

REACHING OUT TO LOW-INCOME NEIGHBORS

On a sunny Saturday, Pastor Reginald looks at the crowd in line for free hamburgers and hot dogs as the band plays in the street. It's Jubilee Church's annual block party. This solidly middle-class church, whose steeple rises above the business district of a medium-sized Northeastern city, wants to do more to reach out to its neighbors, and the block party is a first step. The neighborhood has its share of economic problems, including a low tax base, limited job opportunities, building vacancies, homelessness, drug use, and crime. Today, church members don aprons and offer a free lunch, a concert, and children's activities for city residents. Though happy to see how many showed up, the pastor laments that in previous years none of the block party participants attended church the next Sunday.

A Demographic Divide

Like Jubilee Church, many churches perceive a divide between those who worship inside the building and those who live nearby. It's true: a majority of congregations in the U.S. do not look demographically like their neighborhoods. In a nationwide study of 2,000 congregations, Cynthia Woolever, long-time editor of *The Parish Paper*, found that most congregations are older, more highly educated, and less racially diverse than the surrounding community. The greatest divide concerned unemployment, with 95% of congregations having more unemployed in the local neighborhood than in church.¹

Stigmatized for Being Poor

Though Jubilee Church started by inviting residents to attend church, the challenges faced by low-income residents stand in the way of attending the worship service. Susan Crawford Sullivan, a sociologist, interviewed forty-five mothers on public assistance about their faith life. She found that while spiritual practices mattered deeply, many of them had given up on church. Some were unable to secure transportation to church while others struggled with housing instability. Then there were the psy-

chological barriers, such as stigmatization for being poor and doubting whether they were adequately dressed. To some of these mothers, church was more appropriate for middle-class persons, not the poor. These feelings were intensified among mothers who had been criticized or belittled in public, such as in welfare offices or stores, or when applying for a job or attending health clinics.²

Five Steps for Reaching Out

What can churches do to reach out to low-income neighbors? A study team led by R. Drew Smith at Morehouse College focused on churches located near housing projects in four cities: Indianapolis, Denver, Camden (NJ), and Hartford (CT). Though many churches existed within a mile of the housing complexes, two-thirds of residents told interviewers that no church had contacted them in the past year to be involved in church activities.³ After conducting surveys and observational research in phase one, researchers called clergy, civic leaders, and residents for roundtable discussions, asking those present to consider next steps by churches on their own or in church-community clusters, and offering small grants to get the process going. As a result of these small-scale



projects, the research team learned which practices were most effective.⁴

1. Use a Research-Dialogue-Action Sequence. The research project followed a research-dialogue-action sequence that involved research about the neighborhood, discussion of the findings by church and community members, and empowerment of participants through small grants. This model can be used elsewhere.

2. Learn about Policy. Learn how changes in public policy can address poverty locally by asking a policy specialist such as a social worker, college professor, or pastor to speak to the issues. This educational process is most effective when church leaders are self-aware enough to understand the role that middle class privilege plays in perpetuating poverty. Invite church members to classes and small-group discussions on economic issues.

3. Strengthen the Faith-Based Infrastructure. On the whole, congregations are less suited than councils of churches and interfaith organizations for bridging activities with the poor. One reason for the Camden site's failure to gain traction was that, despite the city being one of the most racially diverse, it lacked a citywide council of churches or interfaith organization that could initiate bridge-building activities such as forums and festivals. By contrast, Indianapolis had a long tradition of interdenominational work, and this faith-based infrastructure led to higher involvement by church members.

4. Increase Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Exposure. Dialogue-based initiatives, such as neighborhood forums and informal study circles provide a place where church members and residents can get to know one another. Likewise, service projects can offer a chance for residents and church members to work together to improve the neighborhood, as long as they include an opportunity for dialogue or debriefing.

5. Expand Faith-Based Advocacy. While classes or discussion groups (# 2 above) can foster understanding of the issues, leadership training moves beyond this by providing church leaders and residents with advocacy tools, which might include lobbying an elected official, using the media effectively, or organizing a protest.

Having a Heart in San Antonio

For years, the leaders of Travis Park United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas, struggled to revive their dying, downtown church. Leaders felt exhausted by their efforts to revive the congregation, but according to the pastor, John Flowers, the solution lay right outside their door in the economically struggling heart of downtown.

The turnaround began when the youth group initiated "Cafe Corazón" (Spanish for "heart"), a breakfast program for anyone who was hungry, regardless of the ability to pay. After five years, the Sunday morning program averaged 120 volunteers and fed 200 people. At the same time, church leaders spent two years studying books on how to revitalize the congregation, a crucial step in achieving change.

At one point, the church began making changes to its worship offerings, with organ and choral music at the early service and contemporary music at 11:00 a.m. As a result, several members left the church, citing their discomfort with either the worship changes or its ministry to the poor. To emphasize the church's new commitments, worship leaders framed the worship services using biblical stories about the marginalized. Over time, the numerical decline of the congregation was reversed, and the "spiritual apathy" disappeared.⁵ Flowers rejects the notion that simply inviting the marginalized will work. Instead, he proposes "aggressive pursuit." Travis' leaders would say something like "I want you to worship with me today. I don't know if you need to come to worship or not but I need you there. I cannot be all God has called me to be without you."⁶

Start by Listening

A common thread in the Morehouse College research project and Travis Park's revitalization is the importance of listening. Caring can be expressed in a simple question, "What's on your mind?" Asking this question might open the door to previously unheard stories and reflections and, in some cases, new approaches to the challenges faced by economically struggling communities.

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation's Location* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 63-64.

2. Susan Crawford Sullivan, *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 157, 160-61.

3. R. Drew Smith, 2001, "Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance," *Sociology of Religion* 62 (3): 301-13.

4. R. Drew Smith, "Beyond the Boundaries: Low-Income Residents, Faith-Based Organizations and Neighborhood Coalition Building," November 2003. PDF. 44 pages. Download: <https://nationalurbanministryassociation.org/free-resources.html>

5. John Flowers and Karen Vannoy, "Growing Mission with God's People on the Margins," *Net Results* (January/February 2004).

6. Karen Vannoy and John Flowers, "Not a One-Night Stand: Reaching the Homeless and Marginalized," *Circuit Rider*, January/February 2007), 14-16.