



Missional-Driven Business

How often do you have an opportunity to think about – “What’s your mission?” or “What’s your organization’s or business’s mission?”

On Tuesday, August 14th, those at BELIEVES had the chance to get to know John Houseal, Founder of GIVN Water (www.givnwater.com), and Jim Reese, President and CEO of the Atlanta Mission (www.atlantamission.org) – and explore what it’s like for them leading a missional-driven business and organization.



Houseal, who founded GIVN Water in 2015, shared that the most difficult part of starting GIVN, a missional-driven business that is officially a B Corp (<https://bcorporation.net/>), was starting.

“I prayed that I could learn faster than I failed,” he said. “My background was with the CDC and other areas, not consumer-retail.”

Reese, who has been leading the Atlanta Mission for 10 years, said that being in the role he is in is the last place he had expected to be.

“I had been in business for many years, including being the CEO of Randstad,” Reese stated. “One day I got a call from someone I knew telling me there was this opportunity that would be great for me professionally and for my faith.”

Reese shared that as he prayed and discerned what to do regarding the opportunity, what he heard the Lord say was “be fully dependent on me.”

“This is easy to say, but hard to live,” said Reese. “What I was also hearing from God was I could do anything but that He wanted me to go serve the least of these, and that there’s the need to do excellent – not mediocrity – for the poor.”

Today, the Atlanta Mission serves approximately 1,000 people each day with the mission to “transform through Christ the lives of those affected by homelessness.”

Reese said he and his team will serve anyone who comes to their door, and won’t beat people over the head with the Bible.

“We need to be the hands and the feet of Christ.”

He also commented, “I wouldn’t have known what I’d have missed, if I hadn’t done this role.”

What were some of the scariest or most daunting considerations Houseal or Reese faced when beginning to lead the organizations they do now – and how did they work their way through them?

“Pricing ‘giving clean water for a day’ for every bottle purchased was the most daunting challenge prior to launch,” Houseal stated.

He added that like many things, the clarity to find the way through such challenges comes in random moments of inspiration.

“I ran across an app called ‘Water is Basic’ that said \$5 gives someone water for a year,” recalled Houseal. “So I called them to know how that worked. When they answered and I asked my question, they said, ‘What app? Oh, you mean, you saw it?’”



Ultimately, this led to a mental model for Houseal of how to overcome this most daunting issue to have social impact.

“It’s not about a bottle of water, but about making it easy for people to do good. As things have evolved we’ve focused on measuring how sustainable each investment is and how we’re going to count what a day of clean water is,” he said.

CTK Parishioner John Ribka then asked Houseal, “Do you actually dig the well, or just contribute money?”

“We focus on locally led organizations doing the work,” responded Houseal. “We do a site visit to partners, like in South Sudan. There can be an academic component to your business, so just going and visiting these communities can be refreshing.”

Another attendee then asked Houseal how he balanced getting his product at an affordable price and being a responsible citizen while having impact.

Houseal answered, “It’s tough to balance trying to get a premium for the mission, trying to save money, and having an environmental impact all at the same time. One thing that’s interesting is there’s no real difference in what goes into sparkling versus non-sparkling water when it’s made, but adding bubbles allows a premium to be charged, so we have to look at that.”

Reese then shared a bit about some of the scariest or most daunting considerations he faced when beginning to lead the Atlanta Mission.

“I took over in August 2008, and you remember what happened in October 2008,” he said. “As God had said – ‘I want you to be fully dependent on me’ – so this was real quick.”

Another thing Reese pointed out was that in ministry often times if you can do it yourself, you don’t include God.

“Often business people coming into ministry try to use skills and then have God ‘clean up what they don’t have.’ I think it’s really about being fully dependent instead.”

He then added, “When you deal with people who show up at your door with all they own in a bag and you tell them ‘God’s enough,’ you have to believe it or else you’re a liar.”

CTK Parishioner Mike Kirchner asked Reese, “How have the issues of the poor changed in your 10 years in the role?”

“Moms with kids issues are over the top,” Reese responded. “60-70% of the kids have been sexually abused. Men have been abused too, but they just don’t talk about it. Now they are talking about it more.”

Another thing Reese brought up that might not be obvious until it’s pointed out – you don’t see women with kids on the street because if they were the moms would have their kids taken.



“So they’re in these horrible areas instead, which is where the abuse occurs,” he said. “The complexity of their issues is increasing.”

When CTK Parishioner Fernando Silva followed on with a question about the psychological and medical side of what those who are homeless face, Reese commented that he felt this was the least served part of their situation.

“I also think part of the problem is over-prescription of medications that creates an unbelievable problem with a stigma that never gets to the root,” Reese stated.

And another thing Reese said ...

“I also think people would be shocked how many people come from hospitals and are dropped off at our facilities.”

He went on to say that the issue that most who are homeless face isn’t financial poverty, but relational poverty.

“Our desire isn’t to get bigger, it’s to get better. We had 150+ people leave homelessness last year.”

One advantage that Reese feels he has from his business experience to make this possible is the experience of “swimming in the lane that you do well.”

“We’ll never be experts in medical, but there are others who are,” he said.

How does Houseal “swim in his own lane” while also building the ecosystem around GIVN?

“It’s tempting when you’re small to want to work with bigger organizations, but it’s not always helpful,” he commented.

With water specifically, Houseal first thought about “where do you buy water?”

“Convenience stores were what we thought of first – that was a horrible idea,” he said. “Then we thought of Whole Foods – a less horrible idea. Finally, we thought to go sell to those who don’t care about water to build traction. This has led to a focus on fast casual establishments, like Chipotle.”

Furthermore, Houseal and his team decided that everyone they engage with needs to be a locally-focused organization.

“The key in all this has been to understand where we needed to be at different stages.”

Understanding what the full picture is has also been essential for Reese in the 10 years he’s been leading the Atlanta Mission.

“It’s taken 10 years to build the organization,” Reese stated. “When I began, we started with an engagement survey and had the worst score possible – but a chance to improve. Last year we were named a ‘best Christian workplace.’ It’s not a magic model on paper, but about the people who deliver the services.”

When asked how he found the good people, Reese said that over time once you find good people, others come.

“Really God’s just brought us good people. There was a period where we got a great bunch of people in their 20s that came from a group in Athens that was serving the homeless there. Now their presence on our team has created such great diversity, and they’ve brought a new vision for everyone.”

Of course, all this isn’t easy, and each day the journey is a personal one, as Susan O’Dwyer, an executive at Aprio, pointed out when asking Reese how he stays motivated when continually pouring into others.

Reese answered, “It’s the hardest job in my life. God’s given me a lot of perseverance. Also, I am not disheartened by people when they fail. There’s a man we serve who has lived under a bridge for 16 years who comes to mind.”

CTK Parishioner Maureen Becker followed up by asking Reese, “Do you celebrate their milestones?”

“I’m not a great celebrator, so I surround myself with those who are,” Reese said. “We also have a call every Monday from 3-3:20 PM to give the chance for things to be celebrated. For me celebrating is getting to do the next thing.”

Reese also made a point to share, “It’s also important to not look past those on your team to just be focused on those you serve.”

Houseal jumped in to mention that for him going out on site in the communities they serve to provide clean water helps.

“You get a ‘window’ for 30 days, then it is back to the norm,” he said. “You have to believe in what you do, and have a group on your team that believes too.”

Reese then jumped back in to say what’s also key is to “do it where God’s got you planted today, not ‘some day.’”

This view that Reese shared on being present where God has him has been one that’s dramatically changed him.

“Me being with homeless people has created unexpected change and grace,” he said. “I listen to people’s stories way more. I understand race way more now – and we have a problem in this country. And the legal system – it’s not a felony, it’s a life sentence. All this has changed me to better understand this.”

One other thing Reese said he’s observed is that some people who get disability don’t need it.

“It destroys their lives and takes their value away,” he commented.

As the session neared its end, there was time to ask Reese and Houseal one more question about how GIVN and the Atlanta Mission can relate and engage with one another, and how anyone could relate or engage individually with GIVN and the Atlanta Mission.

Reese answered first by saying, “God could fix the poor tomorrow, but He doesn’t because we need Him. He changes our hearts. In Christ’s walk, the biggest challenge is that he hangs out with the poor, and those that are overlooked. One of the biggest challenges is as believers we don’t have mercy.”

Reese then challenged everyone with two questions – “Who in your life is different than you?” and “Do you have any unexpected relationships in your life?”

“If you don’t, why not?” Reese asked. “It will change your life.”

Houseal then gave the final remarks by sharing his perspective on the question, and an anecdote.



“You can recognize the difference in being poor financially and poor spiritually,” he said. “Growing up in Atlanta, to find people financially poor but spiritually rich was life-changing.”

At his old company, Houseal said one winter evening he was coming home from a holiday party and the taxi cab driver was going to give blankets and water to the homeless, so Houseal helped the man load his car for that.

“I still keep in touch with him to this day. Staying connected and being exposed to things that aren’t comfortable is rewarding.”