

**COMMUNITY ORGANIZING**

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# COMMUNITIES FIRST

## Community Organizing

Community development is an “inside” story. When it is done appropriately, the people will say with pride “We did it ourselves!” Community development means engaging the voices, resources, and actions of the residents. When a church participates with a community and develops a vision, the next step is to organize the community to work towards those goals. To be truly “with” the community and to be effective servants, the church must engage her members and the residents of the neighborhood in accomplishing the vision. How does a church organize neighbors to work together toward their common goals? That is the focus of this workbook.

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# 1. Places Matter to God

Churches talk about love and service a lot. Rightly so, because that is what Jesus did and it is what he wants his followers to do—not only in their congregational life, but also in their community life. God has planted you in the place where you live for a reason. As a Christian you have the opportunity and calling to love and serve your community. It is God’s community, and he cares about it.

Complete the following chart:

City Case Studies <sup>1</sup>	Sodom and Gomorrah	Nineveh	Babylon	Jerusalem
Read these texts	Gen. 18:16-33 Ezekiel 16:48-50	Jonah 1:1-2; 3:1-4, 10; Nahum 1:1-3, 2:9, 3:19	Jer. 29, 50:1-17, 51:6-10; Daniel 1:1-21, 2:47-49, 3:1-7; Rev.18:2-10, 24	Ps. 46, 48, 122, 147:2, Matt. 23:37-39, Luke 19:41-44, Rev. 21:1-14
List two or three positive/negative attributes of the city.				
What are the expressions of human responsibility?				
What are the city’s problems?				
What is God saying to the city in the passage?				
Can you describe with one word or symbol the character of the city?				
What are the implications for ministry? (how, to whom, where)				
Considering these passages, what should your role be?				

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<sup>1</sup> This exercise came from Dr. Ron Ruthruff during a lecture on Pastoral Care and the City taught at Northwest Graduate School, Seattle, Washington in September of 2004.

## 2. Love Your Neighbor

Bob Lupton, a pioneer of urban ministry, asks, “I wonder what a church would look like that measured its success by the quality of its members’ neighborly love.”<sup>2</sup>

List here the names of your neighbors on all sides of you (first and last names)	How do you feel about how many people you can list? How many of them do you interact with frequently and know well?
List here ways in which you actively love these neighbors	
Are there neighbors you find hard to love? If so, how can you be salt and light to them?	
List some of your neighbors gifts (talents, belongings) that can help others	Can you imagine helping neighbors connect their gifts to other neighbors needs?
List 3 or 4 things you can do to establish yourself as one who loves and cares for your neighbors	

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<sup>2</sup> John Perkins, *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing it Together and Doing it Right* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 88

### 3. Christian Community

Inspired by Pentecost and sermons by apostles who knew Jesus, men and women began to gather in the name of Jesus. As described in Acts 2:42-48, some attributes of the early church were learning together, eating together, fellowshiping (hanging out) together, sharing resources, and worshiping together; all of it done in a spirit of selflessness.

1. If you could do one or two good things in your neighborhood in the next year, what would they be?
2. Write down all the qualities of an ideal community.
3. Now, what *will* you do in your neighborhood?

#### **4. Three Kinds of Community Organizing**

Community organizing is a generic label for a variety of activities and actions. Consider these three kinds of community organizing related to community development:

##### **Getting the lay of the land**

A first set of activities in targeting a community to make it a great place to live could be sending in a community organizer who would go door-to-door to acquire firsthand knowledge of the community using a survey like the one below. This person would be looking for:

- a. People with good character and strength in the community;
- b. People who have energy and leadership for a change process;
- c. People who have a vision for what the community could be;
- d. People who already have the reputation of being good citizens. The people who would emerge quickly as the backbone of community change efforts.
- e. Properties that are stable and those that need significant repair or demolition. These would be plotted on a map of the neighborhood because part of community development is the restoration of the properties.
- f. Businesses and industries that will be good neighbors and those that need to go (bars, drug houses, paycheck cashing etc.)
- g. Various institutions that can partner in the community change process (schools, hospitals, agencies, social services etc)
- h. Associations that already exist whose leaders can help mobilize neighborhood participation
- i. Specific individual gifts in the neighborhood.
- j. Resources such as money, places to meet, or office space,
- k. Strategic locations for three or four families to move in and help stabilize a community (this is in a high-need, high-crime area).

Getting the lay of the land is a strategic community organizing activity to help jump start a community development process. It should never last longer than six to eight months. It is an information-gathering and relationship-building activity to assess capacity and entry strategies for community development.

Here is a short survey that a community organizer could use:

- Tell me about a time when you saw this community functioning at its very best. What was going on then? What made it good? Who was involved?
- Tell me about people you have learned to appreciate most in this community. What is it that you appreciate most about them?
- Give me a picture of this community functioning at its best in the future. What will be going on? What will be different?
- What are the businesses you frequent most in this community? What business do you not have access to in this neighborhood?
- If you could change anything in this community, what would it be?

**Organizing gifts and resources in the community**

Creating a community agenda (or vision) and a plan for change and then working with residents to mobilize their gifts and resources requires organization, leadership, and management. This is another use of the term “community organizing.” The three-question discussion and process on the following page is a method for this kind of community organizing.

**Organizing for social change (policy or system)**

Sometimes in a community it becomes necessary to gather a lot of people around a single issue in order to bring about a specific change. If, for example, you wanted to begin a public transportation program in your community, or if you wanted to change a specific ordinance or law in your community, you would need lots of citizen participation to accomplish these things. Organizing citizen participation on a scale large enough to accomplish these kinds of changes is another kind of community organizing. This kind of organizing requires:

- a compelling issue clearly articulated
- a launch team of some sort: a group of people committed to working on the issue until it is passed
- an education/communications campaign
- a house-to-house advocacy campaign in the entire region affected (may be local, regional, state, or national depending on the policy or system)
- a “get out the vote” campaign
- a resource plan to fund the campaign.



## 5. A Method for Community Organizing: Three-Question Discussion

It often feels awkward to strike up meaningful conversations with people you don't know. Our culture of individualism and its outgrowth of isolation have effectively walled off natural person-to-person connecting points. Sadly, we often find little in common with our neighbors.

Community organizing, by its very definition, requires a growing number of diverse people to join together to get things done for the betterment of all. One way to start new conversations is to use something like the Three-Question Discussion. This tool provides a fairly neutral and safe way to enter into a conversation with someone whom you most likely have never met.

Below is a suggested way for you to introduce yourself, tell the purpose of the survey, and ask three questions of neighborhood residents.

"Hello, my name is John Smith. I'm from Second Church. We are exploring ways to help make this neighborhood great. We call this community development. With your permission, I have three very short questions that will give you a chance to help us and our neighbors understand what you would like to see happen in this area. It will take less than five minutes." (Hold up the clipboard to show them indeed there are only three questions. You might even say, "The first one is fun. It asks you to wave a magic wand...")

### *Questions:*

1. If you could wave a magic wand and make one good thing happen in your neighborhood this year, what would that be?
2. What talents, skills, abilities, education, and experiences do you have that you think could help make this happen?
3. If other people were to have a similar vision to yours, would you join with them to help make this happen?

\* \* \* \*

### **How to use this process**

Each question has an underlying motive. Asked in this order, they attempt to draw out:

- genuine personal vision for a positive future which a person seeks for themselves and their neighbors.
- an identification of personal gifts, abilities, and assets.
- a statement of personal commitment.

Combined in this way (vision, assets, commitment), these questions will help the person to understand that you are not selling anything. Instead, you are offering a genuinely fresh yet purposeful interest in the person's desire to make life better in the neighborhood. Also, because you ask the person what they can offer through their skills, this is often a profound experience. Many people have never been asked these questions before.

By the time you have finished having a discussion with the resident, it will often be evident how your church or church group could team with this person along a specific course or toward a specific goal.

After you and your group have visited with residents from two to three blocks in the neighborhood, compile the results. Look for:

- common themes of interest
- an array of personal gifts, skills and assets
- people likely to be active in deploying their assets for a common interest.

The next step is to follow up with the contributing residents, sharing with them a simple report on the overall results of what their neighbors are saying. A face-to-face follow-up is best. You may revisit these people on a one-on-one basis or with their families. Other times it will be prudent to invite a group of people to a meeting that is formed along common interests. This is good especially if you see some key people who show high interest in getting started.

From the beginning, your role is not to be the one who does the work. Rather, your role is simply to act as a catalyst — someone who contributes just enough to get things going. Therefore, the next steps you choose to follow will require you to find ways to equip others as leaders. They, in turn, keep the ball rolling.

## **6. Community Organizing and the Block Watch Program**

After using the Three-Question Discussion, a community organizer will often discover that many people are concerned about safety, security, crime, and traffic matters. One way to address these concerns is the Block Watch program.

Many cities have police who serve as Crime Prevention Officers (CPOs). They work with local groups of citizens by forming Block Watch (or Neighborhood Watch) groups. The goal of this program is to activate and organize neighbors (usually five to ten households) around a set of crime prevention skills. These skills involve getting to know neighbors and developing a knowledge and trust of each other with regular communication. In effect, people watch out for one another, immediately reporting anything that looks suspicious.

When enough people are interested in this program, the community organizer can set up a neighborhood meeting. The CPO will come to the host home to share how Block Watch works.

After this meeting someone usually volunteers as Block Watch captain. Without a Block Watch captain, no group will form or be recognized by the police.

Once the Block Watch group has been formed, trained, and is active, the members will normally experience immediate positive results. They will see people or vehicles in the neighborhood that seem to be out of place and will call the police without hesitation. This proactive response replaces the usual step of closing the curtains and hoping for the best.

### **How to use this process**

Obviously, the community organizer can do a great deal for the neighborhood simply by bringing the Block Watch idea before the residents. If you do nothing besides prepare a foundation for this program, you have already done a lot!

The Block Watch Program is a relationship-based program and allows for much more than safety activities. It can become a system for building community life.

At the core of Block Watch is the requirement that people know their neighbors. The more neighbors know and trust each other, the more they will look out for each other's interests. This requires time together. The organizer can help facilitate this process by providing tried and tested ideas where people engage around fun or purposeful activities. Some refer to these other activities as Block Watch Plus activities.

Below is a list of ideas for getting neighbors together:

- block parties
- barbeques
- games & prizes
- movie nights
- community garden
- youth night
- talent night

As you can see, this isn't rocket science! Bringing neighbors together around things they might like to do together is the focus.

With these relationship-building activities, more than just crime-fighting happens. People will begin to work together on broader goals that increase in complexity over time. The key is to provide ample opportunities for community actions which lead to quick success.

Where can a block watch captain or community developer get trained? That is where your church leadership comes into the picture. Your church can strategically provide the leadership training and ongoing support for community organizers. Your church might have a staff person or a volunteer whose role is to identify and support and build community-based leaders. Many churches today already have someone who trains and supports small group leaders. The work is very similar to training a community organizer, because community organizing is about developing relationships and facilitating small groups. In time, the church leadership or the Community Organizer steps into the background as new leadership forms in neighborhoods. Then the role of church can shift to convening the association of neighborhood leaders and groups for ongoing neighborhood impact.

## 7. Value-Added Services

Some community-building efforts have started with a church or organization offering a service that is of value to the neighborhood. These services usually revolve around creating a learning environment—something most people will easily recognize as positive and constructive for their individual lives.

The offer of service is dependent upon the gifts and experiences that you, your church, or your organization are skilled to offer. It may be something in which you need training, yet it is something you wish to eventually share.

Some successful services of value you might consider are:

- financial skills program.
- life skills program
- parenting program
- healthy marriages program

Offering a series of classes at a time and location convenient for the residents will be the beginning of developing deeper relationships with those in your neighborhood.

### How to use this process

Many similar programs have come and gone in the past, offered by good-hearted people and churches. Yet often there is a temptation to offer programs to the neighborhood with a patronizing approach. This approach says: “We know the answers and want to tell you about them.”

Also missing is the conscious intention to come to the community using a “with” approach. You are not ministering *to* the community as much as you are working *with* them for positive change. To take a “with” approach, simply ask people if they want what you plan to offer. From door-to-door inquiries, focus group activities, or informational meetings, you will learn:

- if people are open to your offer of service
- the fears and concerns people have about you and what you’re up to
- when and where most people would show up for the service
- who will be key advocates in promoting the events.

After an exploratory phase of approximately two or three months (as described above), you should have enough people signed up to attend the first class. If you get five to ten to show up, count yourself successful. In the beginning, expect dropout rates as high as 50-70%.

Where you meet for the classes is dependent upon what is available nearby and convenient for the residents. One program began in an apartment complex’s laundry room. Others used a community room or center, Boys’ and Girls’ Club building, or local church facility.

As you lead the series of classes, you will naturally encourage follow-up with the students. This and other non-class related connections would provide you with abundant opportunities to get to know people, families, their neighbors and many of their life situations. The door will be wide open, way beyond the program!

When the class is complete, have a public graduation. This is an excellent opportunity to spotlight individual successes while also casting new vision for what else the community can do. Often these graduates will have their own ideas of what is next in their lives, and from them come new initiatives with other residents who may never attend your financial classes.

As these natural, even spontaneous, relationships develop, you will begin to see people finding meaningful, if not transformative, success from your service. Always be looking for ways to encourage such people to step up and offer their own services to the community. As they make progress, keep looking for ways to help them acquire skills and abilities to increase their proficiency and confidence.

## 8. Conceptual and Strategic Entry

It is clear that without initial catalytic efforts, community development leading toward transformation will simply not happen. Someone, or a group of people, will have to get the ball rolling. The *Communities First* Team has seen churches effectively take this responsibility and begin serving their communities with wonderful results. Someone in a community needs to give the leadership for this kind of work. We believe that it is completely consistent with the work of the servant church in her community.

### A. Community Organizer

We have already talked about community organizers in this workbook, but now let's look more closely at what is needed in a community organizer. A community organizer is a staff position in the neighborhood. A staff position needs a "parent" or supervising organization. This can be a church, a neighborhood association, a block watch group, or a Christian community development organization.

The best choice for a staff person would be someone who lives in the community. Their pre-existing connections will jumpstart this new effort. However, in many situations, someone will have to be imported to live within the community. It is really hard to trust and follow a community organizer who does not have the same to gain or lose as the people being organized. Being a community member is essential to the process.

What characteristics does a community organizer need to have? The *Communities First* Team recommends as many of the following as possible:

- love for the Lord
- love for all God's children (a people person)
- someone who draws energy from seeing individuals and groups succeed
- someone who has or is willing to learn group facilitation skills
- someone who has the gift of hospitality
- someone will make community development his or her vocation
- someone with organizational skills
- someone who has or is willing to learn conflict resolution skills.

What sort of compensation level is chosen for the person? A community organizer can be a volunteer, a part-time salaried position, or a full-time salaried position. Obviously the volunteer and part-time scenarios will limit the organizer's intensity of effort or their pace of expansion in the work.

A full-time organizer, living in the neighborhood, will have time and resources to expand community development activities faster and more broadly than the other scenarios. The person may also have the ability to export the learning through teaching and consulting venues outside the neighborhood, which may lead to further community development efforts elsewhere.

## **B. Support and Funding**

There are a variety of ways to raise start-up and ongoing funds for this effort. Some options may include the following:

- Convening a short-lived Initiating Group. This group would be made up of a diverse and influential set of movers & shakers. They would be given the charge to raise sufficient funds (through donations or pledges) that would support a two-year start-up. It's important that these people understand community development so that they can become unabashed advocates. To organize this group may take a year. The first six months will be used to identify these people and to bring them on board conceptually. The next six months will be for this group to organize themselves around a short fundraising campaign. Once the campaign is over, the group dissolves.
- Convening a long-term church network. This is very much akin to the missionary model churches are familiar with, when someone is called to serve in an overseas field. The church or churches would receive a request for support by the community organizer. In this instance, the mission field would perhaps be just down the street or across town, within the county, or within the state.
- Long-term support by one church. This option would look a lot like the church staff model. With this option, one church would call a person for the express purpose of employing him or her in this role. This position would be funded through the congregation as a personnel line item.
- An Agency/Church Collaborative: With this option, the church or churches would forge a trusting relationship with a pre-existing entity, such as a Christian community development organization, a county human services agency, a city planning office, or another non-profit organization with a compatible mission. Many churches or Christian groups now have access to federal and state funding, without having to compromise the essentials of their faith expression. For example, The *Communities First* Team is identifying and supervising 20 AmeriCorps volunteers in their communities to initiate church-based community organizing activities.
- Begin a new non-profit organization in the community to be the convening and supporting institution. (While this may be a good option eventually, we do not recommend it as a starting position. It takes too much time and energy to build a non-profit AND begin the work of community organizing at the same time).

Community Organizing is part of church ministry for those churches who want to cooperate with God's work of restoring communities.



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# COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

This book includes

- Biblical examples of churches in neighborhoods
- Methods of surveying the community
- Ideas for using the Block Watch program as a tool
- Suggestions for where to start

This book is part of the *Communities First* series, designed to help churches and Christians bring unique gifts to their neighborhoods and communities. Combined with consultation, these materials will help you engage with your community and influence it in ways that will make life better for everyone here and now. As a result, you will see your community respond and change in surprising and redemptive ways. The Church and God's Kingdom will grow.

In addition to the cornerstone book simply titled *Communities First*, other workbooks include:

*The Theology of Development: A Biblical Understanding of Christian Mission and Community Development*

*Through God's Eyes, With God's Heart: Building Readiness for Community Ministry*

*Meeting Needs: Moving from Relief to Individual Development*

*Case Management: Creating a Plan for Change through Covenantal Commitment*

*Developing a Community Vision*

*Community Strengthening*

*Community Organizing*

*Justice: Creating Policies, Laws and Systems that Work for Everyone*



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