

Church + Community = Ministry
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Cornwall is a typical small town in upstate New York. We have a Main Street and local shops. We have schools that we are proud of and a high quality local library. We also have several churches, with relatively small memberships and struggling with budgets that are stretched thin. Like most churches in this situation, we have each struggled to maintain a focus on reaching outside our congregations in ministry, while we try to maintain the churches we love so deeply.

A few years ago, our congregation, Cornwall Presbyterian Church, intentionally engaged this dilemma. We participated in a program called *New Beginnings*, which encouraged us to increase and broaden our mission efforts and helped us to see that mission is what we do in response to God's call. We can't stop doing mission because we feel we lack resources, and we can't engage in "mission" work that is actually a thinly veiled attempt at self-promotion. The purpose of mission is to follow God's call, not to get more people in our pews or help us with our budget concerns. Like most churches, we supported several mission projects faithfully: a food collection, coat donations in the winter, funding blankets for church world service. However, we began to discern a call to take a larger role in meeting the needs of our community.

Like all good Presbyterian Churches, we responded to this call by developing a Task Force! This faithful group began its work with an effort to discover what needs existed within our community. We spent an entire year gathering information. We interviewed the Mayor, Police Chief, School District Superintendent, the Director of the Office for the Aging, school principals, and the directors of local non-profit groups. We discovered tangible needs but we also discovered that others were doing very exciting and effective work. In addition to meeting a

particular need, we began to conceive of ourselves as called to form closer relationships between the churches, non-profits, individuals, and many wonderful business partners in our community.

In speaking with church leaders from other communities, we came across the idea of a backpack food program. Many communities have developed such programs to provide food on the weekends for children who receive free and reduced priced lunches while at school. We felt particularly drawn to fill this need as our congregation has many retired and active teachers and school principals. One retired teacher on our task force commented about how impossible it must be for these children to learn on Monday if they hadn't eaten dinner the night before. We knew from meeting with school district officials that we had such need in our district and we began to think about how we could meet it.

We visited a backpack food program in another community and learned some nuts and bolts about how such a program can work. We met together and began to plot how we would organize and fund this effort. We worried about the cost of the program. It would cost five to six dollars each week to fill each backpack. Aware that this program would require considerable leadership to administer, we considered who in our congregation might have that kind of time and energy. We wondered where we could find the space to store food. We thought about the large number of volunteers we would need. As we were discussing all of these details, one wise man interrupted the thought saying, "Why don't we invite the community to help us build it? From the very beginning? That way, rather than asking the community to 'help' *us* with this great program we already built, we are creating a program that truly belongs to everyone."

We changed course. Before we developed the idea any further, we held a community interest meeting, inviting other congregations, organizations, school leadership, and advertising in the local paper. We shared our idea, the depth of the need, and examples of programs in other

communities that were meeting food needs for children on the weekends. We left this meeting with fifty volunteers to begin this effort. We then created a Leadership Team to develop the program. We intentionally began with Co-chairs from two different congregations, and representation from several congregations and organizations on the team. Within months, the program was fully funded, with donations coming from individuals, PTO's, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the Lion's Club, the Rotary Club, the local wine shop, and several churches. In addition, we were fully staffed with one hundred volunteers excited to run this program. This ministry is now over a year old, serving ninety children every week, and enjoying tremendous community support.

In addition to serving these children, this ministry has created and strengthened relationships among volunteers, non-profits, businesses, and local churches. The benefits of these relationships are continuing to reveal themselves. Last Spring, the local United Methodist Church approached us with the idea that we could join together with them and the local Episcopal Church and create a youth group. Rather than creating their own youth ministry and then inviting us to come and join them, they invited us to interest meetings where we learned more about patterns, methods, and purposes for youth ministry. We created a leadership team with representatives of each church. We decided to create a joint budget for the ministry, with each church writing a check to the church that administers the budget. We created a shared Safe Church Policy. We easily decided on a church to host the meetings. We are now even looking into hiring part-time staff together. In short, we have learned to trust each other, first with a backpack food program, and now even with our children.

The Cornwall Youth Group began this past Fall and was immediately successful. We are serving over 30 youth in our small town, who are excitedly gathering each week to share a meal,

play games, and engage in discussion about faith. We have dedicated youth advisors from each church. We have administrative support, and church members who provide meals. In addition to enabling a youth ministry none of our congregations could have managed on our own, we are reaching many teenagers from the community who do not currently have a church home.

A clergy colleague from another town commented to me that most shared youth groups fail because people get “turfy.” Each church wants to claim credit and use the ministry for self-promotion. The leadership maneuvers for influence and control. They have disagreements over money or other resources. I mentioned this to the other pastors involved in this program and we realized that our congregations have now learned how to share ministry with one another. We have learned that we can have a deeper impact on our community when we come together, not only because we become a larger group with more resources, but because we facilitate relationships and a spirit of cooperation in our town that is greater even than our combined efforts. More than that, we have come to know more fully, that together we are Christ’s Church. We are all committed to following Christ into the world, engaging in his ministry of healing and reconciliation.

While we work together stocking shelves, filling bags with food, playing crazy games with teenagers, and making dinner, we are building relationships with one another. We are sharing our lives, the stories of joy and sorrow of our congregations, creating yet more dreams and new ideas, imagining what new ministry God might have for us and our community.