

Engaging with your Community

Jon Kuhrt and David Arscott, Livability
(formerly the Shaftesbury Society)

What is community mission?

Community mission is the active involvement of Christians in their local communities, living out God's kingdom through addressing the needs around us. Community mission brings words and actions together and seeks personal and social transformation – to be good news in practical and tangible ways that bring wholeness and liberation. Community mission takes seriously Micah's call to 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8) and Jesus' instruction to seek first the kingdom of God.

The Community Mission Journey

The Community Mission Journey is a model developed through experience with partner churches to give an overview of how to get involved in your community and be effective in making a difference. It is best used by a group who are working through how they can make a difference in their community.

It introduces three basic steps:

**1. Preparing for
Action**

**2. Engaging & researching
your community**

**3. Exploring
Models of Action**

This tool will help you to identify and consider the options and alert you to the issues you will encounter. It will help you explore the **why, what, when, where and how** of your involvement. It emphasises the importance of listening, working with others, finding out about the needs in your community and responding appropriately.

Step 1: Preparing for Action

It is important to explore the question **why should we be involved in our communities?** In the Bible there are many examples to learn from, both in the Old Testament and in the life of Jesus and the early church. See Chapter 19 for more on the theology of word and deed mission.

It is **best to prepare for action with others:** in your congregation, amongst your friends and with people from other local congregations. Find out what motivates you. Do you have enough in common to work together? Do you have similar values? Community mission is hard work and often quite messy. By **sharing motivations** at the start you will find it much easier to overcome problems and confusion later. By having **clear goals** you will be able to plan your work much more easily and be able to clearly identify the real results.

Be committed to praying for your community. Work out what God is saying, what are His concerns for your community? Do a prayer walk, read the local newspapers, listen to the local radio and talk to local people to find out what's going on.

Step 2: Engaging & researching your community

This step is essential if you want to respond to the key needs in your community, rather than just the needs which are most apparent to you. Although it can be time consuming, researching your community's needs will reap huge benefits in the long run. There are three main sources of information to consult, all of which are equally important:

- Individuals and groups in the community
- Other agencies and organisations already working in the area
- Reports and statistics that have already been produced (taken from Livability's Information Triangle)

Step 3: Exploring models of action

Now that you know the key needs of the community you can now explore ways in which they may be addressed. It is much better to do one or two things well than to get involved in lots of things without much commitment; you should be aiming for long-term commitment not 'hit and run' projects as it is very frustrating for people who begin to rely on a project only to find it has closed down.

Take time to decide what the best way to respond to your community's needs, based on the resources and skills you have available. Continue to talk, to pray and seek God's direction for the next steps.

People in your group may not decide on a collective course of action but agree to support each other in different areas. If you are working with a whole congregation remember that not everyone needs to work in the same way and this could give a chance for everyone to use their different gifts.



Getting involved in what's already going on

Having researched local needs, you will discover many groups and organisations already working in your area. Rather than setting up a separate project, how about getting involved in different initiatives that are already happening? This may be with other Christian congregations, other faith groups, voluntary agencies or statutory agencies. This allows you to work alongside others with similar motivations and passions, get involved in activities outside your local congregation and avoids duplicating existing services. This can be a sacrificial approach as it means laying aside our own agendas to serve other people's visions.

Campaigning for Justice

Campaigning can take place at a local, regional or national level in a response to the specific needs in your local community such as opposing the closure of a school or campaigning for funding for older people's service. It involves speaking out about the underlying issues or causes of injustice that directly affect people's lives and coordinates people to address the issues together. It may mean taking a lead in identifying official bodies and bringing them together with local people to collaborate in finding solutions.

For more ideas please see:

- Church Action on Poverty's website www.church-poverty.org.uk
- Speak's website www.speak.org.uk
- Tearfund offer campaign information on issues such as Fair Trade and climate change see the campaigning section of www.tearfund.org

Social enterprise

A social enterprise is a business with the primary aim of bringing positive change to the community such as a local café incorporating training for unemployed people. It might also be a way of generating income to support another community project plus it can offer education and skills training to help people back into employment. It may encourage local people in the development of their social economy by building local relationships through the business.

For more information please contact:

- **Pecan**, a Christian organisation working in South London who deliver a range of social enterprises www.pecan.org.uk

Setting up a community project

There are a huge range of options and ideas when it comes to setting up a community project. Churches and Christian groups have a long track record of establishing projects to serve the needs of young people, older people and families, as well as those affected by homelessness, debt, disability and mental illness. The government and other agencies such as the Police believe that there is a great role for the church in establishing projects and are often very keen to work closely with churches (See Chapter X). This brings both opportunities and challenges.

We believe the important thing is for the church to be clear about what it is trying to achieve, to review progress regularly and to work hard to maintain the Christian distinctiveness of the work.

For more information please see:

- **The Faithworks Best Practice Guide** - How to apply Christian faith and values in the day-to-day running of your project, ensuring integrity, transparency and trust.
- **Managing Social Action Projects**, produced by the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Email baptistuniongb@baptist.org.uk or phone 01235 517 700

Three key themes

Theme 1: Community Development

An overview of Community Development by Julian Richards, GWEINI (The council of Christian community work in Wales).

The Principles of Community Development make me think of Proverbs 19:2, "Enthusiasm without knowledge is not good. If you act too quickly, you might make a mistake." Or as Roger, a community activist I came into contact with said "*To set up a project without asking if the community want it is immoral.*"

Community development is very BIG right now. Government is investing millions in it and importantly local communities are taking ownership of both the challenges and solutions that local communities face. Residents, charities, statutory bodies, churches and businesses are working in partnership together in an unprecedented way. This new wave of participation has raised the profile of the voluntary sector to such significance that it is now increasingly being called the '*third sector*', next to Government and Business. The implication of this is that community work, or doing acts of kindness in a corporate or organised way in ones local community, now demands a little more consideration. Gone are the days when we can simply see a need, or think of a project and get on and do our own thing. Why is that? Because we may, with all the best intentions, be stepping on many

toes and offend the very people we are trying to bless through our good works.

Here are some keys principles to help you as you develop an effective strategy of community engagement.

1. **Be prepared to get involved long term** both in relationships and in projects you set up as people need time to discover, understand and process the message and claims of the Gospel. The challenge for us is to develop a long haul strategy of engagement and involvement in our local communities that extends way into the future. If we do this the church will once again become integral to community life and a effective change agent.
2. **Consult with your community** – people don't want to be told what they need or should have done for them. Consulting with the community will ensure your project is something that is needed and wanted and will be a great starting point for you to meet people and prove your churches willingness to serve. It doesn't have to be complicated but could involve a questionnaire in the streets or in homes; visiting the local youth clubs and asking questions; an interview with head teachers, the Police the local health visitor, the local councillors, local shop owners, Local Authority officers involved in community development or the local housing office. It is also advisable to make an appointment to visit local organisations and charities currently working in the area.
3. **Develop partnership with others** who are working in the community. Partnership is not merger and losing our distinctiveness even if we join with secular organisation, it is about strategising and talking together, sharing recourses where possible, and not duplicating one another's projects. It avoids competition, ensures best value for money where there is funding and the best possible service for beneficiaries. Working with others also increases our credibility in the community and the presence of the project we are working on.

Action points:

1. Telephone your Local Authority and ask to speak to someone responsible for community development in your area.
2. Ask to meet with your local councillor and explain your desire to serve your community and get involved
3. Contact your local Council for Voluntary Action (CVC) and ask who to contact in your area concerning development. Are there any community development groups in your area?

CVSs or councils for voluntary action are local umbrella organisations working on behalf of the voluntary sector in a given area. They are fount of information, very helpful and excellent for advice regarding community work and how to go about it. They also put on a wide range of courses for charities and voluntary organisations. Any organisation including churches can join for a very small fee and benefit from their help and expertise.

Theme 2: Churches working together

Responding to the needs of a community is best done together. There will be a number of different congregations in your community, be it citywide or a local neighbourhood. Agreeing to work together with a focus on the community, across denominations leads to sharing resources e.g. experience, buildings, volunteers and funding. This enables the church to become much more effective in tackling the effects of deprivation in a given area. It motivates congregations to explore what they have in common and working together for the sake of their communities. It can be a powerful witness in the community, demonstrating unity through action and challenges the view that churches are only concerned with their own growth.

For more information:

- See www.communitymission.org.uk website for many ideas and resources to build unity through community action

Theme 3: New ways of being church in the community

Community Mission can challenge our understanding of church. We may find ourselves with questions, such as: 'How relevant are our church activities to people's day-to-day lives?' 'Is this good news for the poor?' 'What is church?' This can be confusing and disruptive but it can also positively lead to a shift in focus, to new ways of being church in the community.

In what ways can we be 'salt and light' in our area? Some Christians choose to go and live in urban areas affected by deprivation and endeavour to build relationships with the community in a natural organic way. This approach may involve groups of Christians living communally or in different homes within an area. Example: Five Christian households in several streets, who meet to pray for neighbours, share their resources and respond to local needs.

For more information:

- See the two Fresh Expressions DVDs for inspiration and examples of what is happening across the UK 'Stories of church from a changing culture' and 'Changing church in Every Place'. Fresh Expressions with a number of other agencies are also establishing a one-year part-time regional training programme called Mission Shaped Ministry – ideal for teams beginning fresh expressions of church. Visit www.emergingchurch.info or www.freshexpressions.org.uk
- ReSource run courses exploring the mission and practice of church planting in fresh, culturally relevant ways. Find out more at resourcechurchplanting.com or by emailing info@resourcechurchplanting.com
- Be inspired by groups that have gone to live in the most difficult areas in order to reach the people there such as Eden. See www.message.org.uk for more details.

HOPE filled prayer

Find out the prayer needs in your community by placing a Prayer Box in a prominent place or doing a leaflet drop telling people they can email or call with any prayer requests.

Developing new forms of church

In the last decade across the UK, Christians have been discovering that it's often not enough to make contact with people and invite them to come to church as we know it. It's also vital to go to where people are, listen to their culture, to love and to serve them. As part of that loving service, new communities will begin to form, providing opportunities to share faith and make new disciples. The best way to nurture those disciples will often be to begin a new Christian community – a new church – where they are to reach out to a particular network or culture.

This kind of movement is already happening in thousands of different places. The Church of England and the Methodist Church call these new beginnings fresh expressions of church and elsewhere they are known as emerging churches. There is a big overlap with the church planting movement with these new congregations and communities growing up alongside traditional congregations in what the Archbishop of Canterbury has called a 'mixed economy of churches'.

As you think and pray, allow your vision to be stretched even beyond loving service and offering the gospel and an invitation to church as it is. Catch a vision for establishing all across the land new Christian communities – fresh expressions of church which can grow and be a means of grace for those beginning the Christian journey.

More details from the fresh expressions website

www.freshexpressions.org.uk or www.emergingchurch.info or www.encountersontheedge.info

RESOURCES

Prepare for Action

- Livability's '**Why Social Action?**', a series of four Bible studies, will help you to develop strong biblical foundations for any community action. Also our **Prayer – Action – Reflection** Cycle helps gives a model of action to use on your journey.
- Faithworks produce a **Church Audit Pack** to evaluate your church and its potential to rise to the challenge of effective, sustainable community development. They also have a **DVD for Small Groups** which includes questions and bible passages to help your church to think about how you can serve your wider community.

Tools to help you Engage and Research your Community

- Livability's **Information Triangle** explains all the above stages in detail (see Resources for more detail).
- Livability's **Questionnaire Pack** will thoroughly equip you to carry out a community survey and Faithworks also have available a **Community Audit Pack** which contains excellent advice to carry out an audit of your community.

Livability's Community Mission team:

Jill Clark – Community Mission Coordinator

Tel: 020 7452 2018

Email: jclark@livability.org.uk

Web: www.communitymission.org.uk

Livability run bi-monthly training courses in both London and the North on issues relating to Christian social action and community development. Some are very practical like how to manage volunteers or deal with conflict and some are theological and ask questions like 'How can the Bible be made relevant in an urban context?' Most of the days are free. Find out more at www.communitymission.org.uk or by emailing jclark@livability.org.uk