



10 STEPS FOR STARTING A MINISTRY TO PEOPLE IN HOMELESSNESS

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In the story of the Good Samaritan, found in Luke 10:25-37, a man is on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is attacked and left for dead, no one to help him. Until a priest, a man of faith, came by. But instead of helping him, he bypassed the man, leaving him in his obvious distress. But thankfully, another man, a Levite, again a man of faith, came by. Unfortunately, he too bypassed the man as if he were not there, leaving him to his fate. Finally, a Samaritan, one who could, culturally at least, justify passing the man by, stopped. He attended to the man's wounds, gave him a ride, paid for his lodging and care, present and future.



You may ask, what does this story have to do with homelessness. Well, first of all, a fellow human being was the one in need of assistance. Second, he had suffered trauma, maybe but fault of his own or maybe not, the Samaritan did not ask. Third, the man was dependent upon the goodwill of another human being. And finally, he was in the path of those who came by.

In many places, large cities and small, urban and rural, we can experience people who are homeless. People who are fellow human beings, people who have experienced life and found it wanting, some by their own hand and some not, who knows? These individuals are in need of many necessities and are sometimes dependent upon the goodwill of others. But most importantly, they are in our path. It is very possible that their presence in our walk of faith is not by accident. However, it is our choice whether to help. We can ignore their plight, walk on by, pretend they are not there, or, we can find ways to help them in their journey, to show God's love and presence.

This can be done in so many ways, ranging from the small and simple to the response of the Good Samaritan. It ultimately depends on what God calls us to do. What need God places in our path. This can apply to any situation, time, or person but for this particular purpose, we are focusing on homelessness, the people, the needs, the how to's and the how not to's, the joys and the pitfalls. But most importantly, it is clearing our hearts and minds and allowing God's voice to direct us.

Getting Started

Step One - Embrace Your Call

If you or your church is feeling called to respond to the social evil of homelessness, you have already completed step one. You have felt the call. Now, what next? Maybe you see the problem and feel completely overwhelmed. Maybe you feel inadequate. Maybe you are already feeling the excuses of the priest and Levite creep into your consciousness. Not enough time. Not enough money. Fear, and a hundred other worries. But set all those aside and let God lead and empower you.



Step Two - Focus Your Prayer

Prayer. Maybe that was step one, either way, it is an important step. Ask for God's strength, guidance, and empowerment. Ask for forgiveness if necessary, maybe for prejudice, wrong attitudes, misconceptions, or biases.

Step Three - Identify Your Team

This one can be a little tricky if you are a church congregation. Is this a calling for the church as a whole or for one or two individuals? How you determine this will vary from congregation to congregation. But it is important. Do not make the mistake of making an individual calling a congregational calling and then being discouraged because the church did not respond. The calling can be championed by one or two individuals but if you are going to tout this ministry as a congregational effort, be sure the church is behind it.

Step Four - Identify Your Partners

Now, you are ready for the practical steps. This one includes some basic research into your community. What ministries are already happening to help the homeless? What do they do? How well do they do it?

For example, if there are several food pantries already operating in your community, and their ministries provide decent opportunities, there may be no need to start another one.

When researching the community, cast a wide net. Include faith-based ministries, non-profits, city, state and federal programs, and even community-based programs. Get a good picture of who is doing what in your community.



Step Five - Discern Your Role

Here you have to determine what needs are not being met in the community. However, that means you have to know what needs there are in the first place. Some needs of an individual are basic; food, clothing, healthcare; hygiene. These are physical needs, however, there are others that are more holistic; significance, love, value, purpose, and dignity. Finally, there are more individualistic ones that might include economic stability, substance abuse, mental illness, emotional illness, and the list goes on.

Don't get overwhelmed! You do not have to meet them all. We as humans are a complicated bunch and our needs are varied and many. Getting this "map" of services in your community may help point you in the direction you are being called, however, remain open to God's calling. Don't settle on the easy road just because it is easy. Don't settle on the hardest just to make yourselves stand out.

Step Six - Determine Where God is Calling You

Back to prayer. Now that you have a picture of what's around and what is not, it is time to ask God's direction again. When I initially came to First Baptist, I did a preliminary mapping of services and needs in the community and found out there was no place that the homeless could take showers. We had old showers in our basement that were being used as storage rooms. Did God want us to pursue this ministry? I had to be sure this was not just my desire to start this ministry but was indeed God's. That is the fine line we sometimes face. We have to be sure we are not doing a ministry for our own glory first but for God's. This is why step six is so important. Remember, praying may involve not just bowing your head but may include talking to others, especially to those who are homeless, and also getting a feel as to how the church is leaning. God speaks to us in a multitude of ways.



Step Seven - Identify the Task

Assuming that you have a direction as to how to move forward, at least with an idea for the ministry you are going to pursue, what are you going to need to begin? This, of course, depends on the ministry. If you are starting a clothing ministry for example, you would need clothing, racks, shelves, bags, an adequate space, easy access for those you are serving, and volunteers. Consider everything. If unsure, research other places who already have that ministry. Put yourself in the place of the person seeking that service. What would you need?

Step Eight - Get the Right Resources

It is time to start gathering resources. What physical resources does your congregation have? This may include space, volunteers, leadership, budget, transportation, storage, etc... You do not have to lay out all the details for each one until you have a fairly complete picture of your resources.

You also might want to consider partnering with another congregation, non-profit, etc... If so, what resources do they have to offer. Will they make a good partner? Not just in the ministry you are pursuing but ideologically, theologically, and support wise. Are there resources in your community to help you with supply, finances, etc...

Step Nine - Decide on the Details

Nail down the details. Decide on when you can best offer the ministry you are proposing. Is that a good time for you and for those you serve? Are there competing programs at that time where those you serve will have to choose which one to visit? Will you have access to qualified volunteers?

A good idea is to allow room for change as well. In other words, do not make decisions that limit your ability to adapt once you actually begin offering the ministry.



Step Ten - Get the Word Out

Advertise your ministry. By this, I mean let the community know what service you are offering. Advertise among the homeless community, other congregations, non-profits, etc... who also serve the homeless community, and especially within your own congregation. Do this at least a month before you are actually ready to begin. This also gives you time to train your volunteers, prep your space, do some more praying, and consider anything you may have overlooked.

Here are some things you might want to be aware of as you begin this journey:

- Pray. It's been said before but I need to say it again. You cannot do this without God's help, direction, and empowerment.
- Decide what you can do and what you cannot do. You will get a lot of requests for help, many will be outside your area of service. That is where knowing the resources in your community comes in handy so you can refer people. It is okay to say NO. However, practice the way you say it. Say it with love and kindness and with hopefully another alternative. Don't try to be the savior for the homeless. Know your limitations.
- Be prepared to deal with all kinds of people. Some are dealing with substance abuse, mental illness, loneliness, depression, racial and gender inequality, etc... Some may not have bathed for a while. Some have anger issues from being treated like second-class humans. Above all, remember these folks are first and foremost God's children. Treat them as such.
- Have a plan to deal with emergencies. These may be rare but being caught off guard may have adverse effects to your ministry. For example, I have from time-to-time people who get rowdy, abusive, or violent. Rare, but it happens. If you do not have a plan or training to deal with these occurrences, it could cast a negative view on the ministry, chasing away volunteers and those you want to serve.



- You will most likely be taken advantage of from time-to-time. You will be lied to, manipulated, verbally abused, and maybe disliked. It's okay. You have to remember that life on the street is about survival and that many times people who live on them are carrying a lot of baggage. Love the best you can and help the best you can.
- Be aware of compassion fatigue. Be sure the people involved in this ministry have adequate times to re-charge. Working with the homeless can be extremely rewarding and extremely challenging. You will need time to regain your emphasis and passion to help.
- Never think you are an expert, even after years of doing this ministry. You can always learn and grow, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and you will need to continue to educate those in your congregation, young and old.
- Don't let just anyone volunteer directly with the homeless. Know their strengths, their heart, their social and spiritual ability, however, don't underestimate individuals as well. Everyone has gifts and matched with their desire can find a place of service. Sometimes volunteers can do grave damage to the ministry, the church and/or the Kingdom of God if they are volunteering in the wrong place or for their own glory.
- Sometimes when the ministry is busy or volunteers rushed or tired, we fail to listen with our ears and with our heart. Take time to treat each person you serve as they are the only person around.
- Finally, establish rules and guidelines for the ministry and stick to them. There will be some times for exceptions but order and fairness go a long way to keeping your ministry going smoothly and your guest and volunteers happy.

Resources

1. Steve Blanchard blanchard@fbcrichmond.org
2. Read *Toxic Charity* by Robert Ludlum
3. [Homelessness Resources | HUD.gov](http://HUD.gov) / [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](http://U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)
4. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [Homelessness Programs and Resources | SAMHSA](http://SAMHSA)
5. National Alliance to End Homelessness <https://endhomelessness.org>
6. Understand Homelessness

