

Book Excerpt

Through the years, I led mission teams to serve in poor communities along the Texas/Mexico border. Our volunteers—initially a group of 15 but later as many as 40—worked together to improve the living conditions of the people in that area. We made the trip three or four times each year, and our visits ranged from a long weekend to a full week.

Those extended, repetitive visits over a ten-year period allowed us to build strong connections with the residents of that border town. We got to know them, their families, their dreams and their challenges. We watched each other's children grow up. Through it all, we built a level of trust that was a true game-changer.

The people drew hope from the fact that we were committed to helping them long-term. They knew we'd be back. They counted on it and looked forward to it. They found strength in the knowledge that our support and friendship were unchanging, and those relationships opened the door for them to know the Lord. Right there, at the intersection of outreach and discipleship, we experienced something miraculous.

The changes in those families were readily apparent, but I quickly realized something else. The residents weren't the only ones who gained value from these trips. The shared act of service also formed the deepest bonds among our volunteers. There's just something magical about a group of people physically demonstrating their love for God, working together to selflessly serve others. Sharing meals. Sharing a space to sleep. Sharing a goal.

All of the people involved with those mission trips—those who were serving and telling the Good News, as well as those who were hearing it—were forever changed by the experience.

As I wrestled with how to solve our church outreach problems, I kept thinking about those trips and the feelings they produced. Our time together was permeated by love in its most pure and perfect form, all while God was teaching us, knocking off our rough edges, plowing our hearts, and helping us to grow. I've often wished I could bottle up that extraordinary feeling of Jesus-powered connection and pour it all over our daily lives. Then it occurred to me: Maybe we could try.

I knew that our traditional outreach efforts on their own weren't enough, but outreach *paired with acts of service and the goal of relationship* had the potential to make a huge difference. If we wanted to *share* the love of Christ, we needed to *show* people the love of Christ. That required time to form authentic connections with them. Time to build trust and have common experiences. Time to have extended conversations—the kind we had during the long days of our regular mission trips and the kind we have daily with the Lord in prayer.

Ongoing discipleship could be the missing spark to light the fire of outreach for the church.