

The Charitable Church

Drive down Willow Drive and you will pass three churches, cut on over to Yaupon and you'll pass four more before you get to Hwy 332. When people pass by they see the outer buildings, but do they really see the church. Of course not, they see the facilities used by the church, but they don't see the church until they interact with the members of each congregation. The church isn't a building, it's the people inside. But to say that people don't judge the church by its appearance would not be totally accurate. In fact, the world has always judged the church by what they see. Not what the buildings look like, but what they see the people inside the building do when they get outside. The real impact of the church is not measured by the effect it has on the world around it.

The way the church reaches out and ministers to others is what leaves a lasting impression and in fact is what causes it to grow. That's the way it has been since the beginning of Christianity. Acts 2:42-45 We see the members of the early church sharing with each other and their numbers grew daily. Why? Because the outsiders had needs and saw that those needs could be met by joining with the believers. It's interesting to note that it wasn't hearing the gospel that caused them to believe. Instead it was the exposure to God's love through having their needs met that brought them to salvation.

Acts 4:32-35. This charity of the early church caught the attention of local press. The Roman historian Tacitus noted the following regarding the 2nd century church: *There was a sharing of goods and a drastic philanthropy for the benefit not only of fellow Christians but also of the heathen, especially in times of calamity. The care for widows and orphans, the ransoming of prisoners and the support of the families of martyrs all came from the common chest.* The early church shared what they had in common as much for self preservation as for ministry. Their stand against the ways of the world brought them persecution from the Romans and their belief in Jesus brought them persecution from the Jews, so they had to stick together. But what is amazing is that even with the persecution, people still wanted to join them. Acts 5:12-16. Note that the text begins by saying no one else dared join them because of the fear of persecution. But yet the way they shared and the love they showed others caused them to be highly regarded. What an interesting paradox. In the end we see that the power of charity overcame the fear of persecution and the needy joined the believers.

By focusing on social justice, the early church was following through with the example Jesus left with them. As Scott mentioned last week, Jesus traveled among the least of these laying hands on them, healing them, delivering them, and even feeding them. He demonstrated a tangible love for the people that no one else cared about and he charged the body with doing the same. John 14:12. Now that verse has always puzzled me. How can I do greater things than Jesus? Raising people from the dead and healing the sick is pretty difficult to top. But in doing research for this message I discovered what Jesus really meant. The Hebrew word for "greater" in that verse is "meizon" (mide-zon). This word means to "a larger degree" or "more". So what Jesus meant was not that we would do more powerful things than he did but rather we would do the same powerful things on a larger scale than he could have done on his own. Jesus' ministry was limited to a very

small part of world, but he charged us with reaching the ends of the earth...and that's just what the church has done. In 1845, the International Missions Board of the SBC was founded to begin reaching foreign nations with the gospel of Christ. Since that time, the IMB has appointed >15000 missionaries into the field. In 2004, the budget for IMB was \$283MM which was used to support over 5000 missionaries. In that year the IMB activities resulted in 607,000 baptisms, the total number of church plantings world wide reach over 99,000 and the membership in these churches was 7.4 million people. This is what Jesus meant by even greater things.

But how does this work? Why did Jesus know we would be effective? I believe it is for three reasons. First, working together as a body has a multiplication effect. As Paul mentions in 1st Cor 12, we are each a part of the body and when we pull together we can do much greater things than we could do as individuals. Looking at this from a church stance, it's highly unlikely that we here at Willow could fund more than just a missionary or two on our own. However, joining together with the other churches in the SBC we enable the IMB to do its incredible work.

The second reason for the success is that when passion and creativity meet with opportunity, there is an exponential effect. I saw a commercial the other day for a company that really struck me as symbolic for this creativity thing. The company saw the need for providing refrigerated food products for small stores called tiendas located throughout central America. These tiendas are the primary grocery source for thousands of small villages. The company saw the challenge: there were so many tiendas, all individually owned, spread out all over with little inventory capability, poor roads in and out so truck transports are not practical. But the company also saw the opportunity: thousands of stores not being supplied by anyone else, eager for refrigerated products. So the company established a network of small distributorships located in strategic locations, developed scooters with insulated boxes to carry the groceries, and handheld tracking devices to keep up with inventories and orders. The results: the people in need get the groceries and the company gets the business all to themselves.

Within the body this exponential effect happens when a believer encounters a need that ignites both their personal creativity and Kingdom compassion. Lottie Moon was a 4' 3" young lady who by most accounts was non-descript. She started out as a teacher but deep inside, Lottie had a passion to live her life in service to God. In 1873, Lottie Moon followed God's call to be a missionary in China. As she served in China her heart for the local people and their needs grew and she felt burdened to do more, so she began to send letters back to the US exhorting the church members to provide monetary support for more missionaries. Thus began the Lottie Moon Christmas offerings. The first offering resulted in enough funds to send three more missionaries to China. In, 2005 that same offering had a goal of \$150MM and a vision to reach the 1.4 billion people in South Asia. All of this started when the compassion for the lost stirred the creativity of a small lady from Virginia to lay it out for God.

Matthew 10:42 says that "if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."

For James Robison, the passion for this scripture coupled with the knowledge of hundreds of villages in need of water in drought-stricken Africa caused him to put his creativity to work. The result is the Water For Life effort. For \$72, the price of one ticket to an Aggie game, you can provide drinking water to 15 people for life. For \$4800, you can provide a whole village with water. What a staggering opportunity.

In Matthew 18:5, Jesus says "whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me." In, 1952 Evangelist Everett Swanson traveled to South Korea to preach the gospel to the troops in the Republic of Korea army. During his visit he encountered children orphaned by the war. Rev. Swanson was challenged by a missionary friend: "You have seen the tremendous needs and unparalleled opportunities of this land. What do you intend to do about it?" The following year Everett provided sponsorship for 35 Korean orphans. Since that time the Compassion International ministry has touched the lives of over 1MM children by providing these children with the message of the gospel, Christian training, education, personal hygiene and healthcare and food if needed. The Compassion International budget in 2005 was over \$200MM. Exponential Kingdom growth driven by the compassion and creativity of believers.

The third reason that we are able to do greater things is that when the church acts out of correct motives, it can have a community-changing effect. In 1996 Pastors Matthew and Tommy Barnett of Los Angeles wanted to have more Kingdom impact on their community so they purchased a vacant 14-story hospital and converted it into the Dream Center - a place where the hurting people of LA's inner city can find help for their physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. In the first 4 years since the Dream Center was established, gang violence dropped by 73%, homicide rate dropped by 28%, and rape decreased by 53%. The Barnetts credit the Kingdom impact to placing a value on developing relationships with the community. Salem Baptist Church in Chicago recognized that the fact the New Testament church did not meet in a building meant that all of the work of the first century church happened outside of a four-wall structure. So they adopted a "church without walls" mentality and purposely took their ministries to the needy. In 1998, they led a campaign to dry up their suburb by closing dozens of area liquor stores and then the following year led a drive to win 25,000 to Christ. They tutored all the third grade students in their zip code and saw a corresponding increase in standardized test scores. They delivered copies of Bible on cassette and satellite feed of their worship services to 24 prisons so that 43000 inmates could experience worship. Reverend James Meeks says that Salem BC has been successful because the purpose of its efforts are to meet needs of those right outside the church's doors, not increase church membership. Read quote from Rev Meeks. Pg 19.

Nothing bears out the truth about motive-based impact more clearly than the Church's response in the aftermath of calamity. Last year following Hurricane's Katrina and Rita, the body of Christ sent thousands of volunteers and millions of dollars in aid to the victims as well as providing temporary shelter, food, and clothing. They were not sent to grow church membership, they were sent to minister to the immediate needs of the people devastated by the effects of the storm. And this response caught the attention of people outside the church, including some of our worst critics. Quote from atheist.

Why does the body of Christ reach out? It's in our DNA. We follow the example set by Jesus. In turn, Jesus himself said he only did what he saw the father doing. Which ties us back to God, whose heart beats for social justice. Isa 58:6-12

2006 is poised to be a breakout year for Willow in the area of social justice.

- Doubling support of IMB and GCBA
- Helping the India Gospel Outreach to expand its Bible college where it trains pastors to start churches in India
- Starting a literacy training program in the northern India city of Ludhiana. This school program will allow the students to increase their literacy skills enough to be able to attend the local schools and get an education.
- Re-establishing our support of the Girouard family. Ronnie and his wife are responsible for the international adoption program offered by Family Life. Our support enables orphans overseas to find homes in the US.
- We've established a scholarship program to provide some funding for church members who would like to participate in foreign missions.
- We're looking into assisting the translation of the Bible into the Cuna language to distribute to an indigenous tribe in

Locally, we are:

1. Re-establishing support for the Seaman's center and the Pregnancy Help Center
2. Doubling our Church Membership Assistance funds
3. Providing startup funds and volunteers for the River of Hope, which is a coalition of local churches whose purpose is to meet the crises needs of people in our area and move them towards self sufficiency.
4. Care Ministry to meet the needs of our visitors and connect them to the body

These represent a great start, but I wonder if God doesn't have more planned for us as individuals and as a church. What can I do personally and what can Willow do congregationally to have more lasting impact on Southern Brazoria County.

1. What needs exist in our area: needy children, people in nursing homes, undocumented people, single moms, 5 prisons, affordable healthcare and housing, quote from Kirbyjon Caldwell, pg 22
2. What things stir me to action? What things stir Willow to action? Exponential effect of compassion meeting with opportunity. Healing and restoration of others; regional transformation
3. What talents and creative gifts do I have? What does Willow have collectively? This is the Henry Blackaby approach. Look at talents and gifts and see how they can practically be used. Willow has teachers, engineers, business minds.
4. How can your skills and the skills of Willow be used to practically and exponentially advance the Kingdom here locally. Are your talents and gifts being used to touch the needy around us. Get involved with ROH, Helping Hands, Youth missions week, prison and nursing home ministries.
5. Make it a point of prayer. Now is the time to seek his heart, to ask him to move us to a place of intense compassion for the hurting and needy right outside our door, and to

enable us to take the Kingdom to them in a way we never thought possible. Isa 58
When we focus on social justice our light will shine.

Prayer point: To fully utilize the giftings and passions of every member of Willow to reach out and touch our neighbors with the compassion and good news of Jesus.