

CHAPTER 8

FAITH-SHAPING  
CONNECTIONS

## PEOPLE-REACHING

Though life in the inner city comes with challenges, Bridge members Keenan and Kiki wouldn't change their environment. Building faith-shaping connections top the list. The family takes leftovers to neighbors in need and gives rides to people during the winter months. When the temperatures soar into the triple digits, they've been known to buy an electric fan for a neighbor or popsicles to share with the neighbor kids.

Keenan and Kiki are one of 34 lighthouse leaders who are following their calling and putting faith into action. Giving our congregation a purpose changed the focus from self to others. We became a church focused on building God's kingdom instead of our empire. At Bridge, we intentionally emphasize developing a purposeful relationship with Jesus by casting a vision for our members to transform their neighborhoods.

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In Matthew 23:39, Jesus took over six hundred Old Testament commandments and boiled them down to two: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

What if witnessing is not only a *heart* issue, but an issue of developing *habits* in a Christ-follower? What if, as pastors and church leaders, we could do a much better job of training our congregation as powerful witnessing disciples who make disciples?

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If I'm going to lead my church, I can't just point to the broken world, and say, "There's your mission field; now go do something." I need to equip my congregation with real-life connections with people far from Christ. People

need to be discipled and trained by walking alongside me, observing how I live and share the gospel with others. If I connect with the unchurched, they, too, can be released to do the same.

Engaging with unchurched people from different backgrounds gets the church out of their comfort levels and intentionally positions them in new relationships. With this deliberate shift, believers continue to grow by forming faith-shaping connections with the unchurched. This new mindset focuses on reaching the lost like missionaries going to another culture abroad.

## CONNECTING WITH THE LOST

At Bridge, in addition to loving our neighbors and carrying the fullness of Jesus into where we live, we build faith-shaping connections by loving our neighbors **where there's need** and **where we worship**. Because the latter two are primarily congregation-driven, this allows us to serve together side by side. Loving our neighbors together where there's need disrupts our congregation while loving our neighbors where we worship connects our church with unbelievers. Serving together allows us to practice developing our purposeful relationship with Christ. We not only sharpen one another, we encourage and elevate one another to greater impact.

As churches act as light and salt in engaging their communities, real transformation in Christ happens in both the city and the church. With Bridge, a huge shift occurred when we began to have as much concern for our community as we had for our congregation.

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Love outreaches become faith-shaping connections, **connecting the church with the unchurched** and **training members to be unleashed as powerful witnesses who regularly share their faith**. The following questions help ensure that our outreaches meet both goals.

## Connecting with Unbelievers

- Does the love outreach meaningfully engage the unchurched?
- Are we enhancing the community we are serving?
- Do we offer an invitation to visit church?

In addition to impacting the city, successful outreaches must also build and develop the very people doing the outreach. Consistent outreaches give church people opportunities to communicate Christ's love in the city. On-the-job training develops disciples to become saltier and brighter as they share their faith in action.

## Questions for Training our Congregation

- Does the love outreach stretch the faith of our congregation?
- Are the churched learning to connect with the unchurched and share their faith?
- Do we train and unleash our members to reach their own neighbors through the love outreach?

We can't expect to get physically fit if we go to the gym once a year. In the same way, we need regular practice and training if we want to get spiritually fit as followers of Jesus who live with a real sense of purpose and calling. We need consistent practice and training to truly love our neighbors, share our faith and grow into the disciple-multiplying disciples Jesus calls us to be.

## LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS WHERE THERE'S NEED

Loving our neighbors **where there's need** is serving the area within your city where people face significant social challenges such as violence, poverty and other disparities. Partnering with an inner-city church to build relationships within the community is a great place to start. This disrupts the congregation out of what's familiar and provides opportunities for church leaders to model and train the church in becoming powerful witnesses. We aren't called to simply offer charity and do something good; we're called to see real kingdom

change. Getting involved is the key, adding a depth where real impact is made on both the churched and unchurched. When working toward real change, everyone involved is impacted.

The power of working among brokenness is reciprocal; the very brokenness experienced by the congregation transforms them into humble and compassionate Christ-followers. When brokenness enlarges our hearts to be more like Christ, the fruit of the spirit naturally flows out of us in our daily interactions. We can't help but be transformed. Like short-term missions, these faith-shaping connections should be a consistent part of our discipleship plan.

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When extending into an area of need in our city, we need to be sensitive to those we are engaging. Otherwise we come across as patronizing. Building consistent relationships is at the heart of our mission. Sadly, many churches, in their attempt to extend beyond the walls, only address temporal little “c” benevolent causes. These little “c” causes, while helpful, impact a small number of recipients. They are often expensive to administer and don't involve strong relational connections. These benevolent actions touch on the symptoms rather than address the root of the problem or the ultimate suffering of people separated from Christ.

Our world is full of needs, but if we're not careful, we'll get distracted with all kinds of good activity and miss the very mission we're called to fulfill. We've been called to be wise stewards; it's critical that our compassionate and benevolent hearts are Christ-centered and kingdom-advancing.

For years, we had a food pantry that created distance and disempowerment in the very people we tried to help. We quickly learned that our food pantry or any type of outreach best happens when meaningful relationships occur. Further, we want our outreaches to connect people with a local church where they can develop into vibrant disciples of Jesus.

Oftentimes as I consult with churches, I ask pastors what type of outreach they do. Most describe something related to the distribution of food or other one-time benevolent activities. A food pantry is an example of a little “c” cause that can do more harm than good. When we blow in, blow up and blow out without developing consistent relationships with people, we risk: 1. Placing unhealthy relational barriers between the giver and the recipient, and 2. Losing the relational equity needed to share the gospel and plug people into the local church.

While food distribution is important, this good work can be a deterrent to the very relationships we want to form with our neighbors. Benevolent distribution types of ministry are often not mutually reinforcing. Sadly, they oftentimes pit the person of power over the person of need and create an unhealthy relationship.

We’ve made a rule in our neighborhood strategy that we never want money or resources to get in the way of our relationships. Offering food or other resources happens best once the relationship has been formed and well underway.

In our humanitarian goodness, this seems counter-intuitive, void of compassion. And yet when we respond to the immediate need, rather than let God work, we often miss out on the bigger eternal picture.

For example, we have several homeless individuals that attend our church. One evening during small groups, I sat next to a homeless man who had attended church for six weeks. As I listened, I considered how I once would’ve approached his situation. My old self would’ve been quick to provide temporary relief rather than let relationship lead the way. However, I have learned that God often uses our desperation to get our attention and grab our affection. I didn’t want to interrupt the process if God wanted to use this man’s temporary situation to get his attention. Far too often, our humanitarian hearts get in the way, and we interrupt the very thing that God would use in a life for the greater good.

Living in an area of overwhelming need has shown me that God is the ultimate hope. I can’t supply every need and resource, but his supply is limitless. Building relationships with people is key; not only do we point

them to the Father, we can help them in tangible ways without fueling an entitlement and enablement mentality.

Though we do provide some resources to show God's goodness, rescuing people from financial poverty is not our primary goal. Far too often our resources have gotten in the way of relationships. Because of the time involved, it can be easier to write a check rather than engage with others. If we're not in a relational journey with people, our resources will only compound the problem and not address spiritual poverty.

As we serve together as a congregation, we can't help but be impacted. Not only do we build relationships with our neighbors in need, our faith is built as we look for opportunities to engage in relational disciple making. God knows exactly how he wants to meet our every need. If we simply trust him, he'll powerfully show up and turn the brokenness into something beautiful. Talk about life-changing.

## LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS WHERE WE WORSHIP

Loving our neighbors **where we worship** is serving and connecting with the community surrounding the location of your church building. This is an area of impact where church leaders model what it looks like to extend Christ's love outside the church walls. This is a great training opportunity for the congregation to make faith-shaping connections and practice interacting with unchurched neighbors in a loving way. When we get excited about the life of our church, inviting others becomes less awkward and more natural. We want our neighbors to know the church is a friendly place and available for them.

These larger love outreaches allow everyone in the church to be involved in serving regularly. When we serve together in the same environment, we can engage more unchurched people and make a difference in our community while also training and unleashing our congregation to reach their own neighbors where they live and interact.

When orchestrating a love outreach in the area where you worship, take a *broad* approach and engage as many people as possible. While every person matters, leaders must think about influencing the *broader* number of people in their congregation and community of impact. Reducing our

outreach to little “c” *benevolent causes* limits our ability to mobilize our entire congregation and impact the greatest number of people in our surrounding community.

Regular outreaches allow our neighbors to experience the value of our church in the community while inviting them to Sunday morning service. Our prayer is that our churches would be strongly missed if we left the city, and our neighbors would experience the incredible loss because of the practical value we bring to their lives.

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## IDEAS FOR LOVE OUTREACHES

Love outreaches come in a variety of forms. The most effective are those where the cultural inroad builds trust and connection with the largest number of people in our community. By engaging with a broad audience, the church gains social influence which can then translate to spiritual impact.

To appeal to the community around where you worship, four categories of outreach emerge:

- community events
- sports programs
- business outreaches
- school programs

The following chart gives some examples of possible activities we can use to make cultural inroads.

Community Events	Sports Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Block parties.</li> <li>b. Neighborhood clean-up.</li> <li>c. Concerts in the park.</li> <li>d. Movie nights in the park.</li> <li>e. Holiday events.</li> <li>f. Fun family activities.</li> <li>g. Marriage retreats.</li> <li>h. Financial classes.</li> <li>i. Support groups.</li> <li>j. Young moms' groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Select sports programs.</li> <li>b. Recreational teams.</li> <li>c. Parent-involvement programs. (Father/son or mother/daughter events.)</li> <li>d. Camps. (Invite high level athletes to conduct camps.)</li> </ul>
Business Outreaches	School Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Coffee Shop.</li> <li>b. Kids' attractational activities.</li> <li>c. Counseling center.</li> <li>d. Medical clinic.</li> <li>e. Technology center.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Teacher appreciation days.</li> <li>b. Volunteers who read with students or become mentors.</li> <li>c. Tutoring.</li> <li>d. Summer camps. (STEM, coding, trades/skills)</li> <li>e. LEGO-building classes.</li> <li>f. Robotics classes.</li> </ul>

Imagine doing consistent love outreach activities as a church. Not only is this a powerful training ground for the congregation, conversion growth is the natural outcome when we regularly love the neighbors around where we worship.

The goal is to make a practical difference in the area around your church while inviting your neighbors to visit one of your services. This is the power of social influence that leads to spiritual impact. Neighbors will know your church is a caring, friendly place, adding value to the community.

## UNLEASHING DISCIPLES

In John 4, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well who had been married multiple times and lived with someone out of wedlock. Definitely not the most qualified person to lead nearly a whole town to Christ. Yet, in verse 39, John states, “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” (NIV)

Far from the poster child for morality, this woman barely knew enough to share her faith. Yet, she testified how Jesus impacted her life, leading many to believe in the savior of the world.

The same is true for every Christ-follower. Jesus uses willing hearts. While none of us will ever be perfectly qualified, Jesus loves to show up when we are weak. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

Jesus’ prayer to see heaven come on earth is our prayer as well. Passionate followers of Christ live the same way, getting out of the seats and into the streets to extend hope to the hopeless. As pastors and leaders, it is up to us to mobilize and extend our congregations outside of the church walls to meet with modern-day tax collectors and sinners.

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The local church is God’s answer for a broken and dying world. Empowering

Christians who are willing to share the good news of the gospel unleashes our congregation to extend the hope of Jesus to the lost.

## THE LIGHTHOUSE CONCEPT

These simple, yet profound, steps to engage the unchurched grew into a movement at Bridge and its nonprofit partner, Abide. Families moved into targeted inner-city neighborhoods and became lighthouses offering hope through the strategy of connect, care and call.

When we first began, the overwhelming housing problems in the inner city seemed daunting. Over 3,200 properties were considered condemned, abandoned or uninhabitable. When owners didn't maintain their homes, care for the community diminished and crime flourished. Police call this the "broken window" effect because unmaintained neighborhoods and condemned houses become havens for drugs, gangs and violence. Cleaner neighborhoods are safer neighborhoods.

Bridge and Abide targeted two crime-ridden neighborhoods for revitalization. Two houses—just blocks apart—quickly became the focus when we bought the properties. An army of volunteers gutted and remodeled the houses.

Before the transformation, graffiti covered the walls and drug syringes littered the property on Fowler Avenue which had been abandoned for 13 years. This house served as a catalyst for change in the neighborhood. With each improvement, one neighbor after another emerged. Energized by the changes, neighbors began to watch out for each other. Transforming one home impacted the entire neighborhood, creating a new sense of community. The property on Larimore Street mirrored the same effect.

Picking up trash, mowing empty lots, fixing abandoned properties and creating community caused a decrease in crime in these two neighborhoods, and the police took notice. When officers asked the neighbors what happened, they pointed to our home which also housed the church and nonprofit offices.

“We don’t know what you’re doing,” the police told me. “But it’s working. Two years ago, this was one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Omaha. Today, it’s one of the safest.”

As a result, the lighthouse concept was born.

When the Fowler house neared completion, Bridge recruited and trained a family to live in the lighthouse. As an advocate for the neighborhood, the lighthouse family lived out the three C’s of connect, care and call.

The benefits have been priceless. Crime has dropped in these neighborhoods, and residents are empowered to change their neighborhoods and connect with the church in ways they never thought possible.

To date, we have 34 lighthouses and adopted 165 neighborhoods. The inner city is being revitalized, people are coming to Christ and disciples are being made.

Getting out of the seats and into the streets is a highly effective training ground to unleash faith. There is power when we serve together as a congregation or shine in our neighborhoods as lighthouses. These faith-shaping connections transform us, making us more Christ-like and empowering us with purpose to advance his kingdom on earth.