

[COMMUNITY OUTREACH]

Eyes- Wide-Open Outreach

BY RICK RUSAW and ERIC SWANSON

The church that meets the authentic needs of its community develops long-term relationships and influences the culture. Here's how to uncover potential ministry opportunities if your church is ready to open its eyes to the needs and dreams of your community.

First, ask the people you're serving to identify what would help them most.

Rather than assuming what they need, let them tell you. For example, in Santa Ana, California, Mariners Church volunteers began to meet with the residents of an underserved Latino community. Through a translator they asked, "What is it you want for your neighborhood?"

After hours of talking and listening, their neighbors identified these needs: They needed help keeping their kids in school. The dropout rate in this community is among the highest in the nation, and without education, cycles of poverty continue. The parents expressed their limited ability to help their children because of their own lack of education and lack of proficiency in the English language. They also needed help in improving their parenting skills, and they needed instruction in English so they could get better jobs. In response, the folks at Mariners developed the Minnie Street Learning Center in Santa Ana >>>>



and based its curriculum on these specific needs.

Second, conduct or use existing research on the needs of your community.

It's often not necessary for churches to do the research themselves because much of it has already been done. For example, formal census research can be found under <http://factfinder.census.gov>. Navigating around your ZIP code will reveal the latest information regarding income and educational levels, demographics, and employment statistics. This is a great start in understanding a community's needs. Your local chamber of commerce is also a good source of valuable information.

Do organizations exist in your community that already do some of the legwork and screening that you need in order to get started in volunteering? Most communities have an organized method for nonprofits to share ideas and projects.

Third, recognize the

power of existing relationships. To identify ministry opportunities, look through the eyes of those in your church. Often you'll already have a "champion" who, not in conjunction with the church, is leading a ministry. A motivated leader is worth his or her weight in gold, forming a one-person nucleus around which to build a team. Look for places where God is already at work through good-hearted people, and ask if you can join in.

Most likely your church also has its share of "professionals"—people who possess an enhanced awareness of community needs because of their jobs. Though they may not realize it, police officers, social workers, nonprofit board members, schoolteachers, and school administrators are all experts in identifying the community's needs. Forming a working group or task force with these people would put you well on the way toward identifying multiple ministry opportunities.

Fourth, look and listen.

An important means of assessing

needs and opportunities is simply through personal observation. Ask the people in your church what they're passionate about. What common thread runs through all of your current ministries? It might be "youth" or "the poor" or "single moms." Some churches provide "micro journeys" for teams of people to personally investigate the needs of a city. Ask those in your church's small groups to drive around town, read the newspapers, talk to people in the neighborhoods, and so forth to identify needs. For a great example of what can result from this type of observation, see "A Closer Look, The Dream Center" in the sidebar below.

Can you even begin to imagine what would happen if the people in our churches really saw the people around them as Christ sees them? "Ears that hear and eyes that see—the Lord has made them both" (Proverbs 20:12). 📍

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A CLOSER LOOK

The Dream Center

In 1994, then 21-year-old pastor Matthew Barnett began the Dream Center in Los Angeles by walking around his neighborhood, looking for unmet needs. He saw thousands of outcast people living on the fringes of society. Today the Dream Center—"the church that never sleeps"—has adopted 50 city blocks

(2,100 homes!) that it serves with a staff of 200 volunteers. Its campus, a former hospital, houses 400 people in its rehab and discipleship program

and feeds more than 25,000 people a week. They have a wellness clinic, a mobile medical unit, and dozens of other effective ministries that are find-

ing needs and meeting them. Their 40 buses bring hundreds of people to this church in downtown Los Angeles. What began with personal observation is resulting in changed lives as dozens come to faith each week. Scores of churches around our country have also established an Adopt-a-Block strategy as a means of touching the lives of people around them.

