

COMPASSION MINISTRY RESOURCES

Compassion Ministry Planning Guide

From Assessment to Action

A practical planning tool for churches preparing to begin a compassion ministry

Use after completing the Community Listening & Ministry Opportunity Guide and the Church Ministry Assets & Readiness Assessment.

Pray carefully. Plan realistically. Serve faithfully.

www.compassionministryresources.com



How to Use This Guide

This guide is for a church that has already listened to its community and taken an honest look at its own people, facilities, finances, skills, leadership, partnerships, and readiness. It helps the planning team turn those findings into a ministry that is focused, safe, realistic, sustainable, and rooted in the love of Christ.

You do not need to answer every question in one meeting. Work through the guide in order, assign research when information is missing, and pause when the team discovers an issue that should be resolved before moving forward.

The Goal

By the end of this guide, your team should be able to explain whom the ministry will serve, what it will provide, who will lead it, what safeguards are needed, what it will cost, how it will begin, and how you will know whether it is helping.

Planning Team Information

Church

Ministry being considered

Planning team leader

Church staff or leadership contact

Date planning began

Target decision date

Who is participating in the planning process?

- ☐ Pastor or church staff representative
- ☐ Proposed ministry leader
- ☐ People who completed the community listening or assessment work
- ☐ People familiar with church facilities, finances, policies, or insurance
- ☐ Potential volunteers or people with relevant ministry experience
- ☐ Community partner or person with lived experience, when appropriate

1. Confirm the Need, Calling, and Church Fit

Before building a schedule or recruiting volunteers, confirm that the ministry idea still makes sense when the community findings and church readiness findings are placed side by side.

What repeated need or barrier did the community listening process reveal?

What evidence tells us this is more than one isolated request or assumption?

What strengths or resources in our church make a response possible?

Why do we believe our church should respond to this need?

How does this ministry fit the mission, theology, priorities, and current season of our church?

Biblical Foundation

Identify one or more Scriptures or biblical principles that should shape not only why the ministry exists, but how people are treated.

Scripture(s) and principles

What should these biblical principles look like in practice?

Purpose Statement

Keep the purpose statement short enough that volunteers can remember it and leaders can use it to make decisions.

Simple Format

Our ministry exists to _____ by providing _____ for
_____ while demonstrating the love and hope of Jesus Christ.

Final purpose statement

2. Clearly Identify Who the Ministry Will Serve

New ministries are usually stronger when they begin with a clearly defined group rather than trying to serve everyone at once. A focused beginning also makes volunteer training, safety planning, referrals, scheduling, and evaluation more manageable.

Primary group we hope to serve

Service Area

- ☐ Members of our church
- ☐ Our immediate neighborhood
- ☐ Our city or town
- ☐ Our county or parish
- ☐ People referred by partner organizations
- ☐ A specific school, recovery program, housing area, or other setting
- ☐ Another defined area: _____

Participation Guidelines

Who can participate?

What requirements are truly necessary for safety, fairness, or program fit?

What needs are beyond the ministry's role and should be referred elsewhere?

Keep Barriers Low

Do not collect information or create eligibility rules simply because other programs do. Ask only for what is necessary to serve responsibly and fairly.

3. Define What the Ministry Will - and Will Not - Provide

Working ministry name

Type of ministry

What will we actually provide? Be specific about the class, service, assistance, mentoring, distribution, support, or referral process.

What will we not provide?

Examples may include direct cash assistance, emergency housing, transportation, childcare, professional counseling, legal advice, medical services, overnight care, or ongoing case management unless the church has specifically chosen and prepared to provide them.

When a need falls outside our role, what will we do?

A Simple Boundary Test

- ☐ Is this request part of the ministry's stated purpose?
- ☐ Do we have trained people and clear authority to respond?
- ☐ Can we respond consistently rather than making exceptions based on emotion?
- ☐ Could responding create a safety, financial, legal, privacy, or dependency concern?
- ☐ Would a trusted partner or professional be better equipped to help?

4. Choose a Small, Testable Ministry Model

A pilot allows the church to learn before it builds something larger. Starting small is not a lack of vision; it is a way to protect people, volunteers, finances, and the future of the ministry.

Proposed Schedule

- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Twice a month
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Seasonally
- ☐ By appointment
- ☐ In defined sessions or semesters
- ☐ Other: _____

Proposed day and time

Location

Maximum number of participants at launch

Minimum number of volunteers needed to operate safely

Pilot Period

☐ 6-8 weeks

☐ 10-12 weeks

☐ One semester

☐ 3 months

☐ 6 months

☐ Other: _____

What do we need to learn during the pilot?

What would tell us to continue, adjust, partner, pause, or stop?

5. Decide What Meaningful Progress Will Look Like

Attendance matters, but it does not tell the whole story. Decide what change, stability, connection, learning, or next step you hope the ministry will help make possible.

During the first few months, what progress would we hope participants experience?

Over time, what changes or next steps would we hope to see?

What growth or learning do we hope to see in our volunteers and church?

Possible Measures

- ☐ Attendance or participation consistency
- ☐ Goals completed
- ☐ Education or skill progress
- ☐ Employment or training progress
- ☐ Successful referrals or connections to services
- ☐ Improved stability in the area the ministry addresses
- ☐ Participant feedback
- ☐ Volunteer retention and health
- ☐ Spiritual conversations or discipleship opportunities, recorded respectfully and appropriately
- ☐ Other: _____

Measure What Matters

Choose a small number of useful measures. Do not create paperwork that does not help the ministry serve people, steward resources, or make wiser decisions.

6. Establish Leadership, Oversight, and Backup

Ministry leader/coordinator

Primary responsibilities

Church staff or leadership contact

Backup leader if the primary leader is unavailable

Decision / Responsibility	Who Has Authority?
Approve ordinary expenses	
Approve unusual or emergency expenses	
Approve volunteers	
Change procedures	
Respond to participant complaints	
Handle safety or incident concerns	

Decision / Responsibility	Who Has Authority?
Speak publicly for the ministry	
Suspend or cancel ministry operations	
Access confidential records	

How will leaders report to the church and how often?

Avoid One-Person Dependency

If one person holds all the passwords, relationships, records, procedures, and decision-making knowledge, the ministry is fragile. Build shared knowledge and backup from the beginning.

7. Determine Volunteer Roles and Training

Recruit for defined roles rather than simply asking who wants to help. Clear roles make it easier for people to say yes, receive the right training, and know when to ask for help.

Volunteer Role	Number Needed	Main Responsibilities
Ministry coordinator		
Welcome / registration		
Instructor / mentor / coach		
Hospitality		
Prayer / spiritual support		
Supplies / inventory		
Childcare, if offered		
Transportation, if offered		
Safety / facility support		
Data / records support		
Other		

Volunteer Expectations

- ☐ Attendance and reliability
- ☐ Required training
- ☐ Screening or background checks when appropriate

- ☐ Confidentiality and privacy
- ☐ Communication boundaries
- ☐ Participant interaction and conduct
- ☐ Handling money, gifts, rides, or personal requests
- ☐ Incident reporting
- ☐ Who to contact when a volunteer is unsure or concerned
- ☐ Rest, rotation, and time away from service

Training Topics

- ☐ Ministry purpose and whom it serves
- ☐ Dignity, respect, and strengths-based service
- ☐ Economic, cultural, literacy, language, and disability awareness
- ☐ Trauma awareness when appropriate
- ☐ Healthy boundaries and confidentiality
- ☐ Safety, emergencies, and referral procedures
- ☐ Spiritual care that is genuine and non-coercive
- ☐ Role-specific procedures, technology and communication practices, and when to seek help

8. Design the Participant Experience

Imagine the ministry from the perspective of someone arriving for the first time. The process should be clear, respectful, welcoming, and easy to navigate.

How People Will Hear About the Ministry

- ☐ Church referrals
- ☐ Community organizations
- ☐ Schools or educational partners
- ☐ Social service agencies
- ☐ Recovery or reentry partners
- ☐ Healthcare or counseling partners
- ☐ Church website
- ☐ Social media
- ☐ Printed materials
- ☐ Personal invitation / word of mouth
- ☐ Other: _____

How will someone make first contact?

Will registration be required? If yes, what information is genuinely necessary?

What happens from the moment someone arrives until they leave?

How will participants know what to expect, where to go, and whom to ask for help?

How will we offer prayer, Scripture, spiritual encouragement, or opportunities for deeper conversation?

Protect Dignity

People should not have to surrender unnecessary personal information, endure public embarrassment, or feel pressured spiritually in order to receive appropriate help. Christian identity can be clear while service remains respectful and relational.

9. Plan for Accessibility, Dignity, and Practical Barriers

A ministry may be well designed and still be hard to use. Think through the barriers that could keep the intended participants from actually reaching or benefiting from it.

Possible Barrier	How We Will Respond
Transportation	
Childcare or caregiving	
Work schedule	
Physical accessibility	
Language or communication	
Low literacy	
Limited digital access or skills	
Fear, shame, or distrust	
Cost to participate	

Possible Barrier	How We Will Respond
Identification / paperwork needs	
Safety or family concerns	
Other	

What accommodations or adjustments are realistic for us?

What barriers require partnership rather than a church solution?

10. Plan Facilities, Technology, Supplies, and Access

Space Needed

- ☐ Classroom
- ☐ Fellowship hall
- ☐ Kitchen
- ☐ Storage
- ☐ Private conversation area
- ☐ Computer / internet access
- ☐ Outdoor area
- ☐ Childcare area
- ☐ Distribution area
- ☐ Accessible restroom
- ☐ Other: _____

Facility and Access Questions

- ☐ Entrances and signage are clear
- ☐ Parking or drop-off is adequate
- ☐ Space is reasonably accessible for the people we plan to serve
- ☐ Restrooms are available
- ☐ Lighting and exterior access are safe
- ☐ Confidential conversations can occur privately
- ☐ Supplies and records can be stored securely
- ☐ Someone is assigned to unlock, secure, and close the building

[] Cleaning responsibility is clear

[] Weather or emergency cancellation procedures are clear

Technology and Equipment

Item / Need	Already Available	Need to Obtain	Estimated Cost
Computers / tablets			
Internet / Wi-Fi			
Printer / copier			
Phone or ministry contact method			
Registration or recordkeeping tool			
Curriculum / materials			
Storage / locked file area			
Safety supplies			
Other			

11. Build a Realistic and Sustainable Budget

A low-cost ministry still needs a realistic budget. Include recurring expenses, replacement costs, screening, training, technology, supplies, and participant support rather than planning only for launch day.

Start-Up Costs

Expense	Estimated Cost	Confirmed?
Curriculum / participant materials		
Equipment / technology		
Furniture / storage		
Printing / signage		
Background checks / screening		
Safety supplies		
Volunteer training		
Publicity / communication		
Initial food / supplies		
Other		

Ongoing Costs

Expense	Monthly	Annual
Supplies / materials		
Food / hospitality		
Printing / communication		
Technology / subscriptions		
Transportation / fuel, if applicable		
Insurance-related cost, if applicable		
Volunteer training / appreciation		
Other		

Estimated start-up cost

Estimated annual ministry cost

Possible Funding Sources

- ☐ Church budget
- ☐ Designated gifts
- ☐ Individual donors
- ☐ Sunday School / small groups
- ☐ Community partners
- ☐ Grants
- ☐ Fundraising activities
- ☐ In-kind donations
- ☐ Other: _____

What happens if one donor, grant, or funding source ends?

12. Build Partnerships and Referral Pathways

The ministry does not need to become every service a participant may need. Strong referral relationships allow the church to stay focused while helping people connect with appropriate support.

Organization / Partner	Contact	How We Might Work Together
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Organization / Partner	Contact	How We Might Work Together

Referral Resources

Need	Primary Referral	Contact / Notes
Housing		
Food / basic needs		
Counseling / mental health		
Employment / workforce		
Education / HSE / literacy		
Healthcare		
Legal assistance		
Recovery services		
Domestic violence / safety		
Child / family services		
Transportation		
Other		

Keep It Current

Assign someone to review key referral information regularly. Programs, contact information, service areas, and eligibility requirements can change.

13. Establish Policies, Boundaries, and Safety Procedures

Important decisions should not be made for the first time in the middle of a crisis. The church may already have policies that apply. Identify what exists, what needs adapting, and what must be completed before launch.

Area	Already Covered	Needs Work	Not Applicable
Volunteer screening / background checks			

Area	Already Covered	Needs Work	Not Applicable
Child and vulnerable-person safety			
Confidentiality and participant records			
Financial assistance / benevolence			
Donations and gifts			
Transportation			
Building and facility safety			
Medical emergencies			
Threatening or disruptive behavior			
Incident reporting			
Social media / photography			
Texting / communication with participants			
Home visits / one-on-one meetings			
Mandatory reporting obligations, if applicable			
Severe weather / cancellation			
Data / technology use			

Policies or procedures that must be completed before launch

Safety Questions

Who must be present whenever the ministry operates?

Will any volunteer ever be alone with a participant? If yes, under what approved circumstances?

What is the procedure for a medical emergency?

What is the procedure if someone becomes threatening, disruptive, or unsafe?

Who receives and reviews incident reports?

Who contacts church leadership, emergency services, parents/guardians, or another responsible party when appropriate?

When Outside Guidance Is Needed

Confirm applicable church policies, insurance requirements, and legal responsibilities with the appropriate church leaders, insurer, or qualified professional. This planning guide is not a substitute for legal, medical, counseling, or insurance advice.

14. Plan Communication, Privacy, and Data Care

Volunteer Communication

How will schedules, changes, training, and urgent information be communicated?

Participant Communication

How will reminders, cancellations, follow-up, and referrals be communicated?

Church and Public Communication

How will the congregation hear about volunteer needs, prayer needs, celebrations, and appropriate ministry impact?

Privacy and Information

- ☐ We will collect only information we actually need.
- ☐ Access to participant information will be limited to appropriate people.
- ☐ Paper records will be stored securely.
- ☐ Digital records will be stored in an approved location with controlled access.
- ☐ We will obtain appropriate permission before sharing identifiable stories or photographs.

- ☐ Prayer requests will be shared carefully and without unnecessary personal detail.
- ☐ Volunteers will know what may and may not be discussed outside the ministry.
- ☐ We have a plan for disposing of records when they are no longer needed.

What participant information will we collect?

Who may access it?

Where will it be stored?

15. Create a Simple Participant and Ministry Workflow

A simple workflow helps volunteers provide a consistent experience and reduces confusion. Keep the process as short as possible while still being safe and responsible.

1. How does someone hear about the ministry?

2. How do they contact us or register?

3. What happens before the first visit?

4. What happens when they arrive?

5. What service, class, mentoring, or assistance do they receive?

6. How are relationships and spiritual care handled appropriately?

7. How are additional needs noticed without turning volunteers into case managers?

8. How are referrals made?

9. How do we document only what is necessary?

10. How do we know when participation is complete, paused, or no longer appropriate?

11. Is there an appropriate pathway for former participants to stay connected, volunteer, mentor others, or become involved in the church?

16. Decide What to Track and How to Review Progress

Track enough information to learn and steward the ministry well, but not so much that paperwork becomes the ministry.

Information We May Track

- ☐ Number of participants and new participants
- ☐ Attendance or participation consistency
- ☐ Volunteer hours or volunteer participation
- ☐ Services, classes, or materials provided
- ☐ Referrals made
- ☐ Goals or milestones completed
- ☐ Education or job-readiness progress
- ☐ Employment or training outcomes, when relevant
- ☐ Participant feedback
- ☐ Volunteer feedback and retention
- ☐ Ministry expenses
- ☐ Safety or incident patterns
- ☐ Other: _____

Information our ministry will actually track

Who will maintain the records?

Where will records be stored?

Review Schedule

- ☐ Monthly during start-up
- ☐ After the first 30 days
- ☐ After the first 60 days

- ☐ After the first 90 days
- ☐ At the end of the pilot
- ☐ Every six months
- ☐ Annually
- ☐ Other: _____

Review Questions

- ☐ Are we serving the people we intended to serve?
- ☐ What are participants telling us?
- ☐ What are volunteers telling us?
- ☐ What is working well?
- ☐ What is confusing, unsafe, or harder than expected?
- ☐ Are volunteers overextended?
- ☐ Are costs sustainable?
- ☐ Are referrals and partnerships working?
- ☐ What should we continue, change, stop, or test next?

17. Make the Pilot Decision

At the end of the pilot, do not assume the only successful outcome is expansion. A wise decision may be to continue at the same size, adjust the model, partner with another organization, pause for additional preparation, or stop.

Decision	What It Means
Continue	The model is working well enough to continue with normal improvements.
Adjust	The need is real, but the schedule, process, staffing, location, or service model needs change.
Partner	Another church or organization can meet part of the need better, or shared effort would strengthen the ministry.
Pause	The idea may be sound, but leadership, safety, funding, volunteers, policies, or capacity are not ready.
Stop	The model is not meeting the intended need, cannot be sustained, or no longer fits the church's calling and capacity.

What evidence will our team use to make this decision?

Who has final authority to approve the decision?

18. Create the Launch Plan

Proposed ministry launch date

8-12 Weeks Before Launch

- ☐ Confirm purpose, population, and pilot model
- ☐ Receive appropriate church approval
- ☐ Confirm ministry leader and backup
- ☐ Confirm facilities and schedule
- ☐ Approve preliminary budget and funding
- ☐ Identify policies and safety procedures that must be completed
- ☐ Begin recruiting volunteers
- ☐ Contact key community partners and referral sources

4-8 Weeks Before Launch

- ☐ Screen volunteers as required
- ☐ Complete volunteer orientation and role-specific training
- ☐ Purchase or gather supplies
- ☐ Prepare participant forms and privacy practices
- ☐ Finalize referral list
- ☐ Confirm building access and safety procedures
- ☐ Set communication methods
- ☐ Begin appropriate publicity or referrals

2-4 Weeks Before Launch

- ☐ Walk through the full participant process
- ☐ Confirm volunteer assignments and backup coverage
- ☐ Prepare rooms and supplies
- ☐ Test technology and equipment
- ☐ Confirm partner and referral contacts
- ☐ Review emergency and incident procedures
- ☐ Confirm accessibility and signage
- ☐ Pray together as a ministry team

One Week Before Launch

- ☐ Confirm volunteer schedule
- ☐ Prepare participant materials
- ☐ Confirm building access and keys
- ☐ Prepare welcome area

- ☐ Review first-day responsibilities
- ☐ Contact registered participants, if appropriate
- ☐ Double-check privacy and recordkeeping procedures
- ☐ Pray for the people who will come

19. Conduct a Pre-Launch Walk-Through

Gather the volunteer team and walk through the ministry as if you were a participant arriving for the first time. Include someone who was not involved in designing the process if possible; fresh eyes often notice confusing steps.

- ☐ It is obvious where someone should enter.
- ☐ Someone is assigned to greet participants.
- ☐ Signage and directions are clear.
- ☐ Registration steps are understandable and necessary.
- ☐ The environment feels welcoming and respectful.
- ☐ Accessibility concerns have been considered.
- ☐ Privacy is protected.
- ☐ Volunteers know their responsibilities and who is in charge.
- ☐ Supplies and technology are ready.
- ☐ Emergency and incident procedures are understood.
- ☐ The closing / departure process is clear.
- ☐ The overall experience communicates dignity, calm, and respect.

Problems or changes identified

Who will correct each issue before launch?

20. Guard Against Common Ministry Mistakes

Trying to Meet Every Need

A focused ministry can be compassionate without becoming responsible for every problem a person faces.

Growing Too Quickly

Serving a smaller number of people well is often wiser than expanding before leadership, volunteers, funding, and systems are ready.

Depending on One Person

Shared leadership, written procedures, and backup access protect the ministry when a key leader is absent.

Recruiting Without Training

Good intentions are not a substitute for role clarity, preparation, supervision, and support.

Doing for People What They Can Do

Whenever appropriate, compassion should strengthen choice, responsibility, skills, confidence, and participation rather than creating unnecessary dependency.

Collecting Too Much Information

Do not gather personal details simply because they might be useful later. Collect what is needed and protect it.

Measuring Only Numbers

Attendance and output matter, but they do not automatically show whether people are becoming more stable, connected, skilled, or hopeful.

Ignoring Volunteer Fatigue

Build rotation, appreciation, rest, communication, and reasonable expectations into the ministry from the beginning.

Operating Without Boundaries

Unclear limits around money, rides, housing, communication, emergencies, and personal relationships can overwhelm both participants and volunteers.

Forgetting Relationships

A class, meal, food box, referral, or mentoring session can meet a real need; respectful relationships often create the setting for trust, encouragement, spiritual care, and lasting change.

Failing to Partner

A church does not honor people by duplicating a service that a trusted community partner already provides better.

Refusing to Change the Plan

Evaluation is not failure. A faithful ministry learns, adjusts, and sometimes stops doing what is no longer helpful or sustainable.

21. Final Ministry Planning Summary

Ministry name

Ministry purpose

Primary population served

Primary need being addressed

What we will provide

What we will not provide

Ministry leader

Backup leader

Church oversight contact

Number of volunteers needed

Location

Schedule

Maximum participants at launch

Pilot period

Estimated start-up cost

Estimated annual cost

Primary funding source

Key community partners

Most important referral resources

Policies or procedures still required

How we will measure progress

Review dates

Proposed launch date

22. Ministry Readiness Checklist

Before announcing the ministry publicly, confirm that the church can answer yes to the following. A “not yet” answer is not a failure; it identifies work that should be completed before launch.

- ☐ We have a documented and repeated community need, not only an assumption.
- ☐ We know what related services already exist and where partnership may be wiser than duplication.
- ☐ We have identified church resources and limitations that affect this ministry.
- ☐ The ministry fits the mission, theology, priorities, and current capacity of our church.
- ☐ We have clearly defined whom we hope to serve.
- ☐ We have clearly defined what the ministry will and will not provide.
- ☐ We have chosen a manageable pilot model.
- ☐ We have identified meaningful measures of progress.
- ☐ We have an approved ministry leader and backup leader.
- ☐ Decision-making authority and church oversight are clear.
- ☐ We know how many volunteers we need and what each role requires.
- ☐ Volunteers will receive appropriate screening, orientation, training, and supervision.
- ☐ We have an approved location, schedule, and building-access plan.
- ☐ Accessibility and practical barriers have been considered.
- ☐ We understand start-up and ongoing costs.
- ☐ Funding is realistic enough to sustain the pilot.
- ☐ Needed policies, boundaries, and safety procedures will be in place.
- ☐ Emergency and incident procedures are clear.
- ☐ Participant information and privacy will be protected.
- ☐ We have current referral resources for needs beyond our role.
- ☐ We have a simple participant workflow from first contact through completion or follow-up.
- ☐ We know what information we will track and where it will be stored.
- ☐ We know when and how the pilot will be evaluated.
- ☐ We have completed a pre-launch walk-through.
- ☐ We have a realistic launch date.

[] We have prayed together and are willing to adjust the plan if wisdom, circumstances, or new information point in another direction.

Readiness Decision

[] READY TO PILOT - the essentials are in place.

[] STRENGTHEN FIRST - the need is clear, but specific gaps must be addressed before launch.

[] PARTNER - another organization or church should provide part or all of the response.

[] NOT NOW - this ministry is not a wise fit for the church at this time.

What must happen next?

A Final Word

A compassion ministry does not have to begin big to make a meaningful difference. It may begin with a few volunteers, a class, a meal route, a mentoring relationship, a small distribution effort, or one practical response to a need the church has taken time to understand.

The community listening process helped the church understand the need. The church assets and readiness assessment clarified what the church can responsibly bring. This guide connects those two pictures and turns them into a focused plan.

Begin with what God has provided. Serve with dignity, healthy boundaries, strong relationships, wise partnerships, and careful stewardship. Evaluate honestly and adjust when needed. Most importantly, remember that every number represents a person with a story, strengths, struggles, hopes, and God-given worth. Compassion ministry is the privilege of meeting people in real life with practical help and the love and hope of Christ.

Next Step

After the planning team completes this guide and receives appropriate church approval, use a First 90 Days Launch Plan to turn the final decisions into a short, accountable start-up schedule.

Compassion Ministry Resources

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