



Potentials

I N P R I N T

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Partnerships: A Fresh Look at Mission

by Paul MacLean

Rare is the congregation that does not have outreach as part of its mission. However, forces both within and outside the church are challenging us to look with fresh eyes at what we mean by mission for the local congregation. Rather than see outreach as one among many activities, we are encouraged to take a more holistic view: the mission of God is at the very heart of the congregation's identity, and that mission will be expressed in the congregation's interaction with its context. Mission will mean sharing the good news in any number of ways, but a prerequisite is for the congregation to be engaged with the community in which it is situated (even if that community is quite far-flung). Furthermore, God's mission is not the exclusive preserve of the church. While God's mission is the *raison d'être* of the church and needs to animate and connect everything that the church does, God's mission is larger than what can be envisioned

and accomplished just by the church alone.

Brice Balmer, retiring executive director of ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition), thinks that 'doing good in the community' is part of the DNA of the three Abrahamic faiths. (In my limited experience, this is true of some expressions of Buddhism as well.) The desire to put faith into action is common ground for Christians, Jews, Muslims and other people of faith. While this desire leads people as individuals to volunteer or give money to worthy organizations, it also motivates them to act collectively, through their faith communities.

If we look at the 'outreach' expressions of mission in congregations now, we see many forms – use of the building by community groups and twelve step programs, raising money for projects and organizations that relieve poverty and provide housing, congregational

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involvement in nutritional programs, drop-in centres and 'Out of the Cold', refugee settlement – these are just a few of the examples. In contrast to the days when mission meant 'somewhere else', we are definitely seeing an increased desire that outreach be local and provide opportunities for volunteer engagement.

However, there has been a significant shift from the traditional ways in which congregations have done their outreach, brought about in part by the decrease in the church's resources. Seldom do congregations mount a program on their own, using only their own resources and members. Congregations are entering into partnerships with other organizations – commercial, charitable, secular and religious. Surprisingly, in many cases the initiative comes from outside the congregation. The local police are concerned about increasing youth violence and approach the Salvation Army and the local municipality to explore a drop in centre. A food bank closes and Daily Bread looks for new space and a new sponsor in a well-situated church. A school board inquires if a church is prepared to host a program that requires safe space, free from bullying, for at risk students.

I became aware of this trend through my consulting work with congregations and devised a research project to learn more about partnerships that involve faith groups. This research project is itself a partnership with the Centre for Voluntary Sector Studies at Ryerson University. We are looking in depth at partnerships that run youth programs, nutritional access, and cancer care. We are most of the way through our case

studies now and although there is much more to do, I can share some provisional observations.

The first thing I have been struck by is the way in which these partnerships inspire generosity. The congregations are giving generously: this usually includes their space, leaders, volunteers, and money. These gifts inspire others. The end result is far more than a single congregation could achieve. However, the spirit of generosity animates the whole project.

Secondly, all the partnerships we are investigating have strong community support and are a response to needs identified by the community. So the churches and their partners are not operating in a vacuum. They animate networks that already exist, and in some cases, the church is simply the trusted animator, bringing together the diverse community activists.

Thirdly, these partnerships all are making a discernible difference in the larger community. The difference goes well beyond the stated objectives of providing food or a safe place for youth. Strong bonds of community are developed that reverberate beyond the key volunteers. I often ask interviewees to give three words that describe their partnership. 'Inspiring, creative, pragmatic' are given frequently.

Partnerships typically take a lot of effort to develop. One partnership focused on nutritional access involves thirteen Christian congregations, three mosques, a Buddhist charity, many local businesses, public health and social services. These relationships didn't just happen: they

were the result of a small team doing research into needs and resources, and making connections with everybody they could think of. Partnerships are always a team effort, but it also seems true that there has to be at least one unstoppable champion who won't take no for an answer, who attracts support, and who clears every hurdle.

However, the benefits of all this effort are substantial. In addition to drawing on a much larger pool of volunteers than any one faith group could provide, each participant comes with a network of contacts that can be called upon to provide material support and specialized expertise. In the case of several nutrition programs this means Halal food, fresh vegetables, legal advice, public health care, and sensitivity to issues faced by recent immigrants. A successful partnership is focused on the needs of the people the partners are trying to serve. Those needs are not always immediately apparent, beyond the obvious need to reduce poverty and provide access to the basics for human survival. A diverse partnership not only results in more resources, but it also brings more connections with and a deeper understanding of the people who are being served.

In some cases people who are being served become volunteers, staff or even board members in the program. They have first hand experience of the issues and often the most practical solutions. They also bring a high level of trust and respect from their peers. Whether this fluid and egalitarian approach to breaking down the boundaries between those who serve and those who are recipients is more likely to happen in a partnership is an open question. However, true

partnerships bring a sharing of perspectives and values, and in all our cases we are seeing a value for encouraging human development, self-reliance, community and leadership.

There are other peripheral benefits to partnerships. Joined by a common cause to help others, participants find their own faith deepened in unexpected ways. A Muslim recipient at a food bank comes to pray at the bedside of a Christian volunteer who is dying of cancer. A Christian pastor is asked to pray at Muslim gatherings. Buddhist volunteers take it upon themselves to listen carefully to the concerns of a church board around the use of church space. When we think of the need to build inter-faith bridges in our society, these are very significant events. They emerge from the relationships that are forged from common cause and compassion. And there are similar stories of enrichment that come from partners who are not part of a faith group. These people may not talk of a personal faith, but they speak of how their lives have been deeply affected by working with people of faith to serve a marginalized group.

Lest one get too dewy-eyed about partnerships, I have in mind a comment made by an imam in response to a question about success. 'How can you call a food bank a success? We will have success when there is no need for food banks.' His view is shared, and extends well beyond nutritional programs. I asked a person who does not belong to a faith group what he thought was the unique contribution a church could make to a partnership (in this case, a youth program). His response: 'moral outrage.' He went on to say

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that, in his view, churches (and by extension other faith groups) were the best institution in our society to carry the torch for social justice and to speak loudly against the conditions that marginalize people.

What are some of the other unique contributions a church can make to a partnership focused on alleviating human need and creating healthy community? People spoke of the authenticity they find in volunteers motivated by their faith, the trust that comes from a church's long involvement in a community, an impressive network of connections. And there was a significant shift for church volunteers as well. For many, serving in a program such as a youth drop in or food bank was their first experience of engagement with social justice issues. They came to see other organizations as their allies, and to appreciate the motives of their partners who did not come from a faith perspective. They came to see their church not just as a Christian community but as existing for the good of the whole community.

Participating in partnerships to create healthy communities are one of the ways in which churches are taking a fresh look at what God's mission means for them. There's lots to be learned from some of the pioneers. To keep in touch with this project, use the contact information on the back page.

Paul MacLean is the former executive director of Potentials. He continues to pursue his interests in congregational consulting and research. ♣

