

MISSIONAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: OUTREACH TO THE NEEDY AND NEWCOMERS

By Susan Booth, PhD

“Mommy, I’m still hungry.”

“Have you seen the price of eggs lately?!”

“If we don’t catch up on rent by next week, they’ll kick us out!”

“Please! Need help! *Mera bachcha bimar hai!*”¹

One must imagine the voices and faces behind the numbers because statistics alone can numb both mind and heart. What role would God have his people play in showing compassion to the needy and newcomers in Canada?

By the Numbers: Poverty in Canada

In 2019, the Government of Canada created the National Advisory Council on Poverty (NACP) and passed the Poverty Reduction Act. The initial goal aimed to reduce poverty by 20 percent by 2020 and 50 percent by 2030, relative to the 2015 peak, when 14.5 percent of Canadians—over 5 million people—lived in poverty.² The early results appeared encouraging. According to the 2021 Census of Population, poverty decreased from 10.3 percent in 2019, to 6.4 percent in 2020. The NACP reported that “Canada reached its goal of reducing poverty by 50% by 2030, 10 years ahead of time.”³ There was a reduction in poverty in every age group, but especially among children. This decrease across the board resulted from increased government transfers in 2020, an enhanced Canada Child Benefit (CCB), and temporary pandemic relief benefits.⁴

¹ Translation from Punjabi: “My child is sick!” India leads the way as the top country of origin (18.6%) for new immigrants to Canada. See “Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians,” Statistics Canada: *The Daily* (October 26, 2022): 13.

² “Blueprint for Transformation: The 2023 Report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty,” (2023): 9. Online: Em9-10-2023-eng.pdf (publications.gc.ca).

³ “Transforming our Systems: The 2022 Report of the National Advisory Council on Poverty,” (2022): 3. Online: https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/programs/poverty-reduction/national-advisory-council/reports/2022-annual/NACP_2022-Report-EN-final.pdf.

⁴ “Canadian Income Survey, 2020,” *The Daily* (March 23, 2022): 1. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220323/dq220323a-eng.pdf>.

Despite the 2020 decrease in poverty, an analysis of the 2021 Census Report warned that certain sectors of the population remain more vulnerable to poverty. For example, single parents with young children are five times more likely to experience poverty than their married counterparts.⁵ The poverty rate also remained higher in census metropolitan areas (CMA pop. >100,000) and especially high in downtown cores, where the rate in 2020 was 18.6 percent, double the overall rate in large urban areas as a whole (9.2%).⁶ The more vulnerable populations often live in neighbourhoods where poverty is most concentrated.

Inflation: The “Cruellest Tax”⁷

The warnings sounded in the 2021 Census Report proved prophetic as escalating inflation has since fueled poverty rates. By June 2022, the year-over-year consumer inflation rate peaked at “8.1% - the largest yearly change in 40 years,” before cooling to 6.3 percent in December 2022.⁸ Modelled poverty rates for Canada indicate the overall rate will continue to increase from a baseline of 7.4 percent in 2021, to 9.0 percent in 2022, and to 10.2 percent in 2023.⁹ If the projections hold true, the percentage of Canadians experiencing poverty in 2023 will have risen back to the 2019 level (10.3%)—more than 1 out of every 10 Canadians. The successes celebrated in the 2022 NACP report were sadly short-lived.

As challenging as inflation is, it does not affect all Canadians equally. Although 44 percent of Canadians across the economic spectrum expressed strong concerns over not being able to meet day-to-day expenses because of inflation, that fear affected 63 percent of those in the lowest income quintile. This is not surprising, since low-income families spend a higher percentage of income on essentials like shelter (32%) and food (15%). Almost half (46%) of those in the lowest income quintile expressed grave concerns over the ability to pay for rent/housing—a much higher percentage than Canadians in all quintiles (30%).¹⁰ Since the 2023 housing affordability index reached the worst level in forty years, two-thirds of Canadians

⁵ André Bernard and Xuelin Zhang, “Disaggregated trends in poverty from the 2021 Census of Population,” Statistics Canada (November 9, 2022): 5. Online: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021009/98-200-x2021009-eng.pdf>.

⁶ Bernard and Zhang, “Disaggregated trends,” 9-10. The CMAs with the highest poverty rates were Vancouver (11.2%), Halifax (10.5%) and Toronto (10.0%).

⁷ Sharanjit Uppal, “Rising prices and the impact on the most financially vulnerable: A profile of those in the bottom family income quintile,” Statistics Canada: Insights on Canadian Society (February 8, 2023): 2. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75-006-x/2023001/article/00002-eng.pdf?st=uC5ldfWT>.

⁸ Uppal, “Rising Prices,” 2.

⁹ Burton Gustajtis and Andrew Heisz, “Modelled Market Basket Measure poverty rates for 2022 and 2023,” Statistics Canada: Income Research Paper Series (January 18, 2024): 3. Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2024001-eng.pdf?st=jHmpWack>. There is a 1.5-year lag time for annual poverty statistics.

¹⁰ Uppal, “Rising Prices,” 3.

who rely on rentals are left “rent-burdened.”¹¹ The annual increase in the cost of groceries has skyrocketed to 11.0 percent,¹² and the number of households reporting moderate to severe food insecurity increased 15 percent.¹³ Those in the bottom quintile were more than three times as likely (17%) as others (5%) to turn to community organizations for food or meals. They were also more than twice as likely to borrow money from friends and relatives to meet needs (19% versus 8%).¹⁴

What Are Poverty Stakeholders Saying?

In 2022-23, the NACP held in-person engagement sessions across Canada with those experiencing poverty and the service providers who worked with them. Everyone reported “a growing sense of hopelessness and desperation”:

Persons alike told us that things seem worse now than they were before.... More people are in crisis, and these crises are more visible in our communities.... We heard that community organizations and their staff are overworked and demoralized. They lack the resources to help everyone who needs it.¹⁵

The NACP summarized what they heard from poverty stakeholders speaking in unison: “There’s no hope. The cost of living is too high, rent is too high. Inflation is making everything worse.”¹⁶

Who Is Experiencing Poverty in Canada?

Clearly, the most marginalized in Canadian society are those who experience “disproportionately high rates of poverty.”¹⁷ In large urban centres, the more vulnerable populations include “racialized groups, recent immigrants, students, young adults and persons living alone.”¹⁸ Likewise, Indigenous people are also more likely to experience poverty. For example, the poverty rate among First Nations people living off reserve was almost twice as high as the non-Indigenous population

¹¹ Grant Alexander Wilson, “Two-thirds of Canadian and American renters are in unaffordable housing situations,” *The Conversation* (February 2, 2024): n.p. Online: <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/money/finance-real-estate/two-thirds-of-canadian-and-american-renters-are-in-unaffordable-housing-situations/ar-BB1hKO1c?ocid=entnewsntp&pc=U531&cvid=30dbe0ae17d84a14a2968d1437d6b12e&ei=43>.

¹² Uppal, “Rising Prices,” 2.

¹³ “Canada's Official Poverty Dashboard of Indicators: Trends,” Statistics Canada (May 9, 2023). Online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2023021-eng.htm>.

¹⁴ Uppal, “Rising Prices,” 4.

¹⁵ “Blueprint for Transformation,” 14-15.

¹⁶ “Blueprint for Transformation,” 15.

¹⁷ “Blueprint for Transformation,” 15.

¹⁸ Bernard and Zhang, “Disaggregated trends,” 10.

(2020: 14.6% versus 7.9%).¹⁹ Other marginalized groups who experience poverty disproportionately include refugees, the 2SLGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, and people living in institutions or remote locations—as well as underreported groups like the undocumented and those experiencing homelessness.²⁰ There are gender and age dimensions to poverty as well since women, children, youth, and seniors experience poverty disproportionately. Almost one-third of single parents (32%) were in the bottom quintile.

Recent immigrants (those who immigrated between 2016 and 2020) were more likely to be in the bottom income quintile (24%) compared to both long-term immigrants (14%) and Canadian-born (13%). Additionally, newcomer numbers are expected to balloon in early 2024 ahead of the expiration of the emergency visa program on March 31. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada estimates 90,000 Ukrainian refugees will join the 250,000 Ukrainians who have already relocated to Canada. Given the current housing/rent affordability crisis, these newcomers will be especially vulnerable to poverty.²¹

Who Is Helping?

Governmental support at all levels plays an important role in reducing poverty for the needy and newcomers across Canada. The majority of families in the bottom income quintile (62%), rely on government transfers such as the Canada/Quebec Pension Plan, Old Age Supplement, and Guaranteed Income Supplement as their major source of income.²² The 2019 formation of the NACP and the Poverty Reduction Act demonstrates the federal government’s commitment to finding solutions for poverty in Canada. Additionally, a growing number of municipalities are taking the lead in reducing poverty across Canada. Vibrant Communities Canada—a collective of more than 100 cities committed to reducing poverty—contends that municipal leadership and multi-sectoral engagement are crucial for regional and city-wide initiatives that seek to develop long-term, sustainable solutions.²³

¹⁹ Bernard and Zhang, “Disaggregated trends,” 10.

²⁰ “Blueprint for Transformation,” 11.

²¹ D. Kennedy, “Canada’s Ukrainian refugee crisis is about to get much worse, Gen. Rick Hillier says,” *National Post* (February 5, 2024): n.p. Online: <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/canada-s-ukrainian-refugee-crisis-is-about-to-get-much-worse-gen-rick-hillier-says/ar-BB1hKQvd>.

²² Uppal, “Rising prices,” 6.

²³ Brock Carlton and Paul Born, “10: A Guide for Cities Reducing Poverty.” Tamarack Institute (2016): 11. Online: <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/ten-2016>. This guide provides a helpful, concise overview of what cities are doing to reduce poverty. The booklet includes an assessment form, ideas and tips, success stories, and resources for beginners wanting to start city-wide initiatives. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities outlines federal and municipal governments’ roles in reducing poverty and makes several recommendations for cities. See “Ending Poverty Starts Locally: Municipal recommendations for a Canadian poverty reduction strategy,” (July 2017), Online: <https://fcm.ca/sites/default/files/documents/resources/submission/ending-poverty-starts-locally.pdf>.

The complexities of entrenched poverty cannot be resolved by government entities alone. As the Tamarack Institute Report notes, “Ending poverty is not something that any government, institution, or group of agencies can accomplish on their own. Ultimately, poverty reduction is the whole community’s responsibility.”²⁴ The 2021 CRA Report on Charities notes that the 86,112 registered charities and foundations spend approximately \$200 billion annually on charitable activities.²⁵ These numbers include thousands of Christian charities who are already serving both in Canada and internationally. The question arises: How should Christians help people experiencing poverty?

How Should Christians Respond?

Christian responses to poverty undoubtedly fall along a spectrum. On one end, problems appear so intractable that churches might be tempted to do nothing. On the opposite end, the numbers and needs are so overwhelming they are tempted to launch initiatives in every direction without much forethought. What are some cautions churches should heed before responding?

For more than a century, Christian responses to poverty in North America have been characterized by pendulum swings influenced by prevailing theological and ideological trends. In the 1880s, the dire needs of New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen drove pastor Walter Rauschenbusch to promulgate a “social gospel” that ministered to “both body and soul” but abandoned “traditional doctrines of Scripture and atonement.”²⁶ In reaction, many evangelicals began to view social justice with grave suspicion, and they emphasized evangelism. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, millennial evangelicals increasingly turned to social causes.²⁷ Generation Z evangelicals report they are more comfortable sharing their faith through actions rather than words.²⁸ At the same time, concern over “wokeness” infiltrating churches has prompted many evangelicals to renew alarms regarding social justice and the gospel.²⁹ The advent of “woke” ideology has also renewed

²⁴ Carlton and Born, “10: A Guide,” 11.

²⁵ Canada Revenue Agency’s Charities Directorate, “Report on the Charities Program 2018-2020,” (February 3, 2021). One third of these charities report allocating at least some funds outside of Canada. Online: https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/about-charities-directorate/report-on-charities-program/report-charities-program-2018-2020.html?utm_source=txtp&utm_medium=eml&utm_campaign=chrtsprgrmrprt#toc20.

²⁶ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), xii.

²⁷ Amy Sullivan, “Young Evangelicals: Expanding their Mission,” *Time* (June 1, 2010). Online: <https://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1992463,00.html>.

²⁸ “Actions, Invitations, Storytelling—How Gen Z Approaches Evangelism,” Barna (July 27, 2021), n.p. Online: <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-evangelism/>.

²⁹ For example, the 2018 Dallas “Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel” has garnered over 17,000 signatures. Owen Strachan argues that wokeness is a major threat to the Christian faith in *Christianity and Wokeness: How the*

concerns about Christian involvement in social justice issues. Is there a way forward where “social justice” is more than a rallying cry for taking sides? Although the woke movement may have co-opted the term “social justice” so that many evangelicals now see it as a pejorative, Christians must reflect the biblical concern God has for the vulnerable.

The Old Testament Perspective

Although not everyone striving to reduce poverty may recognize it, the dignity of every individual and concern for the marginalized are biblical concepts. Out of all creation, only humanity has the privilege of bearing the image of the Creator (Gen 1:26-27; 9:6).³⁰ Humans should reflect the character of the God who describes himself as “compassionate and gracious... slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth” (Exod 34:6). Moses later tied the identity of God to his treatment of the most vulnerable image-bearers:

For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God, showing no partiality and taking no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless, and the widow, and loves the resident alien, giving him food and clothing (Deut 10:17-18).

The Lord warned when any members of the quartet were mistreated—widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the poor—he would hear their cries and respond with swift, retributive justice (Exod 22:21-27).

Not surprisingly, God expects his image-bearers to mirror his own compassion and concern for the vulnerable (Prov 21:3; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8). In short, the Lord names advocacy for the “poor and needy” as the identifying marker of a relationship with him (Jer 22:16). Those who know God will care for the most vulnerable.

In Deuteronomy, the Lord gave instructions for reducing poverty among his people. The Israelites were to bring and eat their annual tithe in the presence of the

Social Justice Movement Is Hijacking the Gospel—and the Way to Stop It (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021). Since “wokeness” is evolving, the term itself eludes a consensus definition. Strachan, p. 8, describes it as “a mindset and a posture” that “sees the comprehensive inequity of our social order and strives to highlight power structures in society that stem from racial privilege.” According to Strachan, wokeism—like Marxism—divides all humanity into the oppressed and their oppressors, and it offers no hope for healing or unity (p. 19). In this human-centred ideology, “social justice” means opposing unjust power dynamics, including “white privilege,” “toxic masculinity,” intellectuals, the rich, the physically able, “cisgender/heteronormative,” adults, and Christians (p. 16-17). Strachan clarifies that “wanting greater justice in a world filled with hostility, pain, and injustice does not make [a person] woke” (p. 5).

³⁰ All Scripture references are from the Christian Standard Bible.

Lord—a reminder that he was the generous Provider (14:22-26).³¹ Every third year, the annual tithe would meet the immediate needs of the Levites (landless clergy) and the vulnerable, as did the practice of leaving food in the fields for gleaners (14:28-29; 24:19-21). Two additional measures every seven years aimed at lifting families out of poverty: debt cancellation and release of indentured servants with generous provisions (15:1-18).

Significantly, Deuteronomy also fostered unity in the community by instructing families to include all members of the household in the Feasts of Weeks and Tabernacles: relatives, servants, Levites, resident aliens, the fatherless, and widows (16:11, 14).³² Since they were family, God instructed them, “[D]o not be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Instead, you are to open your hand to him and freely loan him enough for whatever need he has” (15:7-8). Likewise, the Lord commanded them to reflect his love for the resident alien since the Israelites had once lived as resident aliens in Egypt (10:18-19). The Lord established not just a social safety net for the marginalized, but a way of life intended to dignify and provide for every member of the people of God.³³

God’s special concern for the vulnerable surfaces not only in the Law, but also throughout the entire Old Testament. Job and his friends alike associate wickedness with oppression of the poor, hungry, widows, and fatherless (20:19; 22:7, 9; 31:16; 23; 34:28). The Lord’s care for the poor and needy is a frequent theme in Psalms (34:6; 72:13-14; 113:7-8; 146:9). The prophets repeatedly condemn the Israelites for failing to protect the vulnerable among them (Isa 10:1-2; 58:6-7, 10). Meanwhile, the Lord warmly welcomes into his house those “foreigners who join themselves to the LORD” (Isa 56:3-8). The Old Testament clearly teaches that the people of God have a special obligation to help the needy and newcomers.

The New Testament Perspective

Concern for the vulnerable—a central theme in Hebrew Scripture—is no less significant in the New Testament. From the manger to Jesus’s itinerant ministry, Luke’s Gospel repeatedly points to Jesus’s identification with the poor (Luke 2:7; 9:58). The preparatory preaching of John the Baptist called for repentance evidenced in actions displaying generosity, justice, and satisfaction with wages (3:8-14). Jesus began his ministry by announcing he would “bring good news to the poor” (4:16-21; cf. Isa 61:1-3), and he pronounced blessing on the poor/hungry and woe

³¹ Michael J. Rhodes, *Just Discipleship: Biblical Justice in an Unjust World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2023), 55. Leviticus 25 outlines two additional measures: the Sabbath year of complete rest for the whole community and the fifty-year Jubilee, when debts were forgiven and lands returned to the original owners.

³² Exodus 12:43-49 explains that if a resident alien wants to partake in the Passover, every male in the household must be circumcised, and thus they would be incorporated into the people of God.

³³ See Rhodes, *Just Discipleship*, 55-60.

upon the rich/full (6:20-21, 24-25).³⁴ Luke includes stories where Jesus gave the admirable roles to ethnic outsiders (10:33; 17:17) and depicted the hard-hearted rich as fools (12:13-21; 16:19-31). Jesus urged his followers to host dinner parties for the poor and disabled, a kindness God would reward “at the resurrection of the righteous” (14:12-14).

Matthew, the former tax collector, seems to have paid close attention to how Jesus often paired warnings and rewards when teaching about possessions. His followers could not serve both God and money: treasures stored on earth would inevitably fail, but those stored in heaven would endure (6:19-24). Recognizing the hold wealth had on a rich young ruler, Jesus instructed him to acquire heavenly treasures by selling his belongings and giving the proceeds to the poor (19:21). In the final judgement, Jesus himself will separate the sheep from the goats and send them to eternal life or punishment based on their treatment of needy fellow-believers: “[W]hatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (25:40). In essence, Jesus so identified with those in need, that when believers provided food, water, shelter, and clothes for them, they ministered to Christ himself.

In Acts, Luke records that extravagant generosity was an attribute of the rapidly expanding church. Christians shared their resources, selling possessions and property to meet the immediate needs of fellow-believers. Their love on display in community was magnetic (2:42-47). The result of God’s grace meant “there was not a needy person among them” (4:32-36). When complaints eventually arose that Hellenistic widows were being overlooked, the church appointed seven Spirit-filled men to oversee daily distributions so the ministries of prayer and preaching God’s word could continue without distraction (6:1-7).

As the church later expanded across borders, believers cared for the needs of the wider church. Christians in Antioch sent famine relief to believers back in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). The “pillar” leaders in Jerusalem urged Paul to continue to “remember the poor” (Gal 2:10). Paul collected contributions from Macedonia and Achaia, earmarked “for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom 15:25-28). Commending the impoverished Macedonians for their “wealth of generosity,” the apostle urged the Corinthians to likewise “excel in every good work”: “Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 8:2-5; 9:7-8).

Other epistles provide ample evidence of the importance of good works in believers’ lives. Paul argued that although salvation is not a result of good works, good works are the expected outcome of salvation (Eph 2:8-10; cf. Phil 2:12-13). Writing to Titus, Paul underscored six times that believers should “devote

³⁴ Matthew 5:2 adds a qualifier: “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” Italics added.

themselves to good works for pressing needs” (3:14; cf. 1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14).³⁵ John observes that generosity even provides assurance of salvation (1 John 3:17-19).

At this point some may argue that good deeds should be intra-ecclesial since most biblical examples point to caring for needs within the family of faith. They may even cite Gal 6:10, where Paul urged the Galatians not to grow weary: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.” Although believers have a greater obligation to care for Christian siblings, Paul assumed they would labour “for the good of all.” Mirroring the Father’s compassion for the unjust demonstrates one’s filial identity (Matt 5:44-45; cf. Ps 145:9; Rom 5:8). Jesus gave his followers an unforgettable object lesson when he washed Judas’s feet hours before his betrayal (John 13:1-11). Additionally, believers’ good works have both missional and apologetic aspects (Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 3:13-18). In summary, the entire Bible calls for believers to model God’s love for the disadvantaged.

How Should Christians Practice Justice and Compassion?

Putting the above scriptural directives into practice takes intentionality. Timothy Keller observes, “Doing justice, then, requires constant, sustained reflection and circumspection.”³⁶ Churches can play a key role in addressing the needs of the vulnerable, but they must exercise wisdom, moving forward under the Lord’s leadership with careful research and thoughtful consensus. Questions to consider include whom and where to help, how much and how long to help, and under what conditions.³⁷

Keller outlines three levels of help: relief, development, and social reform. Relief meets immediate physical and material needs like food, clothing, and temporary shelter for refugees or those experiencing homelessness or disaster. It includes advocacy and assistance in finding housing, health services, and legal aid. Relief also covers caring for foster children, the elderly, and the disabled.³⁸ Development helps both individuals and communities move toward economic self-sufficiency. Keller notes this level, which requires far more time and money, includes “education, job creation and training, job search skills, and financial counseling as well as ...home ownership.”³⁹ Social reform seeks to rectify the

³⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Great Story and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 104.

³⁶ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 112.

³⁷ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 136-38.

³⁸ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 113-14.

³⁹ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 115.

conditions as well as the “legal, political, and social systems” that lead to ongoing dependency.⁴⁰

Historically, the church has focused on providing relief. Although addressing immediate needs is a priority, relief work fails to address long-term causes behind hunger and homelessness.⁴¹ Still, most churches cannot participate in all levels at once. Drawing from Abraham Kuyper’s concept of “sphere sovereignty,” Keller suggests that the mission of the “institutional” church—“the congregation meeting under its leaders”—should be “to evangelize and nurture believers in Christian community.”⁴² Though the institutional church should be involved in relief work both inside and outside the church (and perhaps in some development ministry), it is the “organic” church—all individual Christians—who participate through voluntary groups and agencies in development work and social reform. This approach allows individual believers to follow the Lord’s leadership in using their interests, giftings, and opportunities without distracting from the responsibilities of the church as a whole. Even if the institutional church does not take the lead role in addressing the complexities behind entrenched poverty, it should be represented in all three levels of help.

By its very nature, the church has something unique to offer those on the margins. Instead of delivering social services in a “have/have-not” relationship, the biblical model of Christian charity invites the stranger into an inclusive community.⁴³ Welcoming everyone to participate in table fellowship as equals finds echoes in both Testaments (Deut 16:11; Luke 14:12-14; 1 Cor 11:17-34). When believers see those in need as image-bearers and/or brothers and sisters in Christ, they are moved to compassion and action; they open not only their wallets, but also their hearts and homes.

Community stakeholders with experience in need should have a voice and a principal seat at the table. Churches need to listen to residents of poor communities and see them as “primary agents of action.”⁴⁴ If churches are segregated from communities in need, they may consider the principle of relocation where some middle-class church members “choose to live in impoverished neighborhoods as an act of Christian solidarity.”⁴⁵ Although unusual, this radical practice of intentional “re-neighbouring” takes community missional engagement to a much deeper level. Additionally, “reweaving a community” aims at “redistribution” of financial, social,

⁴⁰ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 130.

⁴¹ Clinton E. Stockwell, “The Church and Justice in Crisis,” in *The Urban Face of Mission*, ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 167.

⁴² Keller, *Generous Justice*, 145.

⁴³ Stockwell, “The Church and Justice in Crisis,” 167.

⁴⁴ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 119.

⁴⁵ Rhodes, *Just Discipleship*, 62. Some label this “incarnational ministry”; others prefer to retain that term for the unique ministry of the enfleshed Son of God.

and spiritual capital so that it flows back into the community. In other words, businesses employ locals who spend their income locally; leaders arise from within the neighbourhood and stay, and churches commit to remain in the community. Encouraging multi-ethnic and interracial leadership may also require racial reconciliation.⁴⁶

Practical Suggestions for Missional Community Engagement

Engaging a community missionally recognizes that God’s mission is to redeem and restore his creation—both people and place. Joining God on mission in a particular community requires a church to move intentionally from principles to practical steps.

1. Pray and listen to the Holy Spirit’s leading. The church must discern how serving the community fits into the mission and vision God has given them. The Lord is already at work in the community, so the church—collectively and individually—should seek to find where he is working and join him.⁴⁷ Repeated prayer walking—praying on location and asking God to reveal insights and opportunities—is a good place to begin watching for his activity.
2. Conduct a needs assessment using a variety of approaches.⁴⁸
 - On a macro level, examine city systems and how they interact, the history of the city and its people groups, and how the area has changed over time.
 - On a micro level, make detailed observations and record questions that come to mind on multiple walk-throughs. Notice where and when people gather and who are community leaders.
 - Get to know people who live in the area by chatting while shopping, sitting in the park, and participating in community activities. Ask about community needs.
 - Identify schools, churches, social service agencies, medical facilities, and community development programs. Network with representatives to discover needs and how others are working to address them.
 - Learn how the community interacts with larger systems, such as the city, the province, the nation. Do these entities already have programs in place to address needs?

⁴⁶ Keller, *Generous Justice*, 117-18, 120. Keller, p. 120, observes, “When [a] theology of grace and race permeates the consciousness of a Christian, a church, and a community, the resulting unity of relationships becomes both a means to re-neighborhood and reweaving and a direct witness to the world of the reality of the gospel.”

⁴⁷ Henry, Richard, Mike Blackaby and Claude King, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Brentwood, TN: Lifeway, 2022), 80-81.

⁴⁸ Suggestions for needs assessment come from Susan S. Baker, “The Social Sciences: Tools for Urban Ministry,” in *The Urban Face of Mission* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 71-74.

- Research the culture and background of the various people groups who live in the community.
- 3. Create profiles of people’s beliefs and values, their contextual relationships, and their common worldview.⁴⁹ Knowing and understanding residents helps to minister and communicate the gospel more effectively.
- 4. Assess internal resources the church has to offer regarding people, expertise, skills, facilities, discretionary time, and finances.⁵⁰ Where is the Lord opening opportunities and giving his people a passion to serve?
- 5. Prayerfully discern the arena of service: young families, senior citizens, widows, high school dropouts, elementary school students, the underemployed, an ethnic group, recent immigrants, those experience houselessness or addiction.
- 6. Prepare for contextualization by asking about “defeater beliefs”—those commonly held ideas that make Christianity seem implausible for this group.⁵¹ Look for gospel metaphors or points of connection for the gospel within this specific community. How might the “good news” address specific needs?
- 7. Rather than “reinventing the wheel,” explore possibilities of working alongside seasoned, well-functioning organizations already serving in the community.⁵² Collaboration calls for research and prayerful discernment. What is the reputation of a given organization? Is it a registered non-profit or charity?⁵³ Another important factor is the level of engagement and involvement.⁵⁴ Participating in an interfaith food drive, for example, is quite different from deeply investing in a shared development project. Believers must maintain their freedom to proclaim Christ.
- 8. Draw on the expertise of others. For example, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, offers a free, downloadable booklet: “Welcome the Stranger: A Canadian Church Guide to Welcoming Refugees.” In 2022, the EFC helped launch a video-based training program that helps churches “welcome newcomers to Canada into churches and into deeper community.”⁵⁵
- 9. Potential ways to serve include food pantry/hampers, clothes closets, literacy, tutoring, mentoring, afterschool programs, debt-reduction, microfinancing, crisis

⁴⁹ See Timothy Keller, *Serving a Movement: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 230, for helpful list of questions for developing profiles.

⁵⁰ Darrin Patrick and Matt Carter, *For the City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 115.

⁵¹ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 230.

⁵² Patrick and Carter, *For the City*, 124-25.

⁵³ The Canadian Centre for Christian Charities (CCCC) is an evangelical ministry that supports registered Christian ministries, helping them become “exemplary, healthy, and effective.” Online: https://www.cccc.org/the_story. Plan to Protect® provides “abuse prevention and protection for organizations serving the vulnerable sector.” Online: <https://www.plantoprotect.com/en/home/>.

⁵⁴ Rhodes, *Just Discipleship*, 35, outlines a continuum of ecclesial engagement with cultural contexts: rejection—adaptation—collaboration—cooption.

⁵⁵ Available online at <https://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca> and <https://www.welcomechurch.ca/>.

pregnancy, abuse recovery, training prospective adoptive/foster-care parents and families, providing affordable counseling/housing/Christmases, etc.

10. When assigning mercy ministries to a task force, consider mobilizing missional community groups led by “missionary” leaders to serve as representatives of the church in targeted neighbourhoods.⁵⁶
11. If the targeted community is far from the host church and has no evangelical presence within it, consider planting a new church as “the single best way to *grow* the whole body of Christ in a city.”⁵⁷ New churches reach new generations, new residents, and new people groups. New church plants raise up new leaders and prompt renewal among existing churches.⁵⁸
12. Maintain a vital spiritual dependence on the Lord. Caring for the needs of the most vulnerable can be exhausting and distracting. There are spiritual forces of darkness behind many factors that entrap people in poverty, and sharing the gospel will draw opposition. Keeping the greatest commandment (loving God above all else) generates the wisdom, power, and presence to fulfill both the second greatest commandment (loving one’s neighbour) and the Great Commission (making disciples of all nations).⁵⁹

Conclusion

The task is daunting, but God hears the cry of the vulnerable and directs the steps of his people to meet their needs. At the same time, believers must recognize the highest act of compassion is proclaiming the gospel to those who do not know Jesus. Christians’ greatest resource intersects humanity’s greatest need—forgiveness of sin and assurance of eternal life. Paul considered the gospel the “most important” thing he could pass on to others: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day, so that “in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Cor 15:3-4, 22). While Canadians will applaud Christian ministry that alleviates poverty, they likely will look askance at proclamation of the gospel. Faithful Christian ministry, however, must be “gospel-centered,” as word and deed are “seamlessly integrated.”⁶⁰ Tim Chester explains,

Evangelism and social action are ... text and context.... We need the context of our lives to help interpret the text of our evangelism. But—and this is

⁵⁶ Patrick and Carter, *For the City*, 119-123.

⁵⁷ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 227.

⁵⁸ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 223-33.

⁵⁹ Matthew 22:37-39; 28:18-20.

⁶⁰ Keller, *Serving a Movement*, 159; *Generous Justice*, 143.

important—if a text makes best sense in its proper context, a context makes no sense at all without a text!⁶¹

In his infinite mercy, God has provided *his* “Blueprint for Transformation.” Only the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to truly transform human hearts and communities.

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⁶¹ Tim Chester, “Reflections on Missional Community,” in *Serving a Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 84.