

FOUNDATIONS FOR MINISTRY BEYOND THE CONGREGATION

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Handbook for Urban Church Ministry, and All Who Reach Out with Their Neighbors
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INTRODUCTION

We want to make clear three fundamental convictions with which we begin:

1. Every congregation must engage in ministries of compassion and justice that reach beyond its own membership. This is, intentionally, a very normative statement—an *ought* statement. We are convinced that the mandates of scripture and the heritage of the Christian faith demand that the church must care for persons in need and seek justice in the systems of society. The church must be engaged with the community for the good of both. Christian educator Susanne Johnson speaks of ministries of service and justice this way: "These actions . . . are not to be regarded as 'social outreach,' counterposed to spirituality; they are means of grace vital to our spiritual discipline and our formation as Christians."¹

2. Each congregation must be enabled to engage in these ministries of compassion and justice in its own way. There is no one single way to do effective community ministry; outreach ministries must emerge from the faith and character of the congregation, in interaction with the strengths and needs of the community. Some people have started with "superstar" program models and tried to imitate them; others have begun with biblical and theological images of the church and tried to get the local congregation to measure up. We work out of a third approach: we accept and respect a congregation as a unique incarnation of the body of Christ, created and shaped over time by both God and God's people. With the guidance, testing, and encouragement of theology and experience, that local body can witness faithfully and effectively in its own way.

3. Every congregation can develop strong, effective ministries of compassion and justice if it has access to guidance, tools, and encouragement. There is no church that cannot reach out with a cup of water given in the name of Jesus Christ. We have seen small and large churches, rich and poor churches, "liberal" and "conservative" churches, city and country churches, that have claimed a vision and developed vehicles for faithful ministry with their neighbors. We urge you to seek the partnership of one or more individuals near you—judicatory staff, church-based program consultant, neighboring pastor, or another who can walk with you in this new venture. We are stronger together than we are alone.

Like three legs of a stool, *community analysis, congregational support, and organizational base* are the three foundations on which congregational social ministries are built. You need to understand the community context you're in, build on and nurture the congregation's gospel witness, and create an organizational structure sufficient to sustain the new program. We strongly encourage you to give attention to all three.

You will need a *planning committee* or group. This may be formal or informal, according to

your church's leadership and planning style and the human resources you have available, but we do encourage you to recruit several people to share the responsibility. A program that depends on one person alone, no matter how gifted and committed that person is, builds on a foundation only one person deep. The planning process itself needs several people to share the work and bring different viewpoints to interpreting what you learn. If you have a large enough group, you may want to divide into subgroups to pursue particular tasks. For example, two or three people might carry out a community analysis while others study the congregation and still others work on organizational needs.

COMMUNITY ANALYSIS

Community analysis is the first of three primary tasks in planning for a new community ministry by your church. *Community analysis*, *congregational support*, and *organizational base* are the fundamental components of a strong outreach ministry. Like three legs of a stool, together they will support your vision and enable you to reach out in your neighborhood faithfully and effectively in the name of Jesus Christ.

Community analysis enables you to choose a ministry that is really needed, take best advantage of existing community resources, and convince your congregation and other friends that your program is worth supporting. In order to do that, you need to create as thorough and balanced a profile of your community as you can.

That means you are looking for both *objective* and *intuitive* information. *Intuitive* insight about the neighborhood, as you can gain from conversations with residents, for example, puts living human faces on social circumstances. *Objective* information, as found in sources like census data, broadens individual experiences to community trends. Based on intuition alone, you might end up creating an entire program to meet needs that only one or two families are experiencing. Working with data alone, you risk becoming simply another social service agency, missing the warmth of gospel love for God's people around you.

You are also looking for both *needs* and *strengths* in the community. Christ calls us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and so on, and that means identifying needs that you can—and should—address. In the words of a Methodist saint in Indianapolis, a need identified, along with the resources to meet that need, constitutes a *call*. But if you look for needs only, you will overlook existing strengths and risk creating a ministry that patronizes your neighbors. God is already at work in your community. Your task is to find out where you can enter the picture and lend a hand.

CONGREGATIONAL SUPPORT

The second primary step in planning a strong, effective community ministry is to root it firmly in your congregation's life and witness. There are two stages to this task: *initial* and *continuing*.

Before you decide on a specific ministry program, you need to examine your own congregation. There are a variety of needs in your community—more than you can possibly address all at once. *You will have the best chance of building a viable and lasting ministry if you focus*

on the points where community needs intersect with your congregation's strengths and priorities.

You want to create a ministry program that faithfully expresses your church's gospel witness. That's fundamental. You also want to create a program that your fellow church members will support. You need their encouragement and prayers, and you need their money, volunteer time, and other practical resources. Therefore, *initially* it will be important that you choose a ministry that is appropriate to your congregation, and that you show them how appropriate it is.

But, even as the church will feed the program with money, work, and prayer, that very investment can come back around and feed the church. *Engaging in ministries of compassion and justice is good for the church.* As you begin working together with your neighbors to help bring God's redeeming work to your community and its people, new energy will be kindled in your congregation. That means it is equally important that you sustain a *continuing* connection between this new program and the larger life of your church.

Initial Roots

The identity of a congregation involves more than is ever taught in any membership class. It is the sum of who the members feel together that they are and have always been. A congregation is a people of God, uniquely shaped over time by both divine and human creation. The better you as leaders can discern the shared identity of your congregation as it has been formed over time, the better you can understand why they sometimes act and decide as they do—and the more effectively you can help to shape those actions and decisions. This is essential for effectively guiding your congregation in any direction, but especially for moving into something new.

A congregation is more likely to be able to move into a new area of ministry if they can see it as reasserting or claiming something good that they have always been than if they feel they are being asked to change into something new and different.

Therefore, your task is to identify elements in the congregation's identity—in its history, its theology, its current membership, and so on—that provide foundations for community ministry, and that signal congregational priorities that will help you choose an appropriate program. This will help you create a ministry that is faithful to the congregation's commitments. It will also help you identify strengths to build on, and avoid (or be prepared for) potential obstacles.

Every congregation has theological roots that support compassion and justice ministry. Old notions that linked "social ministry" with "liberalism" simply don't hold up. One major study in the 1980s showed that "evangelical" churches are just as likely as "liberal" ones to engage in community ministries—or to remain withdrawn.² *The theological base for social witness is the Christian faith itself, not any one interpretation of it.* Your church can support new community ministry as an important expression of its shared faith; your task is to help them see that.

Continuing Connections

Engaging in ministries of compassion and justice is good for the church. It is part of our discipleship, part of our spiritual formation, part of our growth. Community ministry can generate

new commitment and energy within the congregation. But that growth comes in direct proportion to the members' involvement in the ministry programs. Some churches leave it to the pastor (or a small handful of overworked persons) to run their community programs. Your committee may face that pattern in your own church. But if you allow your congregation to remain uninvolved in this new ministry venture, not only will you risk exhausting yourselves within a year or two, but your church will weaken the potential for renewed vitality.

Seeds of congregational renewal are borne in individual members whose faith and lives are changed by their participation in compassion and justice ministry. In a study of over four hundred persons who served as volunteers in community ministry programs, *two-thirds said their personal faith or commitment to their church was deepened by the experience*. In addition, three-quarters said they had grown in leadership skills, in awareness of their community, or in ecumenical relationships.³

Other church leaders say that through involvement in community ministry they have grown in their understanding of mission, of stewardship, and of faith. Some become more sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit or more intentional in their Christian witness. They see spiritual growth in the congregation, and sometimes numerical growth. The church gradually becomes more oriented toward serving their neighbors, and more aware of each others' needs. Some report increased giving to the church, and increased budgets for mission and outreach. Above all, they talk about hope being reborn in their congregation.

Your committee, working together with your pastor, can help bring this kind of impact to your own congregation. It means recruiting church members to become actively involved, enhancing the positive impact they experience, and keeping the whole church aware and supportive of the ministry—and of the underlying gospel mandate to reach out with our neighbors in compassion and justice. We encourage you to plan for these Continuing Connections with the congregation from the very beginning as you plan and implement your new program.

ORGANIZATIONAL BASE

Behind every effective community ministry there is not only good leadership, but solid organizational support. A strong organizational base can help you mobilize the human, financial, and physical resources to develop and support your ministry program. One of the major obstacles for congregations in organizing community ministries is the lack of a good plan of action.

Urban congregations, like many others, are filled with visionaries who possess spirit and enthusiasm for ways their church can serve the community. But vision is the easy part. To get most community ministries off the drawing board requires a lot of time, energy, discussion, and planning. Too often visionaries want to get their projects off the ground immediately—and they want to see success immediately. They try to develop their programs by the shortest route possible. While some such community programs may experience short-term success, many will fail in the long term because not enough time, energy, and resources have been mobilized to build a solid organizational foundation.

For example, to organize a simple community ministry such as a food pantry to provide emergency assistance for families in need, you would need to complete the following tasks:

- ✓ Identify and recruit volunteers from the congregation
- ✓ Schedule the volunteers
- ✓ Solicit food donations or financial contributions to purchase food
- ✓ Organize the space for food storage
- ✓ Purchase and pick up the food
- ✓ Sort, pack, and distribute the food
- ✓ Keep records of the food received and distributed, and of the persons receiving food
- ✓ Interpret the ministry to the congregation and to the community
- ✓ Meet with representatives of community agencies and other congregations who might be interested in supporting the food pantry ministry

Even with a small food pantry ministry, you have a lengthy checklist of tasks. In a very small operation, a member of the congregation could fulfill most of these tasks. But the congregation needs to realize that if you rely on one person, you risk more than losing this one program when that person is not able to do the job. The church risks its institutional credibility with its members, those whom it seeks to serve, and the larger community. Individuals and community agencies will not invest in a ministry program over the long term if there is no continuity and stability in the program or congregation.

Therefore, when your congregation plans to begin or expand a community ministry, you need to understand that the effort will require work, planning, volunteers, staff, resources, partners, and physical space in order to make it happen. The bottom line is: your congregation must build the organizational capacity of your community ministry.

There are no shortcuts in developing a strong organizational base for your community ministry. It takes time, energy, resources, and lots of meetings and work to build this base. You may not see quick results, but if you build a strong organizational base for your community ministry, you will see effective and sustaining results in the long term.

ENDNOTES

1. Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 58.
2. This study of an ecumenical group of sixty-two congregations was carried out as part of the Church and Community Project. The results are reported in "Congregational Religious Styles and Orientations to Society: Exploring Our Linear Assumptions," *Review of Religious Research*, September 1992 (vol. 34, no. 1); and in "Theological Perspectives and Involvement in Community Ministries: Exploding a Myth," by Alan K. Mock, adapted by John Koppitch, Church and Community Brief Paper No. 2.00, Center for Church and Community Ministries, Chicago, 1992.
3. This study, conducted by the Church and Community Project, is reported in "Impact on Volunteers Who Participate in Community Ministry Programs," by Sally A. Johnson, Church and Community Brief Paper number 7.10, Center for Church and Community Ministries, Chicago, 1992.

RESOURCES

Publications

Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets. John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight. Evanston, Ill.: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1993. Provides excellent tools for looking at the resources that exist in your community.

Studying Your Community. Roland L. Warren. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1955. A classic—a very helpful tool for understanding your community.

Online Resource

1990 Census LOOKUP website. Gives you access to nearly three hundred tables of data from the 1990 census, retrieved by state, county, congressional district, municipality, census tract, or block group. You can find it on the World Wide Web at:
http://cedr.lbl.gov/cdrom/doc/lookup_doc.html