

LOVING TO LIFE

GUIDING PEOPLE,
ORGANIZATIONS, AND
CHURCHES TO REACH
THEIR FULL POTENTIAL

BY RYAN STRATTON

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For over twenty years, Ryan has been teaching children, teenagers, and adults. While he was a teenager, he practiced TaeKwonDo and continued practicing and teaching the art form for fifteen years. After receiving a call to Christian ministry and leadership, Ryan is now in full time vocational ministry beginning with youth ministry then becoming a pastor. Ryan's priority in life is to help people see and experience life beyond themselves and the purpose God has for them.

He has a Bachelor's of Business Administration Degree from Stephen F. Austin State University and earned his Masters of Divinity degree through Asbury Theological Seminary.

The most important relationships for Ryan are with his wife and his children. When not leading the church, studying the Scripture, speaking, writing (www.revryanstratton.com), or participating in community missions and outreach, Ryan is found spending time with his wife and four children.

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I dedicate this book to all those seeking to “love people to life.”

INTRODUCTION

You're in a new organization, work, church, or community. You have studied the demographics and learned about the area's history. You are excited about the possibilities.

You may move to an area you are less keen on living in. You see a bleak future that seeks to keep things at the status quo. You moved there because you sensed you needed to, so you went where you were sent.

No matter where you are, take time to discern whether the people are trying to survive so their community, organization, etc., don't die or if they are trying to live. There is a difference between the two. One only wants to maintain by not losing anyone or anything; the other wants to ensure their sustainability for the future and to make an impact in the world.

Whatever situation you're in, some things should be done beforehand and during your first few months. Over the next few weeks, I'll share some thoughts on working with people who "want to live."

I'm already reminded of the words of Jesus, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10b NIV) Even if it seems the organization does not want to die, there is incredible hope because of the promise of Christ to give the most whole life possible.

Now, on to the first step...

1.

PRAYER

What is the first thing we should do that may seem obvious? This is something we say we should do before everything. It is so apparent that we can easily overlook it.

Prayer should be the first thing we do. Right now, I wonder how many people are going, “duh! Of course, prayer is first!” I also believe people reading this currently think they don’t have the time to pray.

I love this idea, “When we pray, it does not nudge God to move more; it instead opens our eyes to God’s activity around us.” This is what we do when we communicate with our Creator. We pay attention to His work and activity to join right in.

It is easy to fall into the trap that when we say “amen,” the prayer is over. Remember, the Apostle Paul writes, “pray continually.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This is not just about finding ways to talk with God about what’s happening with our world. It is also about being in tune with the voice of the Creator, speaking regularly. Prayer is the communication where we should listen to God more than always just talking to God.

Prayer opens our eyes to God’s work all around us. Several years ago, I heard a story about people praying for their food

in a restaurant. The prayer kept getting interrupted because another person was not doing well. They were visibly upset and sat alone. The people praying kept their eyes closed, finished the prayer, and enjoyed their food. All the while, the person who was upset just sat there nursing an almost empty cup of coffee.

Paying attention to the voice of God, even during our prayers, is essential. God may be speaking to us to go and tend to the hurt of another. We may be the answer to another person's prayer. We can miss so much if we ignore what is happening around us - what God is doing in the situations of the people around us.

As we take time to pray, it is easy to ask God to "bless our work." God is always working and is inviting us to join Him in his work. This is a great chance to seek to bless God's work by joining in and showing His glory through your and my life.

In the community, organization, or church you are in or moving to, how often have we assessed the situation and said, "I know what needs to happen. Let's get to work!" I am completely guilty of doing this many times.

When we walk in and "get to work," we tend to focus on our agendas and seek to make everything the way "it should be." Yes, there is always work to be done, but what if God has sent us to where we are for something more significant, something more important than just restructuring? What if God sent you there to be a reminder of His presence?

Yes, we are all reminders of God's presence in the world, but what if God merely wants us to work on loving the people where they are? If we begin by focusing on the organizational structure or what's wrong, we can easily miss the people there.

Prayer is the most important thing we do. It guides our steps and helps us understand and see where God is working. Prayer helps us see our mission, especially when we are actively listening.

Remember these words from Hebrews 3:15, "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

I pray your new venture is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit working within you. I pray the people around you seek to live life to the fullest and find the Kingdom of Heaven daily.

2.

MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

We have begun a journey to help us love people to life. When we go to a new place, it is easy to assume we know what people must do. In many cases, we may be right.

The best thing to do is to pray and listen to see where God is working and how God is working in the new area we're in. Going to a new place and driving forward with our plans without seriously paying attention to the work of God that is already in progress can create some issues. This is not to say God will not bring redemption through our work, but the work could take longer than expected.

So, we've prayed, and we believe we have listened carefully to God's voice and have opened our eyes to see the work in progress. We must be careful not to succumb to the temptation to get to work immediately. This seems odd to say. The truth is we would do so much better if we took our time.

Taking our time means we begin getting to know the people. Plus, it allows us to "meet people exactly where they are."

Think about that for a minute. How did Jesus Christ begin working with your life? He met you, the person you were, in your exact situation. I would also bet that when you realized Jesus was right there with you, he did not start by saying,

“I’m here to fix your life, so you need to do these steps right away!”

Instead, I believe Jesus first told you, “I love you. Come see what your life can and will be like with me.” He said that when he called the disciples in Matthew 4, Mark 1-2, Luke 5, John 1. He invited the disciples to join him, just as they were. That’s when the transformation begins.

Aside from loving and worshipping God through Jesus Christ, our priority is to love the people God created.

Now we have to ask the question, what does meeting people where they are look like?

This is indeed one of the hardest things we will ever do. This involves merely listening to their stories, what they say about other people, how the people say they live their life, anything they want to tell you--without judgment. It involves us learning the area, past customs, traditions, history of the area, and what dreams people have. All of this is done simultaneously; we are praying for God’s wisdom and vision for the area while we are there.

I have found that most of the time, you will hear people begin to say things similar to what God has been speaking to you. And, when we take the time to get to know the person and witness their life, trust is formed through this relationship. Then, we can begin to see the work of Christ in their life. After all, this is how we would want other people to treat us.

We may have a grand vision, a grand ideal, for an area, for the life of a person or people group, but Jesus may be working on something more profound than what we can see and experience at the surface. This is why it is so important to meet with people where they are, as they are, so we can see how God is using us to work with him in that person’s life.

Here is something I have had to learn to consider in every situation: maybe it's not just about working to change other people's lives; perhaps it is also about God's redemptive and transformative work within our lives.

How is this sitting with you right now? What did you know about this concept? What do you not agree with?

Additional questions to consider about meeting people where they are:

- What do the people do/act like that is hard for you to be around?
- Do you have the patience to continue this work to get to know people for months or even years without getting frustrated or impatient?
- What do you sense God working on in your life as you get to know new people and their stories?

3.

SMALL GROUPS

One of the things I love about moving to a new area is getting to know the people. As we learn about the people, we learn their stories, passions, hopes, and dreams for the future. We also have opportunities to learn more about who they are, their struggles, and what's happening in their lives.

So far, we have talked about praying for God's direction and work in the new area. This is important. After all, we will be able to see and experience much more "success" because we are joining God in the work being done instead of coming in and doing what we want to. Then, we discussed meeting people where they are and allowing them to be genuine, authentic selves.

This is all "big picture" stuff if we think about it. I do much better when I think about the bigger picture because I often struggle at the detail level, but this is where we are heading now.

Find ways to be in a small group in your new area. This will do a few different things. 1) You will be able to spend more intentional time with fewer people and give them a chance to learn about you. 2) You will be able to focus more on relationship building. 3) Trust is developed more in smaller groups than always being on stage or in larger venues.

In a church setting, we often talk about small groups as Bible study groups. These are all good, but I would challenge us to think about small groups differently. Instead of finding ways to impart “wisdom and knowledge,” creating atmospheres where people can share, free of judgment, and build each other up is a key.

What are some ways we can do this? I’ll discuss what we can do in a church setting, but feel free to modify these approaches for your context.

- Bible Study groups are a way for people to get together and knowingly talk about the Bible, theology, and doctrine. These provide settings for people to tell what they have studied and believe about scripture.
- Lunch after worship is a great way to connect and be with people in a public setting and enjoy a meal together.
- Prayer groups.
- Meet together at restaurants and bars to share life.
- Groups for accountability.

There are many different ways we can connect in small groups. This is vital because getting to know someone in a smaller group is much easier.

Using small groups to get to know people should not be why we do them. We should be involved in small groups because we are genuinely interested in other people and their lives; they would be interested in our lives.

God will work as we continue to learn about the area, pray for direction, meet people, and share our lives. It will be incredible to see what God will continue to do to help the church, organization, business, neighborhood, etc.

For an excellent book resource on starting small groups within a church that promote life transformation through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, check out Kevin Watson’s book *The*

Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience.

4.

VISIONING

One of my favorite things is envisioning the possibilities of the future.

I do much better in bigger-picture planning and thinking than I do regarding minor details. The details are essential. Visioning is not just about long-term planning or thinking of how an organization/person/church can be in the next generations. Visioning is about taking the plans and putting them into action.

A vision without action is just a daydream. In this aspect of helping people/organizations/churches live for the future, we are doing a few different things:

- We are looking where they have been.
- Where they are now.
- What is possible with the current resources (and resources that will become available)?
- Help them see the gifts and passions already available within the organization.

Visioning has to be covered in prayer from the beginning, during, and execution. I have also learned that listening to the hopes and dreams of the people is another place God is speaking about the future. As we have been listening and learning from the people in our small groups, we have an

incredible chance to hear the people's passions. This is where we should continue with the visioning process.

As we have been praying and seeking God's direction and focus for our new endeavor, we are also searching for the places where God is at work. If we pay attention, we can hear God speaking through the people's passions.

Visioning is a significant picture activity and requires looking at the big picture. You should pause and write down what you consider part of the big picture.

In my experience, we tend to sell the "big picture" short for only what we can see. The challenge here is to look beyond what is seen. Look at the organization, the people involved, the culture in and around, what has been done, what is going on, the resources in the past, the resources in the present, targets, and goals for the future.

This is just a small list, but it does give us some more significant things to think about and consider. It should help us expand our horizons to think about more than just the amount of people and the bottom line. Visioning requires us to dream and act toward a goal of how the organization/person could be in the time frame we decide. This helps us with acting upon the vision.

As far as time, we focus more on the following year, five years, or ten years down the road. How would it affect your vision to consider how things could be in the next 50-100 years? Is that too far into the future?

Think about this. Everything we do is going to last for a short period, or it will continue for an extended period. When we think more about the next 50-100 years, it helps us focus more on the future generations to help make sure there is something for them. This means we work toward something that may or may not be comfortable here and now.

As you spend time in prayer, listening to people's passions, and learning about the past to see future potential, praise God for the opportunity to be in the place you are in the time you are.

God has given and will give vision. Pay close attention and continually talk with others; it is more of a community effort of prayer and work. Watch to see all God will do.

Questions to consider about visioning:

- How have you typically planned for the future in the past? Is there anything written here you haven't considered before?
- What are you excited about in the new area/position?
- What do you think about planning for the next 50-100 years instead of just a year, 5-10 years, down the road? What is challenging about this? How can you work through the challenges?

5.

SHOW GOD'S LOVE DAILY

As we continue loving people and organizations to life, we remember we have been praying and seeking God's direction, we have been allowing the people to be their authentic selves without judgment, we have been meeting with people in small groups, and we have begun a visioning process for the future of the church/person/organization.

This may all seem like a simple, easy-to-do process (it is), but it will take time. It can take as long as God needs. We must be patient when things are going differently than we would like.

With this in mind, the saying "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" is accurate. When we are in a new area, the temptation is to go ahead and begin further steps, visions, and processes without really taking the time to learn the history and the passions of the people or loving the people.

Our mission is to show people the value and worth they have in God through Jesus Christ. Because the people have value in the eyes of God, they also should have value in our eyes.

I have dared congregations and people to pray a very dangerous prayer: to ask God to break our hearts as his

heart breaks. Why is this a dangerous prayer? If we begin to see the world, the redemptive potential of the people, and the world, we will find ourselves more compassionate and loving. This goes against the flow and MO of the world.

We hear messages about how evil people are, how often people do bad things, and how we should distance ourselves from those unlike us. The only issue with this is Jesus never did such a thing. He was always with the people no one liked or were outcasts, and he made them experience and lived into the worth God had placed in them.

Helping people move from a stagnant place means we have to make sure we love the people, and then we show people love through acts and words of grace.

What are some ideas for this?

Number one is to spend time with the people and listen to their stories. This is very important because you can just be present with the people. We all love to know other people have an interest in our lives. Now, we may not be able to get to everyone at first, but this is okay. There are still many ways to try and interact with as many people as possible (many of which we have already talked about in the past few weeks).

Some other things we could do are:

- Personal, handwritten notes: Have you noticed how many handwritten notes come through the mail now? When you get one, how do you feel?
- Phone calls or texts to check on the people
- Visiting when sick or at least calling
- Showing up to important events with them
- Thank you notes
- Words of encouragement
- Of course, praying with and for people

These may all seem like small things, and they are, but they have a massive impact on the lives of the people we are around. As we continue to work through a process of loving people to life, remember the great love God has for the world and the people.

Ask God for help to love the people as he loves them. Seek to do everything, within reason, to show people God's love through you. Show and remind them of their value in the eyes of Christ. Help them remember their worth because they are created in the image of God.

Then, watch God's love begin to take over in you and see how much you care for the people you work with and live around.

6.

PRACTICE & PROMOTE SABBATH

How many people do you know that can work 7-10 days a week (yes, I know how many days are in a week) and still have the energy and desire to live a full life outside of work? Plain and simple, we can't.

In the book of Genesis 1-2, Exodus 20, and reiterated in Deuteronomy 5, God is teaching about a Sabbath rest. This is something we really should pay attention to. A day of rest is so much more than a day "off." It is so much more than a day to "catch up." A day of rest is just that—A. Day. Of. Rest. Period.

So, what does this look like?

It means not doing any regular work. I have heard pastors talk about a Sabbath day as a time when you do not do your "normal" job. If you consider it work, don't do it. Instead, do things that you enjoy and re-energize you. For example, if mowing the lawn seems like work, don't do it on your day off, but if mowing the lawn is something you enjoy, it relaxes you, and by all means, cut the grass on your day out.

Another thing to consider is a Sabbath day is not a day to be lazy. This is not when we should sit around and do nothing. Even when resting, we can still grow in our knowledge and

love of/for God and other people. Find ways to worship, read, be outside, and spend quality time with family/friends.

So, why does all of this matter?

Ask yourself, “Do I trust God with all my heart, soul, mind, strength, and work? All of my life?” If the answer is “yes!” then how we spend our Sabbath shows what we believe about trusting God with everything. If we take time to rest and do not do our “normal work,” no matter how much we must do, we trust God that everything will get done. We show we can trust God to refuel and prepare us for the week ahead.

We are not meant to be workaholics. We are meant to do the work God designed us to do. Only some things must be done (I must keep reminding myself of this daily).

Taking time to rest and time off work makes our minds more focused. We have a better heart for the work we’re doing.

I pray you continue to find joy, rest, and vision in your walk with God as you step out in faith and do the work God has given you.

Here is the link to my blog post on Sabbath Rest from a few years ago:

<https://revryanstratton.com/2016/10/06/sabbath-retreat/>

7.

GET OUT OF THE WAY - FIND WAYS TO CELEBRATE

One of the fun things to do is sit back and watch God do the work. This has challenged me in the past because I have been the one who wanted to make sure everything was running and going smoothly.

But here is something for us to consider. We have prayed. We have begun to meet with people. We have interacted and gotten to know people in small groups. We have taken time to vision as a team. We have shown God's incredible love through small and consistent acts. We have made sure we were practicing and promoting Sabbath rest.

This has been a challenging road. It has not happened as quickly as we may have liked. But God has been working in and through us. God was doing the work through the Holy Spirit and has been using us as willing and able vessels. Be proud of what you have seen God do in and through you.

Now, we celebrate as we see what God has in store for the person/organization/church. Be prepared for what you witness to be something different than what was planned or even better.

If we continue with this same “process” these past few posts have lined out, we will see a renewal movement with people relearning what it means to experience and fully live in the life of God through Jesus Christ.

We can be proud of our work but give God all the glory. Yes, we were part of God’s work because we joined him, but be sure to give all glory and credit to God. After all, we have been working hard to bring people to experience and live the grace and new life God offers through Jesus Christ.

The work we have been able to do has guided the people to know what it means to live. We have been able to LOVE people, through the love of God, to LIFE. Hopefully, there is no desire to return to the simple and easy status quo, but rather, keep living and moving in the life and direction God has in store.

Keep going through these chapters. Keep praying and meeting new people. Keep seeking the wisdom and guidance from God through the Holy Spirit. Allow God to work in and through you. Watch God do incredible work in the hearts of the people.

Our mission is, of course, to work with God for the redemption and transformation of the world. We’ll get to do this one step, one person at a time.

I am praying for you in your work and mission.

“I’m sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6 CEB)



RYAN STRATTON

I would love to connect with you!

Contact me at revryanstratton@gmail.com OR through my website: www.revryanstratton.com

I am praying for you and for the success of the Kingdom of Heaven right where you are as you seek to LOVE PEOPLE TO LIFE.