

A Better Way to Serve the Poor

How to leverage your church's social capital

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It's the end of the month. I'm a church planter in Atlanta, sitting at a portable plastic table that serves as my desk. As the coffee brews, I let the voicemails play through.

"Yes, good morning, I'm calling because I need help with my light bill," a woman says.

At the beginning and end of each month, many such calls come in to the church. I listen to each voicemail, pray, and then return the phone calls to disappoint hopeless people. Our benevolence funds are limited, and most months I am unable to help a single financial need.

We do our absolute best to help, but we fall short. Most of the callers are desperate for financial help, and many are poor well beyond their financial status.

As I hang up the last call, I carry the guilt of wishing I could do more. I think of the passage in Matthew 25: "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (verse 45).

Jesus, did I just hang up, leaving You hungry? While I understand that the call to aid the poor goes beyond spending every available dollar, there is a nagging thought that I *could* do more. I believe in my heart God wants more for the most vulnerable. Yet my congregation and I believe writing another check isn't always the answer. This conviction has led us to seek a better understanding of poverty so we can find better ways to serve.

Relational Poverty

Gunshots rang out as I walked the neighborhood. Startled, 10-year-old Antoine moved closer to me on the sidewalk.

I couldn't help but wonder about his potential. As we rounded the corner, he ran off to greet a group of drug dealers. I sensed God speaking to me: "The gun will not kill Antoine, but the relationships will."

The reality of Antoine's life-and-death choices, all happening at 10 years of age, gripped me. That moment launched me on a journey to discover how social capital — networks of trusting relationships that serve as relational resources — can impact the outcomes of individuals, families and communities.

The World Bank conducted a survey of low-income people around the world, asking the simple question, "What is poverty?" According to respondents, poverty involves feeling alone.

This provides fresh insight. Thinking of poverty in terms of finances is too narrow. Poverty can affect a person's spirituality, family situation, emotions and more.

The poor associate poverty with a sense of isolation. This is an area where the local church has much to offer. A congregation's first concern should be pointing people to Christ. But the gospel can also lift the community socially.

In spreading the good news and loving like Jesus loves, the Church becomes a beacon of hope and a place of refuge for the most vulnerable. Changing hearts and building relationships *is* a form of benevolence.

Social Capital

In *Bowling Alone*, Harvard University public policy professor Robert Putnam wrote about the challenges of inequalities in America. Based on years of research, he concluded that declining relationships are fraying the American cultural fabric.

The result is a loss of social capital. In a 2017 congressional hearing on the topic, Putnam described social capital as "social networks and the associated norms of trustworthiness and reciprocity."

There is another form of poverty growing beneath the surface: a lack of trust. It seems self-evident that trust is crumbling rapidly in today's culture. There is a grave distrust between the general public, civil authorities and religious leaders.

The greatest levels of distrust exist among the most vulnerable in our communities: the poor. Researchers in various fields are beginning to understand the role of social capital as a key ingredient to social lift. Putnam and others acknowledge the healthy social networks historically rooted in religious life.

It is here that the Church can better assert itself as a righteous community of people situated in specific cities as culture shifters. As we make new disciples, we can also lift the community by building trust, both individually and corporately.

The Trust Gap

I met Wyteria on the front stoop of her apartment. The church had just finished an adopt-a-block event aiding the neighborhood through trash cleanup, a children's program, and a block party in her complex. She was sitting with a friend and her young daughter. Wyteria was in her early 20s and lived in government-subsidized housing. She had slash-shaped scars all over her body from where, at the age of 14, a group of girls beat her and cut her with razor blades.

We spent a few minutes connecting and going through the normal new contact pleasantries. The next day, I drove the church bus through the complex and saw her crying. I stopped to check in on her. She told me her daughter's dad, who lived down the street, had accidentally shot and killed himself. We jumped out of the van, gave her a big hug and prayed.

I felt broken for Wyteria. At such a young age, she was already a single mom, traumatized, physically marked by abuse, and now devastated by the loss of a loved one. She had lost trust and hope that anything good could ever happen for her.

I further encountered the breakdown of trust through my education in the foster care system. As my wife and I sat through foster care training, we learned of the trauma and tragedies that strike children. Social workers shared stories to give us insight and context for understanding the kids in the system. We completed exercises designed to build empathy and understanding. We heard lectures about little boys and girls who would enter our home, devoid of the ability to trust us.

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All this reminds me we are a broken people living in a fallen world. Yet God seeks to express His love through His Church. These realities should drive us to bring the whole gospel to the whole world.

The Beauty of Fellowship

In my early 20s, I gravitated toward nondenominationalism. Some mentors challenged me to consider joining the Assemblies of God based on my agreement with theology and the methodology of ministry. After prayer, I decided to follow their advice.

Just a few years ago, I learned in greater clarity about the Assemblies of God's determination to prioritize poverty of the soul, while maintaining a commitment to the very real physical needs of life. We have a long history of aiding the most vulnerable people of our communities and traveling to the ends of the earth to carry the gospel in word and deed.

This heritage gives me pride in who we are as a Movement. It inspires me with great conviction to bring this culture and legacy to desperate and hurting people, introducing every soul to the trust and faithfulness of our God.

For some time, there has been a needs-based approach to evangelism. Many church planters identify local community needs and offer to fill gaps with money, events and volunteers. Generally, we accomplish these tasks as single events scattered throughout the year. Could we build into our modern church systems discipleship programming that utilizes a church's social capital for the betterment of vulnerable families?

The Local Church

Putnam describes two kinds of social capital: bonding (social connections that link us to others who are similar to us) and bridging (social connections that link us to people who are different from us).

Our church focuses community efforts around these two concepts as a means of discipleship for vulnerable families. We create ways to bond and bridge our local, vulnerable families to our church and Christ-centered culture to transform minds. Simply put, the church has a vision to see families renewed spiritually and transformed holistically.

As a pastor, I recognize the importance of our church's bonding culture. By definition, the bonding culture should be rooted in love (with trust), accountability and selflessness, as described in the New Testament. A healthy church culture positions the body of Christ to serve as both an example and a voice for living out the righteousness of God.

Bridging is critical in moving us beyond a one-time, emergency-aid approach and toward long-term discipleship. Along with evangelization and salvation, I want to see individuals and families growing in relationships that promote biblical norms, behaviors, values, opportunities and health.

Bridging capital is usually what the poor lack most in upward mobility. Many of our congregants attained their professional roles or jobs because they knew someone at a company before they applied. The poor often have these kinds of connections only in entry-level positions rather than in careers. Their limited social networks limit upward mobility.

This is just one example. Social networks play a role in every aspect of life, from health care to education. Understanding these social network gaps gives the local church more avenues to make a long-term difference.

Community Impact

There are some incredible ways to influence our communities by utilizing the local church's social capital. Here are four to consider:

First, keep preaching the gospel and the kingdom of God, especially outside the walls of the church.

Second, bond your church to local community leaders, especially nonprofit leaders who can be mutually beneficial. The local church cannot carry every social program. It can, however, utilize bridging capital to other nonprofits — especially like-minded, faith-based organizations.

Third, identify local for-profit leaders in your church, and cast the vision of aiding vulnerable families. There are a variety of ways these leaders can serve the people, such as job training, mentorship and teaching financial literacy.

Fourth — and my favorite — adopt or pioneer a community dinner, church or small group in a vulnerable neighborhood.

Our local body uses these approaches to bond and bridge vulnerable families to Jesus, biblical living, new opportunities and healthcare providers. All are tangible ways to help the vulnerable navigate life in trusting relationships.

Toward Discipleship

The last three years have taught me that the measure of success is obedience, and not always the immediate return on investment. We have seen crowds raise their hands and pray. Yet we also see an embedded local impoverished culture that still needs radical transformation.

Looking at social capital in impoverished communities has given me both an empathy for my neighbors and a passion to see change. I now better understand the gaps in trust and hope in these communities.

We are inspired by the gospel account of Jesus as Immanuel — God with us. Further, we are encouraged by both the research of the benefits of social capital and the transforming message of Jesus Christ.

By adopting this theology, knowledge and methodology, we are pursuing a truly discipleship-oriented approach — rather than just trying to pay utility bills.

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