



Ministries of Compassion Feature Article

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The healthy church actively expresses the love of Christ through generosity and service to those in need.

How should compassionate ministries and evangelism contribute to spiritual transformation? To begin, some may even wonder what sense it makes to include both terms in the same question—compassionate ministries and evangelism.

Our spiritual forefathers certainly understood the importance of witnessing to Christ's Good News in both word and deed.¹ There are abundant examples in the New Testament. In addition, many spiritual leaders in the centuries since then have followed Christ's example, including Polycarp, Athanasius, Augustine, St. Patrick, St. Boniface, Wyclif, Hus, Luther, and Wesley. They have given themselves in loving service, responding at once to people's needs and proclaiming the Good News of Christ's coming kingdom.

We are still captured by Wesley's proclamation, "The world is my parish." The radical transformation of England under his ministry was a testimony to the power of evangelism and compassionate ministry, spawning a revival movement that swept across the Atlantic to North America and then around the world.

However, much has happened on this continent since those early days of the Wesleyan movement, including the rise of the social gospel and the reaction to it, increasing social services by the government, transitions from small community settings to sprawling metropolitan areas, and the growing affluence of evangelicals. Somewhere in the midst of these changes, the biblical understanding and practice of compassionate ministries and evangelism has waned in many places.

Word and Deed in Our North American Parish

The world is our parish. Almost every North American Wesleyan knows that our tribe now extends to more than eighty countries around the world. Surely John Wesley himself would be pleased. The Wesleyan Church, birthed and headquartered in North America, continues to launch ministry in new places and welcome other groups into our worldwide fold.

In the meantime, not all is well back at home. “The unchurched population of the United States is the largest mission field in the English-speaking world and the fifth largest globally.”² Nor are our churches in Canada faring any better. While Wesleyans are growing numerically at a modest rate, we continue to fall behind with whole segments of North American culture—young people in their 20s and 30s, the swelling number of people in urban areas, immigrant populations and other minority groups in general. For example, the United States is now the most multicultural nation-state in the world. Meanwhile, North American Wesleyans are still overwhelmingly White, notwithstanding modest growth in recent years among Hispanic and other minority ethnic groups.

Numbers aside, Wesleyans along with other evangelicals are virtually indistinguishable in many ways from other North Americans. Lest one think otherwise, this is not good news in the light of recent findings by a number of researchers like George Gallup, Jr., and George Barna, who report embarrassing similarities between evangelicals and other North Americans in numerous areas including sexual disobedience, physical abuse in marriage, divorce, materialism, selfishness, and racism. Says Michael Horton about this disconnect between our profession and witness, “...*evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general.*”³

So what should it mean to be a Wesleyan today? What characteristics should define who we are, what we believe, and how we act? A growing number of leaders are asking these questions and suggesting responses. In the midst of these discussions and the current realities of our church in the world today, one thing for sure is urgently needed...the recovery of the biblical understanding and practice of compassionate ministries and evangelism.

Compassionate Ministries and Evangelism: What Should Their Relationship Be?

What does compassionate ministry have to do with evangelism? This question is heard frequently these days, at times as a sincere inquiry and at others as a rhetorical statement, like “Could there possibly be any relationship between the two?” In any event, it is a welcomed question, because our view of this matter makes a huge difference in the way we see ourselves as Christ’s witnesses in our current day and endeavor to fulfill His mandate to “go and make disciples of all peoples.”⁴

There are at least three possible ways of seeing the relationship between compassionate ministry and evangelism.⁵

Compassionate Ministry as a Means

Some consider compassionate ministry only as a means to evangelism, like an opening attraction that has no essential connection with the act that follows. When talking about compassionate ministry, they use terms like “the bait” and “the sugar on the pill.” Even a statement like “evangelism through compassionate ministry” may reveal a subtle bias toward this kind of understanding.

Admittedly people are often drawn to Christ through acts of Christian kindness. Still, the view of compassionate ministry mainly as a means to evangelism is inadequate. It suggests that the only real business of the Kingdom is focused on the spiritual realm and that when we help people with their temporal needs, in reality we are doing so with an

ulterior motive, that is, to save their souls. John Stott writes about this view, “While in its best form it gives to the gospel a credibility it would otherwise lack ...the smell of hypocrisy hangs round our philanthropy.” (Stott 1975, p. 26)

Speaking of compassionate ministry as “pre-evangelism” may also reveal a lack of one’s appreciation for God’s transformational work when we serve others compassionately in Jesus’ name. A cup of cold water given in our Lord’s name can make an eternal difference, even though the recipient may never make an evangelical profession of faith according to our understanding of God’s salvation plan.

Compassionate Ministry as an Outgrowth

Others think that compassionate ministry is essentially an outgrowth of evangelism. In other words, people are saved first, spiritually speaking, and then outward changes take place as a result of Christ’s work in the new believer’s heart. It is true that when God genuinely transforms people they will become doers of good. But seeing outward changes in people only as a byproduct doesn’t accurately reflect the all-encompassing way that God works in our hearts and lives.

Admittedly, this view may seem a little more attractive than the first, since at least it suggests that life transformation is related to evangelism. Nevertheless, this understanding of evangelism as the cause and compassionate ministry as the effect is still inadequate, as we shall see below.

Fortunately there is a third view regarding the relationship between evangelism and compassionate ministry—one that is in greater harmony with the teachings of Scripture.

Compassionate Ministry as a Partner

The third view sees compassionate ministry as a full-fledged partner of evangelism. Both are integrally related to our commission as believers to give witness to Christ’s Good News of the Kingdom in word and deed.

This understanding is more adequate for various reasons. Our word “evangelism” comes from the New Testament term “Good News.” Thus, when Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from Isaiah—proclaiming “good news” to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, release of the oppressed, and the year of the Lord’s favor—He used this term.⁶

For Christ, people are not just disembodied spirits to be rescued from their earthly bodily prisons. In fact, such a segmented view of people comes from pagan roots and is related to popular first century philosophical teachings.

Our Lord certainly had a lot more in mind than many are thinking today when they use the term “evangelism” and just mean “soul winning.” Rather, Jesus proclaimed “Good News” for the whole person, evangelizing new believers in all dimensions of their lives through both word and deed.

Paul also modeled an integrated understanding of evangelism and compassionate ministries. In 2 Corinthians 5, he says that we have the ministry and the message of reconciliation, thus urging us to proclaim Christ in both deed and word. Compassionate

ministry and evangelism are meant to go hand in hand to reconcile lost people to God, His creation, and others.

It could be that when we begin to talk like this, some may fear that we will “water down” the Gospel. They may be afraid that we will be tempted to tiptoe around and limit ourselves to doing good things without talking about Christ to others. But if we are true to Jesus’ example and genuinely transformed by His presence in our lives, we will not be able to keep from talking about Him even as we do good works in His name.

When we proclaim our Lord’s Good News in both deed and word, our witness will have much greater authenticity. Not only will people hear the Good News of the Kingdom with their ears, but they will experience it with their whole being—mind, heart, soul, and body. This is radical evangelism, through which all dimensions of a person’s being are transformed both inside and out, and one becomes a totally new creature in Christ.

For these reasons, evangelism and compassionate ministry are meant to be integrally connected. Admittedly, theological analysis of these two terms can be helpful, as long as in practice we do both in order to give full witness to the transforming work of Christ in the lives of lost people.

Compassionate Ministries and Evangelism: What Should Their Expression Be?

“Okay,” you may say. “So what will evangelism and compassionate ministry look like in our world today? How will witnessing to Christ’s Good News in both word and deed make a difference in people’s lives?”

Biblical Guidelines for Implementation

For starters, Paul sets forth some practical principles for effective ministry in word and deed.⁷

1. We are all called to be ambassadors for Christ.⁸

Churches that understand and practice this principle strive to involve the whole body of Christ in ministry. Lay people have multiple opportunities to witness in both word and deed, and God uses them in amazing ways. Churches can cooperate with Him in this matter by helping each believer to identify one’s gifts, equipping for more effective service, and mobilizing for ministry.

2. We must practice what we preach.

Many today believe that how one thinks and acts in private should have no impact on one’s public life. However, this is a complete lie that is infiltrating the church and weakening our influence in the modern world. “The credibility of the witnesser” is the greatest determiner in the believability of the message. For this reason, Paul speaks to the Corinthian Christians about his endeavors to live an exemplary life.⁹ In recent research, converts revealed that they responded, in part, because they could sense that their Christian friends were “connected to God.”¹⁰

3. We are given both the ministry and message of reconciliation.

Too many Christians today have gotten pretty comfortable with life and have lost sight of the desperate need of people for reconciliation with God, others and creation. Surely, the deceiver is happy that we are feeling so much at home here on earth. Many of us have forgotten what life was like before Christ and have lost a focus on the desperate situation of a growing number of people in our own nation as well as around the world. For this reason, Paul's reminder to the Corinthian Christians that we have the ministry and message of reconciliation is greatly needed today.

4. We must be culturally relevant.

The notion that cross-cultural ministry is only for a few hardy people is not true. None of us should consider that this world is our home. Instead, we are all pilgrims in a foreign land and are called to follow Christ's example of incarnational ministry. This requires a clear understanding of our core beliefs and commitments and continual observation, flexibility, and creativeness. Christ calls us to leave our comfort zones and go into the highways and byways for Him. The early Christians were so effective because they understood this reality and were bold in their strategies.

5. Radical evangelism is a process.

Effective evangelism calls for much more than a simple formula. Rather, coming to faith in Christ is a process that generally requires time and involves a number of people who are on God's team as His instruments to influence a person's life. Typically around thirty different experiences lead up to a new believer's confession of faith, including God's own sovereign action, specific truths of the gospel, caring ministries and witness by others, godly examples, and one's own participation in the process.

6. Effective ministry involves new church planting.

Everywhere Paul went, he planted churches. Still today, church planting is widely recognized as the most effective way to evangelize. For that reason, The Wesleyan Church is striving to fan a church planting movement across North America and around the world. Studies of church planting movements identified the following ten elements in every one of them:

- Prayer
- Abundant gospel sowing
- Intentional church planting
- Scriptural authority
- Local leadership
- Lay leadership
- Cell or house churches
- Churches planting churches
- Rapid reproduction
- Healthy churches¹¹

Healthy new churches will effectively carry out the following five ministries: (1) worship, (2) discipleship, (3) fellowship, (4) evangelism, and (5) compassionate ministries.

7. The world is still our parish.

Given the urgency of the needs here in North America, some may suggest that today we should focus most if not all of our efforts here. However, doing so would not be healthy for anyone. On one hand, multitudes of unreached peoples are still lost around the world. On the other, a vision for the lost around the world will also increase our zeal for the lost at home. Today opportunities to reach the world are even greater, beginning at our own doorstep and just down the street. Only seventy local Wesleyan churches are found in the forty largest central cities of our major metropolitan areas, while the populations in these areas continue to swell. These major urban centers of our own land represent our most neglected parish in North America today.

8. We are called to the vilest of sinners.

Many church planters prefer to go to communities with which they share similar values and lifestyles. Admittedly, there are many lost people throughout North America, and God can use each new church wherever it is planted. Still we must not ignore Christ's call to go to those who are outside of the "establishment society." These include the hopeless, the sick and dying, the abandoned, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, the marginalized, the sexually immoral, the drunkard, the robber, the incorrigible...¹² Some are convinced that we should give preference to these "forgotten ones."¹³

One church planting team in a desperate inner city ministry was puzzling over how to recruit people of influence to join their team of supporters and workers. But during a time of searching and prayer, they heard God say to them, "You just go out and care for those for that nobody cares about, and I'll bring you people that everybody cares about."¹⁴ Today God is blessing their ministry in a great way and many people's lives are being transformed through their obedience and faithfulness.

These practical principles set forth a biblical approach to evangelism and compassionate ministry that can dynamically transform people's lives and communities in urban areas and across North America.

Models of Compassionate Ministry as a Partner with Evangelism

A growing number of effective urban ministries provide inspiring models of compassionate ministry as a partner with evangelism. The following examples illustrate what can happen when God's people become His ambassadors in the ministry and message of reconciliation for our hurting and lost world.

The Lamb's Manhattan in New York City

What was once America's oldest theatrical club, located at 130 West 44th Street in downtown Manhattan, now serves as a refuge for the needy and provides hope in a hurting community. Every Sunday at 11:00 AM in the third floor theater, community residents find a place of worship, praise, biblical preaching and prayer. During the week people are disciplined and mobilized to serve the city and the world. Through the years, the Lamb's Church, part of the Nazarene denomination, has served those in need, fed the hungry, and sheltered the homeless.

The Church on the Way in the Los Angeles Area

This church's name—The Church on the Way—calls attention to (1) the central locations

of her facilities in the San Fernando Valley (there are three), (2) her commitment to relevant ministries, and (3) a crystal clear emphasis on Jesus Christ Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This thriving local congregation, part of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, provides school tutoring, youth activities, summer and winter camps, feeding programs, an emergency shelter and restoration program, and career training. Each year hundreds come to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior and become part of a loving community of believers who are committed to make a difference in their community and world.

Lawndale Community Church in Chicago

In 1975 Wayne Gordon moved to North Lawndale, located on Chicago's Westside, to serve as a teacher and coach at a local High School. At that time, North Lawndale was the 15th poorest neighborhood in the U.S. Desiring to make Christ relevant to his students, Coach Wayne and his wife Anne, along with some local high school students, founded the Lawndale Community Church (LCC), a nondenominational Christian church. Today, LCC has over 800 worshipping families and Wayne continues as pastor.

Over the years Wayne has played a key role in numerous community development initiatives, including Lawndale Christian Health Center, a healthcare ministry that sees over 80,000 patients per year, and the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation, which facilitates economic development, education and housing. One of the major goals of "Coach", as he is still affectionately called, has been developing a new generation of leaders for North Lawndale. Over 150 young people have graduated from college with more than half returning to live and work in North Lawndale.

Lawndale Community Church was given a "Point of Light" award by President George Bush in 1989 and Chicago Magazine named Wayne one of the Chicagoans of the year in 1995 for his commitment and creativity. Wayne believes that the heart of Gospel is reconciliation. For more than 27 years he has exemplified breaking down all racial barriers to pave the way for God's truth in the lives of all that he encounters.

Urban America and The Wesleyan Church

Even though a growing number of local Wesleyan churches are involved in compassionate ministries, Wesleyans are still embarrassingly underrepresented in the large urban areas of North America where these ministries are most desperately needed.

A new ministry initiative called *METRO AMBASSADORS—NORTH AMERICA (MANA)* provides opportunities for Wesleyans to impact these metropolitan areas and thereby experience firsthand the dynamic power of compassionate ministry as a partner with evangelism and church planting in North America. Following are MANA's vision and general strategy:¹⁵

MANA's Vision

A significant increase of Wesleyan transformational presence in the central cities of the major metropolitan areas and throughout North America, as evidenced by growth in compassionate ministries and evangelism and resulting in church growth and multiplication.

MANA's Strategy

Establish centers for compassionate and evangelistic ministries in major metropolitan areas and across North America through partnerships with local churches, districts and other organizations, where lost people can experience Christ's love and become part of local communities of believers, resulting in personal and community transformation.

Can you imagine how pleased our Lord would be if Wesleyans from across North America reached back once again into these large urban centers for Christ, proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed? We would reconnect with our spiritual heritage as Wesleyans and find renewed meaning and purpose. More importantly, multitudes would experience the transformational power of Christ's Good News in their lives and communities.

What a celebration we would have standing before the great white throne and in front of the Lamb with the great multitude that no one will be able to count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, crying out together in one loud voice: "Salvation belong to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."¹⁶

1. The expressions "evangelism and compassionate ministries" and "word and deed" will be used interchangeably in this essay, in the same spirit as Paul's teachings in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 that we have been given both the message and ministry of reconciliation.
2. Clegg, Tom, and Warren Bird. 2001. Lost in America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door. Loveland, Colorado: Group, p. 25.
3. Horton, in Sider, Ronald J. 2005. The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World? Grand Rapids: Baker Books, p. 17.
4. Here I translated "ethnos" as "peoples" to call attention to the multiplicity of "people groups" in contemporary America and to remind us of our Lord's mandate to make disciples of all of them.
5. Regarding these three views, I am influenced by John R.W. Stott in his book Christian Mission in the Modern World, 1975, InterVarsity Press.
6. Luke 4:18
7. Hunter III, George G. 2003. Radical Outreach: The Recovery of Apostolic Ministry and Evangelism. Nashville: Abingdon, pp. 31-40.
8. 2 Corinthians 5:20
9. 2 Corinthians 2:14 ff.
10. Hunter III 2003, p. 32
11. Garrison, David. 1999. Church Planting Movements. Richmond, VA: Office of Overseas Operations, International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Pp. 33 ff.
12. Hunter III 2003, pp. 37 ff.
13. Matthew 25:31-46
14. Told on March 02, 2005, to the author by Aaron Jayne, Executive Pastor, of "The Dream Center" in Los Angeles.
15. For more information about METRO AMBASSADORS, contact The General Department of Evangelism and Church Growth, at ecg@wesleyan.org.
16. Revelation 7:9-10 NIV