

Associational Missions, Part 1

For some time we've been exploring ways to reach into the lives of the friends and neighbors who live all around us. I trust the following thoughts will help stir some ideas for possible ministries where you live and serve. Before jumping in, though, carefully consider these important points that will keep you focused.

1. All of this comes from a commitment to the Great Commandment "to love the Lord your God"... "and your neighbor as yourself." It is all done in a spirit of servanthood that genuinely looks out for the best interests of the ones being served. There should be a "no strings attached" attitude. Some we serve will respond in kind and be very open and interested in getting to know us and finding out more about our faith. However, others will enjoy being ministered to but will draw a line when it comes to matters of faith. We should not take this personally or reject them if they seem uninterested in learning more of Christ or becoming involved in our local church. Our goal is not for folks to join our church but to see Jesus Christ as He lives through us. Therefore, we are looking for an unconditional love to be shown.

2. As we step out of our comfort zones to begin investing in the lives of others, let's **take to heart the Great Commission**. We are to go and tell, and as lost sheep come to know the Shepherd we will follow through with baptism and instruction. All that takes place within the church should be measured by how this will help us fulfill Christ's commands. We must constantly evaluate ourselves that we not be a "come and hear" congregation.

3. Most likely, these efforts will **start slowly and deliberately**. There are sure to be some in the church who are uncomfortable doing new things and stepping out of the traditional setting into a new world. Please keep in mind that this is quite normal, and in fact, is what any new missionary experiences as he leaves the comfort of his known world to travel to a distant or foreign place. A new language, new customs, and people who look and behave quite differently are to be expected. Learn to view this as an adventure with God. With time and effort you will come to feel more at home in the new setting.

4. Learn to **pray specifically** for the individuals that you are serving. Be sure to become very personal and approachable so that you really will know how to pray and minister to them. Be on the lookout for how God is attending to your prayers. It is likely that He will be shaping you to better reflect His image rather than making great changes in the lost sheep.

5. Use common sense and never damage your witness by placing yourself in a compromising situation or saying or doing something that is not Christ-worthy. This includes making promises regarding what you or others might do to help in a given situation. It is easy in the moment to share great plans and give much hope to those in need. This is fine, provided you and your church stand behind what you have committed to do. Extra care must be taken when individuals or teams go in to help. Be careful of male/female roles, and never give room for anyone to suspect inappropriate moral behavior. There must always be open accountability so the "right hand knows what the left is doing."

6. Make any arrangements necessary so that needs may be addressed as soon as possible. A need today may no longer exist

several days hence, so beware of red tape and sluggish bureaucracy when it comes to funding and fielding volunteers. Chances are, once you've settled on a particular ministry the work will flow nicely from one need to another.

7. Needs and opportunities may be discovered in a variety of ways. A good starting place is by talking with members of your own congregation. They will likely come up with a short list of families and individuals who are quietly suffering. It isn't necessary to advertise to find lost or needy sheep. If all members will take an interest in their own neighborhoods they will discover more and more real needs. Most folks who have needs in deed seldom make those needs known beyond their immediate families and friends. Be observant and you will learn to separate a true need from a manufactured one that looks to take advantage of a benevolent system.

8. Tailor your ministries around the gifts and abilities of your people. Begin taking inventories of current and future members, and then work to plug them into a ministry where they will feel most natural and comfortable. A financial advisor may not feel confident putting a roof on a home, but he will really shine when asked to help lead a money management or financial workshop.

Associational Missions, Part 2

The following are ideas that a local body of believers may easily do to reach into and touch the lives of people living in our communities. Some are more suited to a particular church than others, but all should serve as a springboard to further creative thinking as we attempt to share Christ's love on our mission field.

Automotive repairs are especially urgent among single moms who are struggling to support their families and older adults on fixed incomes. Many folks in our churches have a good understanding of basic mechanics that could be shared on a regular basis to minister in a very special way to those in need.

Are there some great cooks in your church? Consider **"baking for Jesus"**! Prepare easy snacks and desserts, and then carry them as gifts to people in your community. You will be amazed at the doors opened and friendships kindled by such simple acts of kindness.

If you live in a community of many homes, create a **neighborhood directory**, and distribute it to your neighbors. This is beneficial on several levels. As you are preparing the information, carry around a brief questionnaire that asks about names, phone numbers, e-mail, occupations, and hobbies. Gather the info during your first brief visit, and be sure to properly introduce yourself as you tell them about the neighborhood directory project. Once the directory is ready, you are able to visit in the homes a second time to share a copy with the family. Additional visits during the year are welcomed as you update new information. If you combine this project with another you will always find your neighbors with an open door. If some folks are hesitant to share information, accept that, but be sure to drop off a copy when the directories are ready. At the next "issue," they may be more willing to join in.

Most households now contain one or more **computers**, and a large number of these are connected to the Internet. Interestingly, many computer users have very little knowledge of how to use their computers and software, safely surf the Internet, or troubleshoot and

fix the problems that are guaranteed to occur. A congregation that can maintain a weekly computer users' group will always have new information and material to draw from and discover a never-ending path to participate with neighbors. If your church has taken the initiative to create and manage a Website, you will also have a connection with the families with whom you come into contact. If there are some with further technical skills, you can even offer repair when there is a need.

Daycare, babysitting, and Mom's Day Out are ministry opportunities that target young families who do not have family or paid child care available to them. Caring for young children around the clock can become stressful without additional support. A congregation can look into the needs of young families within the community and devise ways to relieve the parent for a few hours a week. This can either be carried out at the church or in an individual's home. At an appointed time each week the parents of the children know that they can count on your congregation to help them cope with the pressures and constraints brought about when caring for young children. This type of ministry does involve extra special planning. There should always be more than one volunteer present with the children, careful background checks of volunteers is a must, and if the children are cared for in the church or private home of a volunteer you must be sure to provide a safe and accident-free environment.

America is rapidly aging. Many older people are facing very desperate and tragic situations. Families have so dispersed that it is not uncommon to find older folks living in your community who have no immediate family living nearby. Others are on such limited income that they struggle with healthcare costs, home maintenance, transportation, and even the ability to put nutritional food on the table. **Elder Care** is a goldmine of opportunity for any congregation serious about caring for those in great need of a shepherd.

Over the past several years a number of volunteers have been involved in helping immigrants learn **English as a Second Language**. Part of the population growth we are seeing is because those of other lands are settling in the Bedford area. Wherever there are immigrants there exists the constant need for help with English.

Besides learning English, **immigrants** face many other challenges. Some need help finding places to live and work. Others would benefit from people willing to be their friends while helping them to learn how to get around in a new land. This may include shopping, going to the post office, cashing checks, getting around the region, and even going to the doctor. Imagine yourself in a distant land with different customs, language, and culture. Without a friendly helping hand it would be a very difficult experience.

It is a fact that most families in America struggle with financial decisions and burdens. Much of the root cause of this is a lack of knowledge of sound **money management**. There are many teaching resources that your congregation can make available to the community to help turn around a family's personal financial disaster. Weekly classes augmented by occasional special workshops or big-name conferences will go a long way in introducing your congregation to the community.

Do you know of anyone who has not faced grief? Your neighbors' experiences are much like yours, and when great hurt comes into their lives it is an encouragement and blessing to have others step up to support in physical needs and prayer. If you do your homework and take the time to get to know your neighborhood, you will become aware of many personal needs that come up throughout the year. For those facing difficulty without a pastor or church home, you may be more help than you can imagine as you become involved in **grief care**.

Identify **military families** in the area, especially those with active duty personnel deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Discover particular needs of the family. These may be related to a "single mom" trying to maintain a household.

There are more people in our communities with **plumbing or electrical** needs than you might suspect. These kinds of needs can be discovered whenever you visit in the homes of your neighbors or do small jobs for them.

If you or members of your church have summer gardens, have volunteers of the congregation help you identify neighbors who are without a church home or with special needs, and through the summer pick a basket of assorted vegetables to personally deliver to the homes. In addition to dropping off a **basket of fresh produce** you might help them learn how to grow their own garden, if they're interested. Be sure to carry along some information about other ministries at your church.

As you drive around your community take an inventory of homes that need **roof repair**. If you have some folks in your church who are roofers, gather together enough volunteers to help repair or replace a roof.

In the same way that you watch out for roof damage, look for those who might need steps or **handicap ramps**. With several volunteers this can be a quick one day job. You might also find an opportunity to return later to help add handicap access inside the house.

We don't often come into contact with individuals with **special needs**, but rest assured, they are all around us.

There are some in our communities that do not have **transportation**. Reasons may vary. Some may not have a driver's license or automobile, others may have a non-running vehicle, and still others may not be physically able to drive. Look for volunteers in the congregation who can give some time each week to help see that urgent transportation needs are met.

Whether it is about adult literacy or helping students after school with homework or special instruction, almost any of us are capable enough to help with **tutoring**.

Especially during the summer and fall, keep an eye out for neighbors who for one reason or another are not able to mow the yard or rake leaves. Maybe they don't have a lawn mower, or it could be that the mower is broken down, and there isn't enough money in the budget to have it repaired. Maybe someone in the church can offer to stop by and take a look at the mower at another time. Keep in mind that many older folks struggle to keep their yards up and would welcome volunteer help with **yard care**. ■