

# Game Changer

## 5 Essentials of an Effective Care Strategy

By Scott Wilson

All pastors and church leaders worth their salt say they care about disadvantaged and disenfranchised people. In many cases, however, the actual ministry strategy of their churches is primarily designed to increase the number of people attending weekend services. The result is that many of us invest relatively little time and few resources to touch the lives of “the least of these”—the very ones who flocked to Jesus. We need to remember what true ministry is all about. Jesus didn’t give directives for us to sit in our nice churches and invite people to join us. He commanded us to get up, go where the people are, roll up our sleeves, and show that we really care about them as human beings.

One thing scares me: Some day soon we are all going to stand before Jesus and give account for how we served or ignored the outsiders in our community. If that doesn’t scare you as a Christian, it should scare you as a Christian leader who will be held accountable for how you lead God’s people.

Some church leaders are afraid that becoming a compassion-driven church may make them vulnerable to the criticism they’ve become “liberal” and they’ve “ignored the gospel.” That’s misplaced fear. Effectively meeting the needs of people in the community opens many new doors to tell people about the redeeming love of Christ. But caring for people isn’t just a means to the end of evangelism; it has inherent value of its own. Jesus loved, fed, healed, and

restored people whether they trusted in him or not. That's the measure of his grace, and it's one of the marks of a transformed church, too.

Imagine people driving by your church and saying, "Yeah, that church is incredible. It's making a *huge* difference in people's lives in our community!" I used to think people said that about our church . . . until I started listening to them.

To become a church that's committed to proclaiming the cross of Jesus Christ while also being at the center of solution for the major issues plaguing our communities, we need to change the way we function in five essential areas:

#1 Change the way you think.

#2 Change the way you pray.

#3 Change the way you keep score.

#4 Change the way you do community outreach.

#5 Change the way you teach about giving.

Let's look at each of these.

#1 Change the Way You Think.

After a staff meeting four years ago, our staff team had lunch at a restaurant down the road from our church. The mayor of our city was sitting near us. After we finished eating and got ready to leave, the mayor came over and said, "Pastor, I wonder if I could talk to you for a few minutes." I sat down with him at his table, and he said solemnly, "Pastor Scott, there's a problem . . . a big problem."

I responded immediately, "What do you mean? Tell me what it is."

Without hesitating, he said, “You and your church have a bad reputation in our community.”

I was stunned, and I asked him to explain what he meant: “Mr. Mayor, I don’t understand. Please tell me what you’re talking about.”

He explained, “You’re the biggest church, and in fact, the biggest organization in our community, but you have the reputation for doing your own thing. You’re not really part of our community at all.”

I tried not to be defensive as I explained, “Everything we do is designed to help this community. I wake up every morning thinking and praying about how we can make a difference in the lives of people.” To be sure he heard me, I repeated myself: “I’m serious Mr. Mayor. It really bothers me that you would say such a thing because everything I do is for this city.”

He smiled knowingly, “That’s the problem, Pastor Scott. You’re always doing things *for* us, but you don’t do much *with* us. There’s a difference . . . a big difference.”

I still didn’t understand, and he could see the confusion in my face. To make his point, he gave an example. “Do you remember last fall when your church had your **Fall Festival**? You had about 5000 people at the church. It was huge. The city had a Fall Festival, too, but we had only a handful of people. When we have our citywide clean up days, we call your church to see how many of your people want to participate, but the answer we get is that your church has your own clean up program planned, so very few of your people are available to help us.” The mayor stopped for a second to let this sink in, and then he continued, “Pastor Scott, your church has all the money, all the people, and all the resources to make a huge difference in our city, but the other leaders in the

city see your church as inconsiderate, and worse, as competition. Here's what I'm saying: You can either *partner with us* or *compete with us*. It's your choice, but your reputation is on the line."

As I walked out of the restaurant, I knew this wasn't a complaint I could easily dismiss. The mayor had pointed out a profound misunderstanding in the way we were trying to live out our mission. We had seen our role as being a "bastion of hope" where people could come for salvation and comfort. Our efforts in the community were designed as forays "out there" to touch people and bring them into our fellowship. That afternoon as I prayed and reflected on my conversation with the mayor, the Holy Spirit reminded me of several things. When the Son of God stepped out of glory onto earth, he came "to dwell among us." He was to be called Emmanuel, "God with us." He didn't remain at a distance and offer resources at arm's length. He became one of us, ate our food, drank our water, suffered our disappointments, and felt our pain, endured similar injustice—and far worse. In passage after passage in the gospels, Jesus spent time with outcasts of every stripe: despised prostitutes, hated tax collectors, the blind, the lame, and convicted criminals. Jesus didn't see us as projects to be fixed, but as real people to be loved. There's a monumental difference between creating services to help people and becoming one of them—it's the difference between *for* and *with*. When we do things for people, we feel superior, and to no one's surprise, the recipients often feel inferior. Jesus stepped out of the glory of heaven to become one of us, to live with us, to serve instead of being served, and to give the ultimate sacrifice to show the extent of his love for us.

True compassion comes from being overwhelmed with the grace of God—when we realize we’re no better than the people God has put in our paths. But for the grace of God, we’d be in the same sad shape—and some of us have been in exactly their places!

Genuine compassion is the hallmark of the Christian life. On the night Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, he told them, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. . . . Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:14-15, 17). Jesus’ example that night is our benchmark of selfless devotion to one another. But he wasn’t finished with his explanation. He told them, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Jesus demonstrated the measure of love by *being with, caring for,* and ultimately *laying down his life for* people who were on the margins of society—and even those who despised him.

In the ministry efforts of our church, too often people were perceived as projects (or targets) instead of genuine, flesh and blood people for whom Jesus died. When we helped people, we felt we had new notches in our gun belts, and we proudly showed them off. If we think we’re earning points with God by helping people, this ministry isn’t really about them at all—it’s about us: It has become something we think will impress God and the people around us.

In many churches today, the grace of God no longer amazes us. We need a fresh reminder of the wonder and power of Jesus. A deeper understanding of the

gospel will melt our hearts. It will remind us of our sins and hurts to enable us to identify with struggling people. Only then can our hearts overflow with genuine love, hope, and compassion. At our church, we were *doing* things for plenty of people, but the way we were *thinking* about our care ministries was seriously flawed. It had to change.

That afternoon God also reminded me of the passage that has been the foundation for our church. When Jesus began his ministry and gave his first message, he read from the prophet Isaiah. As he stood in the synagogue, he quoted:

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

Jesus came to inaugurate God’s kingdom on earth, a kingdom that will ultimately redeem not only the souls of those who believe, but all of creation as well (see Romans 8:18-25). He doesn’t divide the world into dualistic spheres of *sacred* and *secular*. He cares for people where they are and uses us to meet their needs. We never fail to communicate the wonderful gospel message of transforming grace, but this message is received most readily if we also fulfill his mission of caring for “the least of these.” In fact, in Isaiah’s prophecy, the people who are recipients of God’s grace become his partners. The prophet says, “They

will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor” (Isaiah 61:3). That's why we call our church The Oaks Fellowship.

God used the mayor's words to challenge me, inspire me, and redirect the efforts of our church. Our leaders prayed and planned, and within a week, God led us to rethink everything about our church: our identity, our calling, and our strategy. Before my meeting with the mayor, if anyone had asked if we had a compassionate church, I'd have pointed to our support groups for addicts and hurting people, our food pantry, benevolence ministries, our assistance for struggling churches in other countries, and on and on. But we suddenly realized all of these were *for*, not *with*. We held a hand out to these people, but we didn't embrace them—we didn't identify with them and become one of them. Now, we have become committed to make compassion who we are, not just part of what we do. Caring for people is no longer a department of our church; it has become the soul of our church. True compassion couldn't remain a niche; it had to become the new norm.