

# Community Partnerships

## Expanding Congregational Capacity, Relevancy, & Impact

### Bible Study/Conversation Guide for Clergy & Lay Leaders

#### *Context Matters*

**Based on your congregational heritage and current guiding statements (mission, vision, purpose, and values), what does your congregation care about most?  
What's breaking your heart most about your local context?  
Who's impacted and who's benefiting from the chaos you know and see?**

Collaboration and partnership have always been at the forefront of successful organizations, sporting teams, businesses, movements, congregations, and thriving communities. In places where collaboration occurs intentionally, faithfully, culturally, ethically, and responsively, it becomes clear that no single group, individual, skill, or resource alone is sufficient to make lasting change. In fact, no individual on any team can achieve victory without assistance. Teams win when collaboration and partnership are strong and consistent, and roles are clearly defined. Many argue that the most effective and impactful teams understand the importance of a shared vision, recognize the collective strengths and gifts each partner brings, and support one another by complementing one another. Real partnerships are mutually accountable as they create desired outcomes.

This is certainly true for congregations seeking to make a meaningful difference in their local communities. Developing community partnerships is critical to a congregation's ability to comprehensively re-present Jesus to the masses by engaging in life-changing missions beyond the sanctuary. Such collaborations not only strengthen the congregation's identity, impact, relevance, and capacity, but they also leverage resources and opportunities on behalf of the communities our congregations are part of. When faith communities partner with other institutions and organizations, such as schools, medical facilities, nonprofit organizations, businesses, other congregations and faith groups, civic and community leaders, public safety officials, and more, it signals that the congregation is a concerned member of the community, not simply seeking to serve or benefit from it. Partnerships help faith communities sustain their ethically and culturally responsive mission and advocacy for those in need.

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Erin Cash and Kory Wilcoxson remind us in their book, *Thriving Church: What We Can Learn from Faithful Congregations*, that a thriving church is a place that understands the value of collaboration. They go on to suggest that collaborations in thriving churches occur both inside and outside the church's walls.

This brief lesson invites clergy, lay leaders, church staff, volunteers, friends, and neighbors to reflect on the importance of community engagement for congregations and the critical need to establish partnerships and collaborations that expand capacity, relevance, and impact within communities. Secondly, I hope to encourage congregations to identify and name key stakeholders, including organizations, civic leaders, not-for-profit organizations, community groups, agencies, individuals, and more, with whom they could partner by sharing space, resources, time, energy, and expertise to confront awful local, national, and global ills. Third, I invite leaders within congregations to consider best practices when establishing community partnerships, whether formal or informal. Lastly, I encourage congregations to use this resource as a small-group, Sunday school, Bible study, or fellowship ministry lesson.

### *Our Community Engagement Efforts*

**What community engagement activities has your congregation engaged in over time? What activities are you engaging in today? Who benefits from your community engagement efforts? How has your congregation's community engagement impacted the members' faith, witness, and human development of those who lead or participate? How has your engagement shaped your congregational reputation among neighbors and other institutions in the community?**



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To foster a shared understanding, the following definitions are provided below:

**A mission statement** is a brief statement that represents what a congregation will be and do to reveal the love of God in our present age.

**Identity/Vision Statements:** Norman B. Bendroth, author of *Interim Ministry in Action: A Handbook for Churches in Transition*, suggests, "Vision statements are a word picture of what your congregation would look like if it were, in fact, to fulfill its mission statement." He goes on to say, "It identifies what would be different if the church were faithful".

**Purpose statements** explain why an organization or ministry exists.

**Value Statements:** These statements clarify and communicate what the congregations collectively care most about. These statements often include shared beliefs that guide a congregation's practical ecclesiology and programming, including missional activities sponsored by Christian education, outreach ministries, affinity groups, and other initiatives.

**Community engagement** is the intentional practice of faith that seeks to build relationships with others within a community or context through listening, learning, collaborating, advocating, and advancing possibilities for shared human flourishing. It's getting involved for the common good.

**Community Partnership** is an intentional, collaborative relationship (formal or informal) between organizations, institutions, businesses, groups, or individuals seeking to improve the well-being of others. It includes working together on what the community deems is important to the whole.

It's important to understand what these terms mean in your context. The guiding statements above should shape your congregation's choices, commitments, direction, and future. They should also guide who the congregation partners with and the difference it seeks to make.

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### *Community Partners*

**To fulfill our mission faithfully, effectively, and to provoke lasting change in our local context, what partnerships (formal and informal) might we need? What do we need the partner to do? What are we willing to contribute to the partnership? In what ways can members, local businesses, philanthropic agencies, our neighbors, and more support our engagement efforts? What strategies can we implement to secure partners within our community?**

**Below are things a congregation should consider before entering a formal or informal partnership.**

- Understand, review, and clarify your congregational identity, guiding statements, etc.
- Name what your congregation cares most about.
- Name what your congregation does extremely well.
- Evaluate your congregation's capacity to serve.
- Understand your community needs and name what organizations are doing already in your community. What's missing?
- Identify shared interests, values, and missional alignment.
- Name the purpose, goals, and objectives of the partnership.
- Understand what builds trust, name what transparency looks like, clarify the communication plan, name the individual, and identify the mutual benefits of the partnership.
- Understand the similarities and differences of ethos and the uniqueness of each organization.
- Know the reputation of your future partner.
- Define each partner's responsibilities and contributions. Describe how the partnership will report to and collaborate with each other's leadership and members of each organization.
- Understand legal liabilities, determine fiscal management, and accountability.
- Name the evaluation process and explore what sustainability looks like.



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When a congregation reflects on the statements and questions above as part of its congregational discernment, it helps the congregation choose the right partners, strengthen its efforts, enhance its capacity, and give it the best chance to impact its community. Choose faithfully with whom you should collaborate. It's ok to partner with people and organizations whose ethos is different than yours. What's important here is mission alignment, shared interests, and a desire to make a difference in the community that both parties care about.

This resource can assist your congregation in making a difference in the community in which you are located. Go out and be the hands and feet of Jesus. Just don't go out alone; partner with others. Joining forces with others will enable your congregation to have a greater impact.



***What do you already know about your local community? What do you need to learn today? What needs are you hoping to address? How might addressing those needs align with who your congregation claims to be in this time and place? Which partners do you need to achieve the greatest impact? When and how can your congregation act in the next 90 days?***



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Before your congregation considers establishing new partnerships to meet needs in your local context, it is essential to engage in spiritual practices. Direction, inspiration, and clarity must include God and sound congregational discernment and research. Decide which spiritual practice best suits your congregation. We often hear, "The devil is in the details", which might be true. I would rather suggest, "God is in the details and the vision." If by chance you do fall doing the difficult work of the mission, fall forward. Fannie Lou Hamer said, "If I fall, I'll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I'm not backing off."

### Let Us Pray

Holy One, you have been known to do all things well. Your imagination created a world perfectly aligned with you. However, somewhere along the way, we disrupted the cohesiveness of our existence. We began to highlight our differences more than our similarities. Help us be one. Help us partner and collaborate to ensure that no one lacks what they need to live and thrive. We are ready. We are ready to join forces again with you and others to make a difference. Send us partners so we can have a greater impact on the world. In Jesus' name. Amen!

### Scriptural Lesson: Luke 10:25-37, NRSV

<sup>25</sup> An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. <sup>26</sup> "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>27</sup> He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." <sup>29</sup> But wanting to vindicate himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and took off, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

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<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" <sup>37</sup> He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

### Bible Study Lesson

#### Group Discussion Questions

- What words or images stand out in the text?
- What's happening in the historical context of this scripture?
- What problems can you identify in this text?
- What does this text suggest about the religious leaders of his day?
- Where can good news be located?
- Who were the partners in the text, and how did they help the fallen individual?
- What risks were involved in the parable?
- What does this text suggest about humanity, power, communal chaos, God, and the role of the Church today?
- How might this text teach you and your congregation about the importance of community engagement, understanding our local context, and what it means to be a partner and establish partnerships for social change?
- What are the personal and congregational benefits of engaging emancipatory hope in your local context?

#### Additional Scriptures for Exploration:

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 (Shared Action)

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 (Partnership ( Mission, Possibilities, Life),

Romans 12:3 - 8 (Understand roles for greater impact)

For more information or to request innovation and vitality support for your congregation, please don't hesitate to contact my office.

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