

# Modeling Early Church Ministry Movements

*By Rev. Steve Bundy*

Michael was a factory worker who had many dreams and desires for his life. He was engaged to be married in six months and was already making plans for a future family. Michael wanted a large family with many children. All that changed one morning when he showed up for work unaware that the machine he was about to work on had a crack in its frame. Michael started the machine and began to put a piece of metal into it, just as he had for the past five years. He heard a loud noise and looked up to see the machine falling on him. Michael sustained serious injuries, including a fracture to his upper neck which left him a quadriplegic, unable to move his hands or legs, and only limited use of his arms.

Six months later, Michael is supposed to be celebrating his wedding day, but instead he's lying on his back, staring at the ceiling and dwelling on his fiancé's words: "I just can't live that kind of a life . . . I am so sorry that I cannot marry you."

Michael is depressed and lonely. His parents do not know how to help him. They, too, feel angry and cheated that such a tragedy happened to their only son. They feel as if there's no one to turn to, no one who understands what they are all going through. Finally, out of desperation, Michael's father picks up the phone and calls you for help. What do you do?

## Looking at the Early Church

The Bible tells us to be ready to "weep with those who weep."<sup>1</sup> It also provides clear examples of how believers should minister to one another and share each other's burdens. Luke emphasizes the nature of the early church as one in which believers cared for one another.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with Luke's theology—that Christ's ministry was one of reversals and contrasts of the kingdom—in the church, those who would seem to be on the "outside" are in fact the very ones we are to welcome, embrace and include. As the early church struggled to find its identity and especially in it struggled to include the Gentiles, it continually experienced a transformation of head and heart. This transformation intimately connected believers into a community of brothers and sisters in Christ who understood that an individual's spiritual and physical needs were, in fact, everyone's spiritual and physical needs. This sort of transformation is one that says, "I will not turn you away because of your disability. . . for you and I are of the same family."

This is in line with Luke's theology of the needy, the outcast and the disabled—and eventually the Gentile, who will be included in the Kingdom of God and the Church of Jesus Christ. Robert W. Walls brings this out in his commentary on Acts by pointing out that the *koinōnia* experienced by the early church was a transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit, a transformation "that has brought about a fellowship among believers that shares more than common beliefs and core values; they display a profound regard for one another's spiritual and physical well being as a community of friends."<sup>3</sup> Walls points out

the prophetic typology of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10) and favorable year of the Lord (Isa. 61:2) that was fulfilled in Christ (Luke 4:18–21).

The new community of believers that would follow the risen Lord and Savior would indeed be a people who exemplify the life and ministry of Jesus among all people including the poor, the blind and the lame:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44, NRSV). At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke uses the Isaianic prophecy about “the favorable year of the Lord” to introduce the principal themes of Jesus’ anointed ministry (Luke 4:16–18). In particular, Jesus’ actions among the poor and powerless in identifying with their marginal status within Israel and announcing their deliverance are taken as the fulfillment of this prophecy of the Lord’s Jubilee (Luke 4:21). Jesus’ teaching about sharing possessions envisages the social character of God’s kingdom where the conditions of the least, lame, lost and last are transformed. God’s grace does not privilege the rich and famous; God’s liberating love extends to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord for salvation. However, this Jubilee is possible only because of the empty tomb and only after Pentecost... God’s kingdom reflects solidarity and mutuality rather than a class system; therefore, believers live together and have “all things in common...<sup>4</sup>

There are six summary statements in Acts that respectively conclude six panels or blocks of material.<sup>5</sup> In the first panel, there are three summary-like paragraphs, each one giving us a glimpse into the very first days of the early church.<sup>6</sup> The birth and life of the early church came as a result of (1) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; (2) growth in numbers of those who believed and; and (3) persecution. We know from the three summary paragraphs that several characteristics of believers in the early church stand out. They devoted themselves to: (1) the apostles’ teaching; (2) fellowship; (3) breaking of bread; (4) prayer; and (5) performing miracles. Yet in all three summaries special attention is given to the *koinōnia* that was held among the believers. There was no physical or spiritual need among them because “they had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). In commenting on this verse, Richard Longenecker refers to it as Luke’s “thesis statement regarding the way the believer practiced communal living.” Longenecker continues:

Luke is, then, 1) emphasizing that both continuous and extraordinary acts of Christian social concern were occurring in the early church and 2) tying these acts into the apostolic proclamation of the Resurrection... Experientially, the spiritual oneness the believers found to be a living reality through their common allegiance to Jesus must, they realized, be expressed in caring for the physical needs of their Christian brothers and sisters. Indeed, their integrity as a community of faith depended on their doing this.<sup>7</sup>

Many scholars feel that the early Christians viewed themselves as the righteous remnant within Israel and therefore had clearly in their minds the words of Deuteronomy 15:4, “There should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.” Simon Kistemaker draws this parallel as well, connecting the acts of the early church back to Christ’s message in the gospels: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3; and the rich young ruler, Matthew 19:21). Kistemaker comments, “The aim of the early Christians was to abolish poverty so that needy persons, as a class of people, were no longer among them” (Acts 4:34a).<sup>8</sup>

## Seven “Movements” of Ministry to Persons with Disability

Our ministry experiences shape our understanding of what ministry should look like. We often think of effective ministry as that which “captures” the greatest number of people or makes the most use of the church’s resources. We need to reach as many people as possible and be good stewards of what God has

given us. It is important, however, that our definition of successful ministry is not modeled on what the world defines as success (“bigger, better, faster!”), but rather on what God calls success.

We must take a personal inventory, look at our hearts and determine our true motivation. This calls for a time of slowing down, prayerfully seeking God through his Word and cultivating a sensitive heart toward those who hurt. For ministry to take place among those affected by disability, *the church and individual believers alike* must intentionally move toward seven specific areas of ministry.

- 1. Movement from Programs to Presence (*Ministry of Fellowship*).** When ministering to those affected by disability, there is no substitute for time. “Programs” should not lead the way—rather, presence of time, attention and sharing in the journey of the one affected by disability should take priority. In Acts 2:44 Luke calls this *koinonia*, that is, having all things in common . . . sharing the journey together.
- 2. Movement from Quantitative Ministry to Qualitative Ministry (*Ministry of the Word*).** There are no substitutes for, or alternative sources of hope comparable with the inspired Word of God. In its truths we find the source of all hope in our affliction, discouragement and despair. Time is required in order to effectively minister God’s Word to someone affected by disability. The minister’s eye cannot be on *quantity* of ministry (numbers); rather, it should be on *quality* of ministry (accurately dividing the Word of Truth). Like a skilled surgeon applying the scalpel to a needed area for surgery, we minister by skillfully applying the Word of God to one who has encountered a life-altering disability.
- 3. Movement from a Ministry of Convenience to a Ministry of Conviction (*Ministry of Obedience*).** Ministry to those affected by disability is not a ministry the church chooses because it is the *easiest* ministry; rather, the church engages in such ministry because it is the right ministry. This is an act of obedience to the Word of God and to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In Matthew 25:40 Jesus told us that ministry to people in despair, “*the least of these brothers of mine,*” is indeed ministry to Jesus himself. Many churches today choose the ministry of convenience—ministry to those who fill the pews with the right style of clothing, perfume, hairstyle and bank accounts. By contrast, a ministry of conviction includes those affected by disability regardless of what they may give in return.
- 4. Movement from Being Understood to Understanding (*Ministry of Identification*).** Every believer has a place in the body of Christ. Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 12:18–22 that God has arranged each member of his Body “*just as he wanted them to be . . .*” and that those members who seem like weaker, useless members are “*on the contrary . . . indispensable.*” The church, desiring to embrace and include those affected by disability, must move from conforming members into the likeness of the church to transforming them into the likeness of Christ. This process involves moving to a place of understanding each member’s role within the church, especially those with disabilities. This also includes gaining an understanding of each individual’s unique journey, struggles, gifts, talents and contributions to the body of Christ. It is in essence the ministry of identification with those with whom Christ has already identified.
- 5. Movement from Being Important to Being Available (*Ministry of Prayer*).** Ministry to people with disabilities is often a behind-the-scenes ministry. It is not “in-the-spotlight” ministry that uplifts one’s ego and highlights one’s gifts, but rather a ministry of “downward mobility,” to borrow Henri Nouwen’s terminology.<sup>9</sup> It is a ministry of humility and of prayer. It is ministry that sets our own agenda aside to earnestly seek, through prayer and abiding, to minister to those

with disabilities. This ministry involves interceding, by petition and thanksgiving, on behalf of others. It might entail inconveniences to one's time, resources and energy, such as trips to the grocery store, rides to church, invitations to celebrate Christmas together, home repairs and mowed lawns. This is ministry that many would call "unimportant," but is applauded by God as being available to Jesus himself.

6. **Movement from Being Heard to Intently Listening (*Ministry of the Spirit*).** In our fast paced culture of immediate gratification, ministry to people, especially to those affected by disability, must be led by the Holy Spirit. We are so programmed to give "answers" that we rarely wait for the words of the Holy Spirit to inspire and lead us. We need his wisdom to know the right Scripture to quote, the right prayer to pray, the right relationships to establish and the right time to help. We need to listen intently to the Holy Spirit. But we also need to hear the one we are serving. Where are they in their faith development? What are the real struggles they face in relationships, jobs and daily activities? Do they feel like they fit in at church? Allow them to reflect on how the Holy Spirit has been speaking to them. What are they receiving from the Scriptures? As we minister to those struggling with disabilities, we must restrain our desire to be heard and take time to discover their hearts.
7. **Movement from Teaching to Being Taught (*Ministry of Reciprocity*).** Those with disabilities have much to teach the body of Christ about brokenness and forgiveness. Ministry to these friends is too often seen as a one-way street, as charity or a handout. However, when those with disabilities find themselves in Christ, they can become mighty ministers and witnesses to the Savior's grace, love and mercy. As God uses their physical or mental brokenness for his glory, they teach us how God uses spiritual brokenness to reveal himself through the church to the world. As Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 1:5, "*For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*" The church must not miss this great opportunity to minister to those affected by disability and to receive rich ministry from them.

## Rejoicing in Life Changing Ministry

Michael's reaction of despair and hopelessness is not uncommon after a life-altering accident. Joni Eareckson Tada has documented her own struggles with depression and has reached into the pit to help draw others out. God used Joni as a lifeline for Ron Huckabee after the former pastor had seemingly given up.<sup>10</sup> Out of desperation, Ron's wife, Bev, sent Joni an email explaining that her husband's paralysis, battle with cancer and constant infections had left him feeling hopeless. Joni reached out for Ron, reminding him of the truths clouded by the fog of depression and helped him see that God could still use him. Ron went from a depressed, bedridden quadriplegic, refusing to talk to anyone, to serving as the National Prayer Coordinator for Marketplace Ministries in Dallas, Texas. What changed him? Hope and a fellow believer willing to come alongside him and help carry his burden.

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1. Romans 12:15, NKJV
2. Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16
3. Walls, R. W., (2002), *The New Interpreter's Bible, The Acts of the Apostles* (pp. 71–73). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
4. Ibid.
5. Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31
6. Longenecker, R.N., (1984), “Acts,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (p. 288). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
7. Ibid.
8. Kistemaker, S. J., (1990), “Acts,” in *New Testament Commentary* (p. 112). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
9. Nouwen, H., (1992), *In the Name of Jesus*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co.
10. Ron Huckabee shares his story in the Joni and Friends TV episode “Get Busy Living,” <http://www.joniandfriends.org/television>

## About the Author

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**Steve Bundy** brings 25 years of experience in nonprofit leadership, both domestically and internationally. The last 17 years have been at Joni and Friends, where he has launched multiple initiatives and now leads our international efforts around the world. Previously he has served as an executive at the US Center for World Mission, as a missionary in Eastern Europe and as a pastor of disability ministry. He is a published author and co-author with Joni Eareckson Tada on projects such as *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View of Disability Ministry* and the Telly-Award winning television episode, *Making Sense of Autism*. He has also co-authored, *Another Kind of Courage: God's Design for Fathers of Families Affected by Disability*. Steve and his wife Melissa know firsthand the joys and challenges of parenting a child with disabilities, as their own son, Caleb, was born in 1999 with muscular dystrophy, intellectual disability, and autism. Their second son, Jaron, is a musician and produces Christian worship music. Steve holds a B.A. in Theology and Missions from Bethany Global University, an M.A. in Organizational Leadership from Biola University, and certificates in executive management from Harvard and Stanford.