

Tool #44: Ideas for Moving from Relief to Development

Most churches in the U.S. offer at least one relief ministry. While relief is a vital expression of Christian compassion, it rarely produces real change. Beyond giving aid, churches can seek to address the root causes of needs and to help people build capital and skills to become more self-sufficient. (See Social Ministry Types, tool #11.) Through redemptive relationships, development ministries become mutually transformational – by serving as agents of Christ's wholeness, we ourselves are transformed.

Relief ministries provide short-term aid without much effort to determine if the need is temporary or ongoing, if it is circumstantial or deeply rooted, or if the aid substantially impacts the beneficiary's life. *Examples: home repairs, food baskets, utility assistance.*

Development ministries focus on measured, lasting changes in the knowledge, skills, abilities, or condition of beneficiaries and their community context. Beneficiaries are not passive recipients but participants in their development. The intended outcome is empowerment for self-sufficiency and healthy relationships. *Examples: substance abuse recovery, ESL classes for immigrants, job training or job creation, community organizing, mentoring.*

Following are suggestions for transitioning a current relief program toward development. Check the most promising ideas that apply to your church's ministry.

- Gather a group of participants to ask about their long-term goals and the broader needs of the community that they would like to see the church engage.
- Consider whether participants can offer something in exchange for goods or services they now receive for free - e.g., a nominal fee, volunteer time, participation in training or educational events, agreed-on steps toward a personal goal, etc.
- For each need addressed by the ministry (hunger, bad grades, car repairs), ask: What are root causes? What would it take (skills, relationships, capital) for people to be able to meet this need on their own? How might the need represent an opportunity to empower change?
- If the ministry serves many people, select 1-3 participants to start working with on a developmental level. Commit together to pursue measurable steps toward long-term change.
- Examine whether the presenting need may offer a bridge to address other interconnected dimensions of well-being: spiritual, physical, relational, emotional or economic.
- Research similar ministry models that have a transformational ministry design.
- Start a study group (with participation by community members) on the community-wide or societal factors that contribute to the need. For example, look into how the availability of jobs or the prevalence of single parent families affect the demand for your church's food pantry.
- Conduct an asset inventory to identify individuals and organizations within the community with something to offer to participants' growth toward self-sufficiency.
- Cultivate a partnership with development-oriented agencies in the community that can provide a complement to your relief ministry.
- Consider whether to transition the church's role from direct service provider to that of a broker of services and opportunities existing elsewhere within the community, or a community organizer that facilitates the development of new opportunities by residents.
- Match participants with trained mentors or life coaches from the church or community.

Adapted from Jay Van Groningen, Meeting Needs: Moving from Relief to Individual Development (CRWRC, 2005).