

NEIGHBORS IN NEED:

HOW TO
IDENTIFY

AND HELP

THE MOST VULNERABLE



WILL YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

For at least two generations of children, Fred Rogers (a.k.a. Mr. Rogers) was a regular part of their daily lives. The affable, compassionate Rogers taught them how to navigate big emotions, embrace kindness, and see the value in every person they encountered. The ordained Presbyterian minister often introduced children to community members they might not typically encounter.

And at the beginning of every episode, Mr. Rogers asked his viewers to consider a deeper sense of community with the probing question: Will you be my neighbor?

That's also what scores of people who live around your church are asking—even if they don't know it.





WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

When an expert in the law asked Jesus what he needed to do to live forever, Jesus pointed him back to the Hebrew scriptures—specifically two sentences in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind”* (Luke 10:27).

The law expert tried to get clarification with another question: Who is my neighbor? That’s when Jesus told the famous story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus’ Jewish audience had little love for the Samaritans, whom Jesus made the hero of the story. Yet it was the despised Samaritan who showed love and support to the Jewish man who had been robbed on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho.

Two thousand years later, it’s a story that reminds us that neighborliness isn’t about convenience or similarity. It’s about responding to the needs we encounter with compassion and action. Just as the Samaritan went beyond societal expectations to care for someone in distress, churches today are called to see, serve, and love the people around them.

The question “Who is my neighbor?” remains relevant, urging us to reflect on how we can embody Christ’s example in a world that often overlooks the vulnerable. By starting with the people in our immediate surroundings and expanding outward, we can answer the call to be neighbors in both word and deed.

SEEING YOUR NEIGHBORS IN NEED

That's where this guide begins. As both Mr. Rogers and Jesus remind us, seeing our neighbors and responding to their needs is the key to building a compassionate community. But it's tough to identify those needs—particularly for the most vulnerable. So we have to be intentional.

The guide walks you through a process of intentionally spotting and then meeting needs in your community so your church can become a Good-Samaritan-kind-of church.

In this guide, you'll learn to:

- Identify the vulnerable in your community that many people don't see.
- Build awareness within your church so they can more effectively see the challenges faced by people in the community.
- Provide a biblical foundation for caring for the vulnerable.
- Mobilize your congregation to meet the needs you discovered.
- Leverage technology to better spot needs and to more effectively engage the congregation.

So let's get started...



WHO ARE THE MOST VULNERABLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

As Jesus-followers, we're called to serve the most vulnerable in our communities. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 25:40, *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."* Caring for the needs of the hurting isn't just about loving others; it's about loving Jesus.

But who are the most vulnerable among us, those Jesus called "the least of these"? In biblical times, those were the poor, orphaned, and the alien (Deuteronomy 10:18).

Today, modern social dynamics expand that definition to all those who face a greater challenge in meeting basic needs or becoming stable because of factors like poverty, age, illness, social isolation, or systemic barriers. These factors put these people at more risk for physical, emotional, or spiritual harm.

Types of Vulnerable Communities Around You

When you look at the vulnerable groups in your community, it can help to sort them into categories. Focusing on specific groups will usually make your church's efforts more effective. Let's face it—no church can do it all. But that doesn't mean you can't make a big difference for certain groups of people in need.

Here are some key underserved communities that might be nearby and the types of churches best equipped to help them.

Economically Vulnerable

Many low-income households face constant stress, worrying about how they'll cover their bills and make ends meet. Whether they're unemployed or working jobs that don't pay enough, life can feel like a never-ending struggle. On top of that, they often deal with not having enough food or the right kinds of food to stay healthy. Things like good education and healthcare—tools that could help them improve their situation—are usually out of reach, making it even harder to break the cycle.

The U.S. Census Bureau says that 36.8 million Americans are living in poverty (2023), which is a bit over 11 percent of the population, but the number of economically vulnerable is undoubtedly higher. The Financial Health Network says that as many as 17 percent of the population should be considered financially vulnerable. Of course, geography plays a big role in this. Some communities have a much higher percentage who are at risk for financial challenges. For example, rural regions and inner-cities have particularly high rates of poverty.

Churches best equipped to help: *Churches with significant financial resources at their disposal and/or facilities the church can use to host food pantries or community meals have great opportunities to help these groups. Also, a church that can mobilize business leaders or entrepreneurs can be helpful here as well.*

Socially Isolated

You likely already engage socially isolated groups every week. For example, when you visit an elderly member who has little family support, you're caring for a socially isolated individual.

But the socially isolated group is broader than just the elderly. Some suggest more than 20 percent of Americans fall into this category.

It also includes refugees who do not know the language and can't properly assimilate into the community. Even single parents who are juggling multiple demanding responsibilities can be considered socially isolated in some instances.

Regardless, those who are isolated struggle with loneliness, depression, and have a limited (or often non-existent) support network. Their social isolation often leads to limited access to essential services.

Churches best equipped to help: *Isolated groups need churches with compassionate volunteers who have time at their disposal to help. Churches with multi-lingual members will have the most success engaging refugees.*

Health-Challenged Communities

Many health-challenged individuals fit in both the above categories as well. Disabilities or chronic illness (physical, mental, and emotional) often lead to financial struggles and, increasingly, isolation. Often, their health challenges make it difficult to fully participate in church life and other social activities.

Churches best equipped to help: *Churches that have a number of healthcare professionals who can offer free clinics, wellness checks, or mental health counseling are well-positioned to help. Churches planning to engage the health-challenged should be accessible to those with physical limitations as well.*

At-Risk Youth

Unstable home lives leave many youths without the tools to succeed today or in the future. At-risk youth include those who face significant challenges stemming from systemic, familial, or community-level adversities. They often struggle academically, socially, and spiritually.

Churches best equipped to help: *You'll want to have people in your church who can serve as mentors. Although it's not a prerequisite, if you have some members who came out of an at-risk experience as a youth, that's often helpful. If you have teachers, foster-care parents, or social workers, they can be good resources for a ministry like this.*

Churches with a thriving youth program may be able to provide at-risk youth healthy relationships with other youth that can provide them much needed support.

Dependency-Struggling Populations

Many people in your neighborhood have become slaves to substances and behaviors that dominate them. Whether it's alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, or a hundred other things, they feel lost and hopeless as they battle against their daily compulsions. They face a future full of chronic health issues, unemployment, broken relationships, and overdoses.

Churches best equipped to help: *Recovery ministries can be messy. People who you thought have successfully beaten an addiction will relapse. Promises will be broken. Churches that want to help need to have perseverance and a commitment to stay the course despite the hurdles.*

Churches with successful recovery ministries typically have healthy, holistic ministries that help people find healing in all areas of their lives (financial counseling, support groups, mental health support, etc.).

By the way, just because your church might not have all the tools or resources to connect with an underserved group like those above doesn't mean you can't make a real impact. Plenty of churches step outside their comfort zones and natural strengths to serve their communities in meaningful and faithful ways.

BUILDING AWARENESS: HOW TO TRULY SEE THE NEEDS AROUND YOU

Your church can't address the surrounding needs until you know what they are. That's harder than it seems. Many of the needs of vulnerable populations aren't immediately apparent. Vulnerable communities tend toward invisibility, which is precisely what makes them so vulnerable.

So what can churches do to see the needs in these communities around them?

Here are a few ideas...

Host Community Listening Sessions

The first step in understanding the needs of your community is to listen—and listen well. You want to hear about needs as directly as possible from the people in your community.

Invite a diverse collection of people in your neighborhood to the listening session. As much as possible, match the diversity of your community (particularly in terms of gender, racial makeup, and social economics). Make sure you include people of varying influence levels. You want to hear from people who engage with lots of neighborhood people regularly, but you also want to hear from people who can be overlooked.

Consider serving a meal or providing a dessert to reward attendance.

Ask questions like:

- **What are the biggest challenges facing our community right now?**
- **Are there any groups or individuals you feel are particularly overlooked or underserved?**
- **What existing programs or resources do you think are making a positive impact here?**
- **What do you hope our neighborhood will look like in five years?**
- **How can churches or faith-based organizations better partner with local groups?**

Have someone take notes on the discussion, particularly noting where the church needs to get more information and/or take action.

Make sure that you follow up with participants later on about how your church has acted upon insights discovered during these sessions. This will help you build trust as you communicate how much you value their cooperation.

Conduct Surveys

While listening sessions provide qualitative information about the hidden needs in your community, surveys can give you quantitative information. You're likely not going to include over 30 people (at the most) in a listening session, but you can get insights from thousands from a survey.

You can use some of the questions above as a starting point. However, for quantitative purposes, you'll need to limit the number of open-ended questions. Include some, but not many.

Build Partnerships

Again, you're listening as much as possible. Organizations that are already meeting needs inside your neighborhood often have their ears to the ground. Partnering with local schools and nonprofits in your community can help you learn more about needs you can meet.

Prayer Walk Your Neighborhood

While listening is important, some needs you need to see up close. A weekly prayer walk can not only help you bathe your neighborhood in prayer, but it will also help you see the needs firsthand.

You'll need to be intentional, though. You can spend hours walking through a neighborhood and not learn anything. Look for the needs. Start conversations.

As you see the needs, pray about how God might want your church to meet the needs.

Leverage Technology

Tech tools can provide you with data that can help see previously hidden needs. For example, MissionInsite, part of the ACS Technologies family, provides detailed demographic data and community trends, enabling churches to identify key areas of need within their neighborhoods.

For example, it can tell you the number of people in your neighborhood who speak different languages. You can learn information about the income and health struggles of the population, along with their spiritual needs.

The guide will go further into how tech tools can help you later on.

BUILDING A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR GOD'S HEART FOR THE VULNERABLE

A DISCIPLESHIP PLAN

Your church's call to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) isn't just about teaching people what to believe; it's about teaching them what to do in Jesus' name. Part of that call is to teach them the importance of engaging the vulnerable communities around you.

You can and should do that in multiple ways, but one of the most effective is a six-week campaign that takes your congregation through what scripture teaches about caring for the vulnerable. In that campaign, you could focus on the themes below through your preaching ministry and your church's small groups.

WEEK 1

God as defender and provider (Psalm 68:5, Deuteronomy 10:18):

God cares for the vulnerable out of his character. Throughout the Bible, God describes himself as both a protector and a provider for the vulnerable. We love the vulnerable because he loved us when we were vulnerable.

WEEK 2

Caring for the vulnerable is an act of justice (Micah 6:8, Isaiah 1:17):

Scripture consistently urges believers to act in a just manner. We are to be instruments of his justice, helping to address iniquities and advocating for those without power or representation.

WEEK 3

Worshiping Jesus by serving the vulnerable (Matthew 25:35-40, James 1:27, Matthew 22:37-40):

Our relationship with the vulnerable communities around our church reflects our love for God. We can't properly love God if we fail to love the people around us.

WEEK 4

God's Kingdom Vision (Luke 4:18-19, Rev 21:3-4):

God's ultimate plan is to extend his rule (kingdom) throughout the world. The Bible tells us one day it will happen through a new heaven and a new earth. When he does, he'll restore and heal the vulnerable in every corner of the globe. Jesus-followers are called to embody this end vision of God's kingdom in how we live today.

WEEK 5

God's Faithfulness in Deliverance (Exodus 3:7-10):

The story of the Exodus is one of the great examples of God's faithfulness to a vulnerable group of people. His deliverance of the Israelites reminds us that he sees, hears, and acts on behalf of those who suffer.

WEEK 6

Generosity as a Reflection of God's Character (2 Corinthians 9:6-8, Proverbs 19:17):

The Bible challenges us to give generously as God gives to us. Your congregation needs to be challenged to use its resources generously to help the vulnerable in tangible ways.

For six weeks, consider using these six themes (or others, depending upon your church's doctrinal commitments) as your preaching points and small group studies.

Because it's important that all ages in your church discover God's love for the vulnerable around you, here are six biblical stories that can be taught to children for these themes.

WEEK 1



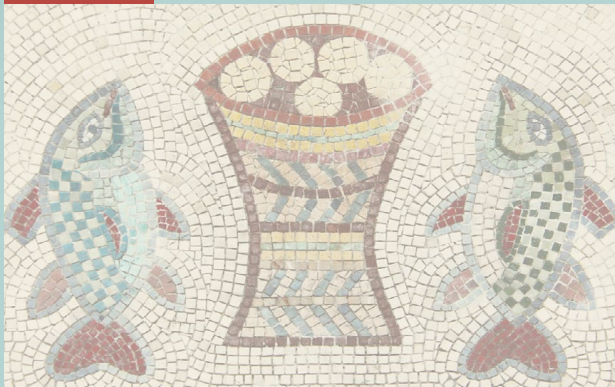
Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert
[Genesis 21:8-21]

WEEK 2



The Parable of the Good Samaritan
[Luke 10:25-37]

WEEK 3



Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand
[Matthew 14:13-21]

WEEK 4



Jesus Blesses the Children
[Matthew 19:13-15]

WEEK 5



The Exodus: Crossing the Red Sea
[Exodus 14:5-31]

WEEK 6



The Widow's Offering
[Mark 12:41-44]

CONNECT BIBLICAL TEACHING TO SERVICE

You want the Bible's teaching about caring for the vulnerable to go beyond the heads of your congregation and into their heart (and ultimately their actions).

As they're learning the themes above, challenge them to serve the vulnerable in the community. Often, your church's small groups and/or Sunday School classes provide the best vehicle for these kinds of projects.

Do your best to connect each of your church's groups to a vulnerable community around you for a specific ministry project once during your campaign (if you're doing the campaign mentioned earlier).

For example, your church's groups can:

PARTNER WITH A LOCAL FOOD BANK TO CARE FOR YOUR HUNGRY NEIGHBORS.

SPEND SOME TIME HELPING NEARBY KIDS WITH THEIR HOMEWORK.

DO A SIMPLE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD.



Help connect people not in small groups to projects your groups are doing. Often, these projects can be entry points for further small group involvement.

Make Praying for the Vulnerable a Regular Habit

One of the most important ways your church can serve vulnerable communities around you is through prayer. It's something everyone can do, regardless of their skill set, time available, etc.

Teaching people to pray for the vulnerable is also an important part of your church's call to disciple people toward God's heart for the vulnerable.

Here are a few ways you can do this:

- **Prayer meetings -**

If your church hosts a regular prayer meeting, consider adding specific prayer requests for vulnerable communities. If you don't have a regular prayer meeting, schedule quarterly prayer meetings for different vulnerable groups.

- **Worship services -**

Spend time during your regularly scheduled worship services praying for vulnerable groups. Be as specific as appropriate.

- **Prayer calendars -**

Create a simple prayer calendar that gives people ideas for praying for vulnerable groups.

- **Visual reminders -**

Design a "prayer wall" where members can write down and read prayer requests related to serving the vulnerable.

Discipling your church to serve the vulnerable isn't a one-time fix. It's an ongoing strategy to help people understand and apply God's love for the forgotten around you.

FOSTER A CULTURE OF SERVICE

Your church's culture sets the direction of your ministry. It's the autopilot your church will naturally drift toward. Establishing a culture of serving the vulnerable isn't easy, but it's one of the most important parts of this process.

How can you do that?

Start by celebrating your successes. You become what you celebrate.

If your church celebrates wins in your ministry to the vulnerable, you'll create a sense of a shared mission for these ministries.

Integrate service to the vulnerable into your church's vision statement, ensuring it remains a priority in every aspect of church life. Highlight that vision during your worship service and through permanent visual elements throughout your campus.

Most importantly, tell stories — often. Share stories that demonstrate the needs in your community. Help your members not only see the needs but feel them, too. As you get people involved in the ministries to vulnerable communities, highlight their stories.

Share these stories during public gatherings, staff meetings, and in electronic publications. People flock to stories.

Address Obstacles to Involvement

Everyone in your church has their own reasons for not jumping into ministry with vulnerable communities. A lot of those reasons make sense. Some folks are already busy serving in other key ministries. Others might feel unprepared or unsure about stepping into the messy realities that often come with this kind of work.

But here's the thing—there are plenty of people in your church who could get involved if some of the roadblocks were removed. Your job is to help them see what's possible and make it easier for them to say “yes.”

Here are some of those roadblocks you can help with:

- **Time constraints** - Serving takes time—there's no way around it. But you can make it easier to fit into busy schedules by focusing on flexible opportunities. Think about ways people can help from home too, like knitting hats for the homeless. It's all about finding ways to make serving work with life's demands without overcomplicating it.

- **Lack of preparation** - People often feel like they're not equipped to help others. They see the needs in vulnerable communities and get overwhelmed. That's why training matters so much. Sure, a lot of what people need to know about working with vulnerable groups comes from actually doing it. But the main goal of pre-service training is to ease participants' fears. It's about giving them the confidence to step in and serve, even if they're not experts yet.

- **Uncertainty about where to start** - As church leaders, we often underestimate how much of a barrier getting started in a ministry is. When you're not thinking about ministry regularly, it's often not clear how to get involved.

That's why it's important to do your best to make a clear pathway for involvement with multiple entry points. Pass out an interest card that someone can check a box and drop in an offering plate. Host a ministry fair. Reach out to members with opportunities via email, social media, and your weekly bulletin. Make sure each opportunity is clear and accessible to your entire church.

- **Misaligned interests and skill sets** - Many people might not see how their particular skill sets have anything to do with ministry to vulnerable groups. But the reality is, just about anyone has a skill that would come in handy with people in need.

For example, a mechanic can offer his time to help low-income neighbors fix their cars. A hairdresser can provide shut-ins with a new hairdo. A human resources specialist can help underemployed individuals spruce up their resumes.

The more you know about the "hidden" skills in your church, the better you can make these matches. Whenever you describe ministries to vulnerable groups, make sure you're casting a wide net by explaining how there's a place for everyone.

- **Fear of commitment** - Many people will more readily commit to a one-time service opportunity than a long-term commitment. Host these one-time opportunities several times a year. Help people see the needs firsthand and how they can help. A special service day is a great way to eventually attract long-term volunteers.

By the way, one important way you can clear the way for better involvement is to trim other ministries on the church calendar. That may sound harsh, but one of the biggest mistakes churches make when launching new ministry initiatives is not deleting old ministries. Part of the reason many of your members don't have the spare capacity to get involved in new work is they're too busy in ministries that no longer fit the church's vision.

EQUIPPING YOUR CONGREGATION FOR MINISTRY TO VULNERABLE GROUPS

Once your church has found the vulnerable groups around you and begun discipling your members to understand what the Bible teaches about caring for them, it's time to prepare them for ministry.

It's important to help your members learn to be effective in their ministries toward vulnerable communities. A well-equipped congregation is better prepared to make a long-term impact on vulnerable communities.

As mentioned earlier, training also helps to ease some anxieties potential volunteers face. People feel more confident serving when they feel like they have a basic idea of what to do.

Types of Training to Provide:

When you're talking about training for ministry to vulnerable groups, there's no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach. You'll likely want to stagger this training, maybe providing it quarterly. Also, if you look at the list below, only the first one (maybe the first two, depending upon the ministry) needs to be done pre-service. The others you'll provide along the way.

Maybe the most important concept to grasp when it comes to training for ministry to vulnerable groups is this: The right training must be provided at the right time. Some topics only make sense after volunteers have begun serving and encountered the realities of ministry. Offering "just-in-time" training allows your church to address volunteers' immediate needs and provide guidance as they navigate real-world challenges. This approach not only makes the training more relevant but also reduces the likelihood of being overwhelmed and helps volunteers retain what they learn.

- **Ministry-Specific Training:**

This is the specific training for what a volunteer will do while serving. It can be quick, depending on the project. This is the one a volunteer will do before participating, so you want it to be as quick as possible (and likely right before service) in order to ease any barriers to getting involved.

- **Cultural Sensitivity Training:**

Depending upon the vulnerable group you're working with, this can be the most important training you need to do with prospective volunteers. It's not one-size-fits-all either. Every group you'll work with will have it's own sense of cultural sensitivity issues.

- **Practical Skills Training:**

These tend to be the "just-in-time" training mentioned earlier. They aren't the skills you need to know before getting started, but they help you become more effective in what you're already doing. It could be anything from conflict resolution techniques to trauma-informed care basics to navigating government resources to teaching English as a Second Language.

Much of this kind of training will probably need to come outside of your church. You'll need to pull in expertise from elsewhere. You may even find books and video courses you can provide for volunteers. The more specific it is to your specific ministry context, the better.

- **Leadership and Volunteer Development:**

Leading ministries can be challenging. You want to support your leaders with training that helps them organize and sustain their teams for long-term ministry. It's also important to get leaders across different ministries together for camaraderie, prayer, and leadership insights. Consider hosting quarterly gatherings like this.

As you encourage people to get involved, let them know your plan to provide training. Let them know you won't leave them unprepared.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY FOR GREATER IMPACT

Technology can't do ministry for you. It especially can't serve and heal the brokenness in many vulnerable communities. That's the job God has given your church.

But technology can help you discover and serve the needs of your neighbors better. It'll save you time and resources if you use it well.

Tools for Understanding Your Community

Vulnerable groups are vulnerable because they are often invisible to most other people. That makes it particularly hard for churches to minister to them effectively. But there are tools to help.

For example, MissionInsite is a community analytics platform designed to help churches and faith-based organizations understand their communities better. It'll provide data-driven resources to help your church identify, reach, and serve your most vulnerable neighbors.

Here are a few examples of how it can help you find and engage vulnerable communities.

- **Identifying the most vulnerable**

You'll get granular demographic information, such as income levels, age distribution, and family structures that can help you pinpoint populations that might be at risk and your church wants to engage with ministry.

The tool also helps you highlight key indicators of community challenges, such as economic distress, food insecurity, and housing instability — all based on the geographic locations you search. That helps you find out the places and people who need your church the most.

- **Acting strategically**

You'll be able to engage vulnerable communities with maximum information on the people you're engaging, including their spiritual openness, values, and challenges.

Use this information to train volunteers to build long-term, sustainable relationships with the communities you want to engage.

- **Building awareness for ministry efforts**

One way to get your church involved in ministry to the vulnerable is by showing them where the needs are. MissionInsite's tools make it simple to create clear, easy-to-understand maps and graphs that highlight the needs of your community.



CASE STUDY

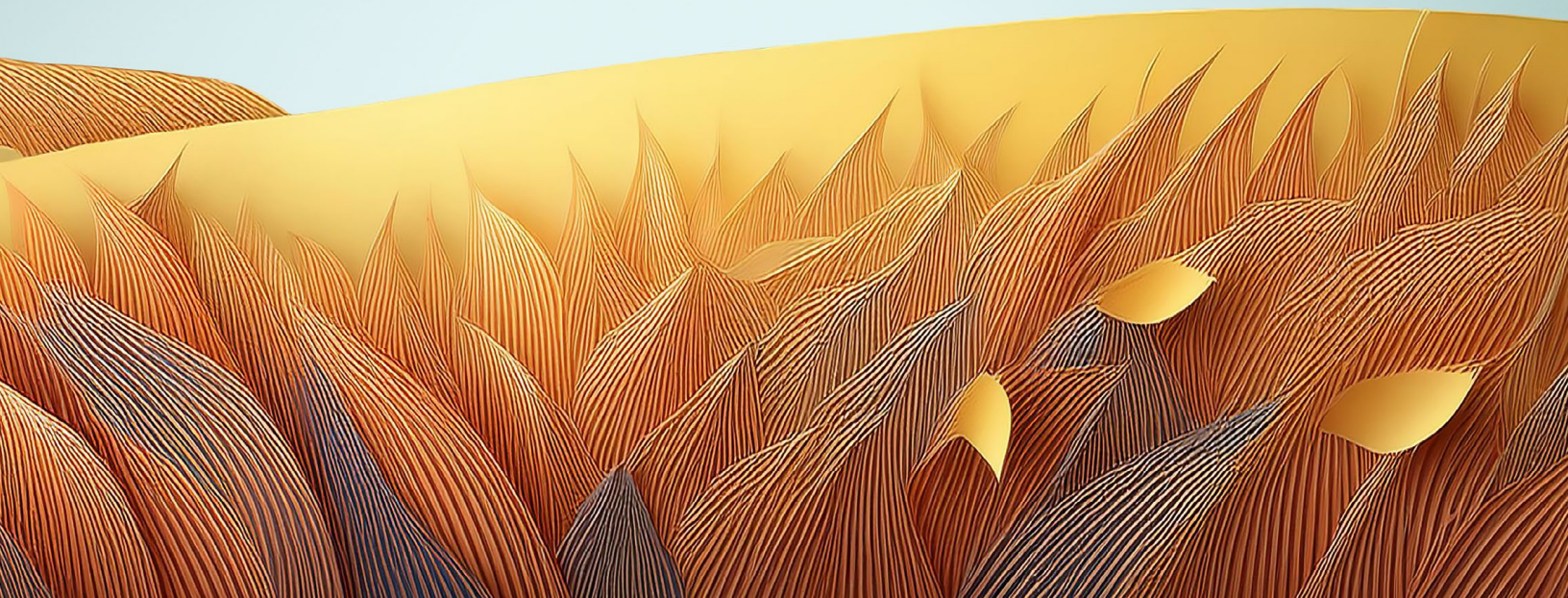
LEVERAGING MISSIONINSITE TO RE-ENGAGE LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORS

Harvest Tabernacle Bible Church, an East Los Angeles church that's almost 50 years old, leveraged MissionInsite to learn more about its changing community. When the church was founded, African Americans made up 95 percent of the neighborhood population. The Asian population had grown significantly during that time. Using MissionInsite, the church discovered that the vast majority came from Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese backgrounds.

As they learned more about their community, the church could invite a more representative group of people to roundtable discussions about community needs. These discussions confirmed what the church had learned through MissionInsite. The neighborhood needed a community grocery store.

Over the next few years, the church built a new building with a community grocery store on the bottom level and affordable housing above.

The church's senior pastor, Dr. Donald Cook, ties that initiative to insights the church gained through MissionInsite. *"MissionInsite really anchors down the Great Commission, which requires us to know our people and to serve our community,"* he says.



BECOMING THE HANDS AND FEET OF JESUS

Your church has a call to become the hands and feet of Jesus in your neighborhood, engaging the most vulnerable people with the hope and the good news of Jesus. Just like the Good Samaritan, we're called to step across societal barriers to meet the needs of people who are desperate for help.

In this guide, we've walked you through the tools, insights, and biblical foundation. You're now equipped to answer the question Fred Rogers asked every week.

WILL YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

BUT WHAT WILL
YOUR ANSWER BE?

