

THE PRACTICE OF MERCY MINISTRY

To this point, we have shown the biblical-theological warrant for mercy ministry and documented its historical scope. But how can we put this into practice? How can a church get started with its own ministries of mercy? As we seek to engage in this work, we do well to bear in mind a few practical tips, some of which are gleaned from our forebears in the faith.

At Least Give, But Don't Just Give

It is a common—and true enough—refrain: “Not everyone can go, but everyone can give.” Without a doubt, it is important to give. Giving to provide for those in need is commended throughout Scripture. As James writes,

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15–16)

We are instructed to give both sacrificially and joyfully in imitation of Jesus Christ and as an expression of our faith in a sovereign God, who will put all things right in the end.

At the same time, we should not only give. Giving is not a substitute for the work of our hands. The key to Thomas Chalmers’s ministry was not to find more money to distribute, but to recruit volunteers to “go out into the streets . . . to do the work of Christian ministry.”²⁹ The closer we are to the situation, the better we understand the needs we seek to meet. Furthermore, the vulnerable need the blessing of friendship, which is not cultivated by staying at a distance writing a check.

▣ What Is Mercy Ministry?

We should follow the model set by Thomas Chalmers and find ways to involve ourselves personally in this work.

Individuals and congregations that volunteer to serve in mercy ministry can expect to receive as well as to give. There is spiritual blessing in the material support of others. We discover our own needs, even needs we had not previously known. We learn new things about God. And we are humbled as we learn from the people we serve. Few of these things happen through financial giving alone.

The effort to organize not only finances, but also volunteers, can build interest and develop a capacity for service in congregations that may be new to mercy ministry. As congregants catch the vision for serving God by serving their neighbors, they are inspired to deeper levels of commitment and more effective involvement.

Work Locally

One barrier to involvement in mercy ministry is the common impulse to go to the ends of the earth in search of opportunities. While we are called “to heal and to reveal”³⁰ to the ends of the earth, the desire to travel can be a barrier to local ministry. While it can be overwhelming—even paralyzing—to try to understand and address the needs of far-off communities, local alternatives allow us to do something, to start somewhere. We can always find significant opportunities for mercy ministry in our own neighborhoods or nearby cities. Often, the first momentum-building step toward effective ministry is to begin with the opportunities that God has provided close to home. Once we have built a platform for effective local mercy ministry—establishing congregational capacity through mobilization, communication, and finance—we can use that platform to reach across borders and minister to those who are far off.