

# ***HOW TO START A MINISTRY TO THE POOR IN YOUR COMMUNITY***

by Keith Giles

## ***Part 1***

Over the last five years or so I have been involved in serving the poor here in Orange County, California. During this time I have learned a lot about what to do, and what not to do, when it comes to serving the least and the forgotten.

In the upcoming series of articles I will do my best to provide practical insights and information about what serving the poor looks like. I hope to inspire many of you to step outside your comfort zones and begin to serve the poor in your own community. Whether you volunteer at a local soup kitchen or if you lead a small group or a church team to go out and minister to the poor I hope you can benefit from these articles and catch a vision for serving others.

I am very excited about this new series of articles. My prayer is that this will inspire many of you to take first steps into an outward expression of God's love for others. I welcome your feedback and your questions as we take a few weeks to explore this subject and wrestle with these ideas.

### **BEFORE WE START**

This series will not be about building a case for the "Why" we serve the poor, instead I will assume that most of you reading this have already come to terms with the overwhelming Biblical evidence regarding God's command to care for the poor and the example of our Lord Jesus towards the sick, the broken and the outcast.

It is my firm belief that, as a follower of Jesus, serving the least and the forgotten in our culture is expected of us. Jesus was our blueprint for living the Kingdom life. His example to us compels us to leave our comfort zones and to seek out the lonely, the forgotten, the least and the lost in our society. Jesus himself made it very clear that those who sincerely love him will be found caring for the hungry, the poor, the lonely and the imprisoned (see Matthew 25).

For more on the Believers Biblical mandate to care for the poor please refer to the numerous Scriptural references (over 2,000) concerning Gods heart for the poor and His expectation of compassion and obedience from us.

### **CATCHING THE VISION**

So, with the assumption of an understanding regarding our personal calling to serve the poor and to love them as we love Jesus, (and as Jesus has loved us), I will try to share some of what I've learned over the last few years regarding God's heart for the poor and how we can step forward in obedience to care for them.

So, how do we live this out? What does it look like?

One of the first things I did when I realized that God was calling me to lead a ministry to the poor, (or Compassion Ministry), was to seek out other leaders who were already caring for the poor around me. There was a church in my neighborhood that hosted a weekly luncheon for the poor in their parking lot. I was also aware that they had started a Men's Shelter and opened a local Thrift Store to fund the ministry. After a few phone calls I got in touch with the pastor in charge of this ministry and took him to lunch.

Over a cheeseburger I took notes and asked a lot of questions. From there I took this pastor's advice and got in touch with the chaplain of our local rescue mission. A meeting with this amazing gentleman proved very insightful and provided further understanding of what poverty in our community looked like and how best to help.

## **STARTING A MINISTRY TO THE POOR IN YOUR CHURCH OR SMALL GROUP: FIRST STEPS**

If you feel called to start a ministry to the poor through your church, or small group, or just want to get involved in some way, here's what I recommend:

- Understand that this is a Spiritual Battle -The people you are about to minister to are trapped in the most unbelievable darkness you can possibly imagine. They are bound by drug addictions, sexual perversion, demonic possession, mental illness, physical sickness and more. You will need to recognize that you are not enough. You are perfectly inadequate in every way. You will need the power of the Holy Spirit. You will require a complete dependence upon God for help. You will not last a second without Jesus as your example, friend and constant strength. Pray.
- Partner with local ministries and churches who are already serving the poor- Don't reinvent the wheel. If there's already a dozen ministries in your area who are serving the homeless there's no point in starting another one. Partner with them and work together.
- Find out what causes poverty in your community- In Orange County there are several non-profit organizations who conduct annual surveys and publish community index reports on everything from education and crime to employment rates and homelessness. A call to your local Rescue Mission and/or the area Salvation Army office can probably put these reports into your hands. Learning what the specific causes of poverty and homelessness in your community are goes a long way to providing your next step.
- Become an expert in what causes poverty in your city. Soon you'll be teaching others about the problem, and the solutions. Because I've taken the time to study the causes of poverty in Orange County, I've had numerous invitations from local churches to come and share what I've learned. Part of my personal mission is to help others to see what I see and to catch a vision for serving the poor. This is a great way to do that.
- Piggy-back with others who have more experience and learn from them- When our group wanted to minister to prostitutes we did our best to find others who were experienced in dealing with this issue. When we felt called to minister in motels we partnered with the local Rescue Mission who was already organizing church groups to address the issue. Don't assume you know the needs, or the best methods for helping the poor. Every city is different. Every category of ministry (homeless, elderly, veterans, prostitutes, drug addicts, battered women, etc.) is unique. Learn before you step out.
- Build a team (from within your church or small group) who can serve with you- Don't start out alone. Even if it's only one other person, you need to have a partner in this adventure. Pray together. Research the needs and brainstorm your approach to ministry.
- Don't blindly copy what someone else is doing- Every community is different, and I believe we need to begin caring for "our poor" first. The homeless or the low-income family in your area is not the same as the homeless or the poor in San Francisco, or New York or Chicago, etc. Take cues from

others, but don't assume you can "cut and paste" what one ministry does into your community and be successful.

- Start close to home- The poor who live within ten miles of you are "your poor" and getting to know them, and understanding their needs and what keeps them in poverty is crucial. Try not to do long-distance ministry to the poor. Find ways to be in fellowship with those you are serving.

## *Part 2*

This week I want to share a long list of valuable lessons I've learned over the last five years when it comes to serving others. Keep in mind that a lot of what I learned here had to be experienced. Even as I share this with you I understand that reading about this is no substitute for actually experiencing it for yourself. Hopefully as you move forward in your own journey with serving people you'll discover the truth of these observations in your own heart.

### **A LONG LIST OF VALUABLE LESSONS**

As you take your first tentative steps into compassion ministry, you'll need to know what to expect. Here are some basic things I've discovered in my journey serving others in our community:

- Consistency Is Vital — We started ministry at the motel in Santa Ana almost five years ago. Over time we've consistently come every month with a bounce house, games, snacks and a puppet show for the kids who live in this motel. For over four years we only blessed them. We never preached a sermon or passed out maps to our Church. (Although we weren't shy about sharing with them if they had need or if they asked us why were doing this for them.)

Recently, in our fifth year, we've started passing out free groceries and asking them if we can pray with them about anything. Why? The goal of the ministry is to show the love of Jesus to them in tangible ways. Not to market our church or to get them to buy something. We have intentionally withheld a sermon or an evangelistic message so that we create the question in their minds- "Why?" We want people to respond to our compassion by asking "Why would you come out here and bless us like this every month?" When they ask us (and they eventually do) we then share with them the difference that Jesus has made in our hearts and lives.

Having no agenda disarms them and, more importantly, demonstrates that we really are only interested in loving them and blessing them in practical ways.

- You WILL Get Burned. It's Part Of The Process — A fellow compassion ministries pastor once suggested that we publish a guide to help local churches serve the poor. He wanted to include a section that would help prevent them from getting burned by some of the poor who take advantage of our goodwill. I protested against this quite vocally because the best lessons I've learned in loving the poor have come from the numerous times I've been played like a violin. Without those experiences of being lied to, taken advantage of and played for a fool I wouldn't have a shred of discernment regarding the poor. Getting burned is part of the process. Try to learn from it. The biggest challenge is to get burned and continue to love people and bless them, even knowing they might be playing you.
- Bigger Is Not better — For the longest time our ministry to the families in the motel was pretty much my wife, my two elementary-age sons and one other woman from our church. We still managed to put together great games for the kids, snacks, puppet shows and a meaningful ministry to the families who live in this motel. Sometimes having a massive ministry footprint means that the people you're

ministering to get lost in the hype. I'd rather sit down and share a sandwich under a tree with one homeless guy than have a massive army of people running a huge event where the poor feel like outsiders.

- **Don't Pet the Poor** — Early on I was warned not to treat the poor as a project or an outreach. When we do this we end up treating them like people who are less than the rest of us. The goal in serving the poor is to make them feel like an equal human being. Look them in the eye. Laugh with them. Learn their story. Pray for them during the week. Get to know them. If you can think of your ministry as being more about making new friends (who happen to be living in poverty) and less about fixing these poor people you'll be fine.
- **Don't Attempt To Cure Poverty In Your City** — This is a common mistake for those who start off doing compassion ministry. In their zeal to bring justice to the poor they get off target and begin to see their ministry as a grandiose scheme to end poverty forever in their city. The sad thing is that when we do this we stop caring for the actual people who are in need. If our focus can remain on finding a few people and learning how to love them we'll be closer to the heart of Jesus. One of my early mentors, David Ruis, used to communicate it this way: "What do you see and what do you have?" Meaning, start with the people in front of you who have a need. Ask yourself what you have that you could share with them. Befriend people and learn to love them.
- **It's About Sharing, Not Giving** — Giving to the poor, although important is not what we're necessarily called to as followers of Jesus. We're called to share. Giving means writing a check and walking away (and taking the tax break on our IRS return). Sharing means taking something that is mine and giving it away to someone who needs it more than I do. That's an investment. That's also about friendship and relationship, not compassion from a distance.
- **Befriend A Few and Learn To Love Them Deeply** — When we first started our Motel Ministry I had grand visions of leading huge outreach teams to lead worship and preach the Gospel and rescue hundreds from the despair of poverty. God quickly corrected my vision and showed me one small family living in the motel. Love them, He said. Get to know them. Invite them to your house for lunch.

For the first two years or so that was the main focus of our ministry in that motel. The difference was that this ministry soon became less about ending poverty in that motel and more about the struggles of my new friends, Mike and Pam and their two children.

- **You Will Learn More From Them Than You Teach** — My relationship with Mike and Pam and their children taught me more about courage and forgiveness and humility than I could have ever learned from reading a book or a blog or listening to a sermon. The things I heard and saw and experienced by knowing this incredible family had the greatest impact on me of all.

### *Part 3*

So far I've received a lot of encouraging feedback from many of you regarding this series. My hope is that this helps many of you catch a vision for how you can step out and begin to serve others and learn to love as Jesus does.

This week's installment will continue to look at valuable lessons I've learned over the years. Next week we'll look at specific ideas for the types of ministry to the poor that can be done and a brief "How To" for

each of them. After that I'll end off this series with more detailed discussions of what ministry to the homeless and to prostitutes looks like, and the specific challenges involved with each.

For now, here's the rest of the list we started last week:

A long list of valuable lessons-

- You Will Get Back More Than You Give, Every time – I used to drive away from our various ministry sites feeling depressed. In my heart I always felt like we could have done more to help, or that I was desperately inadequate to meet the incredible needs of the people we were in relationship with. After awhile I began to understand that this is part of what it's all about. I also began to realize that the blessing I was taking home with me was always greater than the one I had just brought to the people we were in ministry to. No matter how massive or outrageous our ministry was, I always felt like it wasn't enough...and it never would be enough. Part of what I learned was how to be ok with this.
- You Can Only Help People Who Want Help – There's a great passage in the Gospel where Jesus comes upon a man who is laying beside the Pool of Siloam. He is lame and obviously in need of healing. However, Jesus looks at this man and asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" It seems, at first, like a very stupid question. However, in my years of ministry with the homeless and the addicted and the broken, I have been amazed at how many of them don't really want to be made well. For some of them, if I were to reach out my hand and take away their addiction, or their poverty, or their infirmity, they would hate me for it. Sometimes you have to ask people if they're really looking for healing or not.
- Some People Only Want Help Staying The Way They Are, Not Help Getting Better – Honestly, I'm a push-over. If someone asks me for food or money or assistance I have a hard time saying "No" and turning them away, especially if it's in my power or ability to do something. I think it has something to do about the Lord Jesus saying, "Give to anyone who asks of you expecting nothing in return" (Matthew 5:42). So, I will almost always help someone who comes to me for help...the first time. However, I've learned to help them further by saying, "Here's food/shelter/money/assistance for tonight, but what about tomorrow and next week? You need a long-term solution to your problem. Here's a few phone numbers to call. These people can help you make long-term changes and get off the street/off drugs/self sufficient/healing/counseling, etc."

The next time I see them, if they ask for help again, I will ask them, "Did you call those numbers I gave you last time?" and if they say "No" then I explain that the reason I'm not helping them today is because they didn't take any steps towards helping themselves in the long-term. Another response is to help someone financially with the understanding that they need to agree to sit down and allow us to help them create a budget to live on. If they agree, we help them. If they don't then we've established the terms under which were willing to help them out. However, sometimes I do just hand them food or money or pay their rent without any conditions attached. It depends on the person, the situation, and a bit of discernment.

- Be Prepared To Welcome The Poor Into Your Church, Your House, Your Family, and Your Life – I usually caution people who come to me asking how to start a compassion ministry with this statement: "If you're not willing to sit next to these people in Church on Sunday, or to have them play with your kids, or to invite them over for pizza afterwards, then don't start a compassion ministry." Nowadays I usually just let them get their feet wet and after they've been doing it a while I'll suggest that this ministry is more about loving people and less about an outreach. Outreach implies going out

to accomplish something. It keeps the poor "Out There" and that's not what Jesus modeled for us. If we're going to step out and demonstrate to people that Jesus Loves Them it has to be consistent. It has to mean "We love you too," otherwise what we're really saying is "Jesus loves you but we're not too comfortable around you. Stay out here and we'll come back next month and minister to you again." This isn't the Gospel and we can damage the true power of the Gospel if we say one thing and model another.

- **Change Is Difficult** – As you begin to minister to people who are homeless or living in poverty you'll no doubt come across a few people who just can't seem to get the courage to take that big step towards escaping poverty. I've seen people, more than once, come right up to the point of escaping poverty only to run as fast as they can in the other direction. Here's what I've learned: Holding their hand is good, but doing it for them is a big mistake. Sometimes the psychological leap is too great. It's much easier to remain in the world they know than to take a big step and risk failure. Some people will need you to be there with them every little step of the way. It can be frustrating, but when they finally do escape their situation the celebration will be well worth it. Others will just not ever be able to take that test or apply for that federal aid or drive down to that learning center or make that phone call to the counseling center, no matter how much you hold their hand and urge them to take the step. Taking that step for them will ease your frustration in the moment, but unless it's their idea and they're ready to follow through with things, they'll just back out of things eventually anyway. Prayer is really your best weapon usually.
- **Don't Withhold The Blessing** – This is one of my big pet peeves in compassion ministry. I understand that everyone does things their own way, but nothing makes me more angry than to watch Christians withhold the food or the assistance, etc., until after people have sat through an hour long sermon or church service. The Gospel is expressed just as much in showing love and compassion without cost or agenda...maybe more so. People understand love. They understand compassion. They appreciate sincere giving done without an ulterior motive. Just try it. It's incredibly powerful. Maybe if you bless them without strings attached they will WANT to know more about why you love them, and why you love Jesus.
- **Listening Is The Best Ministry Possible** – File this under "Bigger is not Better." When you boil it all down, people just need to know you really care about them. Listening to people is the most powerful way you can demonstrate real love to them. Spending time with people and really paying attention to them is the best ministry you can ever do, and it doesn't cost you a thing.
- **Don't Forget The Poor Among You** – I'm embarrassed to say I needed someone from my compassion team to point this out to me. Our church was so busy knocking ourselves out to minister to the poor in the community that we were neglecting the poor and the orphan and the widow and the single Moms in our very own congregation. Let the blessing begin in the Family of God. There are those among us who are also poor and need the love and the compassion of the Body. Don't forget them.
- **Don't Use This Ministry As A Way To Market Your Church** – File this under "Things that make me very angry". I've noticed a disturbing trend among some churches lately where ministry to the poor is seen as being trendy and hip. They treat compassion ministry as a selling point for their church because it makes them look cool and it looks great on their website and in their bulletin each week. However, caring for people in need is typically not what they have foremost in mind. It's marketing their church. This really ticks me off. So, when we first started our Compassion Ministry I told our team members that, although I wasn't forbidding anyone else, I would never wear one of our church t-shirts to our ministry events. "Why not?" someone would always ask me. Because I don't want them to ever see that t-shirt and say "Oh...that's why they're being so nice to us." In fact, recently we've

been joined by another large mega-church at the motel. Although we've been there for five years now, this mega-church has been serving breakfast every other Sunday and setting up tents and chairs and tables and having an on-site Church service. Because their presence is quite large, many of those we minister to often assume that we're from this mega-church. They will even end their prayers by saying, "And God bless the good people of Church" to which I always say, "Amen!" I love it that our specific church is able to bring Glory to Jesus and even favor to another local Church by serving these people. It's a great reminder that our service to these people isn't about making our church famous or competing with other churches. It's simply about modeling the love of Jesus for people.

- Don't think of it as "Outreach" but as Loving People – After awhile the word Outreach becomes a dirty word. To me, the word carries the connotation of keeping people at arms length. I prefer to refer to what we do as Compassion Ministry or Service or simply "Being with our friends". Even to call them "The Poor" in some ways puts them into a classification that is demeaning and de-humanizing. Whenever possible think of them as your friends. They are people. They have the same needs as you and I. Love them as Jesus loves you.

*About The Author:*

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