

What kind of 'harvest' are you looking for?

Effective community work involves identifying, preparing for and enjoying a range of harvests

'We've done a lot of work but there is no harvest,' said the weary project leader. 'This is a tough town.' She sighed and we looked at each other. There was so much I wanted to say but where to start?

'The harvest is plentiful,' said Jesus. Our cities are full of needy people. Following Jesus' call Christians set up community projects: lunch clubs flourish, parent and toddler groups thrive, and the youth work takes off. But does all this success lead to the results we hoped for like people coming to church, local crime reduced, schools better attended? What sort of harvest should we expect and what do we do if we are not reaping it?

What is your project trying to achieve?

I once worked on a dairy farm looking after cows. The cows' health was critical, the grass quality important but the harvest was not cows or grass but milk. What is your project trying to achieve? It probably has more than one aim. The youth work is not just to keep youngsters out of trouble. There are skills they can learn and information that can help them. If you are introducing them to faith do you have a scheme, a journey for them to follow? Good field management produced good grass which made well-fed cows who gave lots of milk. You need a plan for a harvest with clear steps along the way.

Long term change and short term achievements

In our projects there are short term and long term achievements. Serving thirty lunches is the short term goal. Helping a lonely man make friends takes time. Bringing a youngster to Christ may take weeks or even years. It will help you in planning and running your project to be clear which goals are short or longer term. Often the short term ones are things that can be easily counted or measured. How long did the youth group sit and listen for this week? How many parents came to the cash managing session? The long term ones will be more about the quality of things. Get other people to tell you about the effects of your work; ask the neighbours and families of your clients as well as the agencies that they engage with like schools, health service and police. When you sit and think about long term changes you may discover surprising results. Remember to plan for both types of change but don't expect plans for long term change to take effect in a week or two.

The harvests will be different during the life of a project

On our farm we made hay in summer. In June we cut grass for silage. We planted beet in March to harvest in November. These supplies formed different harvests and kept the cows fed. In our projects there will be different harvests at different times. You cannot work with a group of strangers in the same way as an established youth group. Someone coming on a debt counselling course will not be instantly sorted out. Relationships with your clients will take time and planning to build. You should identify, prepare for and enjoy the different harvests that come with time. This will involve making changes in your project and adjusting activities to fit the harvest you are reaping.

Community Projects are tools, not the harvest

If you are clear about why changes are happening and what harvest you are focussing on, you will find it easier to adapt or close down parts of your work and start new ones. Old cows that do not produce much milk are nice to keep as old friends but cost the farm dearly. Can you afford the luxury of projects that are not producing their harvest? Someone may be very happy running that small ladies' circle in the best church lounge but if no new members have joined for five years should it make way for some new work? It depends what harvest you are seeking but the project is only a tool, it is not the harvest.

Identifying the harvest can help us choose the right tool or modify the one we have.

When you know what your harvest is you can choose the right tool. Maybe the youth group need a weekend away to explore some deeper faith issues. Or maybe just to get to know each other away from some negative influence. Would having everyone sit round one table at lunch help people make friends or would a story sharing session do it better? You will know your answers. Remember that the tools that worked a few years ago may not cut it now. Kids want more than a monopoly board and a packet of smarties! Keep an eye on your local population and its needs.

Why are we going out to harvest? The variety of motivations does not matter

'The workers are few', warned Jesus. 'Ask the Lord of the harvest to send more workers.' It is great to be part of a team but do you know why your fellow workers are there alongside you? Do they know why you volunteer? It will help you to share your different reasons for joining in this work and seeing how they connect to your short and long term goals. We do not need to share all the same motivations, in fact a variety is helpful, but knowing each other's will be useful in talking about making changes to reap a new harvest.

A Salvation Army officer in a tough city told me, 'Our work is like the rings of Saturn. It looks like a lot but it is more like dust.' Precious dust, I thought, and began the process of helping him see his harvest. His work is more like the ozone layer: precious, fragile, invisible at times but critical for keeping out the harmful effects of the sun. Together we are helping him shape it further to help the sun produce the green plants that will yield his harvest.

A summary of tips to gather your harvest:

- Clarify what you are trying to achieve (it may be more than one thing) and share it with the team
- Appreciate the difference between short term and long term goals
- Be ready to change what you do to adapt to different seasons
- Remember that your project is a tool, it is not the harvest itself
- Remember to appreciate and celebrate what you have achieved

David Arscott, March 2009