

BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

Overcoming the barriers to holistic ministry requires an intentional effort both to welcome the community into the church, and to bring the church out into the community. Here we give seven suggestions for cultivating an outreach-minded congregation.

1. Welcome whoever walks through your door.

A good place to start in cultivating the congregation's commitment to reach out to the community is by loving the people in the community who come to you. "We need a theology of welcome to tear down the fences that have come to separate 'church' and 'mission,'" asserts Kathryn Mowry.

A friendly face can go a long way in a person's evangelistic journey. An elder at Life in Christ Cathedral of Faith gives this testimony of the power of a welcoming congregation: "One of the things that made me want to stay here is that when I first came to the door, before I was delivered from drugs, there was a guy there who greeted me with this great, huge smile. . . . I was down to 130 pounds, I really looked a mess. . . . He greeted me with a hug. That made me think, 'Man, I like this place. I want to stay here.'" A welcoming congregation looks past the barriers to see each person as a potential bride of Christ.

It is human nature to view encounters with people in need as annoying interruptions. Encourage the congregation to welcome opportunities to minister informally to the needs that present themselves. Examples of this kind of every-day compassion abounded in our case studies. One day at First Presbyterian Church, a woman came to the office looking for a volunteer who had told her about a local business that was hiring. When the receptionist found out that the woman didn't have a car, she put down the envelopes she was stuffing and drove her to the prospective job site.

A member of New Covenant literally welcomed the homeless woman with two children who knocked on her door. Over the weeks of the woman's stay, the member led her to the Lord. The guest began attending New Covenant and was hired to help with the job of painting the church building, though she had never painted before. Now she is a self-supporting master painter. Bishop Robbins and his wife welcomed two at-risk children from the community into their home and raised them as their own, and have encouraged others at Life in Christ to do the same. Such acts of loving hospitality may be overlooked by news crews and grant-makers—but they form the warp and woof of a church's transforming presence in a community.

2. Network in the community.

Networking is the exchange of information, ideas and resources. The goal of networking is to build relationships as you gather information, scout out potential allies, and let others know about your church. Another benefit of networking is that it builds the church's reputation in the community, says Carl Dudley. "Others will see your church as a concerned neighborhood institution. The people you contact begin to think of the church as a potential partner in the area of shared concerns. They will treat the church differently and include the church in community meetings it has not been invited to before." (See [What is our ministry setting?](#) for more on networking.)

So get to know the executives and staff of key community institutions. Offer to take people out to lunch, arrange to meet for coffee, or ask for a tour of their facilities—and leave a packet of information about your church. Institutions to target for networking include other churches (and non-Christian houses of worship); social service agencies; schools; police; social security and welfare offices; businesses; health clinics; and foundations. Bakke and Roberts suggest a useful conversation starter in networking with other congregations is to ask, “What is the most important lesson you have learned about being a pastor in this community since you have begun?” Every church leader can network in the community in the area of his or her ministry—for example, the youth pastor might connect with public school principals and teachers, the director of the local Boys and Girls Club, and people associated with the juvenile court system.

3. Cultivate a sense of belonging to the community.

“Your people shall be my people,” said Ruth to Naomi (Ruth 1:16). In the same way, help the congregation to think about residents of the community as “our people.”

Cultivating a sense of belonging is a transformational process that unfolds through many small steps. Help the congregation become familiar with the community by leading “field trips” to cultural events and restaurants, preferably together with a hosting team from the community. Invite community leaders to your church’s Christmas party, and attend the dedication for the new elementary school. Host town meetings, AA meetings, community theater productions. Become a sponsor for the community’s little league team. Display artwork in the sanctuary that reflects the community’s ethnic heritage. Print church bulletins, clean the carpet and purchase office supplies using local businesses. Write letters to the editor about issues affecting the community.

Be a presence in times of tragedy or outrage. For example, when a local home for the developmentally disabled was vandalized, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church wrote an editorial for the local newspapers, and organized members from various congregations for an overnight prayer vigil at the home. Find ways of identifying with the struggles of those in the community (Heb. 13:3), and express your sorrow over the things that cause God and your neighbors grief. But do not focus exclusively on what is different or dysfunctional. Encourage the congregation also to identify with everything in the community that is delightful. Give thanks for all its assets—from block captains to children’s smiles—as “good and perfect gift[s] from above” (James 1:17).

These small steps contribute to a process of becoming friends with the community. In the beginning stages of holistic ministry, invest in later initiatives by building up the congregation’s visibility and reputation. Developing a profile as a community-oriented church, for example through wise use of media contacts to publicize church events or by consistently sending representatives to community meetings, increases the likelihood of winning support from the community for major new ministry projects. Becoming known as the church that gets involved in local issues will help open doors to resources and collaboration. Recognition is the first step toward trust.

4. Incorporate a commitment to outreach mission into church life.

How much does a concern for community outreach enter into the life of your church? Here are some self-examining questions:

- C Do the songs sung in worship services mostly talk about our personal relationship with Jesus? Or do they also reinforce a message about God's love for the whole world and the church's calling to serve and reach out to others?
- C What do the art or religious symbols visible in your church communicate? Is there anything that conveys the biblical themes of service, evangelism, restoration, transformation?
- C Do the needs of people outside the church and the issues faced by the community or other lands around the world regularly find their way into congregational prayers? Is information about community events promoted via church bulletin boards or bulletin announcements?
- C Do the literature available in the foyer and the books in the church library or bookstore address issues of mission, or are they solely directed at the spiritual and personal development of Christians?
- C Is the concept of "mission" used in such a way as to imply that it applies only to *foreign* missions? For example, if you have a missions bulletin board, are the pictures and letters all from overseas missionaries?

Consider ways to enfold a loving awareness of the community of ministry into "ordinary" aspects of church life. The church should be a refuge for members from the bruising realities of the world, but not a fortress where people go to shut out the world.

5. Interweave the interests of church and community.

A Christian speaker told of the time God convicted him of not taking seriously Christ's command to love his neighbor as himself. Sure, he occasionally did nice things for people in need—but did he love others *as himself*? So he set up a jar in his home marked "For the Neighbor." Whenever he bought something non-essential for himself, like a soda, he put an equivalent amount of money in the jar. His family got used to saying, "Here's one for me, and one for the neighbor!" When a crisis arose in a neighbor's life, he went right to the jar, dumped out the money, and was able to help meet the need.

In a similar spirit, a church might link its internal care to outreach. When the church raises funds for new carpeting, raise an extra "tithe" of the amount to donate to a local housing organization. When the youth group plans a ski trip, invite (and pay for) a youth from a homeless shelter to come along. Hold a congregational meeting in the local community center, and afterwards repaint it. Think of the things you are already doing, and dream up ways to turn them into an opportunity to connect with others (see [Tool # 34](#)). Such actions help to develop the habit of talking about inward ministries and outreach ministries in the same breath as all part of the church's mission.

6. Take the church out into the community.

A congregation cannot hope to build loving relationships with the community, particularly those who are most needy and vulnerable, by “sitting in the four walls of the church. You’ve got to actually get out in the community,” says Bishop Dickie Robbins. Instead of always waiting for the community to come to the church, your church can “take its show on the road,” moving out into the community.

This does not entail starting a new ministry program—just relocating some of the existing ones. One of the simplest things to do is to hold a regular weekend worship service outdoors in the summertime. (Just make sure you don’t annoy the neighbors by blasting your music into their windows early on a Sunday morning!) Tenth Presbyterian Church’s Sunday school classes overflow their building, spilling out into the community—meeting in local nonprofits and restaurants. “I love the idea of being outside of the building,” says the Sunday School coordinator. “Everybody says, ‘But we want to be in the building!’ And I say, ‘The building is not the church.’”

A success story of ministry relocation comes from New Covenant Church of Philadelphia. Rather than holding the traditional Vacation Bible School at the church, New Covenant decided to tell families, “We will meet you right where you are.” One summer, 120 VBS groups met in homes, public facilities, and community nonprofits. The decentralized format requires more organization and congregational support, but it also allows the church to reach far more children than if it held a single VBS at the church’s facility. Another impact of moving the program out of the church and into members’ homes, explains a church leader, is that now “families in that community see those homes as a place of refuge.” People in the community who would not dream of calling the pastor to ask for prayer feel more free to ask at the home where their child went to VBS.

Routine interactions and chance meetings also provide opportunities for members to represent the church to those outside the congregation. One day Rev. Richard Smith, pastor of Faith Assembly of God, was walking with a lay leader through the neighborhood around the church. A little girl who did not attend the church passed by, and Rev. Smith greeted her. She stopped, because she did not recognize them. “Who are you?” she asked. Rev. Smith answered her, “I’m your pastor!” Members take the church out into the community when they adopt the incarnational understanding that wherever they go, they *are* the church.

7. Support the relocation of church members into the community.

If your church is cultivating a relationship with a needy community where few of the church members actually live, encourage members to consider a calling to relocate there. John Perkins, the co-founder of the Christian Community Development Association, calls passionately for relocation, which “transforms ‘you, them, and theirs’ to ‘we, us, and ours.’” This ministry is essential to breaking down barriers and developing a healthy sense of belonging to the community.

The book of Nehemiah provides a wonderful model for relocation. Nehemiah had completed the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, but the city was still in ruins and the

local economy was a shambles. Few residents remained in the city to complete the work of restoration (7:4). Those who had fled the city were naturally reluctant to return to such an unstable, unsafe environment. So the people of the outlying area came up with an innovative solution: they “cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem” (11:1). In other words, they tithed their population to relocate to the city! The Nehemiah model encourages congregations to anoint those who dedicate themselves to living in the neighborhood as the church’s ministry representatives (11.2). Those who have relocated become community liaisons who help others in the congregation understand and connect with the community.

Besides nurturing an affinity between the church and the community, relocation also lays an important foundation for effective holistic ministry. Bob Lupton writes of the importance of “achieving neighbor-leaders” who “bring living, personal modes of hope back into a disheartened environment. Achieving neighbors bring resources and skills into a depleted neighborhood, along with fresh energy to deploy them.” Seeding a community with strong Christian families strengthens the fabric of community life.

On the other hand, without a strong community presence, a church’s success in transformational ministry can actually undermine the overall quality of life in a distressed community. As maturing Christians get their lives together, as they get a better job and higher income, and as they develop a healthy family life, they often move out of the community. By empowering persons, the church might be helping to drain the community of its best assets—stable Christian families. Encouraging church members to relocate helps to counter that trend. It sends a strong message to residents of the church’s long-term commitment and serves as a symbol of hope.

These seven measures can help strengthen your congregation’s commitment to outreach. They will also make the church and its gospel message more appealing to the world on its doorstep. If the church is consistently cultivating a sense of belonging to the community, incorporating an emphasis on reaching out to the community, stressing its hopeful vision for the community, and modeling its dedication to the community through relocation, it will be better able to attract and keep Christian families from the community who share the church’s mission.

If love is not the heart of the matter, these bridge-building activities and relationships can easily become just a means for self-promotion, a kind of community public relations (1 Cor. 13:3). This is why spiritual formation and social outreach must go hand-in-hand. The more a congregation loves God, the more God can love a community through the congregation. The more your congregation yields to God’s will and relies on the Spirit’s power, the more it will identify with God’s mission in the community. The more your congregation enters into the life of your community, the more the life-giving Spirit can flow through you to your neighbors.

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