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# community SERVICE focus

## Out of Our Comfort Zones

RANDY HOUSTON

Following Christ in mission will involve taking risks, moving out of our comfort zones, and stepping out in faith toward unfamiliar places where God is leading us. Like a trapeze artist with a firm grip on the trapeze bar, we may feel comfortable and confident about the present shape and focus of our ministry. However, following Christ in mission often means letting go of the bar we are clutching in order to grab hold of a strange new one coming towards us.

In addition, inevitably, there is that fearful moment when we are suspended in mid-air. We have released our grip on the old bar, but we have not yet grasped the new one. Someone has called it "the groan zone." "It's frightening because we're out of control. We are afraid that we are going to fall and we will not make it to the next bar. Therefore, our natural inclination is to stay in our comfort zone, to cling to the bar we are currently holding. Nevertheless, to follow the Lord in mission, we must be willing to risk and let go.

As Peter did when he hesitatingly went with the three men who had asked him to come with them to the house of Cornelius, a non-kosher Gentile. God had already prepared Peter for their invitation. He had given him a vision of reptiles and animals on a sheet to teach him "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). Still, it was all so radical and extreme. How could he let a strange vision trump the established unequivocal teaching of the Torah? His precious Jewish identity, bound up with the keeping of the commandments, had been called into question. Yet in obedience he went, sensing that God was leading him, but not knowing where he was being led.

When they arrived in Caesarea and he entered the heathen officer's house, Peter was forced out of his comfortable Jewish cocoon. That, in and of itself, was remarkable, but while he was preaching to the pagans gathered there, things really got out of hand.

In a book I read "The Open Secret" by Lesslie Newbigin she describes it as,

"Before he has finished, the situation passes out of his control. Cornelius and his household are caught up, in a way that cannot be understood, into the same experience of freedom and joy that Peter and the others have known since Pentecost. Peter understands that he is not in control. A power greater than his own has broken down the hedge that protects devout Jews from the uncleanness of the heathen world, Peter can do nothing but humbly accept the fact and receive these uncircumcised pagans by baptism into the fellowship of the church."

Later, when Peter had to defend his actions before the apostles and believers in Jerusalem, he simply recounted the amazing actions of the Spirit and concluded, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17).

Participating with Christ in mission is like that. He is the chief actor in the unfolding story-not us. Not to hinder God, we have got to risk giving up control so that he can be in control. Often, like Peter, it will mean that we risk looking like a fool and that we put our religious reputation on the line.

Like Peter, I have found that God is always faithful and his mission is accomplished through me when I step out in faith and take risks. However, the success engendered by taking risks for God in turn often makes it difficult for us to risk again. My grandfather use to say, "The greatest danger that success brings, aside from arrogance, is the fear of losing what has been gained. The courage and willingness to risk that breed success are endangered after success is obtained."

So taking risks as I seek to participate in God's mission never seems to get easier. Even though God has proven he is faithful in the past and has blessed my steps of risky obedience, I am always scared. I worry about the outcome and what other people will think. It seems like every time I let go and reach for the new trapeze bar God is sending toward me, I have to let go of all the reputation, security, and success I have accumulated



up to that point! Therefore, I always have to overcome my doubts and fears.

Yet, I've found that like Indiana Jones in his desperate pursuit of the Holy Grail, standing at the edge of the wide chasm and peering down at the rocks below, when I lift my foot and step out into thin air, I do not plummet to my death. Underneath are God's everlasting arms-arms that both uphold me and reach out to others to accomplish his mission through me. Someone has described his or her experience of risk-taking like this:

"Come to the edge," Jesus said. "No," I said, "I'm afraid." "Come to the edge," he said. "No," I said, "I'm afraid." "Come to the edge," Jesus said. So, I came to the edge, and he pushed me. And, together we flew!

Indeed, participating in God's mission is not a fail-safe activity. It will involve many risks with much fear and trembling. Nevertheless, oh, the exhilaration of soaring like an eagle, borne up by the wind of the Spirit! Oh! What joy of joining with Christ in his mission to the world.

# Community Service or Outreach?

TODD FERRELL

Each year our church in San Francisco involves itself in getting out into the community with a float during Gay Pride and then we participate in several of the community street fairs by hosting a church booth where we give out information about the church and little give-away items like handheld fans, balloons or yo-yo's.

These all have their place in the life of the church, after all are not we called to get out into the community and serve? However, is that what we are really doing?

**Community service** refers to service that a person performs for the benefit of his or her local community. People become involved in community service for a range of reasons - for some, serving community is altruistic act, for others it is a punishment. The term "community service" therefore refers to projects those members of certain youth organizations, such as the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts and some high school students perform. It also refers to an alternative sentencing technique in a justice system. In addition, at times groups of people will commit to perform service to the community as a gesture to the larger community, as part of gift economics. Examples of community service projects include (but are not limited to):

Cleaning a park

Collecting much-needed items including clothes, shoes, bottle tabs, bottle cans, etc.

Getting involved with Habitat for Humanity

Reading to older people in nursing homes

Helping out your local fire or police department

Helping out at a local library Tutoring developmentally disabled children for free

**Outreach** is an effort by an organization or group to connect its ideas or practices to the efforts of other organizations, groups, specific audiences or the

general-public. Unlike marketing, outreach does not inherently revolve around a product or strategies to increase market share. Typically, non-profits, civic groups, and churches engage in outreach.

Outreach often takes on an educational component (i.e., the dissemination of ideas), but it is increasingly common for organizations to conceive of their outreach strategy as a two-way street in which outreach is framed as engagement rather than solely dissemination or education. Outreach strategies are linked to the organization's mission, and define targets, goals, and milestones. Therefore, as you see from the definitions, community service is more about doing things out in the community for the sake of it and outreach can be the same thing, but often is tied to your identity as a person, leader or group. Moreover, one big striking point is that Outreach seems to focus on the group or individuals getting across a point or their ideas.

While neither is bad inherently, it might be worthwhile to listen to the voices of thousands of people who DO NOT attend church. Most of those interviewed stated they would be more likely to attend a church that was committed to helping people outside the church who needed care and consideration.

In recent years, with government cutbacks in services and pressure to balance budgets, much debate has ensued around the importance of churches picking up the slack in addressing the needs of people who will no longer be assisted by the government. The government increasingly relies upon churches to support those that fall through the crack of our society. Even though many legislators and officials do not wish to grant churches government



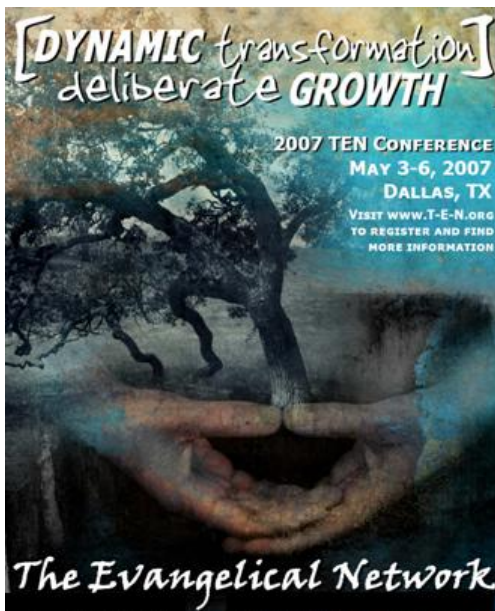
recognition or favor, they believe that churches are an indispensable part of the social support system in America. In another study, people were asked what the most important reasons for churches to exist were. Among the frequent answers provided was to demonstrate the love of God by helping the needy. Even adults at large deem social service ministry to be one of the most significant contributions of the church.

Although I was not born yet when these words from John F Kennedy were first uttered, I cannot help but think of them as I write this article and think about the spirit behind this. "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

We have become so much of a "give me" society that we do not take time to give back anymore. Unfortunately, many Christian leaders have developed this "give me" attitude and it has turned off many to hear the Gospel message.

Maybe it's time to take heed of the voices in the wilderness & just be a presence to those in need...no commercialism to sell them Jesus...no agendas for God put on them...just serve!

No commercialism to sell...no agendas for God...just serve!!



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# The Church Buzz What's Going On?

ELIZABETH STORBO

It is always important to be reaching out to others who are less fortunate than we are. As we reach out and help others, I believe God rewards us and blesses. Some churches expressed that they helped by singing at HIV Aids Hospices and offered winter hats. Another church sang at a convalescent home and offered assistance where needed. Another church gave back packs filled with hygiene items. Another church has been offering a meal to folks and has seen these people eventually incorporate themselves into the church serving. At our church, we offer a meal every Sunday night after church and have noticed more are staying for the service than before.

We must always be sensitive to people with needs. Many of these people suffer from addictions and we are seeing them helped by our giving to them. Take a look at what some of our churches are doing:



## Metropolitan Community Church of Baltimore, MD

[www.mccbaltimore.org](http://www.mccbaltimore.org)

410-669-6222

David Smith, Pastor

The Metropolitan Community Church of Baltimore, a Christ filled, Holy Spirit led church began a potluck before our "Whosoever Wednesday" evening service. We began to feed more and more folks from the community before that service (unlike other churches that feed which we understand primarily feed only after folks attend service. Our location particularly attracts folks living on the streets including sex workers and the drug addicted. We have found more and more folks have started to stay for worship, and have come back for Sunday worship and joined our praise team. One fellow living on the street has brought the message twice.



## Jubilee Apostolic Christian Center Int'l, Mesquite, TX

[www.jacci-tx.org](http://www.jacci-tx.org)

214-282-0192

Charles Morrow, Pastor

We engage in an HIV support ministry through our "Living By Faith" Program. "LBF" is a Support Fellowship offering support, information, and inspiration for people living with HIV/AIDS. It is specifically designed as a program for people of faith who live these conditions. Many participants have reported feeling as though they would live forever after attending our "LBF" meetings.

Jubilee also operates a Thrift Shop, Christian Book Store, and Coffee Shop, which we call our Apostolic Resource Center. The ARC offers folks a walk-in location where they can find counseling, support, and prayer, as well as friends and fellowship. The Book Store offers a variety of literature free of charge for those needing it, as does the Thrift Shop that supplies clothing and house wares to folks who have been burned or flooded out of their homes, or who have experienced other similar traumas. The ARC helps to generate income to help support our ministry while at the same time providing us a platform whereby we are able to witness and be a blessing to members of our community. Jubilee regularly helps a number of families to have Christmas gifts for their children during the holiday season. This past Christmas we were able to assist a number of local families going through a variety of difficult times with both items from the Thrift Shop as well as new merchandise and gifts from our Book Store.



## Holy Spirit Fellowship, Long Beach, CA

[www.holyspiritfellowship.org](http://www.holyspiritfellowship.org)

562-428-5037

Duane Moret, Pastor

We have regular outreach to a convalescent center near our church with Bible studies and special services. In addition, we are very active in the South Coast Interfaith Council and its mission to assist those in need and to promote unity between folks of different faith traditions.



## Valley Ministries, Stockton, CA

[www.valleyministries.com](http://www.valleyministries.com)

209-464-5244

Rev. Terri Miller, Pastor

We have a back pack program for the homeless. We collect supplies ... Backpacks, personal items, toothpaste, toothbrushes, gloves, hats, blankets, and, snacks, pen and paper with a stamped envelope as well as other items. The backpacks are filled and sent out with people from our congregation who give them away to those they see in need. This has been a great ministry outreach because it involves sharing our resources in a positive and helpful way.



## Freedom In Christ Church, San Francisco, CA

[www.christiangayok.com](http://www.christiangayok.com)

415-970-8149

Maria Caruana, Pastor

Rita da Cascia is a home for mothers and children who are or were homeless and impacted by HIV. Many of the mothers are HIV positive and some of the children also. They have about 110 children as clients. In 2005, our church attended their Christmas Party to sing Christmas Carols with the children. We also provided gifts of winter hats to them. Last year we expanded our gifts to include hats, gloves and teddy bears. We have a volunteer agreement in which we provide people to assist them with outings for the children. Several folks have signed-up as volunteers and participate in a variety of events that range from taking a group to the movies to going rock climbing. They have homework night once a week on Wednesday and we provide volunteers to assist the children with their homework as tutors.

Coming Home Hospice and Maitri AIDS Hospice are two different live-in facilities for approximately 15 patients each. The Coming Home Hospice is a mix of patients and Maitri serves AIDS patients specifically. FIC has gone to the Coming Home Hospice for several years to sing Christmas carols and the last two years we have included Maitri. We have also taken Christmas presents to the patients - the presents based on the facility's rules have ranged from toiletries to socks and this year, included teddy bears.

New Leaf Elder Outreach to Elders serves lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender elders age 60 and over. New Leaf Outreach to Elders (formerly Gay and Lesbian Outreach to Elders or GLOE) provides a range of senior social services promoting independent living and improving quality of life. The program offers information and referrals, support services, friendly visits for the homebound, educational and cultural activities, holiday events, group outings, and women's and men's social/recreational activities and groups. We have people involved with and encourage folks to volunteer for the friendly visits for homebound program.

# Synergy

FRANKLIN SAMPLEY

The book *Habits of Highly Effective Churches* speaks of creating synergy in our activities to serve the community. What is Synergy? You may ask. Synergy is defined as the combined effort being greater than parts: the working together of two or more people, organizations, or things, especially when the result is greater than the sum of their individual effects or capabilities. Given the ability to accomplish more with partners than alone – highly effective churches take a positive attitude toward such cooperative efforts. Sometimes folks step back from such cooperative efforts in fear of losing control, but those churches that move forward find that they can work with government agencies and local service groups to bless people.

Research has shown that cooperative ministry is dependent on four key elements or beliefs in order to be effective:

**Willingness to Teach** – Once a church has mastered a service they are happy to act as mentors to other folks seeking to get involved in that service, regardless of the person's affiliation with the other church or agency involved in the cooperative effort.

**Willingness to Learn** – A willingness to submit to others – even if they are from a smaller church or group mark the attitude of those serving in highly effective churches. An attempt to branch out into an area of community service with which one is not familiar should be approached by first learning about those providing that or similar services in the community and then learning all you can from them.

**Willingness to Serve** – What is seen in churches successful in community service is the willingness to be unheralded team members, even if they are the 'superstars' of the effort. This willingness to serve speaks to their controlled ego and their commitment to being part of the Body of Christ – not just the local church body.

**Willingness to Accept Differences** – “A focus on getting the job done properly supersedes an effective church's need to work with partners who see everything the same way they do. They will work with virtually any partners who possess the same goals, even if their motivations are different” (Barna) Reading those comments, brings to mind many issues that can arise when attempting to work with other Gay service organizations and/or Christian organizations. Most of us are not an easy fit for either sector – the willingness to accept differences in order to get the job done thus becomes an even larger issue of cooperative ministry.

God can use any instrument to get His will accomplished. It is not always necessary for us to agree on every issue, or be the lead in order to find ways to impact and serve our community. There are many areas in the LGBT community in which a church can be involved, and the mere presence of LGBT Christians, or those supportive of LGBT Christians, could change lives. Let us challenge ourselves this year to find more avenues of service and a willingness to teach, learn, serve and accept differences.



The summer edition of *focus* is right around the corner. We need your help! Take a minute and jot down your thoughts on stewardship, fundraising, and accountability in your local churches & ministries. Email your thoughts to [evangelnet@aol.com](mailto:evangelnet@aol.com) before May 1, 2007.

The Evangelical Network (TEN) is a group of Bible believing churches, ministries, Christian workers and individuals bound together by a common shared faith, united in purpose and witness and established as a positive resource and support for Christian gays and lesbians.



## *The Evangelical Network*

P.O. Box 324  
Pacifica, CA 94044  
Phone: 415-286-7751  
Fax: 415-494-5780  
[www.t-e-n.org](http://www.t-e-n.org)

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