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101

WAYS TO HELP PEOPLE IN NEED

STEVE AND JANIE SJOGREN



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TO JIM AND DANA COCHRAN

*Thanks for having
a huge heart for those in need—
including us!*

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	9
INTRODUCTION	11
LEVEL 1: RELIEF—MEETING AN IMMEDIATE NEED	
1. Nail Care	30
2. Bread Giveaway	31
3. Donuts, Coffee, and Conversation	31
4. ID Badges for the Homeless	32
5. Backpacks for the Homeless	33
6. Backpacks Filled with School Supplies	34
7. Yellow Bag Grocery Collection at Church	34
8. Tipping Fast-Food Workers	35
9. Cleaning Up a Neighborhood	35
10. Door to Door with Bags of Food	36
11. Hair Care	37
12. Coloring with Children	37
13. Clothes to Go	38
14. Door-to-Door Giveaways	39
15. Pass It On—Computers	40
16. Pass It On—Eyeglasses	41
17. Samaritan Runs	42
18. Walkmans with Cassettes for Street People	43
19. Adopt a Prisoner	44
20. Adopt a Prisoner's Family	45
21. Thanksgiving Dinner	45
22. Giveaway Bags to Collect Food	46
23. CDs and Cassettes	47
24. Compassion Weekend	48
25. Take a Bag with a Map as You Leave	48
26. Potluck in the Park	49
27. Café Rent-Out for Birthdays	49
28. Sock Outreach	50
29. Transportation for the Working Needy	51
30. "Souper Bowl"	51
31. Christmas Gift-Giving Shop	52
32. Tax Help	53
33. Trash Pickup	53
34. Adopt a Block	54
35. Prayer-Walking	54

36. Vegetable and Fruit Giveaway	55
37. Community Gardens	56
38. Health Screenings	56
39. Bus Token Giveaway	57
40. Bus Runs	58
41. Ronald McDonald House Outreach Deluxe	58
42. Chemo-Lounge Singers	59
43. Grocery Runs with “God Money”	60
44. Welcome Wagon for Immigrants and Refugees	60
45. Baby Gift Bags for New Mothers	61
46. Inspirational Calendars	61
47. Park Worship	62
48. Fixing Up Dwellings	62
49. Robin Hood Outreach—Wheelbarrow Food Collection	63
50. Back-to-School Party	64
51. Big Parties	64
52. Inflatable Pillows for the Homeless	66
53. Shoe Shining—Modern-Day Foot Washing	66
54. Two Guys and a Truck—With a Twist	67

LEVEL 2: RECONCILIATION—SEEING PEOPLE GET RIGHT WITH GOD AND ONE ANOTHER

55. Food Pantry	71
56. Food and Ministry Co-op	72
57. Summer Lunch for School Children	72
58. The Magdalene Project	73
59. Big Christmas Party	76
60. Kid’s Club	77
61. Door-to-Door Health Care with Doctors, Nurses, and Medicine	77
62. Camps for Kids	78
63. Bus Ministry Transporting Families to Visit Prisons	79
64. Health Clinic	80
65. Personal Development—Anger Management/ Conflict Resolution	81
66. Personal Development—Addiction Issues	82
67. Nursing Home Pet Parade	82
68. Nursing Home Special Day Remembrances	83
69. Mentoring Parolees	83
70. Shoes for Kids Going Back to School	84
71. First-Aid Kits	84
72. Shelter Center Ministry	85

73. Drop Inn Bus	85
74. Foot Care	86
75. Door-to-Door Prayer	87
76. Prayer at Mental Institutions	87

LEVEL 3: RECONSTRUCTION—CREATING NEW ECONOMIC AND LIFE OPPORTUNITIES

77. Car Buyer	91
78. Literacy for Nonreaders or Slow Readers	92
79. Literacy for Immigrants and Refugees	93
80. Mentoring Children	93
81. Serve (Your City) Weekend	94
82. Car Donations	95
83. Dress for Success	96
84. Good Haircuts for Work	97
85. Special Skills—Cooking	97
86. Special Skills—Carpentry	98
87. Special Skills—Sewing	98
88. Special Skills—Computer Introduction	99
89. Special Skills—Customer Service	99
90. Job Cooperative	100
91. Shoppers for the Elderly or Shut-Ins	100
92. Interpersonal Skills—Parenting	101
93. Interpersonal Skills—Boundaries	102
94. Interpersonal Skills—Codependency	102
95. Interpersonal Skills—Interviewing	103
96. Interpersonal Skills—Listening	104

LEVEL 4: RELOCATION—BECOMING WORLD CHANGERS

97. Serving Vacations	105
98. Urban Free Store	106
99. Living in Community in a Needy Area	107
100. Bringing Church to Apartment Dwellers	107
101. Urban Weekend	108

TOP TEN PROJECTS TO LAUNCH OUT WITH	109
--	------------

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF THE 101 PROJECTS	111
--	------------

NOTES	115
--------------	------------

ABOUT THE AUTHORS	117
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A hearty thanks to the thousands of amazing people who make up the Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati. You are always up for a wild (and sometimes seemingly crazy) idea when it comes to caring for the needy. Who says Cincinnatians are conservative? It's certainly not apparent from your track record when it comes to reaching out to the community. This book reads like a "been there, done that" history of VCC over the past sixteen years of our history together. What a start for a church; yet, as we have often said, the best is yet to come. We fully believe, when it comes to the needy, *the best history is yet to be written!*

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INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO AN ADVENTURE in generosity!

When you begin to care for people in need, you're in for an amazing, enriching experience! But be warned: It's one whose benefits you might not easily appreciate or quickly understand. In fact, much of ministry to people with needs is like an experience I (Steve) had in elementary school.

When I was just starting the fourth grade, my friend Wayne and I noticed that a girl in our class was named Gertrude Dorcas Smith (not her real last name, but the first and middle names were real). Wayne and I saw it as our unofficial duty to notice and point out the physical or name oddities of each student. "Gertrude" was bad enough, but her middle name absolutely begged for a good teasing from us. And as insensitive nine-year-old boys, we gladly obliged.

Of course, we didn't have any concept of this girl's many redeeming qualities. As the school year progressed, it was apparent that she was easily the most caring, generous person in the fourth grade. She was the best listener. She was sensitive and a genuine servant. We just enjoyed being in the spotlight for a little bit at the expense of a little girl whose character ran far deeper than both of ours put together.

I lost track of Ms. Gertrude Dorcas, but I wouldn't be surprised if she went on to big things in the kingdom of God. Why? She had the spirit, and better, the name for it. Dorcas was a character of the New Testament whom we call a "ship passing in the night." We don't know much about her, but what little we do know causes us to want to be like her when we grow up. She lived a life of practical good works aimed at caring for those in need. When she died rather suddenly, all those she touched by her many good actions felt an unspeakable, great loss.¹ I have sometimes wondered, "Would I be missed if I suddenly died? Do my actions speak beyond my physical presence?"

God has put into the hearts of all Christians the desire to make a difference in this world. Even if it is deeply buried, he has put into you the desire to serve people who are less well off than you. If you're one of those who senses that desire and you want to make a difference in this world—if you're one who is a Gertrude Dorcas in the making—this book is for you!

The average person can be involved in hundreds of ways to care for the needy. Mother Teresa said that it isn't necessary to move to Calcutta to do something significant for those in need, and she was correct. Needy people are all around you.

When we began to plant churches, the first thing we did to learn to get the heart of God for people was to begin caring for the needy.

We didn't understand what we were doing. But we saw from Scripture that this activity was a high priority for Jesus, so we decided it needed to be a high priority for us as well.

How Not to Care for the Needy

My first attempt at caring for the needy was marked with more mistakes than successes. Frankly, I (Steve) didn't have the foggiest idea what I was doing. A number of guys who were eager to do outreach to the needy went with me. It was a Christmas Eve and the weather was bitterly cold.

We knocked at the door of a house that looked like it could use some help. We heard someone inside unfasten several deadbolts and a couple of chain guards. The door opened and a woman stood there with a multitude of children around her feet.

I just said the first thing that came to mind: "Are you poor?"

The mom's eyes grew big and she said, "Well, that's a pretty dumb way to say it, but yes, we could use some help." Fortunately, everyone quickly forgot my off-putting comment when we walked in with our "Christmas in a box" outreach. We happened to be the right people at the right place at the right time.

The father of this family was a drunk and had left a week before Christmas on a drinking binge. Their living room had no connection with the holiday season. We brought in a tree, ornaments, a complete Christmas dinner, and a couple of presents for each child (we'd bought generic presents in advance for boys and girls of various age groups).

In spite of our awkward start, it was a touching first effort at reaching out to someone with needs. By the time we prayed upon leaving, everyone had tears in their eyes—the family we were serving and the men in the group. More importantly, we were hooked. We'd tasted a bit of what it's like to do something practical for others in need, and we

saw their eyes light up when a few of their immediate needs were met.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE FOR THE NEEDY?

It's the normal thing for Christians to do.

Many Christians worldwide are needy themselves. According to Larry Eskridge of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College, “For the first time in history, Christianity has become a religion mainly of the poor, the marginalized, the powerless and—in parts of Asia and the Middle East—the oppressed.”²

When New Testament writers call us to care for one another, they are calling for us to care for the needy.

Jesus considered it normal for believers to reach out to the poor and needy. Even if you know you should care for the poor, you may not know where to start. Or maybe you're afraid of the unknown. Perhaps you don't know how to cross the bridge into the hearts of the needy. This book is written to empower ordinary people like you and me to find ways to reach people in need.

It feels good.

In *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Multnomah, 1996), pastor and author John Piper says God is a God of experiences. There's nothing wrong with experiential Christianity. In fact, that's the way God intended your faith to work. But like many others, maybe you've been too shy to experience good feelings. There may be nothing more fulfilling than caring for the needy.

It's part of the message of the kingdom.

Most of the time, we've been too binary in our view of the church's mission. We're either the proclaiming church *or* the healing church. But we're supposed to be doing both of these. If we aren't a “both-and” church, we're simply loving in word but not in deed. That sort of love is not genuine according to Jesus.

It causes you to see as God sees.

Be honest. You probably get tired from showing mercy and kindness. God doesn't. When you're seeing as God sees, you'll certainly still grow tired physically—even spiritually—after you've given more than you've taken in. But you'll also be energized in the work of seeing the beginning of transformation of human souls into Christlikeness.

It proves to the watching world that you really are a follower of Christ.

Millions of people are watching Christians collectively to see if Christians are for real—and more importantly, to see if God is for real. In his recent book *Re-Churching the Unchurched*, George Barna made the startling declaration based on his research that only 2 percent of those who don't attend church stay away because they don't believe in God. The other 98 percent stay away because they, for a variety of reasons, don't like what they see when they look at the church.³ Your actions toward people in need can go a long way toward demonstrating to the skeptics what authentic Christianity looks like, whether it's seen up-close or from a distance.

Most of all—you need “them” more than they need you!

When Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you,” he was promising renewal and continual employment for the church.

As we and our friends have given care to people with needs, we've been blessed to see them change. But the unanimous testimony among those of us doing the serving is, “We have been changed by these utterly amazing people!”

The feeling is similar to the one expressed in this letter to Ann Landers from a reader who discovers a surprise in a most unexpected place.

Dear Ann Landers:

I read the letter from “Toni in Texas,” whose father gave “useless junk” as gifts to his child.

My father gave me a peculiar gift when I turned 16. It was a well-used physics book in a brown paper bag. He said it would be useful since I was now studying physics in school. I began to question his sanity as he extolled the features of the text.

I dutifully looked at the table of contents. My mother had a hard time trying not to break out in laughter as I tried to fake interest. Dad told me to check out the graphs and charts, so I flipped through the battered book. To my surprise, I found a crisp \$2 bill on each page. My father stood there with the smug knowledge that he had taught me not to judge a book by its cover—literally.

Maybe “Toni” should look deeper and see if there is wisdom in her father's gifts.

—LEE IN TEXAS

Dear Lee: How true. I wonder how many children might have tossed the book before seeing the gift inside.⁴

WHY IS IT SOMETIMES HARD TO CARE FOR THE NEEDY?

We expect to get them out of poverty—today!

Some of the needy you'll encounter have needs for just a short time. Others have been in that state for a long time and may be there for the rest of their lives. It's all they've ever known, and it's a cold fact that you really can't do anything to "fix" them. That could be difficult because it goes against the grain of our American way of thinking and even a codependent attitude that says, "Anyone can be changed with enough work."

To give care and love to people in order to fix them is a form of conditional love. It isn't the way God loves and it isn't the way he invites people into his family.

We want to completely change the world—today!

Perhaps you'll never absolutely, totally change the world. But you will make a difference.

It is estimated that Mother Teresa personally picked up thirty thousand dying people to bring into her hospice to die with dignity. Some may say, "What difference did it make? They were going to die anyway." To that we say, she most definitely made a difference to each one she carried.

That's the perspective you need to have as you care for the needy. You're never going to bring heaven to earth more, better, or faster by ministering to people with needs. But you are absolutely going to change the world one life at a time as you move forward and encounter the next person God places in front of you. The line that the good Mother was fond of using was, "A small thing done with great love . . ." We've taken to finishing that sentence: "A *small thing done with great love will change the world.*" That's what Jesus is calling you to in this life.

When we began to work with others to reach out to people with needs, a lot of days were disappointing. The discouragement came whenever we focused on the most successful days

"We take great care of the dying. I am convinced that even one moment is enough to ransom an entire miserable existence, an existence perhaps believed to be useless. All souls are precious to Jesus, who paid for them with his blood."⁵

—MOTHER TERESA

and realized we weren't living up to those. But then we decided that we could establish our lives on a day when we were feeling the least successful working with needy people. This decision came at a time when our team was spending a lot of money and pouring a lot of creative energy into caring for these special people. But it wasn't very apparent whether we were making any real progress. So we decided to shift our perspective.

The shift came about, in part, through a thought expressed by Richard Nixon. He discovered that when you have a new idea and you have talked and talked it up with people to the point that you are just about sick of talking about it—and no one seems to be getting that new idea—that's when people are just beginning to get the new idea. Nixon was onto a profound truth. This observation seems to play itself out in my experience with new ideas and the change process, especially when it comes to caring for the needy. We realized that the people of our own church needed a shift in their perspective.

We've been called to care for the needy, not necessarily to fix all the problems of the poor or to fix the system that's causing them to be poor. What did Jesus mean when he said, "The poor you will always have with you"? We think he was saying that even with all our best efforts, the reality of poverty can't be erased. He calls us to care for people's needs, not to eradicate the problem of poverty.

We want to bring them into the kingdom—today!

The needy are streetwise. They can read through motives behind your actions more quickly than the average person. If they perceive that you're seeing them as a potential notch in your salvation belt, they may play the game overtly, but their hearts will be offended. Don't use acts of mercy and generosity as a means only to "close the deal" or "pray the prayer" or "save" each person you touch. Focus on demonstrating God's love and your own love for them. They'll respond quickly enough and they'll eventually ask what makes you different. The concept of following Christ will come up sooner rather than later.

WHERE ARE THE NEEDY?

They're all around you, but they're often disguised. They blend easily into the scenery of life, and you can miss their cries and faces. The obvious ones are the drug addicts and the homeless you see asking for money. Less obvious are people who are recently divorced, single parents, the elderly, the unemployed or

underemployed, and runaways.

Just down the street from our facility (Vineyard Community Church) on the north side of Cincinnati, we have an amazing array of people with a diversity of needs. To the side of one entrance we have literally million-dollar estates whose pool cabanas are larger than our house! By another entrance are apartments with mostly Central and South Americans who deal with financial and literacy challenges. Down the street about a block is a retirement condo complex with folks who need to know that someone still cares as issues of aging creep upon them.

It's not hard to find people with needs if you just look around your environment.

“At the end of our lives, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by ‘I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.’

“Hungry not only for bread— but hungry for love.

“Naked not only for clothing— but naked of human dignity and respect.

“Homeless not only for want of a room of bricks— but homeless because of rejection.

“This is Christ in distressing disguise.”⁶

—MOTHER TERESA

HOW DID THE NEEDY BECOME NEEDY?

Oppression by the Evil One

Jesus stated that he came “to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). Part of that oppression is the grip of poverty.

Bad Choices

We've all made bad choices in life. And for some reason, some have made bad choices that have caused more serious consequences. It's important that we don't judge others for the way life has treated them. As the saying goes, “But for the grace of God, there go I.”

Oppression by Unfair Social and Political Systems

My grandma used to call them “sitchiations”—something that we get into but just can't get out of. We have all gotten ourselves into a sitchiation now and then, but some people seem to be in them all the time. Their situation is more than bad luck; it's oppression by the systems that operate around them.

WHO ARE THE NEEDY?

Single Parents

Regardless of financial status, being a single parent is a great challenge. Being a single parent doesn't necessarily mean someone is needy, but the probability of being in need increases dramatically when a spouse is removed from the picture.

The church needs to surround families that have been displaced, but it often doesn't know what to do with such situations.

How Do We Define "Poverty"?

"Basically we are asking the question, if we look back to last year, how many families were not able to purchase food, clothing, shelter, utilities and a little bit more—that basic bundle," said Kathleen Short, a senior researcher at the Census Bureau.

"While the Census Bureau struggles to define a poverty formula more realistic than the present one, ad hoc poverty measurements pop up frequently from academic institutions, nonprofit organizations, and regional development groups. Nearly all conclude that at the turn of the century, a family of four needs at least \$25,000 a year to afford the basics, including a car to commute to work, an item overlooked in the Census Bureau's measure. At least \$25,000 is the income featured in the 'basic needs' budget developed by Indiana's Economic Development Council, one goal being to draw jobs to the state that pay at least that much.

"That is self-sufficiency," said David Weinschrott, a United Way director. 'Poverty is all about stereotypes. Families with less than \$25,000 fall below self-sufficiency.'"

—LOUIS UCHITELLE, NEW YORK TIMES

Working Needy

This group is a surprising and fairly well-disguised population of the poor. Sometimes, these are intact families. Or they may be single parents trying to make it without the assistance of government programs. Generally, these are people who are trying to make a difference, but the odds are seemingly stacked against them.

Uninsured or Underinsured

Millions of Americans walk the tightrope of living without health insurance. They are living an accident away from financial ruin.

And sometimes people who are underinsured have it worse than the uninsured in the United States. At least the uninsured have some government nets to fall back on in many cases. Underinsured people may have insurance, but the deductible amount is so high that they would have to have a virtual financial and health crisis for their insurance to kick in and for them to begin to receive any benefit from it.

“Poverty is really the lack of freedom to have or to do basic things that you value. By that definition, a ghetto family that wants to move to an adequate neighborhood but cannot afford to do so, or is prevented by discrimination from doing so, is impoverished.”⁸

—AMARTYA SEN, NOBEL
LAUREATE IN ECONOMICS

Elderly

“Old” is a relative issue, especially with baby boomers coming of age. Boomers are edging ever closer to official retirement age. It doesn’t take a prophet to predict that this group will change the face of retirement, just as they’ve altered the look of every social structure they’ve encountered so far. While many boomers will retire with significant wealth (and some already have), many analysts are predicting that much of this generation will need to work into their eighties to be able to afford retirement. What a scenario!

Disabled

I (Steve) am a person with a disability myself. Before my injury, I never noticed how many people had physical handicaps. It has also made me realize that for most of us, it doesn’t take much of a disability to get us to a point of dependence upon others for day-to-day survival.

Homeless

People who are homeless are more present and visible in some places than in others. The homeless flavor differs from city to city. Some homeless people are “seasonal” and follow the weather patterns. For example, you don’t see a lot of homeless people in Syracuse in the dead of winter, but as the summer rolls around, they appear. San Francisco has a year-round homeless population. Portland has a younger homeless population that is quite large.

How Widespread Is Poverty?

The richest nation in history has persistent, widespread poverty. In 1999, 32.3 million Americans found themselves below the poverty level and 44 million were without health insurance.⁹

Mentally Unstable

Many types of people experience psychological challenges that cause them to be needy. Some who experience significant mental illness would have been permanently hospitalized a few decades ago, but now, due to government cuts in programs, they are freed to their own recognizance. In my experience, the most common mental illness among needy people, and a very common malady in America, is Bipolar Disorder (manic depression). Kay Redfield Jamison backs up this observation in the very interesting book *An Unquiet Mind* (Random House, 1997). If we are going to care for the needy, we need to be aware of the specific needs of the mentally challenged.

Permanently Hospitalized

The first batch of baby boomers to be sent into permanent-care homes will enter those institutions in 2010—not long from now. These will be the poor in spirit, the depressed, and the forgotten. Aside from issues of insurance coverage, many will be dealing with issues of loss and abandonment.

SOME DOS AND DON'TS IN MINISTRY TO THE NEEDY

Be graceful—don't categorize people with needs.

Many people in need have been in their situation just a short time or may be temporarily in their current state.

Don't call them “needy” or “poor,” and don't think of them as being in a permanent state of neediness. To do that will cause you to lose hope for them and will affect the way you relate to them.

Who knows—you may be needy someday. A disability could strike you, and certainly you're growing older and could hit “elderly” status some day.

Be outgoing—smile a lot!

Your smile is your most powerful tool for good. If you ever find yourself in a situation where you don't know what to do, try smiling. It almost always defuses tension.

Be true—check your motives and prejudices before leaving home.

Don't go to gawk.

If you're new to ministry to the needy, go over this entire list of dos and don'ts. We have found that without adequate training, embarrassing things happen. For example, when African Americans from our church go out with our teams, newcomers sometimes think they're part of the urban neighborhood we're serving.

Prejudices can come through easily unless your church provides some sensitivity training.

Be bold—don't hesitate to pray for people.

When should you pray? Before, during, and after an outing!

Pray for the people you're ministering to. Of all the folks in the world, the needy are typically the most responsive to prayer. As Jesus said, "How happy are those who know their need of God" (Matthew 5, PH).

We approach them directly and ask, "Do you have any needs we can pray for? May we pray for you right now?"

Be prudent—don't give money to the needy, at least not your own money.

It's easy for codependency to form when you're ministering to the needy. Many churches that have ongoing ministries to people with needs set up a committee to review needs and requests for funds. You might consider creating an application for assistance that not only will help you assess needs, but also will create a database for following up on the person requesting assistance.

Most often, don't give money directly to someone requesting assistance. Instead, pay to the apartment complex, utility company, or car repair shop.

Be careful—don't make promises.

Even subtle promises could be mistaken as written-in-stone commitments by someone in need.

Stay away from statements like, "We'll do this," "We'll be back," or even, "We'll try to . . ." Unless you are the decision-maker in charge and you are absolutely sure, it's better to say something like, "I can see you have a need. I'll check into that. I'm not making you a promise! I'll see what comes up." It's kinder to be noncommittal or even to answer with a definite "no" than to imply a promise of future help and not follow through.

Be a team player.

Personally, I (Steve) have never felt a moment's danger while being around homeless people, the poor, and others with needs. But clearly, it's prudent to do any of these ministries to the needy in teams of two or more. We know of ministries where negative incidents have occurred—always where an individual was overly trusting and alone in a ministry situation.

Be smart—don't get involved in an extreme ministry of generosity without a substantial team behind you.

Newcomers to ministry to the needy often go through a honeymoon period of six months to a year. During this time, they sometimes make unreasonable commitments to ministry to the needy. God has given them a clear love for the needy, but they're a little intoxicated with their love and they lack reasonable boundaries.

As leaders, we have never supported an individual or small group that has an enormous vision for a new outreach to the needy. We know that sounds antithetical to the intent of this book, but after doing this for nearly twenty years, we're fully aware of the immense amount of energy it takes to begin a significant ministry to the oppressed. It's a lot like a whaling operation. It takes a lot of energy, equipment, and an indomitable spirit to succeed, but amateurs are ill advised to harpoon Moby Dick from a little rowboat. He's bigger than you and he will take you where he wants to go. So it is with beginning a significant new ministry to the needy.

Be creative—try out new ideas.

Dare to brainstorm with others and encourage "out of the box" thinking. The great thing about the needy is that they're resilient and forgiving even if something goes slightly wrong with your approach.

Be hungry—hang around the needy in order to receive the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

We spend time with the needy to get our fuel cells recharged. A special grace seems to rest upon people with ongoing needs. You'll feel an overflow of that grace as you give away ministry to them.

Being around people with needs will also help you put your own problems in perspective. It will allow you avenues to connect with people that were previously closed.

Be aware—of compassion fatigue.

Galatians 6:9 says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

There is high turnover in ministry to the needy. This is the report we heard from the majority of ministries we talked with in doing research for this book. Burnout happens when people giving in ministry aren't nurtured.

Keeping Your Volunteers Motivated

If you're leading volunteers, be sure to let them know how valuable their service is. People choose to serve again—or not to—based on the experience they have each time. That means you have a chance to re-recruit someone every time he or she serves.

Have you prepared the supplies beforehand so that people don't waste time waiting? A volunteer may feel that inadequate planning on your part is disrespectful of his or her time. So think through all the needs of an outreach before the day arrives. Will you need tables, chairs, ice, transportation?

Take the lead in opening and closing the outreach with a short prayer. Monitor your volunteers regularly during the outreach to make sure they have what they need—including a planned restroom break and water to avoid dehydration.

Try to have a short debriefing meeting when you're finished with your project, if possible. Head out for pizza or some fast food after serving together. Ask people to share praise reports and any good things God did that day. Take notes on how to improve effectiveness for next time. Listen to the people. Both uneventful and stressful experiences can be redeemed as a person has a chance to share it with others.

Be a volunteer—for good!

Happy, fulfilled volunteers may tend to think wistfully and romantically about “going full time” into ministry to the needy. Urge them to reconsider. During my twenty years of full-time ministry, I (Steve) am proud to say that I've talked a lot of people out of going into the ministry. Believe me, it's not what it's cracked up to be. I've seen lives converted from fulfilled to distracted by turning from volunteer into full-time status. Consider the facts: People in full-time ministry work something like sixty hours per week. They're rarely thanked as volunteers are. They're severely underpaid for the amount of training and passion they possess. Their home lives often suffer.

Bottom line—only go into full-time ministry if it's absolutely the only option for you emotionally and spiritually, and then only after you have thoroughly, deeply prayed and consulted about such a drastic move.

STARTING A MINISTRY TO THE NEEDY

Pray

Ask God to show you the city as he sees the city. Ask for fresh eyes and a fresh perspective.

Look

. . . for the needs the Lord places in your path.

Interview

Check out people you're considering working with. You certainly don't need to jump into a ministry affiliation before you are ready. Take your time and mull over your options.

Experiment

Try on several ministries for size. See which one fits the best.

Just Start

Perhaps your "team" will initially consist of just you and one friend you bribe with the promise of pizza. That's fine as long as you're safe and not utterly overwhelmed in the process. Remember the saying of Uncle Steve (that's me): "There's nothing better for getting started than getting started."

"Focalize"

This is a special word. It's actually in the dictionary, but has been recently popularized by a new paraphrased version of the gospel of Mark entitled *The Hippie Bible and Commentary*. (To see "focalizing" in action, go to *The Hippie Bible* at www.logoschristian.org/mark and read Mark 1:3.) It's a great word that captures several ideas:

- To tell your vision
- To focus your attention
- To talk something up

When you are focalizing about your new ministry to the needy with great passion, people will listen. If you're getting your point across, they'll want to join you.

Tell Your Stories

We know we said this already. A little repetition doesn't hurt.

Your stories will help tremendously in the gathering together of a team. The most exciting and vibrant ministries to the needy in

the coming years will rise up from the ranks of the volunteers who, right now, don't consider themselves all that knowledgeable on the topic. That's okay.

Take the Plunge

When you've come down to being involved in one ministry to people with needs, don't be overly cautious. Jump in. Give it at least six months to see how things are going before you take the apparent results very seriously. Remember: growth among ministries to the needy is sometimes a slow process.

Creatively Finance

Instead of asking the perhaps already-strapped, financially burdened local church to fund the start-up of your ministry to the needy, consider going to local business leaders for help.

If you can show them a clear plan, they'll be very likely to listen and respond.

You will likely also find in them a lending hand when it comes to manpower and materials. Many businesses are looking for creative ways to get involved in the community.

HURDLING OBSTACLES TO GETTING STARTED

It's simple to start serving people with needs—so simple that you might stumble over it. Feeling called is not the main requirement; being available is. Set this book down for a moment, grab a pen and paper, and take a note on this next sentence so you don't miss it—it's that important. Ready? *Just get started!*

Let me repeat that: *Just get started!*

"The great thing about serving the poor is that there is no competition."

—EUGENE RIVERS

"There are so many needs—I don't know where to start."

That's fine. We didn't know where to start for the longest time. We've read a lot of books on ministry to the needy, and so far they've all contained the same story: No one has ever known what they were doing until they did it. By reading this section of this little book, you are literally better equipped to do ministry to the needy than most people are when they first start.

When we began to care for people with needs, we did it all wrong. Essentially everything we did was politically incorrect. We look back now and think that we couldn't have done things

more poorly! But it still worked because we *did* meet people's needs.

“But we don't have any training.”

You're getting some practical training now by reading this book. But it really doesn't take much training to begin to effectively reach out to the needy. It takes no expertise to minister to this group of the most resilient of all people.

After going out faithfully every Saturday morning for three years, several on our core team went out for pizza and a time of reflection on what we'd learned. When we began to recall how poorly we'd managed our “ministry” to the needy, we laughed until we cried. At times we just cried in embarrassment over how poorly we had represented the Lord in our outings. But through it all, we had sincerely tried to show people God's love. We had been *faithful*. And I now realize that faithfulness counts for a lot when it comes to outreach. We believe that nearly any approach to outreach to people with needs will work if you simply keep at it in faithfulness, because God rewards those who faithfully seek him.

“We don't have any resources.”

Some of the projects in this book do need equipment. This might require organization and purchasing. However, you might be surprised at how eager other people will be to help care for the needy. In my experience, it's generally not difficult to raise money to minister to them. Put the word out—go to people and tell your story. Before you know it, you'll have the resources you need.

“I'm willing, but I can't lead the way all by myself.”

People are attracted to a vision. They will rally around you as you take action to care for the needy. In fact, you may discover new leaders in your church among those who step out to minister to people with needs in your community. For years our main source of new leaders in ministries throughout the church initially were involved in our ministry to needy people.

Serve in teams of two or more for safety's sake. You'll also benefit from doing ministry in teams; synergy and energy come from serving together and sharing stories and observations afterward.

If you feel like you're failing, don't worry! The needy are very forgiving. The path to success goes right through failure. You'll find that people are resilient and willing to embrace you even in your most feeble attempts to minister to them. As long as you have the

attitude of a learner and treat people with respect, dignity, and kindness, you will grow forward.

“How do I get a vision to start?”

Take a look at the original call given to the church at its inception. This is the Magna Carta of the kingdom of God that Jesus issued to the church as he launched his earthly ministry. When asked why he had come to the earth, he quoted from Isaiah chapter 61 the following words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

This book is organized around the four components of Jesus’ words in the passage above:

1. Relief—“to release the oppressed”

Giving care to an immediate problem, but not focusing on bringing a long-term solution to what’s causing the problem.

2. Reconciliation—“to preach good news to the poor”

Helping people get right with God and with one another.

3. Reconstruction—“to proclaim freedom for the prisoners”

Working toward the creation of new economic opportunity.

4. Relocation—“he has sent me”

Moving our physical location in order to bring the kingdom of God to people who need it.

*You neutralize poverty
“by keeping the focus on
the characteristics of poor
people rather than on the
economy, politics, and
society more broadly
construed.”¹⁰*

—ALICE O’CONNOR

LEVEL 1

RELIEF—MEETING AN IMMEDIATE NEED

IN SPITE OF SOME of the failures we've shared in the opening pages of this book, your outreach to people in need can have good beginnings, proper first steps. So this section—which makes up a good portion of this book—includes projects that will help you and your team get started. These are great courage builders before you take the next steps.

One way to think about the projects at this level is that they're like putting a bandage on an open wound. You may not cure any huge problems, but you will bring immediate relief to people with needs.

Most biblical exhortations to serve the needy center on this kind of immediate, relief-oriented work. As someone has said, "Find a hurt and heal it; find a need and meet it." It's Matthew 25 put into action:

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25:35-36)

It's not good to give in to the American tendency of desiring to "fix the system" at all costs. People around you might begin to think that by giving relief you're just throwing money and energy down a black hole. Again, the Bible doesn't have that perspective. Not every problem is fixable. You're not necessarily called to be the healers of every problem you encounter. You will be meeting the needs of many people along the way. On top of that, your relief work will be an enthusiasm-building activity.

1 NAIL CARE

Provide some special pampering with this outreach along with a great chance to connect in a significant way with the people you're serving. As you trim and file nails and apply polish in a hundred different shades, you'll make women and girls feel special. You'll spend time with them, give them undivided attention, and listen. And you'll probably end up praying for them. Something about all of that is refreshing to both body and soul. Many of them, particularly the children, haven't received much positive attention in their lives. You'll be a breath of fresh air.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Cotton balls
- Nail polish remover
- Nail clippers
- Emory boards
- Variety of nail polishes
- Basket for supplies
- Trash bags
- Anti-bacterial wipes
- Hand lotion
- Cuticle softener
- Connection cards (see sample below)

How do you find people who can use nail care?

Set up where a crowd of people naturally gathers in an urban area. This is a good “companion” project, one that can be done in conjunction with another project listed in this book.

Connection Cards

When doing a project, it's important to have a means of connecting with those you serve. A connection card is a small, business-sized card you can leave with those you've served so they can get back in touch with you if they desire. The idea isn't to accomplish a sales job where you promote your church. Rather, it's a simple way to leave your church's name, address, phone number, and service times so that when future needs arise, those you've served will have a way of reconnecting with you. Certainly, more needs will crop up in the weeks and months to come, so it's crucial to leave some means of reconnection. The idea is to be available without giving out personal addresses.



2 BREAD GIVEAWAY

Everyone likes bread, especially the high-end kind that is sold at stores that typically have “Bread Company” in their names (there are several assorted chains like this across the country). You can arrange to receive day-old bread from these classy bread stores for free! You can also check with national chain grocery stores that have in-house bakeries. Talk to the store manager and explain your out-reach concept. Tell a few stories of the people you’re helping and you’ll likely establish your “daily bread connection.” It will only take one or two of these connections to begin a substantial ministry to your community.

Many of these stores don’t have a reliable source to distribute their old bread to. The key is to be consistent and reliable in picking up the bread. You’ll need to have a team and a schedule so you don’t disappoint the bread store managers. As a good public relations gesture, write a letter of thanks to the store manager for his company’s generosity to the community (and don’t be surprised to see it framed and posted on the wall of the store).

The ministry is simple and straightforward. Knock on the doors of houses or apartments. Say, “Hi, we’re giving away free, fresh, high-quality bread. Could you use some or do you know anyone in the neighborhood who could use some?” Give recipients a connection card and offer to pray for them as you hand out the bread.

How do you find people to give bread to?

Cold calling (just knocking on doors) in lower-income neighborhoods and apartment complexes works fine with this project. Stay away from neighborhoods closest to the donating store.

3 DONUTS, COFFEE, AND CONVERSATION

Coffee and donuts together are a natural people and conversation magnet. This project works well among urban people in open spaces like parks. If you want to make this project work wonderfully well, give away the best donuts available. You’ll then be making a statement to the community: “We *really* care about you!”

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- A supply of high-quality bread
- Connection cards

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Donuts
- Coffee
- Cream
- Sugar
- Artificial sweetener
- Cups
- Stir sticks
- Napkins
- Connection cards

You'll be putting your money where their mouths are.

In our community, for example, people consider Krispy Kreme donuts the best. As soon as the people we're ministering to see these, smiles abound, and the conversation takes off because we've demonstrated that we're friends!

Coffee backpacks work well with this project if you are doing any sizeable outreach. These specially designed contraptions are handy and

available at our website, www.servantevangelism.com. Or you can pick up a caterer's coffee container, which holds five gallons of hot liquid, for about 120 dollars at a restaurant supply store.

Learn to ask good questions. Don't just get quiet while others are speaking. There's a big difference between quietness and listening. Get some listening training.

How do you find people to connect with by serving coffee and donuts?

Go to parks where a lot of people hang out on weekends. Retirement homes are good places as well, but get permission from the staff in advance. Housing shelters also work well for this outreach.

4 ID BADGES FOR THE HOMELESS

Keeping an identification card can be a daily issue for homeless people. But it's easy for them to misplace or to have their IDs stolen.

Step out with an outreach to create IDs for all the homeless in your area.

This ID should include a clear photo of the person's face, his or her social security number (optional), Medicaid number, any special medical needs, and a name and phone number to contact in case of an emergency. An inexpensive way to produce these is to simply laminate the entire card. You can provide a wallet to keep this card

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Laptop computer
- Digital camera
- Portable color printer
- Simple graphics software
- Laminating machine
- Lariats
- Connection cards

in, or attach the card to a lariat to wear around the neck.

Regarding the supplies you need: Take the photo and print it on the spot with a battery-operated color printer. (Our team uses a Canon BJC 85 that costs about three hundred dollars; on a single battery it prints about one hundred sheets of 8x10s.) For software, you don't need anything as exotic as PhotoShop. Someone in your group may have a simple graphics program already loaded on their setup. It's probably the same person who has the digital camera and/or computer. A laminating machine for covering the finished card costs about two hundred dollars; you'll then spend approximately fifty cents per 2x3-inch badge. The laminator will require an AC power outlet. Radio Shack and other electronics stores sell converters for the DC outlet in your car (the cigarette lighter) for about one hundred dollars. Lariats for hanging the card around the neck cost twenty-five to fifty cents each.

For a less professional but quicker solution to all of the above, I-Zone Polaroid cameras take postage-stamp-sized color pictures. You need to get very close to the subject (eighteen inches away).

How do you find people who could use an ID badge?

Connect with those who run shelter housing as a starting point. The Salvation Army will also know who to direct you to. Or you can approach people "cold turkey" in parks if you're bold enough.

5 BACKPACKS FOR THE HOMELESS

Homeless people prefer backpacks for storing and transporting their possessions. They especially like the type of backpacks with bungee cords attached so they can tuck other things onto the outside of the packs.

These packs can actually be found on the Internet for as little as five dollars when purchased in quantity. Instead of just providing people with an empty pack, fill it with some of life's essentials, such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, a brush, deodorant, and nail clippers.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Backpacks
- Backpack contents (toothbrush, comb, and so on)
- Connection cards (laminated for protection against rough handling and moisture)

How do you find people to give backpacks to?

Give these out at other events that attract homeless people (such as the coffee and donuts giveaway). You can also connect with the homeless through a local shelter.

6 BACKPACKS FILLED WITH SCHOOL SUPPLIES

Some children fall into a pattern of chronic absenteeism early in the school year because their parents can't afford required school supplies. Give students a leg up by sending them back to school with supplies they'll need and you'll help them feel confident going into the year.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Backpacks
- School supplies
- Connection cards

School backpacks can be purchased for about seven dollars each in quantity on the Internet. Fill the packs with school supplies. Supplies vary by

district and grade level, so call local school systems to ask what is specifically needed for each grade. In addition, many large discount stores and office supply stores offer copies of school supply lists. Remember that these lists differ from school to school and grade to grade. "Load" the packs according to grade and school system and label them before they're distributed.

How do you find kids to give backpacks to?

Most local school districts will provide names of families who can use help with school supplies. The Salvation Army is also a good source.

7 YELLOW BAG GROCERY COLLECTION AT CHURCH

As people leave your church services, hand them bright yellow plastic bags (which can be purchased from American Paper and Plastic at 1-800-822-5600) with a card listing five to ten food items. The next week, families bring the bags back filled with food and leave them behind their cars. Teams drive around the parking lot and pick up the donations during that week's service(s)—quick in, quick out.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Yellow bags
- Cards listing suggested food items

How do you find people to collect food from?

Your church! They will be eager to participate once they get the vision of what the food will be used for.

8 TIPPING FAST-FOOD WORKERS

Many of the adults working in the fast-food industry are from among the ranks of the working poor. An unexpected dollar or two as a tip is tremendously appreciated. Unfortunately, Christians have a reputation for being bad tippers. You can immediately change that perception by tipping fast-food workers, who typically receive no tips.

Leave special connection cards that include an additional line: “Here’s a little something extra. We hope this brought some light into your day. If we can be of more help, please give us a call.”

WHAT YOU’LL NEED

- Special connection cards



How do you find people to tip?

Approach workers at fast-food restaurants. Also under-tipped are housecleaning staff at hotels and motels.



IN ACTION: Seacoast Community Church in Charleston, South Carolina, issued a challenge to their church members. They put their heads together and came up with a tipping campaign that swept through the city and put their church’s name on the map. They offer preprinted cards for members to leave only if they commit to giving a great tip above and beyond the usual 15 to 20 percent. And they tip in unexpected places, such as fast-food restaurants, where workers can especially use the money. Now the city is buzzing with excitement, and other churches have caught on to the tipping craze. They’re reversing the trend one food worker observed: “The longer the prayer for the food, the smaller the tip.”

9 CLEANING UP A NEIGHBORHOOD

The work that needs to be done in many urban neighborhoods seems to be without end. It’s sometimes a question of “Where do we get started that’s going to make any difference?”

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Clean-up tools
- Rakes
- Brooms
- Garbage bags
- Connection cards

The key to working with an inner-city neighborhood is to be helpful, but not to come across as patronizing to residents. You'll find it vital to work hand in hand with neighborhood leaders. Plan projects with leaders whom residents look up to and you'll change the perception of the project from a handout to a hand up.

For some inspiring stories of people who have done some great urban renewal projects, check with the Soul Survivor folks in Great Britain (www.soulsurvivor.com).

How do you find people who need their neighborhood cleaned up?

Ask around in neighborhoods with older residents who could use help with their dwellings. They're usually a safe place to start. Once you've gotten your feet wet, begin to contact urban leaders of other neighborhoods and begin to build relationships for future outreaches.

10 DOOR TO DOOR WITH BAGS OF FOOD

Nothing says love like a bag full of food. This is perhaps the simplest approach to ministry to the needy. You simply knock on doors and say, "Hi, I'm _____. We have food for anyone who can use it. If you need any, or if anyone else in the neighborhood does, we can help!"

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Bags
- Nonperishable food
- Connection cards

As with all projects, go out in teams of two or more. After you've given out a bag of groceries, it's quite natural to offer to pray for the individual or family that

you're serving. Be open to hearing from God.

How do you find people to serve with bags of food?

You can go to whomever you meet in this door-to-door fashion, or you can go to specific shut-ins or families that you know who are in need.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

STEVE and JANIE SJOGREN have been involved in church planting in Oslo, Norway; Baltimore, Maryland; and Cincinnati, Ohio. Janie is a graduate of Sonoma State University (California). Steve graduated from Lutheran Bible Institute of California and Bethany College (Kansas), and is the author of many books, including *101 Ways to Reach Your Community* (NavPress), *Conspiracy of Kindness*, and *Servant Warfare* (both Vine Books). The Sjogrens live in West Chester, Ohio, with their three children, Rebekah, Laura, and Jack.

HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR SHARING GOD'S LOVE WITH OTHERS.

101 Ways to Reach Your Community

You don't have to be gifted in evangelism to successfully share your faith. Here are 101 simple, effective ways to demonstrate the love of God and win a hearing for the gospel.

(Steve Sjogren)

Beginning with Christ

This short booklet provides the format for telling others about salvation and the Christian life. Topics include assurance of salvation, answered prayer, victory over sin, forgiveness, and guidance.

(The Navigators)

Bridge to Life

How do you lead someone to Christ? This short tract developed by The Navigators shares the gospel clearly, explaining our need for salvation, and how to come to faith in Christ.

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