

BOOK REVIEW

Not Just a Soup Kitchen – How Mercy Ministry in the Local Church Transforms Us All

by Dr. David S. Apple
CLC Publications, 2014

Reviewed by David Nakhla, Administrator, Committee on Diaconal Ministries

“The unmotivated, undisciplined, undeserved poor.” Who are they? They are our neighbors – the neighbors that Christ commanded us to love. In his book, ***Not Just a Soup Kitchen: How Mercy Ministry in the Local Church Transforms Us All***, Dr. David S. Apple, Director of Mercy Ministries at historic Tenth Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, challenges us to go “beyond our comfort zone” when reaching out to the needy.

Apple recounts the conversion he experienced - first in his own life and then in the life of Tenth Church - as, through God's transforming power, they were awakened to the diaconal needs among the urban poor in their community. Those who were once considered "inanimate objects" and kept at a safe distance were brought near as fellow image-bearers of God. The church was reminded of the ways in which deeds of mercy serve as bridges to bring people to Christ. The learning process was not an easy one, but through it, "hostility turned into hospitality," and "strangers became guests." This evangelistic outreach in word and deed resulted in Tenth Church becoming known as a refuge of hospitality and care for anyone in need.

Apple challenges the reader to remember that conversion to Jesus Christ means following His example of living our lives for others (Phil 2:3-4). Our service to others, particularly to those who don't deserve our love, is both an expression of our true appreciation for the great mercy that has been shown us in Christ and a demonstration of obedience to His command that we “love ... as I have loved you.”

Apple seeks to inspire other churches to consider “the biblical mandate to love the needy with God's compassion,” to look for the opportunities for mercy ministry that surround them (whether urban or suburban), and to further develop these ministries. Through this book, which is historical, theological, and practical in scope, churches can benefit from the many lessons that Tenth Church learned in its own process of transformation. Apple points out that those involved in mercy ministry must acknowledge their own limitations (since only God is infinite), set boundaries, and avoid the tyranny of the urgent. Yet, he also stresses that each one of us has received a gift to be shared, and that we are God's instruments for ministering to one another.

The best thing about this book is that it is eminently practical. Deacons, would you like to have a set of precautions and principles for working with those who come to you for help? Check out Chapter 8. How about some advice on ministering to a

church member who is blind or wheelchair bound? See Chapter 10. Wouldn't it be great to have a template for carrying out a talent survey in your congregation to discover the gifts and talents hidden there? Appendix C provides that. Could you use some practical guidelines on what to do, read, or say when making a hospital visit to an ailing church member? That is included in Appendix D, along with many other useful resources.

This book is a welcome addition to the diaconal ministry literature, which seems to be limited in books written from a reformed, Christ-centered perspective.