

PASSION FOR GOD



FEATURE ARTICLE

COMPASSION FOR PEOPLE

BY **SHODANKEH JOHNSON**

Shodankeh Johnson, husband of Santa, and father of seven, is the leader of New Harvest Ministries (NHM) in Sierra Leone. Through God's favor, and a commitment to Disciple Making Movements, NHM has seen hundreds of simple churches planted, over 70 schools started, and many other access ministries initiated in Sierra Leone in the last 15 years. This includes churches among 15 Muslim people groups. They have also sent long-term workers to 14 countries in Africa, including 8 countries in the Sahel and Maghreb. Shodankeh has done training and catalyzing prayer and disciple-making movements in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States. He has served as the President of the Evangelical Association of Sierra Leone and the African Director of CityTeam International. He is currently responsible for global training and prayer mobilization for CityTeam International.

ACCESS MINISTRIES ARE ONE OF THE pillars of New Harvest Ministries (NHM) since its inception and they have played a major role in manifesting God's compassion, in making disciples, and in planting churches in more than 4,000 communities in 12 countries. These compassionate engagements have been key catalysts in the transformation of hundreds of thousands of new disciples, and more than ten thousand new Christian leaders.

Compassion for people is an essential Kingdom value found in the DNA of every Disciple Making Movement. We have dozens of different types of access ministries and each one plays its unique role in helping us advance the kingdom of God in Africa. Most are not expensive, but with God's help, uniquely impactful.

Every ministry is pursued in partnership with locals. Locals often provide leadership, labor and materials—things readily available in the community that can be made to serve needs.

Heroic Compassion

New Harvest serves many countries but is headquartered in Sierra Leone. When Ebola struck in 2014, we could not stay in safe places and not engage the disaster that was all around us, especially in Muslim communities where burial rites were causing the epidemic to explode in many villages. People could not even touch dying parents or children.

In that context there were several New Harvest leaders who volunteered in the most hazardous places. Some survived but several lost their lives serving others—mostly Muslims.

The Muslim chief of one community was discouraged by people trying to escape the quarantined village and amazed at seeing Christians coming to serve. He privately prayed this prayer: “God, if you save me from this, if you save my family, I want us all to be like these people who show us love and bring us food.”

The chief and his family did survive and he kept his promise. Memorizing passages from the Bible, he began to share in the mosque where he had been an elder. A church was birthed in that village, and the chief continues going village to village sharing the Good News of God's love.

Discovering Felt Needs, Engaging Lostness

For NHM, access ministries begin with assessing the felt needs of a community. When a needs assessment is completed, the partnership with the community must develop mutual respect and trust. In turn the relationship eventually leads to story-telling and Discovery Bible Studies (DBS). Access ministries make the love of Christ visible and leave an indelible mark in hearts.

The On-Ramp to Kingdom Movements

Prayer is the foundation for everything we do. So once an assessment is done, our intercessors begin to pray for:

- open doors and open hearts
- the selection of project leaders
- open hands by locals
- a supernatural move of God
- the leading of the Spirit
- God's provision of needed resources

All our prayer centers know the communities being served and they fast and pray for each of them. And God always opens the right door, at the right time, with the right provision.

Prayer is the most powerful and effective access ministry, and has caused a cascading effect throughout the movement. Beyond any doubt, we are convinced that strategic fasting and prayer consistently leads to the undoing of dark powers. Sometimes praying for the sick is a wonderful accelerator of access itself.

Through persistent prayer we have seen very hostile communities opened, unlikely Persons of Peace identified, and whole families saved. All the glory goes to the Father who hears and answers prayers. Intercession is the undercurrent that supports all we do. I tell people that the three most important elements of access ministries are: first—prayer, the second is prayer, and the third is also prayer.

Every Project Makes Our King Famous

We do whatever it takes to get the gospel to the people so Christ is glorified. Our work is never about us. It is about Him. We are making Him known with a strategic focus on unreached people groups.

Education Team

When education is an obvious need, then the intercessors take this need to God in prayer.

While we are praying, we engage the community to discover what resources are available, and what they are ready to provide to meet their own need. Often the community will supply land, a community building, or construction materials for the development of a temporary structure.

Usually the community is encouraged to pay part of the teacher's salary. The teacher is fully certified and he or she is also a veteran disciple maker/church planter. Schools start with a few benches, pencils or pens, a box of chalk, and a chalkboard. The school may start under a tree, in a community center, or in an old house. We start slowly and grow the school academically and spiritually.

When a Person of Peace opens his or her home, it becomes the launching pad for DBS meetings and later a church. We have launched more than 100 primary schools, most of which are now owned by the community.

From this simple program God has also raised up twelve secondary schools, two trade technical schools, and Every Nation College which has an accredited School of Business and School of Theology. Contrary to what might be expected, Disciple Making Movements also need strong seminaries.

Medical, Dental, Hygiene

When we identify a health need, we send in teams of well-qualified medical practitioners with medicines, equipment and supplies. All our team members are strong disciple makers and skilled in facilitating the DBS process. Many are skilled church planters as well.

While patients are being treated, the team is busy looking for a Person of Peace. If one is not discovered on the first

visit, then a second visit is made. Once discovered, he or she will serve as the bridge and the future host for the DBS. If this person is not found, then the team will find another community, while still praying for an open door into the previous one.

Dental

Ten church planters have been well trained, equipped, and accredited by health authorities to do mobile dental extractions and fillings. Another, who doubles as an optometrist, checks eyesight and dispenses appropriate glasses (at cost—so as to keep the process going and to avoid dependency).

Other health team members provide training on hygiene, breast feeding, nutrition, child vaccines, and prenatal care for pregnant women.

A Most Unusual Access Ministry

When all of this is done in a Christ-like manner, seeking to make the kingdom of God visible, God moves and makes His presence evident. This typically starts with one family or an unlikely community leader. In this way we consistently see the ongoing multiplication of disciples, Discovery Bible Groups, and churches.

There was a large community in the Southern part of Sierra Leone that had been very difficult for us to penetrate. They were extremely hostile toward Christians. It was difficult even for people who identified as Christians to enter that place. So we prayed for that town. But time passed and none of our strategies worked.

Then suddenly something happened! The national news began to report that there was a health problem in that town and young men were becoming ill and dying. It turns out that they had determined that the infections related to the fact that the village never circumcised their boys. As I was praying about the problem I felt the conviction of the Lord that this was finally our opportunity to serve this town.

We gathered a volunteer medical team and went to the community with the proper equipment and medications and asked if they would let us help them. It was wonderful when the town leaders agreed. In the first day they circumcised more than 300 young men.

Over the next days the men were just healing and that was our opportunity to begin Discovery Bible Groups during the healing days. The response was remarkable and soon Kingdom multiplication began happening with churches being planted.

The place where Christians could not enter was transformed in just a very few years into a place where the Glory of God was manifested. The compassion of God's people, the power of much prayer, and the transforming Word of God changed everything.

Agricultural Team

Our first access ministry was agriculture. In lands where farming is critical, agriculture becomes a great gateway to serve people. Most of the farming is subsistence farming and primarily for family consumption. Typically, no seed is reserved for the next planting.

These situations led us to develop seed banks for farmers. As with our other teams, we have trained agriculturists who are trained church planters. These agriculturists/disciple makers educate the farmers. Their training and mentoring lead to relationships that result in DBS groups, baptisms and eventually churches. Today many farmers are followers of Christ.

Sports Team

Sports ministry is another phenomenal access, especially in communities with a large population of young people. When assessments are made, and we discover a number of youth and a passion for say soccer, we immediately move into action by throwing out a challenge for our powerful team to play a "friendly."

If a town does not have a good team, we encourage them to get players from nearby so they can field a good team. Once this is done, we often provide jerseys and soccer balls to help with their training.

When game day comes the whole village is in a festive mood singing the praises of their team. They are totally confident they are going to win. Our team goes into the game knowing what will happen.

They play competitively but in the end they will lose, intentionally.

When victorious, you can imagine the town's excitement. This becomes a point of pride. The story doesn't end here. We normally ask for a rematch. With great confidence, the community responds, "Come anytime. We will beat you again!"

The return match is usually played at the earliest possible date. In the second game, our team will play very professionally making sure they thrash the host team mercilessly. After their pitiful defeat the atmosphere becomes more charged as the community team will immediately ask for another match.

The reason for losing the first game is to build a strong relationship with the community. We are convinced that discipleship boils down to one thing—relationship. Every relationship has two main dimensions, a connection with God and one with man.

The point of the game is to create an environment that will lead to DBS groups and eventually churches. Many churches have been planted, disciples and leaders raised up that rapidly multiply within their tribes or communities. Today, we celebrate many coaches and players who have become committed disciples, disciple makers and passionate church planters.

Planting Churches

About 90% of our attempted access ministries have led to a church. And very often several churches are planted from one engagement. As we revisit communities we hear many testimonies of individual, family, and community transformations. Compassion for people, making God famous! 