**

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

In short, they chose trustworthy people with the right kind of gifts to organize and execute the food ministry. The Apostles then commissioned them (gave them their blessing and released them to do what it takes) and empowered them to lead. And what was the result? Vs 7, **“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”**

I hope you’ve figured out by now that this focus season is intended to cause a culture shift. We’re called to continue the mission of Jesus—that’s what it means to be the body of Christ—and we want to do this well. But good intentions are not good enough. In this church community, we need to develop both the culture and organization that will lead to lives being transformed by Jesus.

We don’t just *hope* to do it, we’re *planning* to do it. We’re forming partnerships with *Together for Good*, which you’ll hear more about and will get the opportunity to figure out how you’d like to be involved at lunch today. We’re also going to be working with *Prison Fellowship* which we’ll be working on over the next month. We’re not going to start off with a bang right way. We’ll ease our way into these ministries because we

want to be in them for the long-haul and we want to make sure we're working at a level we can sustain. We don't want to make promises to families that we can't keep.

Now, these ministries are simply a bridge. Obviously, we want to reach out beyond those ministries. We want to reach our neighbors and we want you to reach *your* neighbors. And we need it to be a whole-church effort, not just a few doing the work and the rest watching from the sidelines. Each of us needs to do our part.

So, today, we're starting to put some of the structure in place. And to do that, we have Tammie Haveman from Together for Good. At lunch, she will share more in-depth about that ministry and talk about the ways to get involved.

Ashlee Slye will be our point person for Together for Good. You'll hear more from her at the lunch, but right now, I just have to tell you that Ashlee is a dynamo. She's really excited about this ministry and if you get near her, you'll probably catch the bug, too.

I'm really excited to have Ed Idarraga as our point person for Prison Fellowship. He and Renata have a real heart for prison ministry. And you'll be hearing more about that in the next few weeks.

We've also put together a team of Naomi Beckering, Holly Almhjeld, and Adrienne Kinde to develop a way to identify everyone's skills, gifts, interests and availability to make sure everyone who wants do to ministry in the church is able to contribute. In fact, the start of that process today is that we have a survey for you to fill out. If that survey

confuses you, Holly and Naomi would be happy to meet with you and help you identify your gifts and the best ministry for you.

What we're about to do here isn't a secondary thing, it's incredibly important for us to accomplish our mission. Here's the thing, people matter to God. And God has given us the task of sharing the good news that through Jesus, we can be made new. But we don't do it just with a one-time message, but through life-giving relationships. As we care for each other, as we reach out to our neighbors, as we provide care and support families in crisis and prisons. We need you. We need your time. We need your gifts. We need you to engage in the mission. We're better together than we are separate. So, what do you say?