



Ways for Churches to Create Partnerships in their LOCAL COMMUNITIES

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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God is already powerfully at work in the community where your church is located, and your church was put there for a reason. In the past, many churches understood that purpose as *bringing people into* the church rather than *going out* to join what God is doing in the neighbourhood. Now, as many churches seek to move outside of the church building's walls, they are looking for new ways to understand the hopes and needs of their neighbours, build relationships and partner with others in the good work that is already happening. This resource contains tips for how your church can create partnerships with other organizations and people doing God's work in your community.

LISTEN AND CONNECT: The most important part of developing partnerships in the community is taking the time to truly listen to your neighbours. This can be done in informal ways. For example, by talking to people in coffee shops, at bus stops or at neighbourhood events and asking them what they think is needed to make the community a better place. It can also be done in more formal ways. For example, by visiting businesses, community organizations, firehalls, police or ambulance centers, schools, and political offices in your neighbourhood. Bring a gift of thanks from your congregations (cookies are always a good choice!) and come with specific questions you'd like to ask, such as "What is the biggest challenge that this area is facing?" and "What could our church do to support people in this community better?"

Connecting Through Food

Each Sunday from 12–1 p.m., rain or shine, free hot dogs and drinks are served to the community by the members of City Centre Church (Surrey, BC). Initially, it began as a way for members at City Centre to fill a need they saw in their neighbourhood. People were hungry and serving hot dogs was a simple way to provide a meal. Soon it became obvious that they were also responding to another need. As they listened to stories of struggle, hardship and loneliness, they offered words of encouragement, prayers and extra support. People started showing up not just for the food but for the conversations and connection. This "hot dog ministry" has shifted the church's dynamics with people in the neighbourhood who now see City Centre as a friendly and welcoming place that cares about the well-being of their neighbours.

COLLABORATE ON POINTS OF INTEREST: After listening and connecting with neighbours, you need to ask questions such as, "Where do the needs in the community meet the gifts, interests and abilities of those in our congregation?" Perhaps it is in the realm of justice, environmentalism, poverty reduction, food security, affordable housing, addiction, loneliness or community connection. Who is God calling you to partner with to create or join an initiative in the area you identify? Do not limit yourself to partnering with other Christian organizations. Think outside the box. You can partner with a local business, a community service organization, a school or a neighbourhood association.

CONNECT WITH OTHER CHURCHES: While you do not want to limit your partnerships to Christian organizations only, it is important that you reach out to other churches in your neighbourhood. Who are they connecting with? What do they see as needs? Who are they serving?

Churches often overlap in what they are doing to serve the community. It is amazing how much you can get done in pooling your resources, both financial and volunteer power, together.

BUILD ON WHAT CONGREGATION MEMBERS ARE ALREADY DOING:

In any given congregation, there are usually people involved in all sorts of different organizations in the community. From coaching a sports team to helping out with a breakfast program in schools to volunteering for Rotary Club to reading with kids in an after-school club. Celebrate the community participation that congregation members are already involved in with a community engagement Sunday. Pray for all the organizations in which you are serving and provide opportunities for other people in the congregation to learn more and sign up to volunteer with them.

GIVE MONEY, BUT ALSO BE PRESENT: There are many organizations—such as foodbanks, refugee homes, soup kitchens, after-school programs and homeless shelters—that churches regularly donate to without having an ongoing relationship. Connect with the organizations that your church is supporting financially and ask if there is an on-the-ground way your church could support them. Could you help them with a specific project? Are they in need of regular volunteers? Do those they serve need new friends in the community?

VOLUNTEER TOGETHER IN THE COMMUNITY: Research and identify organizations in your area that need volunteers. Ask congregation members which organizations they would have fun getting involved in. Prioritize regular commitments rather than one-off “service days” so that relationships can be built over time. This is a perfect opportunity to encourage the small groups in your church to serve together. Don’t forget about the children and youth in your congregation. There are some organizations that will be open to having young people accompany adults in volunteering, such as visiting elderly people in age homes, stocking supplies at food banks and engaging in environmental advocacy.

Issue a Volunteer Challenge

Keswick Presbyterian Church (Keswick, ON) decided to do a different type of Lenten project last year. Instead of raising money for a cause, they decided to give 1,000 hours of volunteer service to the community. Putting up a giant thermometer at the entrance to the sanctuary, they invited people to log their volunteer hours in community organizations over the 40 days of Lent. For some who were already actively volunteering in the community, it was easy. For others, it challenged them to step outside of their comfort zones and busy schedules to take the time to do what is really important: being a disciple and making disciples. Not surprisingly, after they met their goal by Easter, many people continued to volunteer in the community!

PARTNER WITH THOSE SHARING YOUR BUILDING: Who is using your building? Could “renters” be transformed into “partners in ministry”? Talk with those who are using your building already to see if there is any way the church could support them. Maybe the AA group that meets there on a weeknight would appreciate some homemade cookies for their meetings. Perhaps the daycare or playgroup that rents space could use some extra people to read to the children. The adults who drop kids off for Scouts, Brownies or other kid’s activities at your church might appreciate having a social time together or quiet time in the sanctuary. If there aren’t groups already using your building that you could partner with, identify community groups that are looking for space and see if there are projects that you could run together.

BE A BLESSING: Attitude is everything in building strong partnerships. Churches are often used to running programs and setting the agenda for how they will serve. In partnering with community organizations, you will either be setting the agenda together or you will be helping them with their mission. Be flexible and put on the attitude of a servant leader. Remember that you are there to bless your neighbours and serve in whatever way they need.