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Building the church's readiness for a transformational ministry journey

“My question is, ‘What makes the difference? Why is one church a place of total transformation, while another is a place where people are saved and then sit there until they die? What kind of church changes the community and what kind of church is just there taking up space?’ ... I pray God will show me how to fulfill the passion I have for a different kind of Christian ministry, one that makes a difference.”

(Seminary student)

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The cry of this seminary student echoes in many churches. A growing movement of Christians is taking ownership of the biblical mandate to care for the poor, the prophetic call to “do justice and love mercy,” and Jesus’ example of ministering to the whole person. Their heart yearns to be part of a church that makes a difference. Yet many churches find themselves stumbling on the path from intention to action.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO DEVELOP

A TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMUNITY MINISTRY?

Transformational ministry with the community flows from the Great Commandment to love God and love our neighbor with all we’ve got (Mark 12:30-31). It is expressed through ministry programs as well as a discipleship paradigm of serving Christ by serving others. It energizes the church with a vision of extending Jesus’ healing presence in a broken world through a mosaic of justice, compassion and spiritual renewal (Mic. 6:8). It leads churches to invest with abandon in the *shalom* of their city, working alongside other instruments of God to rebuild struggling lives and neighborhoods (Jer. 29:7; Isa. 61:4).

What kind of church can develop transformational community ministry? Is this kind of ministry more likely to take root in a growing church, an urban church, a liberal church, a young church?

Studies have identified various factors such as size, class, theological tradition, and location that correlate with social service activity.¹ But none of these fully satisfies the seminarian's desire to know "what makes the difference" between churches that place mission at the heart of their existence and those that are motivated primarily by self-maintenance. After reviewing the relationship between community ministry and salient variables, Ram Cnaan concludes:

Given that most congregations are involved in at least one social service program, the distinction between the high performers and the low performers is not mediated by budget, size, membership, or theology. Rather, it is mediated by the congregation's commitment to faith-based action and a tradition of congregational care.²

Based on a study of how churches learn to do ministry,³ we conclude that moving a church into transformational community ministry often entails more than comprehending new ideas or implementing new projects. It calls for becoming a new kind of church. A missional church sees itself as a "sent" church (Matthew 28:19), one that exists not just for itself but also for the sake of a beloved, broken world. As this paradigm seeps into a church's DNA, it changes how a congregation sets its priorities, communicates its identity, allocates its resources, and defines success.

Sharing in God's transforming mission in the community goes hand in hand with transformation within the church. Thus developing effective ministry typically means venturing through change. And change is never easy.

What does it take for a church to make it through the process of change, despite the obstacles?

Research suggests seven critical components for church mobilization:

- a healthy foundation
- a compelling vision
- a plan for action
- missional resources
- a motivational catalyst
- change-sustaining relationships
- transformational leadership skills

BUILDING READINESS FOR A TRANSFORMATIONAL MINISTRY JOURNEY

Becoming a church that embraces transformational community ministry is a journey – hazardous, winding, and richly rewarding. What does it take for a church to make it through the process of change, despite the obstacles? Research suggests seven critical components for church mobilization: a healthy foundation; a compelling vision; a plan for action; missional resources; a motivational catalyst;

change-sustaining relationships; and transformational leadership skills.⁴

Note that these components are not how-to steps to developing community ministry. They are, rather, characteristics of a church that is ready to take effective steps toward developing community ministry. They describe elemental qualities of churches that live out Christ's good news in word and deed in their community. A church that has these qualities is more likely to succeed in carrying out the changes needed to truly make a difference.

Lacking one or more of these readiness factors, a church may experience more difficulties on the path toward transformational ministry. If a church has all the pieces in place except a plan for action, the momentum toward change may produce reports and committees but no true real-world traction. Without sufficient resources, a church is likely to experience frustration as it starts ministry projects it lacks the capacity to complete. A church that does not have a sense of urgency for change may still move toward community ministry, but only gradually. If a church lacks leadership skills, the change process may generate overwhelming anxiety and conflict.

Following the metaphor of a journey, each readiness factor corresponds to a metaphor for travel:

1. ROAD: The journey toward transformational community ministry must be launched on a sufficient foundation of church health. This includes mature leadership, relational health, and spiritual vitality. A church that is struggling with bitter internal divisions or a pastoral crisis is not in a position to initiate a new ministry. Another foundational element is a general theological compatibility with a sense of calling to external ministry – or at least, a theological framework that is not opposed to outreach of word and deed.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: Assess your church’s relational, spiritual and organizational health; work toward healing wholeness among members, and build up the church through intentional opportunities for mission-oriented discipleship.

2. DIRECTION: Eric Swanson notes, “City transformation (like personal conformity to Christ) is more like the North Star (a direction to pursue) than the North Pole (a destination we can arrive at).”⁵ Change is guided by a compelling vision or portrait of a preferred future for the church and community, worth exchanging people’s time and energy to help bring about. Hunger for God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness is the compass that points toward transformational ministry.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: Study Scriptures and other sources that lay out a biblical vision for the local mission of the church; gather for ongoing prayer to discern God’s direction for your church.

3. ROAD MAP: Churches need a strategic plan to move from vision to action. This does not necessarily mean a detailed strategy for the next 10 years of ministry. Rather, what is needed is an intentional plan for taking the next step, and then the next. Putting feet to faith entails a basic framework of accountable action steps for discerning ministry opportunity, mobilizing people and resources to respond, and growing through reflection and relationship. The next leg of the road map may only take your church

through next year, or even next week. But unless the goal of movement is intentional and accountable, it is most likely the church will not move.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: Train a community ministry team empowered to develop an action plan for the next steps of community outreach, and to work with church leaders to implement it.

4. FUEL: The journey toward transformational mission requires resources of “time, talent, and treasures.” Assets can include money, facilities, equipment, and people, as well as intangible strengths such as skills, connections, and reputation. Assets should be recruited for ministry from both the church and the community. The magnitude of the resources is not as important as whether there is a plan in place for identifying and mobilizing them for community ministry.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: Conduct an asset inventory in the church and community;⁶ seek training in fundraising and volunteer mobilization.

5. STARTER: A church may be drawn toward the ministry journey, but needs a larger-than-life motivation to hit the start button. A catalyst for change propels a church out of its normal routine and generates missional momentum. A catalytic sense of urgency can come from many sources: a spiritual awakening, a newfound biblical conviction, a powerful short-term ministry experience, a crisis in the neighborhood or the nation. The spur to change may also be less altruistic – such as a wake-up call that the church’s decline can only be reversed by revitalizing its relationship with the community.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: Create opportunities for church members to share catalytic ministry experiences, such as short-term ministry projects or exposures to poverty.⁷

6. ENGINE: Relationships are the driving force behind transformational ministry. Missional change is guided and sustained through

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redemptive relationships with the community, within the church, and with ministry partners. The core of transformational ministry is love for God and neighbor (Mark 12:30–31). A church can best prepare for a ministry journey by cultivating loving, accountable fellowship within the congregation, an authentic, servant-hearted connection with the community, mission-oriented links with the broader body of Christ, and a deep passion for God.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: One of the first and most important ways to show love to a neighbor is by simply listening to their concerns and dreams, while opening our lives to them. Create opportunities for church members to develop relationships with members of the community (some ideas: block parties, family game nights, community garden, neighborhood newsletter, “dining clubs” in local restaurants, community clean-up days).

7. DRIVER: Churches need a core leadership team with the skills, vision and support to navigate the transformational ministry journey. The transition from faith to action is smoother if piloted by the pastor or official governing body of the church; at minimum, if not on board, they need to be out of the way. But other ministry midwives can also emerge: mission staff, ministry committees, Bible study groups, vision teams. Leaders assess the congregation’s readiness for ministry in relation to the first six readiness factors described above. They take responsibility for developing internal conditions and external connections to help the church creatively and collectively put their faith into action. They may not know how to do this exactly – but they are eager and empowered to learn.

How to strengthen this readiness factor: Offer leaders training in a missional paradigm and transformational leadership skills;⁸ identify and

equip lay members who display vision and gifts for ministry leadership.

GETTING STARTED ON THE JOURNEY

These seven factors describe a church that is ready to roll, motivated to move, pointed in the right direction, with empowered leadership at the helm. But it still takes a spark to ignite



the motor. The spark of the church is the Holy Spirit. The conduit for the Spirit’s work in our ministry is persistent prayer. Without prayerful dependence on God’s love and power, none of these seven elements is sufficient to produce a church that truly makes a difference. Only the transforming grace of God can drive us beyond our stubborn resistance, prideful self-reliance, faithless fears, and self-centered comfort.

The good news is that it is God’s design to supply the church with all that it needs for ministry (1 Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 2:10, 1 Peter 4:10). The test of readiness for transformational ministry is not what a church has, but how it is willing to use what it has.

Even if a church lacks a detailed understanding of what it means to be a missional congregation, it can still decide that it needs to become one. Even if a church doesn’t know exactly where it is headed, it can take the next step toward serving the community in love. Even if church leaders make mistakes along the way, they can choose to learn and grow from

each ministry experience. Even if only limited people and resources are available for ministry, the church can invest what assets it finds in the church and community, in faith that God will provide for each stage of the journey.

Ministry development is an incremental process. There are no “transporters” to vault us to our goal. Each small step toward reflecting God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10) creates the opportunity to plant relationships, generate learnings and create momentum for the next step . . . and the next. If you hunger for change in your church and community, don’t focus your energies on cataloguing the church’s deficiencies. Rather, look for signposts of opportunities to share God’s love, particularly with those cast off on “the streets and alleys” of life (Luke 14:21). Then ask the question, “Who is willing to go there with me?” Start with those who say yes, and see where this leads your church and community.

ENDNOTES

1. David Roozen and Carl Dudley, *Faith Communities Today: a Report on Religion in the United States Today*. Report from the Faith Communities Today (FACT) Study (2001); Jason Scott, *The Scope and Scale of Faith-Based Social Services* (Albany, NY: The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, 2002).

2. Ram A. Cnaan, Stephanie C. Boddie, and Gaynor I. Yancey, “Bowling Alone but Serving Together: The Congregational Norm of Community Involvement,” in *Religion as Social Capital*, ed. Corwin Smidt (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 114-115.

3. Heidi Rolland Unruh, “Learning About How Churches Learn About Social Ministry: Reflections on Research that Explains and Empowers,” research report to the Lilly Endowment (September 2004).

4. This analysis incorporates material from Stan Rowland, “Church Initiated Neighborhood Transformation,” a PowerPoint available from the Collaborative For Neighborhood Transformation, <http://www.healthwholeness.net/index.php>.

5. Eric Swanson, “To Transform a City” (January 2, 2007).

6. Jay Van Groningen, “Learning the New ABCDs,” in *Family and Community Ministries*, v. 22, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 37-40.

7. Three good resources for getting started: Faith in Action, www.putyourfaithinaction.org; Harvest’s seed project guide, www.harvestfoundation.org; Mission Waco’s exposure trips and poverty simulation, www.missionwaco.org.

8. Three useful books for transformational leaders in training: Jim Herrington, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God’s Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Alan J. Roxburgh & Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

▮▮ What are your church’s greatest strengths for a transformational ministry journey (readiness factors already or mostly in place)?

▮▮ What are your church’s greatest priorities in growing toward transformational ministry (readiness factors to be developed)?

▮▮ What are one to three action steps (including prayer) that can be taken in the near future to strengthen your readiness for transformational community ministry?