

Twenty-one Ways to Make a Difference in Your World: #1-#7

The fires of 2003 were called the worst in Southern California's history. A million acres of land burned, roughly the size of Rhode Island, destroying 2000 homes. More than two dozen people died. The initial cost was in the billions of dollars. Stories of heroism and stubbornness punctuated the crisis. Neighbors and firefighters risked their lives to evacuate people from the encroaching flames. As four firefighters fought to save houses from the flames, their own houses burned to the ground. Some residents refused to leave and died as a result. Laws in our country allow warning and persuasion but no one can be forced against their will to be saved.

You don't need a forest fire to find people who need to be saved. Plenty of people are at risk from all kinds of dangers in life, from bad behavior to spiritual unbelief. As Christians we delight to do all we can to help those in need, to make a difference in their lives no matter what.

The New Testament is loaded with stories of ways to help. Jesus fed the hungry, helped the poor and raised the dead. Paul helped prison guards escape an earthquake and challenged churches to stand by their widows. Peter helped marriages succeed. James taught Christians how to pray for those who are sick.

When I was interviewed by the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* about Wooddale's involvement in the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa the writer asked me why we are doing what we are doing. I answered that we are just doing what Christians have always done. Christians have responded with love and compassion all the way back to the Roman Empire when there were epidemics of bubonic plague and smallpox. What Christians do is make a difference in our world.

At the end of our lives we want to have made a difference in the name of Jesus. We do not want to finish poorly. We don't want our lives to be measured by the money we earned, the education we received or the possessions we accumulated. We want to make a real difference.

So, let's look at some ways to make a differ-

ence in our world. I have twenty-one ideas for you to consider. Let's start with seven of them and see what ones are especially for you.

First of all, learn what God is doing in our world. This is without a doubt the "Golden Age" of Christianity. There are more Christians than ever before and the number of Christians is growing far more rapidly than ever before in history. The church is exploding with new converts in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Far more people are becoming Christians every hour than there were in the New Testament on the great Day of Pentecost.

This is also a time of enormous immigration to the United States. One out of five Americans speaks a language other than English at home. About half of the people in the New York City borough of Queens were born outside of the United States. Some people say the mission field has come to our doors. We no longer need to go overseas to evangelize. Just go downtown or across your apartment building hallway.

The truth is that millions of new immigrants to the USA are Christians from other countries who are bringing their contagious faith and explosive church growth with them. They will rise to power and influence in coming generations and they will be the evangelists of America. In many ways it is not the mission field that has come to our doors but the Christian missionaries who have come!

The scholarly book *The Next Christendom* documents what is happening and predicts the massive expansion of Christianity in our generation and beyond. If you want to get your juices flowing and your heart

pumping learn what God is doing in our generation. Read a book. Take a missions class. Check out a few websites.

Next on our list is to look for opportunities. You know those bumper stickers that say "Start seeing motorcycles"? The point is that there are motorcycles whether you see them or not. Just open your eyes and look and you will see what otherwise you would miss. And the same thing is true when it

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comes to seeing ways that as Christians we can benefit and bless others.

Try it for a week. Look for ways that you can reach out and make a difference in the lives of other people. You will discover that God will give you lots of ideas. And they will be ideas that will fit who you are and what you can do.

One Wooddaler was driving along the interstate when she came up behind a pickup truck that was plastered with obscene and profane bumper stickers. Some people would be offended by this, but she saw an opportunity. Her first response was, “I wonder if anyone has ever invited the driver of that truck to church.” So, she followed him. When he took an exit and turned into a Target parking lot she parked next to him, introduced herself and invited him to church.

You say, “I could never do that!” Okay then, look for another opportunity that fits you.

Charleen and I were in New York City very early one morning at a car rental office. The woman behind the counter kept yawning and yawning. After one of those yawns she said, “Jesus, help me!” And Charleen said, “Yes, Jesus is the one who really can help you.” Charleen saw and seized the opportunity to say a word for Jesus. The woman gave us a free upgrade in appreciation! It was a good deal all the way around! So, try it. Look for opportunities.

Number 3 is to serve your neighbor. Define “neighbor” any way you want, but just pick someone and do something for them. Rake their leaves. Shovel their snow. Give them some flowers. Help paint their fence or their house. Baby-sit for free. Offer a ride to the airport. Pick up after their dog. Clean up their trash on a windy day. Help fix their computer. Take their son to a hockey game.

The neighbor doesn’t need to be where you live. Serve your neighbor at work. Invite a new coworker out to lunch. Sit with the lonely guy at coffee break. Stay late to help out. Listen to complaints with sympathy. Bring some Krispy Kremes to share at work on a busy morning.

Serving a neighbor can be as profound as donating a kidney or as simple as sharing a recipe. Just make a difference in your world by serving someone nearby. Mark 10:45 says that Jesus “*did not come to be served, but to serve.*” So, be like Jesus. Serve your neighbor.

STOP! Just stop for a minute and think. What could you do? What will you do? Let’s get started. Let’s practice. Pick someone who is not a member of your family. Are you ready? Serve your neighbor with a smile. Go ahead. Smile at somebody.

What do you think? Was that so hard? You did it? Great! Now try it again ten more times before the day is over. If you are really bold, say “Hi!” to someone. Offer to help. Let someone pull ahead of you in the parking lot. The point is, serve your neighbor!

Fourth on our list is to give money. Jesus said in Matthew 6:21, “. . . *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” For most of us our money and our emotions are often linked together. If we give our money to bless others then we will give our hearts to love others.

I love to give money to help and bless other people in my world. I love to give money to people in need and I love giving money to the cause of Christ. I especially love to give money to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ through evangelism, missions and starting new churches. It is something I started doing as a college student. It wasn’t much, but it felt great. It was fun! The Bible says God loves a cheerful giver. Well, I love *being* a cheerful giver. Over my lifetime—and especially through the years of our marriage—we have given away lots of money. It starts adding up when you give regularly.

From my own experience, here are some lessons I’ve learned about giving away money:

- 1.) Giving is one of the ways I love God and grow spiritually. If I don’t give, I don’t grow. I give because of people’s needs. I give because I believe in and love the church. But, most of all, I give because I love God. God has been really good to me and this is one of the ways I say thank you.
- 2.) Giving needs to be by plan. If I don’t pray ahead, think ahead and plan ahead I just don’t give. Impulse giving usually isn’t very generous because I don’t get the impulse very often.
- 3.) Giving is best when it is significant and sacrificial. A few bucks once in a while really doesn’t make much difference. Years ago I started giving away 10% of

my gross income. It was one of the best things that happened to my finances and to my faith. Then I realized 10% wasn't significant or sacrificial enough. More became better.

- 4.) Seeing the results is a great joy. Seeing lives changed at church, hearing missionaries report their work, knowing that poor people are helped—it feels great to know that I had a part. It's the best investment I ever made!
- 5.) I have never regretted giving. I have regretted purchases I've made. I've regretted money I've wasted. But I have never regretted giving. There have been times when I thought I would because I didn't think I would have enough money for the rest of life, but that has never happened. God has always provided.

I know some people never give anything. They don't give to the poor or to the church or to missions. They either keep or spend all their money on themselves. I think that is totally sad.

Fourth on the list to make a difference in your world is to give money. Number 5 is to pray. One Minnesota woman committed to pray for rain in Southern California, even though it was not the time of year when rain usually came. It rained! Now, is that cool, or what?

Christians believe that the most powerful influence for good in our world is prayer. We do a lot of praying for ourselves and that's okay. We pray for our family, our health, our job, our finances, our happiness and all kinds of other needs.

But we need to pray for others as well. That's what I do. I have a daily prayer list that includes my neighbors, friends, family, missionaries and all sorts of other people. I actually check off the list every day. And when God gives a direct answer to my prayers, I write the date in red ink on my prayer list.

If you want to have a totally fantastic prayer experience, tell someone you are praying for them. When you tell a coworker or a neighbor or a missionary or just about anyone, "I have prayed for you every day since you had your surgery" or "You

have been in my prayers ever since you lost your job", you will make a friend for life.

But, best of all, prayer works! Charles Lyons, the pastor of the Armitage Baptist Church in Chicago, tells about the takeover of their neighborhood by gangs. He says that once a gang member puts on gang colors no one speaks to him except police detectives. Gang members take over a corner and everyone avoids them.

The people of Armitage Church set up prayer patrols. They drove the neighborhood and prayed for those in the gangs. They parked across the street from the corner and prayed for them. They got out of their cars, walked up to the gang members and said, "We're the prayer patrol. How ya' doin'? Anything we can pray about with you? Got a sick child? Got a brother in jail? Got something I can ask God to do for you?" Then they put their hands on the shoulders of these gang members and prayed for

them. What they discovered during twenty years of doing this is that gang members got to know them and respect them. The neighborhood was transformed and today the gangs are gone. Prayer works!

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Fifth on the list of ways to make a difference is to go see for yourself. It used to be that we learned what God was doing in the world secondhand. Now we can go check out the needs and the miracles God is doing on our own.

Wooddale Church and other ministry organizations can help you visit people and places from Minneapolis to Mozambique. See what God is doing in brand new suburban churches, inner city soccer leagues, HIV/AIDS projects, African schools and Bulgarian church planting.

Ask around! Talk to people who have built houses in Guatemala or trained church leaders in Romania. See the places, meet the people, feel the need and see what God is doing in our generation. You will never be the same again. It will profoundly impact your life.

Ancient Greeks dreamed of a once-in-a-lifetime journey to Athens. Millions of Muslims around the world have a lifetime ambition to make a pilgrim-

age to Mecca. At the end of every Jewish Passover celebration the same words are spoken: “Next year in Jerusalem.” As Christians our dream is not so much to see where something happened in history. We are focused on what God is doing here and now and what he will do tomorrow.

I’m not talking about a vacation but a vision trip. Not spur-of-the-moment but planned ahead. Meet a missionary. Study a people group. Pray for a year or two. Check out the possibilities. Save up your money. Start close and dream far. Go see for yourself what a difference you can make in our world.

Seventh on today’s list is to volunteer to help. This is a different spin on number 3 which is serving your neighbor. Here we are talking about teaming up with others to participate in an organized ministry. Americans are big-time volunteers. Americans volunteer more than any other people in the world, but our busy schedules are eroding our volunteering generosity. When we team up with others as volunteers we can accomplish things we would never possibly be able to do individually. Frankly, it can be hard to do things all by yourself. Teams of volunteers encourage one another, come up with good ideas, build friendships and share the load.

At Wooddale Church there are plenty of volunteer opportunities. One example is with children. On peak Sundays we have run out of adults to work with children and turned children away from classrooms. Next time you are annoyed by a distracting child in a church service think about volunteering to teach and care for that child in the nursery or Sunday School.

But, if every Christian volunteered in the church there is no way the church could keep everyone busy. So, volunteer in the community. Deliver Meals on Wheels. Tutor immigrants learning English. Help in a hospital. Mentor an urban church. Coach a sports team. Adopt a highway. But whatever you do, do it in the name of Jesus to make a difference in your world.

How about volunteering in the name of Jesus Christ to go overseas? Let me share a story from the *New York Times*. Sonia Angeline, a 17-year-old girl living by the garbage dump in Maputo, Mozambique, went into labor that continued for four days. She would soon be part of the statistics

of African women who die in childbirth. Her family didn’t have money for taxi fare to get her to the hospital. The typical household savings in Mozambique is ten cents.

Katrin Blackert, a 23-year old American volunteer, came by during a regular visit to the children living at the dump. She rushed Sonia to the hospital and personally paid for a Caesarean delivery of a healthy baby girl. The total cost was \$4. Sonia Angeline named her baby daughter Katrin after the volunteer who saved her life.

Imagine how wonderful it would be if you had a story like that as part of your biography!

As a Christian, make a difference in your world. Learn what God is doing. Look for opportunities. Serve your neighbor. Give money. Pray. Go see for yourself. Volunteer to help.

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