Getting Started: Laying the Foundations for a New Rescue Ministry


Introduction

In communities throughout the nation, Christians are showing a heightened sense of responsibility for the poor and the homeless. Here at the headquarters office of the International Union of Gospel Missions, we receive several requests every week for help in setting up new ministries to the homeless. Because I founded a new rescue ministry almost fourteen years ago, these requests are often directed to me. In this booklet, I will be sharing principles I learned in the start-up phase of the ministry in Michigan that can be followed by others who seek to develop new organizations that work with the homeless.

Success in laying the foundation for a new ministry begins by asking some basic very questions before its doors are even opened. There are certain factors that reoccur in those new ministries that fail. In dealing with how our own ministry, as well as others like it, have avoided them, we can insure success in the furtherance of God's Kingdom. In no way do I consider this to be the last word in laying successful foundations for a ministry, nor do I consider this a conclusive list of "failure factors," but I trust God will use it to guide you into more fruitful service for Him.

Vision

The idea of starting a ministry may appear to be a glamorous adventure. Yet, when you become involved, you see 90% of it is just plain hard work. Additionally as the Apostle Paul states, "Our warfare is not against flesh and blood." Satan is not about to sit quietly if you are planning an attack on his kingdom. He in no way delights in people becoming saved, or in seeing the homeless and troubled being led into responsible and victorious lives. He will be attacking you, as well as the others in your ministry. You will find opposition from him as well as from the others he may use -- even other Christians. There will be times when it looks as if the bills will never get paid; other times it will seem as if the entire operation is simply falling apart. You will probably be tempted to throw in the towel many times. You must have the rock bottom assurance that you are in a ministry to which God has called you. Then, if everything has been done in accordance with His principles, even the tough situations will be times of refining and strengthening.

There are a number of good books on the market today in regard to discerning God's will -- these are well worth looking into. As we discuss this further, I would like to put forth a few basic questions we must think through in light of your vision:

- Is this type of ministry the best approach for meeting the needs of your particular city or area?
• Are there people who believe enough in such a ministry to give continuing financial support?

• Are there other ministries in this area which are doing similar work? Would it mean unnecessary competition to them? Could a cooperative effort be developed?
• Are there sufficient resources available for such a ministry, i.e. facilities, qualified staff, and the like?

There are other considerations to be sure, that could also pertain to the subject, but these appear to be the most common. One thought for your workers: spend, from the very beginning, time together in serious prayer. This will not only insure God's guidance in your work, but it will also enhance the spiritual unity and vision of future staff.

**Failure Factors**

Being aware of four basic failure factors, and working to avoid them in the early stages of your ministry, will help to insure success and a good reputation. If you begin on the premise of a ministry truly being the will of God, then be assured Satan will do all he can to destroy it. In thinking of these "failure factors," I do not want to imply that God demands utter perfection from a group of people before He chooses to bless their efforts. My main point is this: we can learn from the mistakes of others, and therefore build an organization which truly will honor the Lord.

Here are the four:

• Immature or unqualified leadership
• Disunity among staff
• Poor image in the community
• Lack of financial resources and accountability

We will talk about these one at a time, with in-depth explanation of what may be done to avoid them in your own ministry.

**Leadership**

This is a crucial aspect of any Christian ministry. It is very clear in Scripture that God takes interest in leadership. In the case of a ministry, it seems apparent that leaders are appointed by God Himself. There are a number of resources on the subject of leadership; but one important point I can make from my own experience; the key to successful ministry is good knowledge of Scripture. The primary purpose of a rescue ministry is evangelism and discipleship. Counseling will also be a large part of what your staff will be involved with.

The leadership will be a focal point of Satan's attack -- he knows if he can tear down the leadership, the rest of the ministry will follow. Here are some important considerations:
• Be sure your director has a good standing in the community. If he has a bad reputation, the organization will inherit it.

• The director must have a working knowledge of God's Word and be living a consistent godly lifestyle.

• The director needs to delegate. Burnout occurs all too easy in ministries such as these. The "this is my ministry" attitude threatens others who might give additional input worthwhile of consideration. A sharing of responsibilities will enhance total output of any ministry. No tyrants are able to glorify God.

• The director must be teachable and willing to take advice. An ego trip is a sure route to destruction -- or disruption -- of a ministry. There is much that can be learned from other ministries, related organizations, and local pastors. The Scripture verse, "In a multitude of counselors there is safety," should be employed.

A Board of Directors made up of local, mature, business-minded Christians provides a sound foundation for the leadership of the new rescue ministry. These people must be kept closely in touch with the needs and the efforts of the ministry. They will be able to help you in areas such as volunteer workers, fundraising, and other types of financial support.

Have you ever noticed how people tend to react negatively to anything new in the spiritual realm? With all the cults and other offbeat occurrences happening in the world today, there is little wonder skepticism prevails. A church will be more willing to support your ministry's work if one of its members has a definite involvement with the leadership aspect of the ministry. Good board members serve an important role in promoting "good will" in the community on behalf of the new ministry. When you start a ministry outside the work of the local church, using nontraditional modes, having the support and involvement of local Christian leaders really goes a long way in starting off with a good reputation. Churches will be willing to get more involved if their pastor himself is involved. After an initial visit, approach pastors to participate with your Board of Directors -- this can turn into a definite plus, and lends credibility to your vision. Look for the pastors and spiritually mature lay people who are most "fired-up" about your vision, they will probably be the ones most able and willing to get involved as members of your ministry's Board of directors.

Aside from these considerations, the idea of having spiritually mature "oversight" is the best blessing of all. This leaves the staff and other leaders of the ministry in a position of accountability: when major decisions are in the hands of a board with years of spiritual work and experience, a more ready discernment of God's will can be had. They often will see pitfalls and insights the laymen cannot. In the eyes of the community, these will be people who are trustworthy, having a direct control in the ministry, assuring financial integrity, and will be able to encourage further financial involvement without fear or apprehension. Most of all, an accountability point is beneficial to the director, serving as protection for him from outside pressures he may not be aware of. I have endeavored to stay "up front" all the way with our board. In some instances there have been accusations about my work, and these men have stood
behind me in the face of these attacks. Their prayers, encourage, and commitment to this ministry have been a real incentive to me through the most difficult times we've had.

Volunteers

Every rescue ministry depends on volunteers to operate its programs. In the earliest stages of a new ministry,

If Satan can't get to the director, the next plan of attack will surely include the volunteers. It is important that you have a good knowledge of those who are on your volunteer staff; be sure they are professing Christians who have assurance of their own salvation and have the ability to share Christ with others. It's important to have each of the prospective volunteers fill out a form which includes general information applying to function of the ministry. Lay down definite guidelines for responsibility, clearly defining tasks which pertain to each member. The lines of communication should be open to the maximum, for this can be an area where hard feelings could develop due to misunderstanding.

Each member should be respected and allowed to be heard -- therefore, handle all of the problem areas with real love and understanding. Matthew 18 is a wonderful guide to use when solving volunteers problems. Above all, let your volunteers know you really appreciate them and the work they do, and often. It goes a long way.

Provide an opportunity for your first volunteers to pray together, which should be done as much as possible. Everyone should know exactly what is to be expected of them in order to feel they are a real part of the ministry.

Community Image

It isn't too hard to understand why this is a very important facet of the ministry; if we stop to consider all of the "off-the-wall" religious groups that circulate these days, it makes sense. Right from the beginning, get a good idea of the goals and programs your ministry intends to carry out in order to get promotion out.

A new rescue ministry is able to make use of much free advertising space available in the form of public service announcements for newspapers, radio stations and television. A few things which we did were attempts to set up interviews with some of the radio shows that deal in community affairs. Also, we did a special mailing to all of the local pastors, detailing our program, activities and personnel. We also met with local clergy through the Clergy Council (or Ministerial Association), trying to contact each pastor individually, as well as setting up meetings with the board of elders of each congregation.

Other opportunities we had were an open house where the community had a chance to see the ministry firsthand, and meeting people involved with it. Another possible outlet may be air time on a local radio show. Meetings with groups such as the Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, and so on, really become good ways to create that positive image in your community. The key is to be totally open and let people know exactly what you have to offer. I realize not everyone will be
sold on your ministry -- particularly if you take a strong stand on the Gospel. Good publicity will, however, squelch rumors which may arise at the very beginning. A monthly newsletter also helps to make yourself known in the community.

Some churches might worry that your ministry would be in competition with their own programs -- which would end up in drawing their own young people away from them. If a ministry is sponsored by one single church, you may not have to worry about this; however, if the ministry is sponsored by cross-denominational effort, this could present a problem. My own personal feeling here is that to have a board of directors from many different church backgrounds is a definite plus. They will be people with a good corporate reputation in the community, and will also provide a voice of support in regard to what you are doing in cooperation with the local churches.

The pivotal point here is to be visible and be open. Get people involved in the ministry so that it is truly a community project -- not just your own. If you create a staff from a variety of backgrounds, it is important to know where each stand spiritually. It is amazing to discover how much unit there actually is within the body of Christ.

Financial Accountability

In these days we have seen ministries both large and small come under real attack in the area of financial accountability. It is but proper that those who contribute financially know where, and how, the money is being spent. Therefore, it is important from the start to keep accurate records. Have a treasurer who will keep track of financial responsibility in a proper manner. Be sure to mail receipts or acknowledgments to all who send monetary gifts. It is also important to be officially incorporated with your State Department of Commerce. Becoming a "non-profit corporation" can actually enhance the spiritual success of your ministry. It also paves the way for a bulk rate mailing permit from the United States Postal Service, which allows you to mail your newsletter for about 1/4 the first class rate. It will also give you the essential legal access for a tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service, which could save your ministry hundreds of dollars a year.

Maybe you have no idea what a non-profit corporation is. What this says, basically, is your ministry is now a legally recognized body. Rather than having one person as the legally responsible party, the organization becomes the entity which is responsible.

Summary

If you look back on the "failure factors" mentioned at the start, thinking of how God has worked in our ministry, following these suggestions has:

- The added input of spiritual maturity -- with pastors and others with a background of Christian life and training.
• *Given us a staff of workers working together for Christ* with each one having a vision for the ministry, and knowing their participation is an important service to God.

• *Promoted a good image in the community* -- through well-known and respected people directly involved with leadership.

• *Financial Accountability* -- with mature, trustworthy people having say in financial policies that have been clearly defined and consistently carried out.