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Moving From Ministry FOR Our Neighbors to Ministry WITH Our Neighbors

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In March, none of us imagined that social distancing, mask-wearing, and living in a new normal would still be happening come September. Or maybe we didn't want to imagine such a world. As hard as it has been for our worship services, Bible studies, and small groups, it has been equally difficult for our outreach ministries and missions.

Yet our missions and ministries have worked to pivot in the face of our new reality. Food pantries have shifted to drive-thru models. Community meals have continued as curbside pick-up. Summer feeding programs for children started earlier and delivered directly to doorsteps. The amazing ways ministry has continued is beyond anything we could have imagined.

Still, many have felt the loss of relationships established through all of these programs. Sitting across from one another in a meal, walking through and picking up groceries at a pantry, or sharing life stories in a small group are not happening right now. They may not be able to happen for more months to come.

While we may feel disconnected from those we serve, this time is also an opportunity. A chance to take stock of the “how” and “why” of our ministries. Let us use this time to dream and to reconfigure our ministries to give dignity, choice, and hope to all we serve.

Often our ministries focus on what we can do for those in need rather than seeing how we can walk alongside or be partners with them. Our intention is to have meaningful ministries that not only help us express God’s love and care for all God’s children, but also give respect, hope, and strength to those in need.

Many of us find ourselves in the realm of doing ministry FOR our community. It’s a bit like the feeding of the 5,000. We find ourselves trying to make an impact for as many people as possible- passing out bread and fish while it lasts.

Ministry FOR may look like writing a check to support the local food pantry or packing supply boxes to distribute to neighbors. It is the necessary work without which ministry could not happen. It often leaves little room for relationship building with our neighbors. Still, as we see in the gospel passage, miracles do happen when we pool our resources together to help one another.

Doing ministry FOR those in need is very comfortable for many of us. We do not have to bridge socio-economic divides to make sure our neighbors’ needs are met. Yet, as followers of Jesus, we know that the gospel message is not about staying comfortable. Jesus compels us to move out of our comfort zones and into relationships.

We must take steps to do ministry WITH our neighbors. It may not be comfortable at first, but it provides dignity to those we serve. We can choose to include those we serve in our ministry planning and program execution. We can listen to the concerns of our neighbors, recognize their struggles or needs, and help not only by providing food or services but by providing connections.

Being in ministry WITH the poor looks less like the feeding of the multitudes and more like a communion meal. It brings all to the table of God on equal footing. At the table, there is conversation and community.

Ministry WITH might sound challenging especially during COVID, but one church has found a way to make sure the connections with their neighbors remain in this difficult time. When the regular visitors to their community meal were not coming to the drive-thru pantry at FUMC in Monticello, they decided to change tactics. Instead of hosting a monthly pantry, the congregation sought out their neighbors bringing boxes of groceries to their porches once a week. This change has allowed them to check in on their neighbors more often and to truly be in community with one another.

As we are all starved for community in this unprecedented time, finding opportunities to be in ministry WITH our neighbors is of the utmost importance. Our job is not only to feed bodies but to nourish souls. We do that by being WITH one another.

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