

What is Mercy Ministry?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

Philip G. Ryken & Noah J. Toly

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▣ What Is Mercy Ministry?

The Reformed tradition has inspired mercy ministry not only in Europe and the United States, but also in many places around the world. Christians from Africa to Asia to Latin America draw upon the doctrines of grace as they serve their neighbors. In 1991, various Reformed churches of Nigeria—led by the Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria (RCCN) and the Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria (ERCC)—joined together to found the Reformed Ecumenical Council of Nigeria (RECON). RECON extends mercy ministry to the work of redressing the social causes of vulnerability and marginality by partnering to address needs arising from poverty, persecution, and violence. Programs emphasize community development, healthcare, literacy, medical care, and microfinance. The ERCC has also joined the Christian Rural Development Association of Nigeria, which promotes holistic education, community development, and capacity building through member organizations.

The work in Nigeria is just one example that illustrates a broader point: mercy ministry is for rural communities in developing countries as well as for influential cities in wealthy nations. Along with Reformed churches from Burkina Faso and Angola, RECON participates in the ACT Alliance, which works toward “positive and sustainable change in the lives of people affected by poverty and injustice through coordinated and effective humanitarian, development and advocacy work.”²⁸ Through global partnerships, churches are administering mercy not only through charity toward the less fortunate, but also through programs meant to provide sustainable opportunities for everyone to flourish. By addressing corporate and structural aspects of sin and suffering, RECON and others are not only giving fish, so to speak, but teaching others to fish and ensuring access to the pond.

THE PRACTICE OF MERCY MINISTRY

To this point, we have shown the biblical-theological warrant for mercy ministry and documented its historical scope. But how can we put this into practice? How can a church get started with its own ministries of mercy? As we seek to engage in this work, we do well to bear in mind a few practical tips, some of which are gleaned from our forebears in the faith.

At Least Give, But Don't Just Give

It is a common—and true enough—refrain: “Not everyone can go, but everyone can give.” Without a doubt, it is important to give. Giving to provide for those in need is commended throughout Scripture. As James writes,

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15–16)

We are instructed to give both sacrificially and joyfully in imitation of Jesus Christ and as an expression of our faith in a sovereign God, who will put all things right in the end.

At the same time, we should not only give. Giving is not a substitute for the work of our hands. The key to Thomas Chalmers’s ministry was not to find more money to distribute, but to recruit volunteers to “go out into the streets . . . to do the work of Christian ministry.”²⁹ The closer we are to the situation, the better we understand the needs we seek to meet. Furthermore, the vulnerable need the blessing of friendship, which is not cultivated by staying at a distance writing a check.

▣ What Is Mercy Ministry?

We should follow the model set by Thomas Chalmers and find ways to involve ourselves personally in this work.

Individuals and congregations that volunteer to serve in mercy ministry can expect to receive as well as to give. There is spiritual blessing in the material support of others. We discover our own needs, even needs we had not previously known. We learn new things about God. And we are humbled as we learn from the people we serve. Few of these things happen through financial giving alone.

The effort to organize not only finances, but also volunteers, can build interest and develop a capacity for service in congregations that may be new to mercy ministry. As congregants catch the vision for serving God by serving their neighbors, they are inspired to deeper levels of commitment and more effective involvement.

Work Locally

One barrier to involvement in mercy ministry is the common impulse to go to the ends of the earth in search of opportunities. While we are called “to heal and to reveal”³⁰ to the ends of the earth, the desire to travel can be a barrier to local ministry. While it can be overwhelming—even paralyzing—to try to understand and address the needs of far-off communities, local alternatives allow us to do something, to start somewhere. We can always find significant opportunities for mercy ministry in our own neighborhoods or nearby cities. Often, the first momentum-building step toward effective ministry is to begin with the opportunities that God has provided close to home. Once we have built a platform for effective local mercy ministry—establishing congregational capacity through mobilization, communication, and finance—we can use that platform to reach across borders and minister to those who are far off.



“This is the best brief description of the church’s ministry of mercy that I know. The authors lay a concise but rich theological foundation for it, sketch some of its historic forms, and give good practical principles and examples to enable local congregations to get moving. I highly recommend it.”

■ **Tim Keller**, Redeemer Presbyterian Church

Mercy ministry isn’t a new concept. It’s an integral out-working of your faith that is essential to your life as a Christian. But what does it look like? Where does it begin?

Mercy ministry begins with recognition of suffering and continues with gratitude and love. Here Ryken and Toly take an incisive look at mercy ministry, exploring its necessity, theological roots, and legacy in the church throughout history. They provide insights on starting in mercy ministry both as an individual and as a church. Examples and tips help you to imitate Christ in practical, far-reaching ways that testify to his love.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

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