

LOVING YOUR COMMUNITY

PROVEN PRACTICES
FOR COMMUNITY-BASED
OUTREACH MINISTRY

STEPHEN VIARS



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To John, Tony, and Michael
A philanthropist, a political leader,
and a community organizer
A powerfully effective community service team

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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 Christ-like 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?