

Matthew Barnett: Starting With the One

Matthew Barnett was 20 years old when his father, Phoenix First Assembly of God leader Tommy Barnett, asked him to take over a Los Angeles church with 18 people that was located in a gang-infested community next to a liquor store. The younger Barnett quickly managed to drive the crowd down from 18 to two congregants.

After a particularly discouraging evening service, Matthew took a walk through Echo Park, which was notorious for its high crime. As he walked, he saw addicts, people without homes sleeping on benches, runaway teens. That night, Barnett realized that while he thought he had been called to Los Angeles to pastor a church, in reality God had called him to serve the brokenhearted, the homeless, the addicts—the “least of these” (Matt. 25).

The church started with taking in one person and knocking on a few doors to give away groceries. Fast-forward 19 years and Barnett’s Dream Center has become a 24/7 church based in the heart of the city in a former hospital that takes in hurting people—from human trafficking victims to homeless families to at-risk teens. The church’s Adopt-a-Block ministry started with a few homes and now reaches more than 700 families every Saturday.

Barnett’s story is both inspiring and challenging. How many churches can buy a 360,000-square-foot hospital and feed 30,000 people a week like the Dream Center does? But that’s when we have to remember how the story began. They started with just one person in need—something any church serious about Jesus’ mandate can start with, regardless of your size, location or context.

Throughout this issue of *Ministry Today*, we focus on community engagement—the inspiring whys and the practical hows. In addition to hearing from Guest Editor Matthew Barnett, we also talked with two of the Dream Center’s ministry directors to learn practical principles. Our prayer and hope is that as you read these stories and best practices, you’ll be inspired and equipped to begin with that one need or build on what you’ve already started to meet many needs. Compassion begins with opening our eyes to “the one.”

As Barnett says, “Compassionate people don’t just wake up overnight that way. They make themselves available to be put in situations that require them to be compassionate.”

I read that statement and think, *What would our world look like if every church leader placed his or her church in situations that require compassion?*

I’m intentionally looking for ways I can take that to heart. I pray you do the same.

Lindy Lowry *is general editor of Ministry Today.*