Engaging the Mission Field

Rethinking church to reach our communities

Faith Community Development
Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church

Curtis Brown
PO Box 13650
Des Moines, WA 98198
1.800.755.7710 x334
cbrown@pnwumc.org
www.pnwumc.org
What is Church For?

When we ask people who don’t go to church what they think about church, they often reply with some variation of the idea that church is irrelevant. Churches don’t seem to have a very big impact on their lives, so they don’t really think about them very much. Or if they do think about church, they don’t really see how church engages with their life or community.

In order to get our communities to “rethink” church, we need to reconnect with people at the point of their real needs, with relevant resources, offered in authentic Christian love. For churches, the journey of reaching out to their communities begins with this key question:

*What are the missional needs of our community that God is calling this congregation to engage?*

Rethink Community: Who’s out there?

Our first step is discovering who are the people living in our neighborhoods, towns or communities. Often churches are made up of people who have lived in an area for a while, and current church participants may not have a good understanding of the kinds of people who more recent residents in an area. Doing some basic demographic research can be helpful (see resources for suggestions). Demographic reports need to be fleshed out with exercises like community mapping – where a map of the area is marked with people groups, churches, service agencies, schools and other relevant information. Churches can find out a lot about their community simply by walking around and talking to people. Joining and volunteering in other community agencies is also a great way to learn more about the people who are living in an area.

**Church Leader Discussion Questions:**

1. Who are the kinds of people living in your community?
2. How are they different than the folks inside your church?

Rethink Needs: What are their needs?

Once you have a sense of the people living in area, then you will want to better understand their needs. It’s easy for churches to assume that the needs of that church’s participants are the same needs felt by everyone in the community, but this is rarely the case. People have a lot of different kinds of needs. Some ways to discover needs include visiting with community leaders, officials, school administrators, and others who deal with the community. Have your church pray for that leader, and when you visit with the leader ask about what needs they see in the community that your church could meet. Have the congregation ask that same question to their neighbors and friends. Especially find a way to ask people who don’t go to church, as they are likely to see things that people in church don’t or won’t see.

**Church Leader Discussion Questions:**

1. What are the major needs of people in your area?
2. What could be done to help with those needs?
Rethink Missional: How are these spiritual needs?

Churches are not simply social service agencies. Churches employ a different tool-kit in meeting community needs, including a deep concern for seeing how community needs are also spiritual needs. Spiritual needs include justice and economic needs, not just prayer and worship, because we know that God is concerned for whole people and whole communities. When churches look at community needs, they not only want to address the physical, emotional, political and economic but also the spiritual. With this concern in mind, church solutions are often very different than solutions envisioned by others concerned with meeting needs.

When Habitat for Humanity, which sprang out of a religious group, began asking questions about providing affordable housing, it didn’t think the answer was the large-scale projects of government housing authorities. Instead, they insisted on building relationships and ownership as they build homes. They drew on vast pools of volunteer labor instead vast sums of public money. They saw the answer differently because they saw the need differently.

Church Leader Discussion Questions:
1. How does Christ lead us to respond to our area’s needs?
2. What unique approaches or resources do Christians bring to the needs in our community?

Rethink Calling: What is God calling us to do?

The hardest part for most churches is focusing their efforts in order to have a significant impact on a need in their community. Churches too often choose “all of the above” from the list of potential ministries to an area, and then cannot sustain attention or passion for all of them. A better approach is to carefully discern which need God is calling the church to meet, and then pursue this calling with vigor and intention. Discernment is born from congregation-wide prayer, discover of gifts and resources, deep study and discussion, and careful listening to God. Once this calling is identified, the church can have a profound and relevant impact on the lives of the people in its community.

Church Leader Discussion Questions:
1. What are the gifts of the people in our church?
2. What resources does our church have to use?
3. What are we passionate about doing?
4. How will our church listen to God’s calling?
Your Next Steps into Your Community

Answer these questions on another piece of paper using words, scripture, hymns, diagrams, metaphors, phrases, doodles, whatever.

1. How is your church already engaging its mission field?

2. What one or two current ministries could be strengthened for greater impact and engagement with your mission field?

3. Who else needs to be brought into a conversation about more deeply engaging your church’s mission field?

Resources for Mission Field Engagement

On Community Needs Assessment
- Community Ministry: New Challenges, Proven Steps to Faith-Based Initiatives by Carl S. Dudley
- Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments by Belle Ruth Witkin and James W. Altschuld

On Mission Field Engagement
- Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary to Your Community by Ed Stetzer & David Putnam
- Fling Open the Doors: Giving the Church Away to the Community by Paul Nixon
- Needs-Based Evangelism: Becoming a Good Samaritan Church by Robert Pierson

Sources for demographic information for churches:
- www.factfinder.census.gov (free community summary)
- www.gbgm-umc.org – “Research Office” (free profile)
- www.link2lead.com – Percept Demographic (for a fee)
- www.missioninsite.com – Demographics (for a fee)