

WHAT IF  
YOUR CHURCH  
**REALLY**  
EMBRACED THE IDEA  
OF LETTING GOD'S  
LOVE FLOW  
OUT INTO YOUR  
COMMUNITY

# OUTFLOW

BY STEVE SJOGREN AND DAVE PING



**S**plash...A tiny drop of rain fell from heaven as Theresa's dented Toyota idled roughly in the Taco Bell drive-through. A single mom, she depended on a government welfare check to feed her 8-year-old son,

Donny. It was 10 days till the next check would arrive, and she was already broke. Here's how she described what happened:

*After looking under the sofa cushions, all the car seats, and through the glove box, we came up with a grand total of...\$4.58! It had been a hard week and my thinking was, "Hey, any way you look at it, we aren't going to have enough money to make it through to the next check. Let's go out with style." So we headed for Taco Bell.*

*As we got to the drive-through window to pay, I was never so shocked in all of my life. The guy standing in the window had a big grin on his face and said, "This is your lucky day—the people in front of you paid for your entire meal. They said to give you this card."*

*The card read, "We hope this small act of service shows you God's love in a practical way," but I've got to tell you something—for me and my 8-year-old son, Donny, this was no small act of love. It was huge. We were in exactly the right place at exactly the right time to receive this touch from God when we needed it most.*

The next day, Theresa and Donny came to church for the very first time. That tiny drop of generosity they'd experienced in God's name made them hopeful that perhaps God really did care about them and what they were going through.

## "EYEDROPPERS" IN A SEA OF SOULS

There are millions of Therasas asking questions about God, questions such as: Does God exist? Does God really care? Are God and religion even relevant anymore? My life is filled with modern problems—what, honestly, does an old-fashioned God have to do with my life?

There are also millions who already know God. They're asking different questions...questions such as: How can I have a deeper relationship with God? How can I have a more authentic faith—one that's

reflected in every part of my life? How can I trust God for my health, finances, and future? How can I share my hope in God with the people around me?

If, like so many people, you see your community as a sea of souls and your personal influence as a tiny eyedropper, it's easy to get overwhelmed. After all, what difference can one, or 10, or even 10,000 eyedroppers of love have on the vast sea of hurting humanity around you? Yet just as the largest ocean is made up of individual drops of water, your community is made of individual lives that need Christ's love—each one, one at a time.

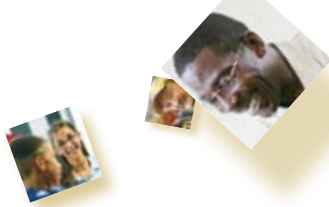
A few years back, I (Steve) traveled across the Atlantic to Brighton, England, to equip a large group of young, twentysomething Christians to influence their community. These young Brits weren't just eager to hear how to change their city, they wanted to go out and really get their hands dirty doing it.

After a couple of days explaining biblical concepts, we received an offering to fund our outreaches in Brighton. We received something in the range of 2,000 pounds—enough to give about 20 pounds (around \$35) to each group of four people. Instead of being the "ugly American" and suggesting what types of outreach were right for England, I let the crowd shout out ideas they thought would work in their city. I simply wrote down the ideas as they came in without judging their wisdom or probability of success.

The ideas were all over the map! Some seemed wonderful and some sounded shockingly goofy to me as a Yank—but I held my tongue. Some of the ideas were what you might expect, and others were...um... a bit more original, like buying "crisps" (aka potato chips) and giving them away for free to folks drinking beer in pubs. The crowd was pretty excited about this idea, as it's almost unheard of to drink beer in Brighton without a bag of crisps in your hand.

Another bold suggestion was buying cigarettes and giving them away to street people. I have to admit this one threw me, until later that night when a good number of street people showed up at our evening worship celebration. One ragged old gentleman's testimony was classic, "All right, this is my kind of church—the kind that gives out free cigarettes!"

Some of the street people brought their dogs to church with them, explaining that the dogs were their only friends in the whole world. Suddenly, God's love had become real in a way these poor and friendless people could understand. I'm not suggesting giving out free cigarettes as a regular outreach, >>>>



but it sure warmed my heart to see smoking actually bringing people to church instead of keeping them away.

The same group that gave out the smokes also cleaned up garbage and broken glass in front of several shops. The shopkeepers were blown away by this small measure of kindness. Some of the most grateful shop owners were Islamic immigrants who asked a lot of questions about Jesus. Other Brighton residents had all their fines for overdue books paid at the library or received free stamps on all their letters at the post office—all so they could see God's love in a practical way.

My whole time in Brighton was just a profoundly moving time. Many people experienced the work of Jesus like never before. Even more than that—for one night at least—many who had decided Christianity was not for them were seeing Christ and his followers in a fresh new way.

The simple acts of kindness these groups of young British Christians poured out over the city were like "drops in the ocean." And yet they touched and transformed thousands of hearts. For some the changes were profound, and for others relatively small. The only sad thing about this story is that what happened in Brighton is not a normal, everyday event in every city where Christ's followers are to be found.

But we can change all that!

## THE "OLD NORMAL" AND THE "NEW NORMAL"

It's a good bet that the perception of Christianity many people in your own community have is something less than completely positive. They've seen local priests and well-known church leaders busted in sex scandals. They've watched the lavish lifestyles of flamboyant

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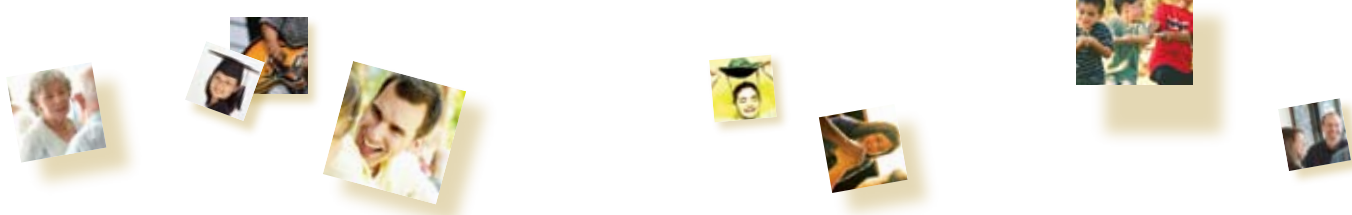
preachers exposed on TV news shows. They've had personal run-ins with annoying, judgmental, and hypocritical Christians.

It's discouraging to think about sharing Jesus with the people in your community when you know you're likely to face negative perceptions and even ugly prejudices. That's probably the reason it's become "normal" for so many who love Jesus to be afraid of openly acknowledging him out in their communities.

Obviously, silence and inaction do nothing to change anyone's negative perceptions of Christianity; the only thing that can change those perceptions is for people to personally *experience* Christ's love.

Perhaps that's why the two greatest commandments Jesus gave us are both about *love*. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus says, " 'You must *love* the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: '*Love* your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments" (*emphasis added*).

You've heard these verses before, but what would happen if you and your church *really* embraced these two kinds of love as your *new normal*? What if you started loving God so much that you let what he feels for the people in your community begin to overflow into your heart? What if—as you walked through your neighborhood, grocery store, and local mall—you watched the people around you and literally ached with love for them? What if every time you looked at the people in your community, you longed for them to personally know Jesus? What if you focused on dreaming up ways to let God's love flow out from you in all sorts of fun and creative actions? As you went about your daily business in the city or town where you live, what if it was normal for you to be intentionally pouring out generous words and kind actions on your >>>>



neighbors? And what if you were doing all of that in Christ's name?

Wouldn't that be something?

If you set out to touch one or two people a day with some small act of kindness in the name of Jesus, every week you'd be helping to change the way between seven and 14 individuals perceive the Lord and his followers! And if you did this every week for a year, that would be somewhere between 365 and 730 acts of love in Christ's name. Even if you missed a few days here and there, you'd overflow God's love into the lives of hundreds of people—each individual little kindness a surprise package that simply and profoundly says, "You really are important to God."

We're not talking about some program that you give "the old college try" for a few days or weeks. This overflowing lifestyle of love is meant to become part of who you are for the rest of your life. Instead of just doing outreach as a project, you'll *constantly* be filling up with the joy of Jesus and *constantly* giving it away. What happened in Brighton (homeless people joyfully showing up at church to express their gratitude, Muslim shopkeepers spontaneously asking questions about Jesus, and all the rest) was just the tip of the iceberg. When you get in the habit of letting God's love flow outward from you, wonders like these—and even better—will start to become part of your everyday experience.

These experiences will have a dramatic impact on the people around you, but they will have an even more powerful impact on *the person you are inside*. With each outward-focused act, you'll become a little more generous, a little more grace-giving, and a little more comfortable with pouring out Jesus' love on those you meet.

This exciting new normal will not come about effortlessly or in short order. In over 20 years of trying to live it ourselves and help others get started, we've seen how strong is the human tendency toward selfishness. We've all spent so much time "looking out for #1"

that it's hard to break the habit. It takes time to switch from grudgingly doing the minimum amount God lets you get away with to becoming available to God every day. In fact, it's a life's work. There will always be tension between human self-focus and the outward-focused life God desires for us. That's why Jesus tells us In Matthew 6:32-33 not to worry so much about food and material possessions. "For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Seeking God's kingdom first means the main event of your life is focusing on what God focuses on: people. It means being outward toward others in the righteous, generous ways God desires. While others may devote their waking hours to bringing home the bacon or pursuing self-gratification, when you seek the kingdom first, you're trusting in God's generosity toward you *at the same time as you're sharing it with others*. By giving away precious time, energy, and money with no expectation of getting anything in return (from people, anyway), you become "Exhibit A," testifying that God's promises are the real deal.

The new normal of overflowing generosity is much more fun and satisfying than the world's old normal of fear and selfishness. It's sort of like being inside the New Testament experiencing Jesus' love, witnessing the abundant joy and generosity in the early church believers, and seeing more and more people coming to know Jesus personally.

**"WHAT IF YOU FOCUSED ON DREAMING UP WAYS TO LET GOD'S LOVE FLOW OUT FROM YOU IN ALL SORTS OF FUN AND CREATIVE ACTIONS?"**

## HOW YOUR CHURCH CAN DIVE INTO THE NEW NORM

Imagine if a church of 250 members adopted this generous new norm and every single person >>>>



made a commitment to reach one or two people a day with Jesus' love. Just imagine! That church would touch between 1,750 and 3,500 people *per week!* And the things they'd be doing would be so full of genuine caring that those who received them wouldn't quickly forget—people remember acts of kindness for days, weeks, and in our experience, even years! Now multiply that impact by a month of just four weeks—that's between 7,000 and 14,000 drops of love raining down on your city! Sometimes one of those drops will lead to a conversation; sometimes it'll just bring a smile. But all the while, each of those encounters will quietly slide someone a little closer toward God.

*Fast forward.* In a year's time these little encounters would add up to between 91,000 and 182,000 drops of love in the "sea" of your city—all of that coming out of a church of just 250.

Of course, if your church were embracing this new normal, it wouldn't stay at 250 members for long! Those little drops of love would fall into all kinds of lives, and some of them would land in hearts ready to seek Jesus. Your church and many others would begin to see a whole new group of people seeking, finding, and beginning to follow Jesus. Your life and the lives of all the others in your growing church would begin overflowing with rich experiences and inspiring true stories that would draw more people like magnets.

We hope you're inspired by this vision of everyday people constantly overflowing with life and reaching out with loving actions. We'd like to see it replace some of the self-focused stuff that goes on now in many churches. To us, this vision sounds like what Jesus had in mind in Matthew 28:19-20 when he said, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mat-

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thew 28:19-20). As far as we can tell, every disciple of Christ is meant to be part of the "going" and "baptizing" and "teaching," not just the highly skilled or talkative few. Extroverts or introverts, shy or outgoing, it doesn't matter. It's a big world, and if each of us pours out our little eyedropper-full of Christ into one or two lives every day, God can use us to bring about tremendous change in our communities. And in the process, God will change us to be more and more like Jesus!

Though it may not seem like you or your church can make much of a difference, God has entrusted you with the power to give thousands a taste of Jesus and awaken their thirst. In the process, you'll help change the way an amazing number of people in your community think and feel about Jesus and his followers. So let's give our all—heart, soul, mind, and strength—as we invest in something that lasts forever, the people Jesus loves and died for.

It'll be fun. We promise. 🌍



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This article was adapted from their new book, *Outflow: Outward-Focused Living in a Self-Focused World (Group)*. For information on using *Outflow* in sermons and small groups, go to [www.group.com/outflow](http://www.group.com/outflow).



**WEB EXTRA:** For additional information on using *Outflow* in your church, go to "Rev! Magazine Extras" at [www.rev.org](http://www.rev.org) and click on "Outflow: Everyday Outreach for Everyday People."