

THE CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY: SHOWING LOVE TO OUR NEIGHBORS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31 NIV). What does it look like as Christians live out this command from Jesus? This paper looks at the importance of building relationships and loving our neighbors. Now, more than ever, it is important for Christian churches to build relationships with those in their community. Building relationships requires time, something that most Americans do not have a lot of, but time spent building relationships and connecting with the community is time well spent. Working to build relationships presents many opportunities to show Christian love to those around us, and it provides many opportunities to bring Jesus to people in a time where most people are no longer going to church.

## INTRODUCTION

“We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). God showed us unconditional love. Jesus modeled that love perfectly for us. We strive to show this unconditional and agenda-less love to those whom God has placed around us in this world.

In 21<sup>st</sup>-century America, it appears that Christians do not have a reputation for showing love. In recent years, Christians seem to be doing worse and worse in the public relations department. Because of this, a more intentional effort is required on the part of both Christian individuals and Christian churches to build up a good reputation among those around them.

Consider a couple statistics from a 2020 Barna survey. One of the questions asked in this survey was: “Would you say Christians churches have an impact on your community?” In response to this question, 57% of non-Christians said that a church has either no impact or that it has a negative impact on the community. That means that over half of the people in a church’s mission field will already have a negative perception of the church.<sup>1</sup>

The survey also asked, “Based on whatever you know or feel about the Christian faith, in general, do you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of Christianity as a religious faith?” The results show that 52% of non-Christians had an unfavorable impression of Christianity, while one in five of those non-Christians had a very unfavorable view of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Barna Group, “Five Trends Defining Americans’ Relationship to Churches,” 19 February 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/current-perceptions>.

2. Barna, “Five Trends.”

Having a good reputation is imperative when it comes to carrying out the Great Commission. It opens the door for more people to be served by Christians. It opens the door for more people to hear the life-changing message of the Gospel.

People tend to be responding less and less to invitations to come to worship services, to come to Bible classes, or to come to events on church campuses. But this does not mean that people are not willing to have spiritual conversations or to talk about the Bible. Instead of bringing people into church, it seems that the most effective way to begin to have a spiritual conversation with someone is by bringing the Gospel to them outside of church.

There are numerous ways that Christians can take Christ's love out into their community. They can meet people where they are, building bridges and connections with a number of different people.

With a little time and effort, Christians can build new relationships with those who live closest to them. In those relationships, Christians can show the same love to others that Christ has shown to them.

Finally, the Holy Spirit works through those relationships, bringing more people to a knowledge of their Savior. "Let God 'worry' about the results. We plant the seed; God makes it grow. We let down the net; God fills it. The Word will produce its own results because the almighty God himself stands behind it."<sup>3</sup>

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3. David Valleskey, "Challenges Facing the WELS in 2001 and Beyond As it Seeks to Advance with the Gospel," WLS Essay File, 10.

## THE CHURCH'S REPUTATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

### **A negative reputation**

“I have met no end of really nasty, bigoted people who are full of hate and call themselves Christians and can quote the Bible.”<sup>4</sup> Statements like these, or variations of them, seem to be common in our world today. A quick internet search will turn up dozens of articles and blog posts on this topic. Most people have likely even heard someone make a comment like this in person, possibly at school or at work. The idea that Christians are hateful and unloving people certainly is a common thought shared among Americans today.

Kolander points out this problem that Christians face: “Through the news or the culture, some may come to think Christians and churches are bigoted or unintelligent or mean, or too political.”<sup>5</sup> Kolander, is not alone in this, as Werre also points out, “It is no secret that in a post-modern, post-Christian era, Christianity is losing ground in the collective American Weltanschauung (‘worldview’—the lens or philosophical/religious assumptions through which a person understands the world around him).”<sup>6</sup>

This is also not necessarily a brand-new problem that Christians are facing. In a paper presented in 2000, Vallesky said this: “Learning how to approach a postmodern society with the

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4. Tim, “Christians Are Bigoted People,” <https://truthsaves.org/articles/christians-are-bigoted-people>.

5. Ryan Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion: The Opportunity is Ours” (paper presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, Mequon, WI, 22 September 2022), 28.

6. Jonathan Werre, “A Look Ahead: Continuing the Great Commission in a Covid-affected world” (paper presented at the 51st Biennial Convention of the Dakota-Montana District, Watertown, SD, 16 June 2022), 13.

gospel is certainly a major challenge facing all Christians in general and us of the WELS in particular.”<sup>7</sup> For many years now, Christians have been faced with the task of bringing the truth to a society of people who deny the existence of truth. The view in society that everyone has their own truth only makes it more difficult to spread the message that Jesus is the truth and that his word is truth.<sup>8</sup>

This view of Christianity extends beyond just the general public, however. In a presentation given in April 2021, Forest Bivens observed: “It’s no secret that Christianity and professing Christians have been on the losing end of legal battles in our increasingly secular society. We aren’t winning many friends in the courtroom of public opinion either.”<sup>9</sup> In the May 2022 WELS connection video, WELS president Mark Schroeder added, “Years ago, Christian congregations automatically had a good reputation in their community. Today, we have to earn it.”<sup>10</sup> These perceptions are a reality that Christians have to face. This world that we live in, a world where the word Christian automatically carries a negative connotation, is the same world in which we have been called to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

### **How this reputation has affected the church**

The church has been affected in several ways by this change in perception towards Christians in the last couple of decades. The church is no longer viewed as a safe space in the

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7. Valleskey, “Challenges Facing the WELS,” 4.

8. Valleskey, “Challenges Facing the WELS,” 4.

9. Prof. Forest Bivens, “Christian Counsel on Confronting Culture” (video conference presentation at Our Savior Lutheran, Brookings, SD, 20 April 2021).

10. Mark Schroeder, WELS Connection video segment, May 2022, <https://vimeo.com/showcase/79546/video/695816507>.

community. It is difficult to be viewed as a safe place in the community, a place where people can go when they need help, when most people in the community view the church as a place full of hateful people.

The church is no longer the center of activity in most communities. “The church as an institution has lost its privileged position and increasingly occupies a place on the margins of society.”<sup>11</sup> There are certainly many factors that play into this. Rainer points out one of these factors: “Worse yet, the church is losing influence in culture. Local churches are having trouble relating to their local community and the younger generation.”<sup>12</sup> If the church is having trouble relating to its local community, then it would logically follow that the church is no longer going to be the center of activity in its community. “While some peg this irrelevance as the major underlying factor of declining churches, we believe that it is merely symptomatic of a much greater issue: the church is no longer essential to people’s lives. Unless a dramatic change occurs, the American church will continue down the same path as the European church, which is all but dead.”<sup>13</sup>

Since Christians currently live in an America that is often hostile towards Christianity, relating to the local community and building up a positive reputation are of great importance when it comes to a church’s ability to carry out the Great Commission. Rainer underscores the importance of relating to the local community. “The church, however, must find ways to relay this gospel message to the culture around them. The church in a farming community in Indiana

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11. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2006), 17.

12. Thom and Sam Rainer, *Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2008), 8.

13. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 8.

should relate differently from the church in a suburb of Vancouver, which should relate differently from the church in the heart of New York City.”<sup>14</sup>

What happens if churches do not find ways to relate to their local communities? “Churches that do not find ways to become relevant in their respective communities will eventually falter.”<sup>15</sup> There is an important question that churches should be asking themselves: “How can we best relate the unchanging gospel to the shifting culture around us?”<sup>16</sup> It is impossible to find out the answer to that question without being active in the local culture. More about the answer to this important question and the importance of building relationships will be covered in another part of this paper.

Another reason that reputation is so important is that it can help to reverse the negative perception that so many Americans have of Christianity. Kolander notes how compassion work undoes the common lies and misconceptions about Christians here and around the world. “When Christians are working in difficult places in the community without asking anything in return, the watching world might respond, ‘I guess they’re not as bad as I thought.’”<sup>17</sup>

“It is a known phenomenon that meeting a real, live person who is your enemy (as opposed to the one-dimensional version you see in the media or your imagination) tends to make your enemy more human and less of an enemy.”<sup>18</sup> Face-to-face interaction is still important, even in the digital world that we live in today. Being active in the community and talking to people

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14. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 17.

15. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 18.

16. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 18.

17. Mike Duncan as quoted by Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion,” 28.

18. Werre, “Continuing the Great Commission,” 15.

face-to-face is one way that Christian churches can reverse people's negative opinions that they have been holding that may have been based on rumors or skewed by things that they read on the internet.

### **The Unchanging Word of God**

While churches can and at times should change things to best relate to their local community, one thing that can never change is the Word of God. The preaching of the Gospel and the administering of the Sacraments are of the highest importance.

Nothing should ever become more important than that simple truth. Vallesky notes one potential danger of churches getting caught up in providing humanitarian services: "The reputation of our humanitarian services may become so great that we become known as the church or mission that distributes mission supplies, does pregnancy counseling, runs food stores, etc., rather than the church that preaches the gospel and offers comfort, forgiveness, and eternal hope to sinners."<sup>19</sup>

We have something that many churches and people do not have. Dave Malnes says, "This is an amazing time to proclaim the gospel...what a great time to be a WELS Christian who has this Truth in all its clarity, this gift that has been passed down to us from faithful generations of the past. And as other church bodies are going in a different direction, this is a treasure."<sup>20</sup>

Living in a world full of darkness only makes the light of this pure Gospel shine even brighter. Werre points out this simple fact: "After all, a bonfire at noon seems to cast no light at

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19. Valleskey, "Challenges Facing the WELS," 7.

20. Dave Malnes as quoted by Werre, "Continuing the Great Commission," 20.

all. But at night, a bonfire attracts. This is why holding on to the pure Word and Sacraments, like a city boy hangs on to a galloping horse, is so important. False doctrine is not light, it's just another form of darkness."<sup>21</sup>

We certainly have a great treasure, a treasure that we are eager to share with others. It leads us to have an attitude "like a boy who has five loaves and two fish and is surrounded by thousands of very hungry people. And we know what our Jesus is able to do with five loaves and two fish."<sup>22</sup> One of the ways that Jesus provides an opportunity for us to share this treasure with others is through the church's relationships in the community. Jesus is also our motivation and model for showing this kind of love.

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21. Werre, "Continuing the Great Commission," 20.

22. Werre, "Continuing the Great Commission," 20.

## OUR MOTIVATION FOR LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS

Jesus said to his disciples, “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). Four times in these two short verses Jesus uses the word “love.” In our world today, the word “love” may very well be one of the most overused words in the English language. It gets used so much that it loses some of its meaning. People say that they “love” certain foods or music, or that they “love” their favorite sports team. “Love” tends to lose its meaning when used in these contexts. However, in John chapter 13, Jesus is talking about a different kind of love. He uses the word ἀγάπη. This word describes a special kind of love. It’s not a word that would be used to describe feelings toward food or a sports team, but rather this ἀγάπη is an action. It is things that we do, not just a feeling.

### **A perfect example to follow**

God is the perfect example of this special kind of love. ἀγάπη is the word used in John 3:16: “God so *loved* the world...” That was not just a feeling that God had towards the world, but it was an action. God did not simply tell us that he loved us, but he showed us by sending his son Jesus to rescue us from our sins. This is the kind of love that Jesus is talking about when he speaks to his disciples in John 13. It is an unconditional love, a love with no ulterior motives. Jesus’ love for us is our motivation for loving others. “The basic Christian motive is not even the neighbor’s need or our love for him. Such motives, though valid, are derived from a deeper

motive—Christ’s love for us and all mankind.”<sup>23</sup> “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor 5:14).

“If you love me, keep my commands” (John 14:15). Christians who love Jesus will naturally love to keep his commands. We already heard the command Jesus gave to his disciples in John 13. At another time, the Pharisees asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was. Jesus' response was this, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt 22:38,39). With these commands in mind, Christians naturally will ask themselves how they can show this love in the world.

“There is no such thing as a non-caring Christian. If we have been born of God, this will reveal itself in our relations with others, with brothers and sisters in the faith especially, but also with all people. God both wills us to and empowers us to love one another as Christ loved us.”<sup>24</sup>

When it comes to Christian churches, there are numerous opportunities for each church to show this unconditional love in their communities. Jesus commands us many times to show love to our neighbors, and Christians and their churches are daily given opportunities to do just that.

We have already looked at the proper motivation for our love; it is Christ’s love for us. There are also improper motivations for love. There is often a temptation to show love with an ulterior motive. Although someone’s intentions might be good, for example, if they want to show love to someone so that they will believe what the Bible says, that should not be a person’s motive for showing love. Pathak and Runyon make this point: “To put it even more bluntly, we

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23. Arthur Graf, *The Church in the Community: An Effective Evangelism Program for the Christian Congregation* (Ft. Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1984), 15.

24. David Valleskey, “Forging Our Church Into A Caring Community,” WLS Essay File, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/1317/ValleskeyChurchCaringCommunity.pdf>, 8.

don't love people so they will believe what we believe. Many people we love and serve won't ever believe, and that's okay. We just love our neighbors. That's it."<sup>25</sup>

Jesus did not add any qualifiers when he commanded us to love our neighbors. He never said, "love your neighbor, but only if they are a Christian", or "love your neighbor, but only if they want to be told about Jesus." Jesus does not say anything about loving others only up to a certain point, or loving your neighbors unless they have wronged you. We are simply to love our neighbors no matter their race, religion, political opinions, or how many times they have wronged us.

Obviously, this is not to say that we should not be interested in sharing Jesus with our neighbors or that a church should not be interested in sharing Jesus with its community. Christians often have the Great Commission in mind. However, that is not our main motivation. People tend to be good at being able to tell when others come to them with ulterior motives. It seems like they are trying to sell them something. Most people do not talk on the phone very long with telemarketers; in fact, they usually hang up right away. If people can see someone coming to their front door trying to sell them something, oftentimes they will not even answer the door. If people in the community sense that others are trying to "sell" Jesus to them, they might shut down, similarly to how they respond to telemarketers or door-to-door salesmen. Clearly, that is not ideal for spreading the Gospel.

Valleskey notes this potential pitfall of ulterior motives: "Humanitarian aid can sometimes backfire. It may be perceived by others as a deceitful means to an end. The line between building bridges and buying allegiance is not always easy to see, especially when we

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25. Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 114.

cannot be sure what the recipient is thinking.”<sup>26</sup> Being perceived as deceitful does much damage when it comes to building trust in relationships. Being deceptive can quickly undo lots of hard work and effort that was put into building a relationship.

Instead, it serves Christians better to be genuine in their relationships with those around them. “If you love Jesus, then he will naturally come up in your conversations. It happens as we share the substance of who we are. So the more you love Jesus, the more that love will be apparent in your conversations and relationships.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Fears and excuses**

Many people would admit that they struggle with showing an unconditional love to their neighbors. Why is that? It seems to be a combination of different fears and excuses that people have; some of these are valid concerns while others are a little less valid.

One major obstacle that people have to face when it comes to showing love to those around them is fear. In one sense, this fear is not surprising considering the world we live in today. “It’s no wonder we live in a culture of fear and suspicion, given the twenty-four-hour news cycle that’s just one click away. Anytime, any day, you can turn on the TV or hit a link to view multiple scary or downright cringe-worthy stories.”<sup>28</sup> The effect that the media has had on people could be an entire paper on its own. But it is not surprising that when people are constantly bombarded with scary news stories, they are naturally going to be more suspicious of

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26. Valleskey, “Challenges Facing the WELS”, 7.

27. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 107.

28. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 61.

those around them and less likely to go out and get to know those in their neighborhoods and communities. In fact, according to a Pew Research Center study, only 31% of Americans know most or all of their neighbors.<sup>29</sup>

One of the reasons this happens is that “People drive into their driveways, go into their houses, and never see one another. And when television and newspaper become a person’s only source of information about his or her community, fear and isolation run rampant.”<sup>30</sup> This is a common scenario in neighborhoods across America. And when neighbors never see each other except for the few seconds when they are pulling in or out of the driveway, then the personality of the neighbor is left up to the imagination. And the imagination can be influenced by many different factors.

This is not to say that everyone should ignore their fears or uneasy feelings. Certainly, there are times when these concerns are valid and they can save people from dangerous situations. That being said, more often than not, these fears become an obstacle to showing love to our neighbors. Pathak and Runyon point out how fear has become an obstacle: “And keep in mind that most of us have been conditioned to be afraid of our neighbors, and they’ve been conditioned to be afraid of us. Someone has to break the cycle of fear.”<sup>31</sup>

Someone has to break this cycle of fear because the truth is that the vast majority of your neighbors are generally law-abiding citizens. “The newspeople tell Bob and Karen the neighbors around them are predominantly crooks and murderers, even though only a relatively few

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29. Kim Parker, “How Urban, Suburban, and Rural Residents Interact with Their Neighbors,” Pew Research Center, 22 May 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/how-urban-suburban-and-rural-residents-interact-with-their-neighbors>.

30. Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2001), 112.

31. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 66.

Americans are actually severely immoral and devious.”<sup>32</sup> People who are afraid will do their best to avoid conversation. And this is not just limited to the neighborhood; people will avoid conversation wherever they go.

Nowadays it is so easy to avoid conversation. People can put gas in their cars and never have to talk to a real person; people can go to most stores and use the self-checkout line without ever having to talk to someone. With Amazon and online shopping, people are able to have almost anything delivered to their doorstep, all without ever talking to anyone. It is very difficult to help people or to know how to help people without ever talking to anyone.

Connected with this is the fear that most people have of coming off as weird or awkward. This fear only leads to a never-ending cycle of making excuses and saying, “I’ll do that tomorrow.” There is a distinction between fear and awkwardness: “This feeling of awkwardness isn’t fear—it’s just nervousness about possible rejection. The truth is, awkwardness won’t kill you.”<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps another fear is about how people will respond to acts of kindness. This too is often a valid concern. People can be rude. If someone offers help or goes and introduces themselves to new people often enough, they are eventually bound to run into some people who are rude and ungrateful. Understandably, this can be rather discouraging to many people.

Here is where it is helpful to look at Jesus, look at how he acted, at how people responded to Jesus, and then at how Jesus responded to them. Jesus was constantly treating people with compassion throughout his ministry. He raised people back to life, he healed people who were

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32. Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, 115.

33. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 68.

sick, fed crowds of people, and taught crowds of people even when they followed him when he was trying to get away from people for a while.

One account, in particular, stands out. In Luke 17 we hear the familiar account of Jesus healing 10 lepers from their disease. Even though Jesus healed all ten of these men, we hear how many returned to him. “One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice” (Luke 17:15). Jesus showed compassion to ten men, yet only one returned to show his thanks. This was a common theme throughout Jesus’ ministry. Kolander noted this theme in his essay: “Some followed him, some didn’t. Some were thankful, some weren’t. This did not deter him. He preached and he healed those in his path.”<sup>34</sup>

In many respects, Christians can expect to be treated in the same way Jesus was as he showed compassion to those in his path. Some people may be very thankful for what others do for them; others may be rude and ungrateful. Some people will come to believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin and others will not. People’s responses should not determine whether or not Christians have compassion on those around them. Jesus set the standard by showing an unconditional love to everyone he met. “Let us ourselves not pick out those whom we wish to assist, but rather those whom God puts before us on whatever occasion, just as God put the man who had been robbed and beaten in the path of the Samaritan.”<sup>35</sup> Kolander says to the same point: “The marks of Christ’s Church then are certainly the gospel in Word and Sacrament. But the Church truly rooted in the gospel will most certainly carry out compassion ministry as well!”<sup>36</sup>

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34. Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion,” 16.

35. Martin Chemnitz, “On Almsgiving,” trans. Rev. Dr. James A. Kellerman, (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care Series, 2005), 15.

36. Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion,” 16.

### Whom do I help?

There is another common fear that people have that has to do with the question, “whom do I help?” “There are swindlers all around me looking for easy handouts; there are people from foreign countries contacting me through Facebook to donate to an orphanage! *Whom* do we help? Also, *what* do we do?”<sup>37</sup>

Not only do we live in a world that is full of scary news stories, but we also live in a world that is full of scams. People will contact others over the phone or through various social medias to try to take thier money. People will beg for money on the side of the road instead of working because they can make more by begging. But sometimes, these are people who actually do need help. How are people supposed to know whom to help?

These are valid concerns to have. Kolander says, “I am ‘fearful’ of compassion ministry because I’ve been burned before. Therefore, I don’t want to expose myself to such hurt and abuse ever again.”<sup>38</sup> Kolander is not alone in this feeling. I would imagine almost every person has a story about offering money or some sort of help to someone only to get burned because they were tricked or lied to. The question “Whom do I help?” can be a difficult one to answer at times. Because of this, Kolander suggests starting near and small.<sup>39</sup> Start with those people that are already known instead of strangers, people who are members at church, or co-workers at a job. “Compassion is the same divine impulse that pushes the Christian to evangelize the lost and

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37. Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion,” 8.

38. Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion,” 8.

39. Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion,” 8.

love their neighbor. Compassion isn't a program, it's a culture. It isn't just what we do, it's who we are."<sup>40</sup>

Kolander is not alone in this thinking. Dorsett agrees with him, saying this about compassion in the community: "Churches who seek to reach out in evangelism will venture outside the walls of their buildings and into the communities around them. Churches will engage the culture with the gospel by meeting specific community needs, helping the less fortunate, helping young people deal with pain."<sup>41</sup> This is just who Christians are. In his sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt 5:13). "This is more than a mere slogan that does not reflect realities. This is God's truth. The believers have time and again demonstrated that they are actually the salt of this sinful earth, working veritable miracles in the social action arena without benefit of bluster, bludgeoning or bloodshed, simply letting the gospel have its sway in their daily lives."<sup>42</sup>

With this mindset, the opportunities to help others will become more and more apparent, because this is not just another program or gimmick, but rather a way of life that is a natural response to the Gospel that God has given to us. "We are uniquely postured to help every single person in our membership and to see that love pulsate out into their homes and to their neighbors. Such unique love attracts more and more people to a God worthy of their devotion."<sup>43</sup>

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40. Kolander, "Cultivating a Culture of Compassion," 8.

41. Terry Dorsett, *Mission Possible: Reaching the Next Generation through the Small Church* (Bloomington, IN: Crossbooks, 2012), 86.

42. E.C. Frederich, "How Much Room Is There on the Church's Agenda for Social Issues?" (WLS Essay File, 13 November 1979), 5.

43. Kolander, "Cultivating a Culture of Compassion," 10.

## WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?

“But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor” (Luke 10:29)? This expert in the law was hoping that he could convince himself that he had successfully loved his neighbor as himself. If Jesus would have told him that his neighbor was only people that he liked or respected or only people that treated him well, then perhaps this expert in the law would think that he had done a pretty good job. However, that’s not what Jesus told him. Instead, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan.

The main point of the parable of the good Samaritan is that everyone is our neighbor, including people that we might see as our enemies or people that we do not get along with very well. This is a parable that many people grow up hearing over and over again throughout Sunday school, Bible class, and church services. It is ingrained in people’s minds that everyone is their neighbor and that they are supposed to love everyone. That is a true statement, but is there some danger in that way of thinking? Pathak and Runyon point out that there is a temptation to turn this parable into a metaphor.<sup>44</sup> They make a convincing argument. “If we say, ‘Everyone is my neighbor,’ it can become an excuse for avoiding the implications of following the Great Commandment. Our ‘neighbors’ become defined in the broadest of terms. They are the people across town, the people who are helped by the organizations that receive our donations, the people whom the government helps. We don’t have to feel guilty, we tell ourselves. After all, we can’t be expected to really love everybody, can we?”<sup>45</sup>

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44. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 34.

45. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 12.

When children are taught how to shoot a basketball, they are often taught to aim for one small part of the basket, usually the back of the rim where it attaches to the backboard. Aim small, miss small, is the thinking. If they miss, hopefully they won't miss the whole basket. Can a similar line of thinking be applied when it comes to showing love to our neighbors? "When we insist we're neighbors with everybody, often we end up being neighbors with nobody."<sup>46</sup>

Instead of turning the parable of the good Samaritan into a metaphor and only having a metaphoric love for our metaphoric neighbors, maybe Christians ought to take this parable more literally.<sup>47</sup> Instead of zooming way out and focusing on the fact that everyone is our neighbor, maybe we ought to zoom in and focus on the people that live right in our own communities because they are also included in Jesus' command to love our neighbors.

Finke offers an interesting thought about the concept of a neighborhood:

"'Neighborhood' is all about the relationships, or the potential relationships, we could have with just a little intentionality. For our purposes, a 'neighborhood' is defined as any network of people to which we have regular access."<sup>48</sup> Think about all of the networks of people that each person has access to regularly. There are obviously the literal neighborhoods that people live in, but there is also the workplace, sports teams, schools, workout places, or simply any place where someone regularly hangs out or spends time. Just think about the number of people that one congregation could reach if each of its members goes out and shows love to all their neighbors! When we focus on the fact that everyone is our neighbor, it often becomes nothing more than a

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46. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 35.

47. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 36.

48. Greg Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission: How to Be an Everyday Missionary* (Elgin, IL: Tenth Power, 2014), 27.

catchy saying, but when we start to focus on the real people that live near us, then things tend to start happening.

### **Focusing on our literal neighbors**

Why is it so important to put focus on our actual neighbors, on the people who live right by our house or right by our church? It is so important because our neighborhoods have turned into mission fields. Finke says, “In a remarkably short amount of time, the U.S. has become one of the largest mission fields on the planet. The odds are very good that right now, wherever a person lives in the U.S., the people in their neighborhood and workplace are largely unconnected to a local congregation and may not be connected to Jesus at all.”<sup>49</sup> On any given Sunday morning nowadays, one will not find the majority of people in a church, whereas a few decades ago that may have been the case. Therefore, it is likely that the majority of those people who live in a neighborhood and in the neighborhoods surrounding a church are not attending a church.

In their 2005 book, Gibbs and Bolger state that: “The reported weekly church attendance in the U.S. is 40 percent. It may be an exaggerated number based on intentions rather than actions, possibly reducing the number 15 to 20 percent.”<sup>50</sup> Whatever survey or poll is looked at, church attendance has been going down in America for some time. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, for the first time in 80 years, less than half of U.S. adults belong to a religious organization.

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49. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 21.

50. Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 19.

US church membership is down to 47%, which is down significantly from the 70% mark, where it had been hovering until the '90s.<sup>51</sup>

Consider these thoughts from Finke: “There really wasn’t a need for a church to strategize how to ‘reach’ its community because all they had to do was schedule a service on Sunday, open the doors and people would come!”<sup>52</sup> This is no longer the case, however. “People in the community are increasingly saying, ‘No, thank you,’ to our invitations to come to church.”<sup>53</sup> If this is the case, then maybe it is time to start bringing Jesus to these people instead of waiting for them to bring themselves to church.

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51. Hannah Frishberg, “American Church Attendance Hits Historic Low, Says Gallup Survey,” *New York Post*, 30 March 2021.

52. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 39.

53. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 39.

## BRINGING THE CHURCH TO PEOPLE INSTEAD OF THE PEOPLE TO CHURCH

“When the general population is not interested in attending a religious event or affiliating with a religious institution, no amount of marketing is going to get them to show up on Sunday.”<sup>54</sup> The previous section ended with the thought that a couple of decades ago all a church needed to do was schedule a service and people would show up,<sup>55</sup> but as James points out here, that is no longer the case in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America.

James points out that no amount of marketing is going to get people to show up on Sunday.<sup>56</sup> There is at least some truth in that statement. There are various marketing strategies that churches commonly employ. Is it time to revisit the effectiveness of some of these strategies?

Many churches send out mass mailings of postcards inviting people to worship services, especially at Christmas and Easter. Years ago, many of these invitations may have ended up stuck to the refrigerator with the intention of attending the worship service. Nowadays, it seems that most of these postcards end up getting thrown directly into the trash can rather than placed on the fridge. Invitations to church or flyers for Vacation Bible School programs seem to be getting thrown away along with all of the other junk mail that people receive. People are simply not interested in walking into an unfamiliar church on a Sunday morning when all they receive is

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54. Christopher James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2018), 227.

55. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 39.

56. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 227.

a flyer from someone they do not know. A Facebook ad or other types of advertisements will be ignored just like all of the other ads that people are bombarded with on a daily basis.

This is not to say that mailings or advertisements do not have their place; they can still serve a purpose, and of course, if even one person responds to these invitations, it is worth the effort.

However, if mailings or advertisements are a church's only form of outreach or evangelism, it might be time to rethink the strategy. Sending out mass mailings may cause people to become lazy when it comes to reaching out to the community. Sending out a mass mailing is easy. It requires a minimal amount of time and effort and only a small amount of money. Sending out a mass mailing can look good on paper; people can say that they have reached a very large number of homes in their community. But then again, if a flyer or postcard goes directly into the trash, has that household really been reached? Sending out a mass mailing does not require talking to anyone in person. It is not awkward or uncomfortable. If this is the only form of outreach into the community that a church does, then that church is likely taking the easy, less effective way out, instead of taking the route that requires more time and effort but is more effective.

We do not live in a culture where people have no interest in spiritual conversations. People are genuinely still interested in having these conversations; they are just much more likely to want to have these kinds of conversations with someone they know. "Spiritual interest is at a high level in our culture, but so is bewilderment about what to believe."<sup>57</sup> People have spiritual questions, and we have the answers to give them. It is important to connect with those people.

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57. Frazee, *Contagious Church*, 16.

James makes this point: “Personal relationships have always been an important bridge between the church and the world, but in post-Christian contexts they are indispensable. Proactively building genuine mutual friendships with people is the most basic and essential practice for ecclesial vitality and witness.”<sup>58</sup> While people may not be likely to respond to anonymous invitations to come to church or church-related events, they are still likely to respond positively to an invitation from a friend or an acquaintance. It is almost always the case that the amount of guests who show up to events like Vacation Bible School due to an invitation from a friend far exceeds the number of guests who show up from flyers hung on doors.

Dorsett points out how the younger generation is still interested in having spiritual conversations, but those conversations are much more likely to happen with people they know and trust. “Young people are not as interested in how many Bible verses Christians can quote as they are in how many biblical concepts Christians live out in real life.”<sup>59</sup> Building real relationships is so important, because, “As postmodern individuals see the truth lived out, they become more willing to hear the theological propositions that undergird the Christian faith.”<sup>60</sup> We must meet people where they are and build relationships with them. More and more that is not at our church events, but rather in our neighborhoods and at our workplaces, at the athletic field or the gym, or a local coffee shop. “If they will not attend church, we must take the Gospel message to them.”<sup>61</sup>

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58. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil*, 228.

59. Dorsett, *Mission Possible*, 50.

60. Dorsett, *Mission Possible*, 50.

61. Graf, *The Church in the Community*, 72.

### **Jesus as our example, again**

Here again, it is important to look to Jesus as an example. Stated simply, Jesus enjoyed hanging out with people.<sup>63</sup> Throughout Jesus' ministry, he is often found hanging out with people, hanging out with different kinds of people, and in different ways. He spent a lot of time with his disciples, but he also spent lots of time with others. We will look at two instances in particular.

First, Jesus spent time with people who were viewed as the lowest in society, people like tax collectors. But Jesus did more than just simply spend time with them. In Luke 19 Jesus said to Zacchaeus, a tax collector, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today" (Luke 19:5). Jesus ate meals with these people and stayed at their houses. Didn't Jesus have better things to do with his time? No! These were people that Jesus came to save! He enjoyed spending time with them.

Next, we look to Matthew 14. Jesus found out that John the Baptist had been killed and he wanted to spend some time by himself. Crowds of people had a different idea though. They followed him. It would be understandable if Jesus told the crowds to go back home, or if he told them that he needed more time alone. But that is not what happened. "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matt 14:14). After Jesus healed the sick, he fed the entire crowd even after the disciples wanted him to tell the crowd to go home. Was this the most pleasant or convenient time for Jesus to hang out with crowds of people? No. Yet it is important to note that he still took the time to care for these people, even during a difficult time.

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63. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 57.

Throughout his time on this earth, Jesus consistently spent time with various groups of people. He made it a priority to get to know people and to love them. What are we to take away from this? How does this apply to our lives as Christians?

### **Applying Jesus' actions to our 21<sup>st</sup>-century world**

Obviously, the world in which we currently live is much different from the world that Jesus lived in. Times have changed, technological advances have been made, and it seems as if people keep getting busier and busier.

“For busy U.S. Christians, one of the biggest challenges we have in living missionally is investing time in the process of becoming friends with people. We think we need to be efficient with our time.”<sup>64</sup> There is no way around it; building relationships with people takes time, time that many Americans do not seem to have. We live in a time where everyone is always busy; calendars are always full. It is often hard enough for people to maintain the current relationships that they have. How could they find the time for more? How do we live like Jesus did? “We must learn to keep the main thing the main thing.”<sup>65</sup> Our relationship with God and with our families is most important. But to Jesus, time with those around him was also very important.

In the busy world that we live in it might take a little more intentionality, but by keeping the most important things in our life at the top of our priority list and eliminating things that waste time, we will find that there is plenty of time to build relationships with our neighbors, to show love to those around us.

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64. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 59.

65. Pathak and Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 50.

### **Why building relationships is so important**

There are many reasons why building relationships is an important part of both loving our neighbors and carrying out the Great Commission. Building relationships is a critical part of showing love to our neighbors. This may be stating the obvious, but it is difficult to love one's neighbors when one does not even know their names! By building relationships with people, it becomes easier and easier to notice ways to help people. Again, building relationships with people takes time, but it is time well spent. "Could it be that a strategy which on the surface seems inefficient ultimately is most effective?"<sup>66</sup>

Building relationships with people is important because it offers a much more natural context to have a spiritual conversation with someone. Anyone who has spent time going door to door, inviting people to church or a church-related event, knows that these conversations are often awkward. When meeting someone for the first time, most conversations start with some form of small talk, the weather, the local sports team, etc. That is why, for most people, trying to have a spiritual conversation with someone they have never met before can be so awkward. It is difficult to have deep conversations with strangers. They are usually unwilling to share much with someone they do not know.

But when time is taken to build a relationship with someone, it becomes much more natural to have deeper conversations. There is a level of trust that is established. And over time, people tend to naturally talk about the things that they care about the most. If someone loves Jesus, then he will undoubtedly come up in their conversations with those they have established relationships with.

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66. Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission*, 58.

As a church and members of a church take time to build relationships in their local community, it helps to establish bridges and connections with different layers of people in the community. These connections often become ways that the Gospel is shared. “Our neighbors will never see Christ exemplified in our lives unless we show them.”<sup>67</sup> Jesus said in Matthew 5, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

### **Strategies for building relationships**

There is a number of strategies that could be employed to build and strengthen relationships, each with its strengths and weaknesses. The number of strategies and amount of pages that could be spent discussing them could be almost endless, but because that is not the main point of this paper, this section will only offer a brief overview of a couple of strategies.

Many times, these relationships are built through any number of different kinds of volunteer work and volunteer organizations. This work establishes connections with people on many different levels in the community. It establishes connections with those who benefit from the work, with other volunteers, and with the leaders of those volunteer organizations.

Those who benefit from volunteer work will often remember who it was that helped them. “If you tend to a person in their crisis, they will not forget that.”<sup>68</sup> People who are helped by volunteer organizations are often people who are facing difficult situations in their lives. Through our actions in their time of need, they will see the love of Christ exemplified.

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67. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 50.

68. Jim Behringer, interview as quoted by Kolander, 27.

Volunteering with a local organization also provides an opportunity to work alongside a number of volunteers from outside of your church. Working with other people toward the common goal of making your community better is an easy way to form new relationships, and another opportunity to let the light of Christ's love shine.

Finally, working with volunteer organizations establishes connections with the leaders of these organizations. These people are often people who have already established many connections throughout the community. Establishing relationships with leaders in the community can be an easy way to quickly multiply the number of people that can be reached and thus the number of people with whom relationships can be built.

Authors Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon see great benefits in hosting neighborhood events such as block parties. "When we participate in block parties, we are being like Jesus. We are making it a priority to understand the people God has placed around us, regardless of what they believe or how they act."<sup>69</sup> Events such as block parties provide a natural environment for people to further build their relationships with people they already know, as well as meet new people. For many people, going out and introducing yourself to strangers does not necessarily come naturally. This is where events such as block parties can be beneficial. Block parties are something that can be planned out step by step and they can have some kind of theme, providing a much easier context for meeting new people.

Pathak and Runyon even have a website that offers many free resources for individuals or churches that are interested in throwing a block party. The resources include things like maps and a block party kit which offers a ten-step guide to hosting a block party.<sup>70</sup>

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69. Pathak and Runyon, *The art of neighboring*, 80.

70. See [www.artofneighboring.com](http://www.artofneighboring.com) for these resources.

Hosting a block party might seem intimidating. It might seem like something that requires too much work or spare time that people often do not have. But the good news is that a large event such as a neighborhood block party is not required to bring people together. Relationships can be formed through any number of events. It could be as simple as inviting a few people over for a meal once a month, or maybe inviting people over to watch the local sports team play in their big game. Everyone is probably watching it at their own homes anyway, so why not watch it together? So much can happen when just a little bit of intentionality and effort is put into getting to know the people who live near you.

## CONCLUSION

Building relationships has always been an important part of life. But for the Christian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these relationships have become even more important due to the opinion that many in society have of Christians.

These relationships are often formed through Christian love, a love that has been shown to us by our heavenly Father and modeled for us by Jesus. In a dark world, the light of Christian love shines even brighter, bringing people to a knowledge of their Savior.

Showing love to our neighbors is not always easy; in fact, it is often difficult. There are many fears and obstacles that need to be overcome. But Jesus' command to us is to "love one another" (John 13:34).

As we work to build relationships and show love to our neighbors, God works through those actions. The apostle Paul writes, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Cor 3:6).

## AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Throughout the research that was conducted for this paper, several points kept coming up again and again but were not within the scope of this paper. Here I will briefly mention some of these points which could be pursued further in another paper.

First, this paper only briefly touched on strategies for building relationships and becoming involved in the community. Many more practical strategies could be discussed and past successes and failures could be reviewed.

Another area that would be worth further study was discovered when I read the book *Essential Church* by the Rainers. In this book, there is a quote from someone saying, “I did not see church as essential to my life.”<sup>71</sup> What makes a church essential in someone’s life? The church providing a sense of community is only a small part of the answer to that question and it is something that could certainly be researched further.

Finally, a concept that came up multiple times throughout my research is the idea of the church as a third space; in other words, a gathering place for people outside of their homes (the first place) or their work (the second place). The third place is a sort of community gathering point, a place where people go to build relationships with one another, to meet together informally, and to work together on things. What role can/should the church have as a third place? This is another question that is worthy of further research. All of these topics are worthy of further research but do not quite fit the main point of this paper, that loving our neighbors is a natural part of who we are as Christians.

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71. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 2.

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