

The Church and Community Development

WHY would the Church engage with community development?

The Church is a beautiful visible manifestation of the Kingdom of God, however it is not all of God's kingdom. God is concerned with making every realm of creation whole. As Churches we have an incredible privilege of partnering with the Spirit of God in the work of restoration in our local communities. As we experience the wholeness that Jesus offers, we are to carry his abundant life ^(John 10:10) forward into our local communities and the wider world. As we continue to experience the wholeness of God in our own lives and Churches, we then extend that wholeness of life into our wider communities.

Throughout the scope of Scripture we see the work of God is always swayed towards those most disempowered, voiceless and marginalised by society (eg. Deuteronomy 15:11, Psalm 34:18) and never is this more clear than the life of Jesus (eg. Matt 5:42, Luke 4:17-21). Jesus himself was vilified for spending time among those least appreciated and most damaged by society (the blind, the leper, the sick, outcast and the poor) and it is therefore not surprising that since the first recorded instances of the Christian Church (Acts 4:34) Christians have followed their King's footsteps into places of brokenness (1 John 3:16-18 etc).

In the 4th Century Roman Emperor Julian tries to launch pagan charities to compete with the Church who were attracting so many converts by their charitable works:

"These impious Galileans (Christians) support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us."

(Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press 1996, p84)

Current church engagement in community development represents the continuing of this tradition of preferential work among those more vulnerable to disadvantage in our communities.

HOW should the Church engage with community development?

The short answer is with humility before God and before our communities.

Humility before God starts by understanding that we are not bringing Christ to poor and vulnerable communities but that God has always been active in and sustaining these communities (Colossians 1:16-17) and that the role of people who know and recognise Christ's redemptive work is to discover, appreciate and celebrate what God has been doing in the community and to join God in that work.

Jesus' attitude of service was one of humility and of setting aside his privilege as God (Philippians 2:5-8). In the same way in all our work we must also minimise power imbalances on behalf of those serving and seek to place the vulnerable and disadvantaged persons within our communities "at the head of the table" (Luke 14:7-11).

Practically then, humility before our communities requires us to actively avoid paternalism (ie. never doing or providing for a person what they could be rightly expected to do or provide for themselves).

Consistent with the perspective that all people are image-bearers of God and blessed with a host of gifts in line with that image, we must then put an emphasis on discovering what the most vulnerable in our communities already have instead of immediately providing external resources and solutions.

While we should not deny or minimise the needs experience by those marginalised in our communities; we must recognise that the best means of overcoming the foundational causes of these needs is when the individual experiencing them is empowered and equipped to mobilise their own gifts, experiences and assets. By starting with the God-given gifts and capacities of the person we can change the dynamics that have both disempowered and marginalised the individual and potentially created a sense of superiority in ourselves.

We must encourage practices that support those vulnerable people to best steward the gifts they have, affirming their dignity and capacity to contribute to the betterment of our communities. By inviting them to be contributors we can support the process of overcoming shame and poverty of being. As we begin to witness them using their gifts and ability we are also transformed in our capacity to see them as God does, helping us to overcome any residual sense of superiority.

WHAT does this look like on the ground? (A case study from a local Baptist Church)



The Recovery Ministry at Clovercrest Baptist Church works with individuals recovering from a life controlling issue. Recognising that people recovering from addiction are not just people in need but also people with a lot to offer to our communities the Recovery Ministry recently hosted an art night. This night demonstrated the gifts of Recovery participants and provided an opportunity to share and express their journeys with the wider community. Participants were able to contribute their gifts in a number of forms and Director of Recovery, Suz Foley, particularly shared how one participant (an ex-bar tender) was able to concoct the most incredible mock-tails for the evening. Addiction can seriously disintegrate a person's dignity but the act of appreciating a person's gifts and abilities is an incredibly restorative act.

WHERE to from here?

Baptist Care employ a consultant who can walk alongside your Church as they explore what community development might look like from here whether that be evaluating existing programs or supporting you in developing a new approach.

A great book to read to learn more community development from a strong Biblical foundation is "When Helping Hurts; How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself" by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2009)