

Lesson Three

Serving the Whole Person: Churches and Ministries



Before You Press Play

In Lesson One, we learned that seeking social justice requires tending to the broken relationships at the root of the problems we see around us today. In Lesson Two, Cheryl and Ron’s friendship with Roderick and Lisa demonstrated how preventing and overcoming social breakdown begins at home, through face-to-face, personal relationships found within the context of family and close friends.

But what happens when the need simply overwhelms a family? Or when someone in need has no family to lean on?

We’ve gotten used to the idea of turning to a government “safety net” for these types of situations. After all, there’s a targeted social service program for every tangible need from unemployment to homelessness. But government programs cannot adequately address the intangible and complex relational needs at the heart of many problems.

That’s what makes the work of churches and ministries so different—and so well-equipped to serve as a first line of defense to prevent and overcome human need.

Churches and ministries can offer a comprehensive set of resources to help cultivate and restore the foundational relationships of life. Along with other community groups and local networks of support, they also strengthen the family in its critical role. Religious congregations and aid associations once played the leading role in addressing human need in America. For various reasons, that focus has receded over time, but some congregations believe they can lead the way once again.

In Lesson Three, you’ll see one church’s role in serving its community. The First Baptist Church of Leesburg, Florida, under the leadership of Pastor Charles Roesel, established a “ministry village” called the Christian Care Center to offer a holistic range of services. The campus contains a Men’s Residence, Benevolence Center, Thrift Store, Pregnancy Care Center, and other facilities that serve hurting members of the Leesburg community. As you watch the video, consider these questions:

- How did healthy relationships play a role in this church and its ministries cultivating social justice in its own community?
- What makes this church’s service effective?



Watch

The Loving Justice of First Baptist Church Leesburg

with commentary by Dr. Albert Mohler, Jr., President, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (see DVD or watch online at SeekSocialJustice.com)



Read and Discuss

When thinking in terms of social justice, we should ask which institutions are best equipped to help those in need. Just as we learned about the role of family in Lesson Two, a key theme of Lesson Three is that local congregations are a foundational institution of a just society.

The Responsibility to Serve

Responsive Love

For the congregation of First Baptist Church Leesburg, outreach and service aren't only for the especially pious. Church members don't consider service merely an act of personal generosity. Instead, they also view helping those in need as a response to God's command to love others. They approach this ministry as a responsibility, even a privilege—a joyful *obligation*, not just an *option*.

- 1** What difference do you think this perspective makes for churches, in terms of the kind of assistance they provide? With this question in mind, read and discuss Matthew 25:34-46.

- 2** In the video, Pastor Roesel discussed social responsibility in terms of Jesus' call to "love your neighbor." Read Luke 10:25-37. Who does the parable of the Good Samaritan suggest is a neighbor?

The Servant Church in American History

Until recently, the character of American compassion was rooted in the church. As Dr. Albert Mohler notes in the video, churches led the way in developing schools, hospitals, and other social institutions in America. Christians pioneered disaster relief agencies and savings and loan programs. They were at the forefront of social movements such as the abolition of slavery and prison reform. Alongside these inspiring examples, American congregations in earlier centuries also carried out their responsibility to care for the day-to-day needs of hurting people.

In *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, Marvin Olasky describes how, just a hundred years ago, congregations were the first place to turn to in times of need. Churches and Christian aid societies practiced careful, deliberate, and personal generosity by opening their homes and giving of their time—not just providing money. They did not separate the tangible needs from the intangible: such a division was considered neither wise nor truly compassionate.

Today, we don't necessarily think of churches on the front lines of meeting need. But churches and ministries still have the capacity to serve that role, and those that do often stand out for their effectiveness in tackling some of society's most complex problems.

3

Where do people in your community tend to look first for help?

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How do you think the community of Leesburg would differ without the people of First Baptist Church? If those being served had to turn somewhere else for assistance, how would the help they receive differ in that scenario?

Keeping the Faith

Pastor Roesel sees serving the needs of the community as part of the core mission of the church, stemming from its central beliefs. But some members of the congregation were initially wary that focusing on social ministries would lead the church off course.

They're not alone. Churchgoers have voiced similar concerns since the appearance of the "social gospel" movement in the early 1900s. That movement

"We as the church have to be the people who say, 'We can't franchise this out.' ...The church has the responsibility to make a start—to get its members mobilized for that kind of ministry."

—Dr. Albert Mohler, Jr.,
President, Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

has been criticized for abandoning central Christian doctrines and fundamental responsibilities of the church, reducing the gospel to a message of social redemption through political and economic transformation.

Theologians like Dr. Anthony Bradley note that the main problem with the social gospel isn't that Christians were concerned with improving social institutions and structures. Rather, it is the tendency to reduce the entire gospel to this one arena, distracting from an emphasis on personal sin and redemption. First Baptist Leesburg provides one example of how faith and acts of service are biblically compatible.

5 In what ways do you think that maintaining core doctrinal beliefs and cultivating social justice might actually reinforce each other?

6 Read Matthew 5:13-16. What do you think it means for the church to be salt and light? What does that look like in practice?

“The amazing thing is the impact a servant church makes on a community.”

—Rev. Charles Roesel,
First Baptist Church Leesburg

What Makes Churches' Service Distinct

Care for the Whole Person

First Baptist Church Leesburg demonstrates that local congregations can provide a full range of resources—spiritual, material, financial, emotional—to people in need.

7 Name an *intangible* resource this church was able to provide in its efforts to restore broken lives and cultivate human flourishing. How did this kind of effort make a difference for people like Bob (the Men's Residence graduate) and Vicki (the lady helped by the Pregnancy Care Center)?

Consider the following characteristics of local congregations and faith-based outreach. Churches and faith-based ministries:

- Take people’s spiritual nature seriously
- Possess close-up knowledge of the surrounding community’s needs
- Can address problems at the level of the human heart
- Are motivated by deep conviction and hope
- Point to a source of meaning and purpose in life
- Emphasize reconciliation
- Allow members to know each other by name
- Represent a wide-ranging pool of gifts, skills, and resources
- Provide a sense of belonging in a supportive community
- Foster hope, strength, and perseverance in the face of difficulties

8 How do these characteristics distinguish the kind of help that churches can provide from the kind offered by more remote sources such as government welfare agencies?

9 Pastor Roesel talked about ministries serving the totality of a person’s needs. Which foundational needs and relationships did he mean by this and how did they do it?

“Every ministry we have is for the purpose of meeting the total needs of the individual.”

–Rev. Charles Roesel,
First Baptist Church Leesburg

Different Gifts and Different Needs Drive Innovative Solutions

One of the most exciting aspects of church outreach is that it can offer flexible, creative, and resourceful solutions to both immediate and long-term needs.

Needs change over time, for both individuals and communities. Churches can be flexible in addressing those needs: shifting resources and developing new approaches as necessary. Because of their close relationships with those who are hurting, church members see the direct effects of their efforts and get immediate feedback. This allows for quick course correction as well as maximizing the outreach that works.

The initial ministry effort at First Baptist Church Leesburg was a rescue mission, which provided soft beds and hot meals for the homeless. Pastor Roesel says that he later came to believe that this particular approach needed improvement.

- 10** How does the Men's Residence represent a change in the congregation's approach to serving those who came to the rescue mission?

There is no single right model for all churches' outreach ministries. Faith naturally manifests itself in a diversity of gifts of service, and the needs of each community differ. One church may express its responsibility to love and serve community members through establishing a targeted ministry, such as a health clinic or a school. In another congregation, an informal group may identify opportunities for congregation members to participate in existing external ministries.

- 11** What kind of relational ministries could members of your church or small group engage in to seek social justice in your community? What do you think are the main obstacles standing in the way of church members engaging in this kind of ministry?



Rethink

Congregations and faith-based organizations have great power and potential to promote social justice by serving community needs through personal relationships. Face-to-face interactions generate personal knowledge and care and can yield direct feedback that allows for innovation and course correction. The diversity of gifts in a congregation allows for creative and flexible service, and even a small church can make a big difference.

Churches once had a much more prominent role in providing for social welfare in America. Today, government's social welfare activity has greatly expanded, but churches remain better equipped than government in their ability to meet the wide range of complex, relational human needs. By resuming their place on the frontline of serving those in need, churches and ministries could significantly advance social justice in America.

- 12 How might it change your perspective and social engagement to view local, caring congregations as a necessary component of social justice?



Read On

Explore further how churches and ministries can serve the whole person through these Scripture passages and other resources. Visit SeekSocialJustice.com for hyperlinks and related material.

John 13:34-35

Romans 12:9-21

James 1:27

Meeting Needs, Sharing Christ, Donald Atkinson and Charles Roesel

Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road, Timothy J. Keller

“Why Religion Matters Even More,” Patrick F. Fagan, The Heritage Foundation

“The Difference One Church Can Make,” Ryan Messmore, The Heritage Foundation

“Private Faith, Big Government,” Ryan Messmore, The Heritage Foundation

Behind the Scenes

How many ministries are a part of the “ministry village” of First Baptist Church Leesburg?

First Baptist Church Leesburg operates a “ministry village” called the Christian Care Center that includes six different ministries—from an Emergency Children’s Shelter to a Pregnancy Care Center—each housed in a separate building on the FBC campus.

Are the health care scenes from a ministry run by the church?

The scenes of the nurse and the medical equipment were filmed inside the Community Medical Care Center (CMCC), which is jointly sponsored by the Christian Care Center

