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Five Steps to Successfully Make Social Engagement Happen in Your Church

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STEPS

to successfully make social engagement happen in your church

Its local community was recently in the national news—once again for the wrong reason. Instead of violence, the news this time was an unacceptable level of lead in the drinking water. Over the last 10 years, this church had developed a close connection with the community. Unsurprisingly, various local media outlets regularly listed it as a center for distributing free bottled water. The church collected and donated free sneakers to the community. In the front yard of the church, they built a basketball court. Open to the public, they launched a very successful basketball tournament for the youth. “Wellness Wednesday” promoted a healthy lifestyle. In addition to 70-plus persons baptized during the pandemic, the response has been overwhelming.¹

Social engagement is biblical

When the prophet Samuel saw what was happening in his community and observed that many young people were idle and getting into trouble, he knew it was an opportunity for ministry. He

established the school of the prophets, unleashing their potential and making a tremendous impact on the socioeconomic fabric of the community.

Dorcas recognized a need in Joppa and, because of her love for Jesus, realized that she must do something about it. “She was a worthy disciple of Jesus, and her life was filled with acts of kindness. She knew who needed comfortable clothing and who needed sympathy, and she freely ministered to the poor and the sorrowful.”² Twenty centuries later, her compassion and spirit of initiative still inspire countless Christians.³

God calls His “chosen people” to proclaim the praises of the Lord (1 Pet. 2:9, NIV) by helping those in need physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. They are His “ambassadors” (2 Cor. 5:20), anointed by the Holy Spirit to represent Jesus. It is all about connecting the church with the community. Commenting on the explosive growth of early Christianity, Timothy Keller wrote: “Christians’ *lives*—their concern for the weak and the poor, their integrity in the face of persecution, their economic sharing, their sacrificial love even for their enemies, and the high quality of their common life together—attracted nonbelievers to the gospel.”⁴

Learning social engagement

Education and training can make a lasting impact on the community. Jesus invested much time and energy in training His disciples before sending them out to minister to the surrounding villages and towns (Luke 9). Barnabas took Saul from Tarsus, trained him in Antioch, and prepared him to be a successful missionary (Acts 11:25, 26). Then he multiplied his impact by mentoring John Mark (Acts 15:37–39). Aquila and Priscilla gently shared the full gospel with Apollos, preparing

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him to become a more effective evangelist (Acts 18:18–28).

Pastors should seek every opportunity to engage with their communities. Newly developed programs can equip them with the latest insights to enable them to engage in social entrepreneurship, social advocacy, and social service. They must train leaders on how to initiate projects that will improve lives in their communities. It might involve raising funds, writing grants, conducting research to find relevant information about the community they serve, and partnering with other community leaders for specific goals, such as fighting domestic violence, addiction, or illiteracy. Other projects may involve the social integration of immigrants and refugees, helping people learn the local language so that they can find jobs and support their families, job training, after-school tutoring, mentoring young people, or providing sources of clean water.

Five simple steps for your church

First, *the church must involve community members* as part of key decision-making processes. This is necessary in order to build mutual respect and trust between the church and the community. Such engagement must be *with* the community, not *to* the community.

Second, before the believers proclaim the good news of salvation, they must *earn the right and privilege to share that good news* by becoming trustworthy messengers. Their message will have a more significant influence if they demonstrate their commitment in tangible ways.

Third, Christ's disciples must *address the most important issues facing the community*, not simply what they want to do. They must keep in mind the following five vital components of community engagement: (1) identify community priorities, (2) track community assets, (3) leverage those assets, (4) conduct research, and (5) generate new knowledge in the process that they can then use to reset priorities.⁵ Social

engagement should be a community-based ministry of a missional church instead of a church-based program employed just to attract others. Such engagement represents their real presence in the community.

Instead of asking people to “come and see,” a church should ask itself such questions as, What are we known for in our community? How are we relating to our community? How have we positioned ourselves in our community?

Fourth, the church must *maximize the participation and leadership* of the people living in the community. Social engagement does not focus on the question, How do we attract people to what we are doing? Instead, it asks, What are the ways we need to change in order to engage those who do not consider church a part of their lives?

Create opportunities for people in the community to be involved and serve together for the betterment of life. Pastor and civic leader Jerome Hurst recognizes that “it is imperative that the church work in partnership with others in bringing solutions to the issues the communities we serve are facing.”⁶ Gaspar Colón, director of the Center for Metropolitan Ministry, Washington, DC, calls for an “incarnational community-based ministry.”⁷ Amanatidou, Cox, and Gagliardi, from the Manchester Institute of Innovation Research, encourage us to move from consulting society to partnering with society, and even to the most effective method—in which society controls the activity.⁸

Fifth, believers must *create critical service-learning opportunities* by involving students, teachers, churches, and community members. Through social innovation, participants will make a difference while learning and growing. Greg Dees, pioneering leader in social entrepreneurship, notes that social innovators engage in the “process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning.” Further, they exhibit a “heightened accountability to the constituencies” they serve and for the outcomes they create.⁹

Everyone is called

The church must sharpen its tools if it is to have a positive impact on its neighborhood and world. It will do so by educating and equipping church members to be the light to the world. Three important questions will help guide the ministries of the church: What are we doing? (the question of mission), How are we doing it? (the question of strategy), and When are we successful? (the question of measurement). Christians must become visible signs of salvation and the kingdom of God in the world. Theologian and pastor John Stott said that Jesus' "words and deeds belonged to each other, the words interpreting the deeds and the deeds embodying the words. He did not only announce the good news of the kingdom; he performed visible 'signs of the kingdom.'"¹⁰ Historian Donald Yerxa and a team of colleagues argue vigorously against the myth that religion is incompatible with innovation. In fact, they contend that religion has been inspiring amazing innovations around the world for centuries.¹¹

Compassion

The church cannot be contained by its walls nor confined and limited to just a worship program. It is not about just keeping traditions and maintaining the status quo. While the church must plant its feet in tradition, it must also advance beyond it. If we do not grow out of our traditions, we will be ineffective and inefficient. That is why God summons all Christians to participate in His mission of salvation, promote restorative justice, and bring healing to the world. Theologian Ronald Sider wrote: "If anything is clear in Jesus, the announcement and demonstration of the Kingdom are at the very core of His message and life."¹²

Following Jesus' example, His disciples will rely on the power of love and compassion to harness the resources needed to contribute to the well-being of the community. Although God's kingdom is not of this world, His disciples are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13, 14). They are the modern good Samaritans, engaged in taking care of life's victims and bringing relief to their pain and sufferings (Luke 10:25–37). Jesus wants His followers to invest their energies and resources in making a difference in the community, prioritizing the most vulnerable in society: the poor, widows, orphans, children, the elderly, and immigrants (Deut. 14:29).

The apostle James wrote: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit

orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27, NKJV). Scripture's divine command is for God's shepherds to empower His people to transform the world around us, just as Jesus and the first Christians did.



- 1 See Louise Wrege, "Promoting Peace and Unity Through Basketball: Harbor of Hope Church Set to Dedicate Rise Up Basketball Court," *Herald-Palladium*, September 3, 2020, https://www.herald-palladium.com/communities/benton_harbor/promoting-peace-and-unity-through-basketball/article_532c8664-7a31-5661-851d-e188ed7b1d6e.html; Sylvia Rose, "Harbor of Hope Hosts Grand Opening of Basketball Court With Youth Tournament," *ABC 57*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.abc57.com/news/harbor-of-hope-hosts-grand-opening-of-basketball-court-with-youth-tournament>; Jharony Fernandez-Gibbs, "Church Hosts Event to Combat Violence in Its Community," *Lake Union Herald*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.lakeunionherald.org/archive/articles/church-hosts-event-to-combat-violence-in-its-community>; Jarod Facundo, "Benton Harbor Is Not Flint"—It's Worse," *American Prospect*, February 23, 2022, <https://prospect.org/environment/benton-harbor-is-not-flint-its-worse-water-lead-contamination/>.
- 2 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 131.
- 3 See, for example, Isabella Koh, "Andrews University Leadership Program Adds Social Innovation Concentration," *News, North America Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.nadadventist.org/news/andrews-university-leadership-program-adds-social-innovation-concentration>.
- 4 Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 285.
- 5 See Alan R. Fleischman, "Community Engagement in Urban Health Research," *Journal of Urban Health* 84, no. 4 (July 2007): 469–471.
- 6 Jerome M. Hurst, "Calling All Church Members to Evangelism and Mission: Ways to Connect the Local Church to the Community for Effective Ministry," *News, North America Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.nadadventist.org/news/calling-all-church-members-evangelism-and-mission>.
- 7 Gaspar F. Colón, "Incarnational Community-Based Ministry: A Leadership Model for Community Transformation," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 10–17.
- 8 See E. Amanatidou, D. Cox, and D. Gagliardi, "Social Engagement: Towards a Typology of Social Innovation" (MIOIR/MBS Working Paper Series—Working Paper 82, Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, 2018), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323809176_Social_engagement_Towards_a_typology_of_social_innovation_MIOIR_MBS_Working_Paper_Series-Working_Paper_82.
- 9 J. Gregory Dees, "The Meaning of 'Social Entrepreneurship,'" Kauffman Foundation, rev. May 30, 2001, 4, https://centers.fuqua.duke.edu/case/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2015/03/Article_Deess_MeaningofSocialEntrepreneurship_2001.pdf.
- 10 John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 28.
- 11 Donald A. Yerxa, ed., *Religion and Innovation: Antagonists or Partners?* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
- 12 Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving From Affluence to Generosity* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 18.

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