

# Street Ministry Strategy Summaries

## Looking Back and Seeing Forward

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### Abstract

*By equipping the saints to lead and minister to people experiencing homelessness, especially queer people, in the context of Spokane, Washington, we as the Church will better live out the Gospel. The local church's ministry to queer people experiencing homelessness in Spokane is best accomplished by small teams with one leader, working in coordination with other long-term organizations (e.g. Union Gospel Mission<sup>1</sup>, the House of Charity<sup>2</sup>, etc) already at work. The local church should not contribute to systemic problems or hinder the work of full-time ministries, but should contribute to the work of long-term organizations. The local church should apply its financial resources to tend to the poor in our city<sup>3</sup>, and its knowledge of the Gospel to bring more people into a saving knowledge of Christ<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.uniongospelmission.org/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.cceasternwa.org/>

<sup>3</sup>Acts 2:42-47

<sup>4</sup>Matthew 28:18-20

# 1 Audience

This work targets churches in Spokane with a biblical understanding of the Gospel's call for the church to engage and come alongside the poor. I do not attempt here to provide an exhaustive theology of social justice or sexuality, but rather the specific steps that local churches in Spokane can take to better care for the needy, especially those who do not identify with conventional sexuality or gender. This is intended for congregations that understand the need to engage with the poor, but perhaps lack the information or experience to carry it out. Note that all Bible passages are from the English Standard Version [1].

## 2 Current Strategies at Work

Charity groups ought to equip themselves with the information necessary to best minister to those experiencing homelessness, and churches are no exception. Various organizations in Spokane go about this differently, and here we will examine the strategies of the two largest charity organizations in Spokane after equipping ourselves with some foundational knowledge before examining the strategies I have been using.

### 2.1 Foundational Knowledge

According to the Human Rights Campaign, Spokane has a score of 30 out of 30 with its anti-discrimination laws, but only a 2 out of 4 with regards to single-occupancy gender-neutral housing [2]. Additionally, Spokane receives a score of 16 out of 28 when it comes to employment municipality. This means that there are additional boundaries in the way of queer people gaining employment in the city. Across the United States, queer people are about twice as likely as straight cisgender people to be unemployed (9% vs 5%), twice as likely to be food insecure (27% vs 15%), and 7% more likely to have an income below \$24,000 [2]. These are all contributing factors to homelessness, and since Washington State is 6<sup>th</sup> in the United States in its queer population, our churches and charity organizations must be equipped to serve them alongside straight people experiencing homelessness. With this information in mind, we

will examine the strategies of the two biggest charity organizations operating in the Spokane area, and how their strategies may affect queer people, positively or negatively.

## 2.2 Catholic Charities

The Catholic Charities (CCEWa) has a housing-first model irrespective of the belief of the individual [3]:

*We serve people based on their need, not our creed. Everything from meals to emergency sleeping in shelter beds to quiet chapel or prayer and reflection time to respite care for those exiting the hospital to case management is provided in the shelter, along with a variety of supported services for health, education, job training, etc. HOC runs with both professional staff and hundreds of volunteers, including folks from many religious congregations in town. HOC also partners with other downtown providers of services to those experiencing homelessness, many of which are other religiously affiliated nonprofits and ministries.*

This means that anyone who comes to their door that has not been previously flagged by the organization are welcome to sleep and seek rehabilitation. They will not turn any queer person away on that basis, however they are so often overfilled that sexual orientation is the least of the boundaries preventing them from getting housing assistance. This has both benefit and drawback; because they accept such broad group, they are very often flooded and overwhelmed with clients, yet many receive housing help that would not otherwise, such as queer people that are experiencing homelessness. In my experience with CCEWa, this has led to the discouragement of some of their leadership, as it is much harder to hold their recipients accountable and to track their progress. It seems that the most effective method for rehabilitation is partnership with groups of people that all hold each other accountable. This strategy has seen astounding results in the microfinance industry. For example, in India, a group that used the microfinance model achieved a repayment rate of 99.87% on its microloans [4]. This is significant because of how economics and homelessness are related, and how similar the strategies to fight homelessness and poverty often are. The Union Gospel Mission's (UGM) model looks much more like this.

## 2.3 Union Gospel Mission

The Union Gospel Mission has a different philosophy, which centers on the growth and empowerment of individuals through four programs [5]:

- Food and shelter
- Job training
- Recovery
- Youth outreach

Additionally, Phil Altmeyer (the regional UGM director) is planning on distributing a document to all regional churches and charity organizations to unify our efforts. This document, titled the *Covenant of Compassion*, has the following headline:

*It's time for charities in Spokane to come together for the welfare of our city and agree what it means to care for those in need.*

This document outlines 7 points which they hope all organizations may agree on, and around which we may all form our strategies:

- Empower
- Compassion
- Work
- Sobriety
- Relationship
- Good Neighbor

Again, this strategy has several drawbacks and several key benefits. Those who are fortunate enough to receive assistance through their programs are typically more closely attended to, and are held much more accountable. For example, over 200 people were placed with jobs through their employment programs last year, with about one-third estimated to be queer. However, due

to the risks of abuse and the lack of effective internal policing, transgender people are not permitted to receive group housing services, though LGB+ people are. All LGBT people are welcome to any of the other service aspects of the UGM. Historically, abuse within shelters has been a difficult problem, as the prejudiced beliefs and behaviors of some of the recipients cannot be effectively filtered for. Shelters are also often understaffed, which means there is likely not an effective security team to care for queer people in the shelter as attentively as is appropriate. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, transgender individuals experience a much higher rate of abuse on the streets than their straight cisgender counterparts, and even more so than LGB+ people [6]. While this unfortunately means that the UGM is not a viable shelter for housing services for transgender people, the UGM puts them in contact with other shelters in the area that will accept them. This balance of charity and ensuring safety is a difficult one, and as someone who knows the Altmeyer's and their intentions well, I would encourage anyone upset by this message to stifle their anger with grace as we all work together to promote the well-being of all those experiencing homelessness in the area. This last April, Phil Altmeyer made a statement on this issue to the Spokesman Review, in which he said:

*I disagree with a lot of decisions people make... but at the same time we serve them every day, we love them... Every day, we serve the LGBT community and every day we serve them and we love them.* [7]

He went on to elaborate on the fact that the UGM has shifted its ministry and service focus from being mostly male-oriented as the needs of the city have changed. The UGM is now comprised of four housing shelters, three of which are only for women and children, which comprise a larger portion of those experiencing homelessness without shelter options at the moment. The UGM serves queer people of every point on the spectrum every day, save only for the housing portion for transgender people for the risk of abuse. I am confident that after some time, as the needs of transgender people become more apparent and more people advocate for the care of transgender people, the UGM will also find some way to make accommodations for transgender people as they ought.

## 2.4 Strategy Summary

In conclusion, many organizations in Spokane are working continually to serve the portion of the queer community the is experiencing homelessness, yet there is continually more work to be done as well. From my experience, both downtown over the last three years and in my relationships with the Altmeyer's, I believe that Spokane will continue to improve in its support for queer people as long as we work together and are roughly on the same page with our strategies. Both the UGM and the Catholic Charities provide a diverse set of support structures to queer people experiencing homelessness, and these services continue to grow. However, it is apparent that progress still needs to be made, especially in the support of transgender people.

## 3 Opportunities to Equip the Saints

In my experience with local churches, organizations and individuals in Spokane, believers tend to feel ill-equipped in several areas. Believers in middle- to upper-class Spokane tend to be somewhat removed from the needs of the poor. As a result, they do not know what physical needs they are able to meet, or what of those needs are of the highest priority. Believers rarely feel comfortable sharing the Gospel, which is significant because of the opportunities to share the gospel downtown. The church can bridge this gap by equipping:

1. Team members to share the Gospel and pray with people <sup>5</sup>
2. Members with information needed to tend to the physical needs of people experiencing poverty, especially from the queer community <sup>6</sup>
3. Leaders to coordinate and empower team members <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”, Matthew 28:19-20

<sup>6</sup>“If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”, James 2:15-16

<sup>7</sup>“[W]hoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”, Matthew 20:26-28

This is the standard laid out by Scripture, and should the Church be anything less than this, She is falling short of Her calling.

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

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James 1:27

## 4 Intended Results

All team members should be equipped in the following capacities:

1. Preparing and distributing items for physical aid
2. Sharing the gospel
3. Praying with/for the served
4. Deescalating conversations with upset people
5. Developing relationships with those being served

Leaders should be equipped in the following additional capacities:

1. Navigating the streets and leading teams on foot
2. Leading and comforting team members coming for the first time
3. Equipping others to lead in the same capacities
4. Informing others about the current state of the city

## 5 Implementation

This section describes the steps that the local church can take to achieve the goals previously outlined.

### 5.1 Team Members

The following applies to volunteers from within the church, however a visiting nonbeliever or non-member may not need to bear these responsibilities. The volunteer may serve along with the team and be ministered to by the rest of the team. In this way, God’s character is revealed to both the team member and the ones being served; the ministry can be both inward and outward facing. Otherwise, every team member should be ready for the following five responsibilities:

#### 5.1.1 Catering to the Physical Needs

*If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?*

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James 2:16

Though the spiritual health is in every case more important than the physical, the physical is still of utmost importance, and we are commanded to tend to the physical health of those who lack it. The majority of Jesus’ miracles were physical in nature, and Paul includes the body in the process of sanctification.<sup>8</sup> About 15% of Spokane County is within the poverty threshold as defined by the US Census Bureau [8], and queer people are much more likely to be within that threshold. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, 43% of clients served by drop-in centers identify as queer [6] There are many ways that we as the local church can tend to the needs of our community.

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<sup>8</sup>1 Thessalonians 5:23



In my experience, the most common way for the local church to provide is through bagged lunches, hygiene supplies, and clothes. Historically, lunches have included a sandwich, a fruit, and a snack of some sort. It is worth noting that many homeless people do not have healthy teeth, so they cannot eat fruits like apples or crunchy snacks. Additionally, foods with nut products should be kept separate in case of a nut allergy. Of all the clothing items to donate, socks and underwear seem to be in the highest demand. This is because used underwear cannot be donated and many people are not comfortable giving them out. The needy do greatly appreciate when we overcome this social stigma and donate unused underwear, as fewer people are willing to do so. The organizations and businesses along the routes also appreciate handing out goods near trash cans and/or helping pick up garbage after handing out goods.

*For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the saints, as you still do.*

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Hebrews 6:10

Each member of the Body of Christ is gifted uniquely for the construction of the Kingdom of God, and each may contribute according to their gifting. For example, some may be physically incapable of walking long distances, so their contribution may be the purchasing or preparing of goods to be taken with the rest of the team. Each ought to contribute according to their capacity, however I have met many elderly ladies, exceeding eighty years of age and with many crippling physical ailments, who faithfully take to the streets with whatever aid they can provide. Their steadfastness has been an encouragement to me, and I hope it will also be for any members of the Body that feel incapable of contributing. Let it also be an encouragement that the Father will notice and remember the efforts of every member of the body—the valiant efforts of the physically impaired are of great value to the church, and are pleasing to the Father.

### 5.1.2 Sharing the Gospel

*Go therefore and make disciples  
of all nations, baptizing them in  
the name of the Father and of  
the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
teaching them to observe all that  
I have commanded you.*

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Matthew 28:19

The most capable entity in equipping believers to know and share the Gospel is the local church. The local church should equip its members to know and share the Gospel by biblical teaching from the pulpit, and through members teaching each other. Each member of a team going downtown ought to be a member or attendee of a local church that professes Christ and teaches biblical doctrine, enabling the member to articulate the Gospel. This is a great opportunity for more mature members of the Body of Christ to model to the younger ones how to share the Gospel. Particularly, parents have the opportunity to show their children how to share the Gospel, a skill that may translate to their schools and eventually their workplaces.

### 5.1.3 Prayer

In my experience, one of the methods of sharing the Gospel that has met the least friction is prayer. For example, “Father in heaven, I thank you for your Gospel, which is...” with a subsequent articulation of the Gospel. Prayer opens up a window for sharing the Gospel and is an opportunity to bring someone’s needs to the Father, and every team member should be comfortable in praying with and for people they meet.

### 5.1.4 Deescalation

Occasionally, people being served get agitated for one reason or another, and it is important to know how to deescalate these situations. For example, a member of a team I led once offered some cookies to a man with his dog. The man became quite upset that my team member only had cookies for people,

and didn't bring dog treats. As he became more upset, my team member wisely replied, "Well I am very sorry that we don't have any dog treats, but I will make sure to pack some next time!" She then proceeded to walk away from the man and wish him a nice day (she also did in fact make sure to bring dog treats the next time!). Any team member would be well-served to follow her pattern, which is to:

1. Speak softly, kindly and calmly, <sup>9</sup>
2. empathize with what they seem to be feeling,
3. apologize,
4. and if the person continues to escalate, walk away

Interactions tend to deescalate when the volunteer makes everyone feel heard, as many homeless people do not often feel that way. Additionally, this is an example of why it is always a good idea to walk with other members of the team.

### **5.1.5 Developing Relationships**

It is in the context of relationship that the Holy Spirit seems to do the most work. <sup>10</sup> In living out the Gospel, we as the Church seek not to simply distribute food to people, we seek to love them and forge relationships with them. This does not happen in a single day, but over weeks, months, and years. By going downtown many times, each team member ought to get to know and pray for specific people. This means remembering names and details about those we serve, with the intention of forming long-term relationships. Writing down names and praying over specific people, whether individually or in community, is a great way to remember details from interactions. This builds relationships because remembering the names of people and details about them is indicative of intentionality and genuine care for the person. Referring to a person by his or her name and remembering information about them carries a special significance, especially when this demographic is often treated as sub-human.

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<sup>9</sup>Proverbs 25:21-22

<sup>10</sup>Matthew 18:20

## 5.2 Leaders

The responsibilities of team leaders exceed that of the other team members. Volunteers should be made aware that they may be subjected to hateful opinions, such as misogyny, prejudice based on sexuality, and racism. Occasionally, residents and people on the streets may speak or act out in such a way that volunteers, specifically women, are uncomfortable. Volunteer teams tend to feel more comfortable and interactions tend to stay more appropriate when there is at least one man on any team, and leaders should ensure this is the case.

### 5.2.1 Leading on Foot

*Let the greatest among you  
become as the youngest, and the  
leader as one who serves.*

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Luke 22:25-26

It is usually best to have a specific route in mind before actually hitting the streets for a couple of reasons.<sup>11</sup> First, if a couple of members of the team are talking for a particularly long time with someone, it may be helpful for the team to temporarily split up. In that case, there should be at least two people equipped to lead a group, so that no group is left without anyone to lead. Then, because there is already an established route, each group knows where the other is going, and can regroup later. Additionally, a team leader should always be conscious of where his or her team members are, ideally keeping all of them within eyesight. Some team members may absentmindedly walk away from the group and end up alone in a crowd of people, which is undesirable. There is usually not any danger, however it is the team leader's responsibility to make sure that everyone stays together and is accounted for.

Leaders would also do well to watch for animals, as some can be aggressive or diseased, and some team members may be allergic to or afraid of animals. It is usually effective to stand in between the team members and the animal, so the team members feel comfortable.

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<sup>11</sup>Luke 14:28-33

### 5.2.2 Leading First-Timers

Before breaking into teams, I find it is helpful to recap three points: our motivation (the gospel), past experience (how the ministry has looked in the past), and the plan (what it will look like today). When leading someone downtown who has never gone before, it is extremely helpful and reassuring to describe to them what typically happens and what the plan for that day is. Even if they seem comfortable, they may need some encouragement to feel ready to talk to people or hand out food. For example, as the leader you may begin an interaction with somebody and invite the newcomer into the conversation, or ask them to give some food to someone in particular to get them started. Encouragement, reassurance, and gratitude go a long way in making a team member feel comfortable sharing and speaking with people on the streets. Additionally, leaders may provide more information to first-timers to help contextualize what they see downtown. For example, they may help the first-timer understand that around one-third to two-fifths of the people they will meet will be queer.

### 5.2.3 Equipping Others to Lead

Leading is the best way to equip another person to lead. Especially if someone has participated several times before, it may be helpful to let that individual carry the food/goods and handle most of the interactions with people. This will boost their confidence and make them feel comfortable, while you stay close by and encourage their interactions. The mark of a truly experienced leader is their ability to empower others to lead—in the same way, a leader downtown ought to bring up other capable leaders from within their team.

## 6 Concluding Notes

*God is most glorified in us when  
we are most satisfied in  
him... our pursuit of joy in him  
is essential.*

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John Piper [10]

I have attempted to show (1) where the church in Spokane is presently lacking in service to the poor, (2) what it looks like for the church to grow in those areas, and (3) the steps we can take to get from (1) to (2). This growth is not emotionless, however. Christ is faithful to provide us with surpassing joy and satisfaction in Him when we obey His word, and service to the poor is no exception. I encourage each local church in Spokane to engage with the poor of our community no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

**Uncover the treasures of joy in store for those faithful to live out the Gospel.**

*God made the world that He  
might communicate, and the  
creature receive, His glory; and  
that it might [be] received both by  
the mind and heart.*

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Jonathan Edwards [11]

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