

An Unconventional Approach to the Mission of the Church

Chapter 1—the Sunday School lesson

There are great efforts and energy already being poured into benevolence at the University Church—and more are coming. And so, the purpose of this is not at all to criticize the efforts that are already being made or even to suggest that they are somehow inadequate or defective. Rather, I want us to change our vision: our view of who we are and what we are about. I want benevolence to become as important and as intentional as missions and evangelism. And I want us to share a vocabulary and an understanding.

I don't think what I say is at all the final word. It is an effort to communicate in black and white what I think I see. Perhaps I'm deluded. Maybe my study is in error. I don't know. But perhaps this will trigger a worthwhile conversation.

Oh, and I'm not pushing for anything immediate. Change takes time. If I'm right, we'll have to learn a host of new skills and behaviors. This is big stuff, and I may not live long enough to see it fully realized. I just want to be part of helping get us to where we need to be.

There are times I'm thrilled with the direction we're going, and other times I'm so frustrated I want to beat my head against the wall. We desperately need that vision or mission we keep talking about. But when we talk about it, benevolence pretty quickly gets shunted aside as though evangelism were the only mission we've been given. Indeed, we sometimes turn our noses up at a mere "service small group," and wish those people were holy enough to want to do evangelism instead of merely caring about those in need.

This morning, I taught a Sunday School lesson all about benevolence. I've long been in the habit of writing my classes up. Of course, what I write is more what I wish I had taught than what I actually said. This is what I meant to teach—

Lesson

I'm teaching this because I've had (been given, actually, I think) some thoughts that I'm having trouble expressing. They are (you won't be surprised to learn) about community service or benevolence. I just don't think I've been able to adequately communicate what I feel called to say on the subject.

I've finally concluded that my communication problem is due to the fact that we are all used to thinking of evangelism and benevolence in certain ways. When we are confronted by a contrary way of looking at things, we see things in the way we are used to and don't even realize that we're being confronted with an entirely different approach.

The best I can tell, there are four views of benevolence at church. They are as follows:

Personal preference. I get this all the time. “My, you sure seem to have a heart for the poor!” people say. But I don’t. I have a heart for study and teaching. I’m not coming from some deep heartfelt desire to go to the “projects” and do benevolence. This comes from study and prayer and has nothing at all to do with what I want or even like.

In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Warren lists 9 ways a Christian can grow close to God—

- Naturalists—by being outdoors
- Sensates (sounds like a genus of dinosaur, doesn’t it?)—love God with their senses (big on vanilla incense)
- Traditionalists—ritual, doing what they’ve been doing for 500 or so years, connection with the past
- Ascetics—solitude and simplicity
- Activists—doing something to make the world a better place
- Caregivers—by meeting the needs of others
- Enthusiasts—celebration
- Contemplatives—love God through adoration
- Intellectuals—”love God by studying with their minds.”

Of course, this isn’t really a list of ways of growing close to God. It’s a list of ways of *feeling* close to God, and that’s a different matter altogether. Indeed, the unintended—but plainly taught—lesson is that we get to *pick* whether to be activists and try to “make the world a better place.” If we’d rather meditate or sing or smell incense, that’s okay, too, just so long as we achieve a warm and fuzzy feeling about God.

Similarly, some teaching on spiritual formation speaks of Christians having four ways of approaching God—through study, prayer, contemplation, and service. Again, depending entirely on your personality type, you may spend your life in study or you may serve. It’s *your* choice. After all, Christianity is all about *you*.

Checking the box. Another approach to benevolence is the legalistic view that pleasing God is being a member of the right church. And the right church is a church that has just the right “marks”: organization, name, and worship. A correctly formed church does benevolence and does evangelism. But it does these out of obligation, rather than a heart-felt love, and so benevolence tends to be of a token variety.

I do legal work for dozens of churches around the state, and many of the largest, wealthiest churches have only the tiniest benevolence programs. One church with a \$20,000,000 building program only gives money to the poor out of its end-of-the year

leftovers. Most churches have a program just large enough to avoid pangs of conscience due to the annoying beggars at the door.

The notion seems to be that any level of benevolence is enough, as all we're trying to do is check the box and be a church that has the right characteristics. Big check, little check, it just doesn't matter. Hence, when I mention my belief that we need to expand our benevolence activities, I'm told, "But we already have Harvest Hands! Why would we want to do more?" It's rather like saying, "We already sent *one* missionary. Why send two?" Could it be: because we *care*?

Competition. The next approach is much more understandable. The person I'm speaking with says, "I know that we're told to do benevolence. We're told to do lots of things. But nothing is more important than saving souls! Why should we take resources from evangelism to feed the poor? Aren't their souls more important than their stomachs?" And, indeed, their souls are more important.

Logically, it seems, we have finite resources. We have just so many volunteers, dollars, and hours in the day. Our evangelistic efforts aren't all that effective as is, so plainly the remedy is to redouble our evangelistic efforts. When we finally get our evangelism in good working order, then we might find some remaining resources for a literacy program.

It makes sense. It's just not biblical. Indeed, in Matt. 25, we are quite plainly told that our salvation depends on how we treat the hungry, thirsty, naked, and imprisoned. James says that pure and undefiled religion is caring for widows and orphans. In 1 John 4, when John wishes to explain the meaning of love, he says that giving to those in need is truly living out the meaning of the cross. He never mentions evangelism.

In fact, while the Great Commission is quite plainly at the end of Matthew, it's a bit surprising how much more emphasis the scriptures place on caring for the poor than on evangelism. We don't see epistles to the Christians urging them to invite their friends. We see missionaries being sent, but we also see Christians selling all that they have to help each other out. We see deacons appointed to distribute food to the widows. We see Paul traveling the Mediterranean and, in addition to preaching the gospel, raising funds for the poor in Jerusalem.

Paul's letters generally begin with a theological discourse and end with ethical teaching—how to live as Jesus wishes—and they never mention evangelism in the ethical sections. They do talk quite a lot about service.

In Peter's great passage on how to live among the lost, he writes,

(1 Pet 2:11-12) Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, **they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.**

Amazingly, Peter seems to think that the pagans will glorify God because of our “good deeds”! Not our sound doctrine, not our celebrative worship, not our deep meditation, and certainly not our buildings. Not even our personal evangelism. Our good deeds—deeds so good that even those who hate us will see their goodness!

Obviously, these deeds must be visible and must be done in the name of God, or else no one will know whom to glorify. Indeed, this is reminiscent of something Jesus said—

(Matt. 5:13-16) “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, **that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.**”

Christians individually, and the church as a body, must change the community in which we live. Salt permeates all that it touches and makes it taste better. Light expels darkness. Indeed, we are to do deeds of such goodness that they “cannot be hidden.”

Now, evangelism is, of course, of infinite importance, but the lost see it as of no value at all. If you have no faith, then you certainly can’t understand the incredible blessing of salvation. But everyone who has ever been thirsty understands the value of a glass of water.

(Mark 2:3-12) Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” He said to the paralytic, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.”

He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Jesus forgave the paralyzed man of his sins—and he could have given him no greater gift. But no one glorified God. But when Jesus healed the man, even his enemies gave glory to God.

The Gospels teach that Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and gave sight to the blind because of his compassion. To be true to his nature as God's Son—the God who is love—he could have been no other way. And he also healed to demonstrate his credentials—to prove that he really is who he says he is.

Just so, the church is the body of Christ, and so must walk and live as Jesus walked and lived. Jesus had compassion that compelled him to help those in need. Jesus wept. If we do not feel the same way, we aren't very much like Jesus. It's not a choice on a smorgasbord of Christian pleasures—it's our essential nature as re-created by the Holy Spirit.

This is why we'll never prove our credentials as true Christians until we heal, feed, and visit. Basketball and relationship-building events may make us a great social club, but we won't be the church Jesus died for until we lay down our lives and serve others. Even the pagans serve *themselves*.

It has nothing to do with law. Rather, it is being true to who we are.

(Phil. 2:12-13) Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

You see, God—through his Spirit—works in us to want what he wants and so to do what he wants. And we know what God wants, because he lived among us and showed us. He wants us to live lives of compassion.

Compassion, therefore, denies the check-the-box mentality. The question is never: why one more benevolence effort? Or why one more missionary? But *how many more can God empower us to do?*

Thus, we have a fourth view of benevolence:

Synergy. Good works and evangelism are synergistic. Indeed, neither works very well without the other. We never, ever do benevolence in order to save. We do benevolence because we love those we help. But because we love those we help, we also teach them about Jesus. But if they refuse the good news, we still help them.

(Luke 17:12-18) As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Only one of the 10 thanked Jesus, but Jesus didn’t return the nine back into lepers. And Jesus healed them although he knew (knowing the future) that they’d be ingrates. And he kept healing. Compassion could do no less.

Benevolence, you see, does much more than feed the hungry and give us a chance to teach them the gospel. For example—

- Benevolence changes those doing the giving and helping. It softens our hearts and reinforces compassion in us. We become what we do.
- Benevolence defeats the argument that we’re all hypocrites. Christians will never be sinless, and we’ll always have leaders whose failures embarrass us. We can overcome our inevitable human failures by doing irresistibly good works, showing Jesus through our actions rather than pretending to show Jesus through our supposed perfection (or supposed perfect pattern keeping).
- This is because benevolence causes others who see what we do to praise God—and to recognize us as truly Christian.
- Benevolence gives the church a richer, more powerful sense of mission.
- More importantly, it gives us a sense that we are—finally!—being what we were called to be.
- Benevolence encourages giving. Especially in the Churches of Christ, people give as they see need rather than from discipline. Of course, if we would actually do what we are called to do, the discipline and the need would be the same.
- Benevolence can balance budgets from the other direction. It’s cheap. It’s cheaper to paint houses here than in Memphis. Cheaper to play with foster children here than in the Bahamas. Cheaper to teach job skills than to give hand outs. Cheaper to teach literacy than support the illiterate. Cheaper to

get into the lives of the poor, bring them to Jesus and Christian living, and end the cycle of broken families, drug dependence, and crime that is destroying our society—than not. And people who'd struggle to give a weekly tithe will gladly stop by Home Depot and buy a can of paint and bring a ladder for a project they are working in.

- Benevolence speaks to the hearts of children. Too many kids grow up thinking church is about being a nice person and figure they can be nice without having to pay a tithe or get up on Sundays. Benevolence shows that Christianity is about changing the world.
- Benevolence speaks to the hearts of the Postmodern. The new worldview demands that we be “authentic” rather than just having the right positions. Of course, this means that God is just bit Postmodern himself. If we don't live what we teach, we won't reach those with this worldview.
- Benevolence changes the world. Done properly, we don't just give the hungry fish, we teach them how to fish. We don't just give money to the poor, we teach them how not to be poor. We teach individual responsibility, not dependence.
- Benevolence breaks down barriers. Today, at Tuscaloosa Middle School, whites and blacks often fight. The racial barriers are huge. But imagine if the blacks at TMS spent Sundays in an apartment-based VBS with the white kids helping out. Imagine a world where the blacks know their mother has a job because the father of the white kid next to him taught her to make a resume and interview for a job. Imagine a world where Alberta blacks and Wellington whites paint houses together during the summer—in Alberta rather than Memphis.
- Fellowship is noun, not a verb. We are in fellowship. It means partnership or sharing, and it has much more to do with working side by side than eating brownies together (2 Cor. 8:4). Of course, a partnership or sharing leads to social interaction, because goods deeds done together lead to friendship. And it's in that order. Although friendship doesn't necessarily lead to good deeds, we try to attract the lost by promises of “relationships,” which is a selfish motivation. As a result, we produce a crop of selfish Christians. To the extent we can seek and save through benevolence, we'll produce converts to lives of committed compassion. Hence, benevolence makes for better fellowship, better converts, and better Christians.
- Benevolence also makes for better worship. We think we have to hire a professional worship leader to celebrate. I have a better idea: let Jesus accomplish something through our church worth celebrating! When our student finally gets a job, when our patient finally gets well, when the house is finally painted, when our friends made through service accept

Jesus in baptism—hard work and a significant mission will lead to extraordinary celebration.

- And it's great to praise God for forgiving my sin 40-plus years ago, but even better to praise God for what he's doing in Alberta or the hospital or Harvest Hands right now! Benevolence gives us a better sense of God's powerful action in the world. We don't have to meditate to find God: we find God in the faces of those in need (Matt. 25, again).
- Benevolence makes for better study, meditation, and prayer. It drives us to our knees as we learn compassion for people with incredible needs. We seek God's presence because we know we have to rely on him, not to assuage our over-privileged American *angst*, but to help us cope with the sufferings of those around us. We study to be better at our mission, not for intellectual curiosity.
- Benevolence makes for better evangelism. For many, it's easier to invite a friend to paint a house or help teach literacy than to attend a Bible study or worship. In fact, in this Postmodern age, it's getting easier and easier to do this. And when a friend sees the power of God's Spirit in our fellow workers, he'll "see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."
- Benevolence can also be the way to grow without yielding to the temptation to compete with other churches in town by catering to the latest whim in worship or architectural style. We may never be able to have the most exciting worship service (no band) or the most beautiful (no organ). I don't think we'll ever match the sanctuary at First Presbyterian. Perhaps the solution is to grow by entirely different means: by growing as a natural result of being Christ on earth to those who most need him.
- Benevolence unifies. We may disagree with many churches in town on many issues, but we all agree on caring for the poor. I can paint houses side by side with someone I may not be able to worship beside.
- Benevolence shows the world the unity of Christ. Of course, there's not much unity to show, but what unity there is, is shown through the Soup Kitchen and Good Samaritan Clinic far, far more than through anything else. Frankly, if we're ever to realize Jesus' prayer in John 17 to be shown to be his disciples by our unity, it will come through benevolence, not ecumenical negotiations or, even less likely, doctrinal debates. We've tried those. They don't work. Maybe love for our neighbor will get us there.
- And perhaps benevolence will help us outgrow our American desire to compete against the other churches in town. As we get involved and feel touched by the vast unmet needs in the community, we'll quickly find that our congregation isn't big enough to solve the problems. If we really care,

we'll go looking for help from other churches, and if they realize the same blessings we receive from service, we'll be happy, because that will bring more workers into the field.

- As we bring Jesus to the poor, some may prefer to join a different congregation, and we should be happy that they found Jesus. On the other hand, we must make every possible effort to let them feel welcome and wanted at our congregation. We can't truly love people and then shunt them away to another community.

So why else do I think benevolence is important? Because doing good works is the very reason we were saved:

(Eph 2:8-10) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

A quick look at our bulletin shows that the Spirit is moving within our members to do benevolence already. Harvest Hands, Love Bears, Agape, and much more. I am constantly approached by members with tender hearts asking to be told what to do to satisfy their compassionate longings.

We are, in many respects, already a benevolent church. But we aren't intentional enough about it. We don't see it as a way to change our community. We don't see it as so tightly intertwined with evangelism as to be inseparable. Rather, we over and over insist that our mission is evangelism (meaning *just* evangelism). Or we say our missions are worship, fellowship, maturity, service, and evangelism, giving Christmas parties equal weight with, quite literally, changing the world through benevolence and evangelism.

I believe we have *two* missions: evangelism and benevolence, and that we should see them as a unity, two reflections of the love of Christ that, properly envisioned, will work together to do more than we "can ask or imagine." All the other "missions" are simply means to an end and are holy and Christian only to the extent they further the church's mission. Else they are self-indulgent and even narcissistic.

God saved us and gave us his Spirit so we would "do good works." Not to have relationships. Not to meditate. Not to study. Not even to worship. To change the world. And if we'll make those our mission, he'll give us the rest in abundance.

(Eph 3:20-21) Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Chapter 2—Some Implications for Ministry

That was the theology. This is the missiology: a theory of how to do benevolence.

I came to some of the foregoing conclusions, not by studying benevolence, but by asking how we can conduct teen and campus ministries in such a way that we keep more of our kids in the faith.

The fact is that our (meaning the church at large, not our particular ministries) teen groups do a very credible job of keeping our kids entertained and coming to church. And many also do what their elders demand—get lots of kids to come to weeknight devo. Nothing quite excites the elders like the sight of one or two hundred teens at youth or college events. This is so exciting that elders often give the youth minister leave to do things they'd never allow among the adults. After all, don't the crowds *prove* that something righteous is going on?

Sadly, though, when the kids leave for college, they often abandon the church—not just the Church of Christ, but Christianity altogether. Either that or they go looking for a church that entertains them and helps them make friends as well as their old teen program did. What they don't do is look for a place that will equip and support them to serve.

What was holding the kids to the teen program anyway? Music? Parties? “Relationships”? And so what would have kept them? You have to figure: more of the same.

The fact is, we might just be looking at this exactly backwards. The solution isn't to be better purveyors of goods and services. Christians aren't consumers. They're servants. Servants! If the teens had been taught to be servants—really, really taught so that service is in the marrow of their bones—not just one of many optional church missions—they just might stay—provided the church as a whole really becomes a place to do service. You see, teen ministry must be nothing but age-appropriate adult ministry. The two ministries can't be all that much different.

So why don't our kids grow up to be servants? Well, in part because their parents aren't servants, but that just moves the question to another age group. Why don't we teach the parents to be servants?

Now, I urgently state that many of their parents really are servants. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and living in the hearts of our servant members, sometimes despite our best efforts. But many are not. Why not?

Well, it's because we have an incomplete doctrine of service. We teach two kinds of service: evangelism and service to our members. And the purpose of the service to our members is to make church such a great place that we irresistibly draw the lost to join our

group. Basketball, intramurals, Weigh Down Workshops, softball, youth league baseball, singles mixers, “relationships”¹ developed through an intricate series of small groups—everything the 21st Century un-churched person needs, all for the low, low price of baptism. “Relationships! Get ‘em while they’re hot!”²

Nowhere does the Bible ask us to call people to the formation of relationships. Nowhere are we called to develop sports programs. In 1 John 2, we are called to have a relationship with God (“know God”) by obeying his commands, of which there is one: love our neighbors. *I don’t see where 10 years of nurturing the healthy in small groups is getting us any closer to knowing God.* We enjoy the groups and are often comforted by them—but we don’t serve others, at least, not much.

We are called to serve, not to be served. This is the essence of Jesus’ example—

(Matt. 20:28) “[T]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

And whom do we serve? Well, whom did Jesus serve?

(Matt. 9:12) On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”

We have some very thoroughly doctored healthy people. We’ve gone from being a hospital to being a health club—highly buffed bodies sweating in the air conditioning to no effect other than being in great shape to exercise some more.

Every preacher, sometime in his career, preaches this sermon—

I went to the ball game yesterday. Boy, I’ve never seen anything like it! I mean, I just thought I’d been to a football game! People screaming and cheering everywhere for hours before and even hours after the game! Incredible!

Why, 85,000 people went to that game and they could have sold twice that many tickets. Millions watched on TV. It was just so exciting!

But isn’t Jesus much more exciting than Mike Shula? Didn’t he do far greater things than even (dare I say it?) Bear Bryant? And if that’s so, why aren’t we screaming and cheering

¹ It just kills me to say or type “relationships.” “Relationship” is the generic term for how two people relate. My relationship to some is as father, to others as son, to others as attorney, to others as client, and a few others as enemy. Why not say something with a little content: “friendships.” Was that so hard? We really don’t sound smarter or better educated talking this way—just harder to understand.

² Yes, yes, I know that members have to have 7 friends to stay. I just think they should make their friends with their sleeves rolled up.

just like we did yesterday? Surely a victory over Satan is better than a victory over MTSU!

So let's get excited! Let's get fired up!! Let's cheer for Jesus!!!

And on it goes. We've heard it before. We didn't get all that excited last time (or the first time). I mean, we tried. It seemed so very logical. But the preacher's cheerleading just didn't work. A forced show of excitement, a moment of guilt: why aren't I as excited today as yesterday at the big game? And then the sermon's over and soon forgotten.

The reality is that we aren't excited because there's nothing much to be excited about. I mean, it's obvious, isn't it? If church was exciting, *by definition*, we'd be excited. If we're not excited, then church is just not exciting.

Here's the idea. If our teen ministry not only does evangelism but also does benevolence right, there will be victories aplenty—and the celebrations and excitement to go with it. The same is true for college and adults. Even for children. Imagine seeing one of our teens or college students in the baptistry Sunday after Sunday immersing a convert! Imagine last year's converts in the baptistry again, immersing the next generation of newborn Christians!

So to decide what is benevolence done right, we have to first figure what is a victory? What would make us dance with excitement (even in church)? Well, it's such a rare thing, we can't imagine it. One fine woman told me: only a miracle. Well, miracles still happen.

First, something good has to happen for someone. And that person needs to be someone we love. That's about it. Of course, the more people we love, the more opportunities we'll have for victory dances. Unfortunately we really don't love very many people—not in the sense that we'd excited enough to buy a ticket to see their baptism.

There are basically two ways to do good. You can help someone find Jesus, and this is, of course, an incredible thrill. But we already know that. It's just that we aren't very good at it.

The other approach, which I'm calling "benevolence," is just about anything else good done for another. There are plenty of options. But from a programmatic standpoint, an ideal benevolence program would look for these characteristics:

- It must be done in the name of Jesus. Helping people without giving Jesus credit dims the light on the hill.
- It must involve true interpersonal contact with other people. We can mail millions to the tsunami victims (and we should), but we can only love

them in the abstract. We need programs where we love people we know: where perfect strangers become neighbors whom we love intensely.

- It must involve victories. Now, not all benevolence is about winning, at least, not in the American sense. Hospice care, for example, is all about accepting defeat, which is, of course, a victory, but we need at least one program where the good guys get to win in a way understandable to the immature: college students, teens, and kids.
- It must be doable by the young. Again, many valuable programs are beyond the reach of the young, but some are well within their reach.
- It must be in our community. It absolutely eludes me why youth ministers insist on hauling kids to other parts of the world to do benevolence. Good deeds are done, but—
 - The kids don't learn that there's good to be done here.
 - The kids don't get to see their own community change.
 - The community doesn't get to see the congregation's love for the world.
 - Many of the kids don't get to see their own parents participate.
 - The rest of the congregation doesn't get to help. The kids and new members need to see benevolence as a work of the congregation, not the teen or campus program. They can, of course, do different parts, but one reason we lose kids is we convert them to salvation but not to the body—the community where Jesus lives.
 - It's an inefficient use of money. The same monies could do much more good at home and the kids could be powerfully changed by getting to do the good *in community*, that is, in partnership with the congregation they are part of. This is a powerful concept that God invented for us.

The reason some (former) ministers have given me is this: “When we take the kids out of town like this, they build great relationships.” It makes me want to scream! We isolate kids from the families, their congregation, and their community to built self-indulgent relationships. And when they turn 18 or 22, the relationships end as kids go their separate ways, and so the kids leave the church.

When a white teenager sees a kid from “the projects” in the hall and they exchange a high five because the white kid and his dad visited his home and helped him find a job, will lives be changed? Will the school be changed?

When the *Tuscaloosa News* writes up the story and the church freely teaches other churches in town how to follow its example, will the community be changed? When the churches expand the Tuscaloosa Prayer Network to include a forum to share ministry ideas and coordinate efforts, will the church be changed?

Negatives

There are always negatives, of course. God has built caution into us for good reason.

How will we ever find enough volunteers? Good question, and it's even worse than you may think. Churches have very few economies of scale. More members means we need more teachers—more volunteers of nearly all kinds. And as we get bigger, our expectations get higher. Some people who were great song leaders or Bible class teachers back home don't make the grade when they move to a larger church. People just expect a huge church to have great classes, great singing, great everything. We never get so big that volunteers are spare.

But this also means that we have guys who *could* teach back home and who will now be excellent in a jail, in an apartment church, or in an evangelistic small group. And now they'll be worth vastly more to God.

Hence, there are at least four pools of additional volunteer talent—

- *Underutilized talent.* We have people who teach children's church once a year who could do puppets at an apartment church for six months—just long enough to train someone local to do the puppeteering and graduate to puppeteer coach.
- *Formerly unusable talent.* There are people at church who know how to teach a kid to house paint but don't know how to lead a small group or even invite a friend. We have retired speech therapists and social workers. There's lots of talent out there that doesn't find a spot on the yellow volunteer sheet. (The theological point to make at this point is that if God gives a talent, there's a need. We just have to find the need to fit the talent. We do tend to get this one backwards.)
- *People in the community that we serve.* These people can paint, move a puppet's mouth, or punch out flannel graphs. Soon enough, they'll be leaders.
- *Friends of volunteers.* If my theory is right, kids and adults will easily invite friends to come paint a house or put on barbecue, and the friends should be put to work. It's called "hard work evangelism." Show up because you already have a friend, do hard work, see people smile, feel your heart grow, and so find Jesus. (Kind of the opposite of go to church to find a friend, expect to be served, and feel entitled.)

- *New talent.* Gifts come from the Holy Spirit. We'll surely find people who last year didn't have a clue about how to do this who suddenly find themselves, literally, inspired (God-breathed) to lead or work in ways that are beyond our power to ask or imagine.

We don't know how to do this. Yes, and we don't really know how to grow 10% a year by inviting friends, but we try very hard anyway and spend millions trying.

Besides, there are people who've already done this. Get on Amazon.com and type in "Ron Sider" and then try "missional" and then follow the links to other authors. While Churches of Christ have largely been uninterested and ineffective at benevolence (and many other denominations are the same), there are churches that have been doing this for, well, centuries. They are glad to share what they know.

We don't have enough staff. That's probably right. But perhaps that's because of our self-indulgent external and internal culture. I mean, how big was Paul's staff?

I think that, over time, we'll find this problem solved by God's gifts, more volunteers, less selfish demands on staff time, and more donations. In fact, just getting the members to see how their neighbors live will persuade them to be less self-interested.

Hence, per my earlier footnote, one reason for bringing this up now. We have to allocate resources. If we start by first indulging all our members' whims, there won't be time or money left to change the world. Allocating is very hard. (I remember the first time I proposed cutting out the subsidy for baseball shirts! We all know other examples. Pray for courage.) Allocating is easier when the congregation has a shared vision.

But the mission fund (among many other prior successes) amply demonstrates that when Christians step out on faith, God supports our feet. We often underestimate the goodness and spirituality of our members. After all, the deeper you go into the leadership structure, the more you see their selfish side. It's easy to get cynical, even hopeless. But the scriptures provide ample encouragement—

(Deut. 15:11) There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to **be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.**³

(Job 22:7-11) You gave no water to the weary and you withheld **food from the hungry**, though you were a powerful man, owning land—an honored man, living on it. And you sent **widows away empty-handed** and **broke the strength of the fatherless**. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.

³ This is the verse Jesus quoted. Of course, it's used in budget meetings to argue *against* benevolence programs (to the credit of the Ministries Team, never in one of its meetings).

(Prov. 17:5) He who **mocks the poor** shows contempt for their Maker

(Prov. 19:17) He who is **kind to the poor** lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done.

(Prov. 21:13) If a man shuts his ears to the **cry of the poor**, he too will cry out and not be answered.

(Isa. 14:26-32) This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back? ... The **poorest of the poor will find pasture**, and the **needy will lie down in safety**. ... What answer shall be given to the envoys of that nation? “The LORD has established Zion, and in her his **afflicted people will find refuge**.”

(Isa. 58:6-12) “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to **loose the chains of injustice** and untie the cords of the yoke, to **set the oppressed free** and break every yoke? Is it not to share **your food with the hungry** and to **provide the poor wanderer with shelter**—when you see the **naked, to clothe him**, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. “If you **do away with the yoke of oppression**, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves **in behalf of the hungry** and satisfy **the needs of the oppressed**, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.”

(Ezek. 22:29-31) The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they **oppress the poor** and needy and **mistreat the alien**, denying them justice.

“I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

(Matt. 19:21) Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and **give to the poor**, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

(Luke 6:20) Looking at his disciples, he said: "**Blessed are you who are poor**, for yours is the kingdom of God."

(Luke 14:12-14) Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But **when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed**. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

(Rom 12:20) On the contrary: "**If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink**. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

(Gal. 2:10) All they asked was that we should continue to **remember the poor**, the very thing I was eager to do.

(James 2:5) Listen, my dear brothers: **Has not God chosen those who are poor** in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?