

COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING

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1. Strengthening Community

The interactions and social arrangements of neighbors in a community can have a huge impact on the quality of life for the people who live there. Imagine a new high-rise apartment building with an ocean view is built in a certain neighborhood. It can accommodate 5,000 residents. Now imagine the difference that would quickly develop in these two scenarios:

Scenario 1

- Every resident (owner or renter) has to have an income of \$100,000 or more in order to afford living there and paying the membership fees. 75% of units are owner-occupied, 25% are rentals.
- Rents or membership fees cover a management fee for timely service, solid security, prompt structural maintenance, clean and high-quality community areas.
- Every resident is invited to weekly events that are scheduled in a commons area to encourage a sense of community.
- There is a tenant board to handle all public concerns and conflicts that arise in the community.

Scenario 2

- No occupant has an income over \$30,000. Most occupants qualify for public benefits.
- The security, building service, and facilities management are handled by public contracts granted to lowest bidders. There is no accountability to the residents for the services.
- The only public meetings are tenant-convened and usually to focus on adversarial relations with the service providers.
- Neighbors do what they must to protect themselves and their property.

You can imagine what each of these scenarios would lead to within a few years. How communities live and work together, the rules that govern the living places, and the social systems they create, make a huge difference in the quality of life in a community. Christians have the unique privilege of serving their community (as unto the Lord) in ways that make life in the community better for everyone.

This scenario is an accurate depiction of a systemic problem in North America. The rich live among the rich and the poorest people are directed to communities of exclusion by virtue of their low incomes. The cultural norm of preserving wealth at the expense of creating healthy integrated (mixed-income) communities is hurting us all. It will take concerted Christian witness and cooperative developers to help us counter this trend by creating mixed-income communities where rich and poor can live side by side and everyone can preserve capital and flourish.

Christian community development includes analysis and change in the relationships, rules, systems, and access to power within a community. These have potential to make life better for everyone.

2. The Role of the Church in Strengthening Community

Exercise: Compare and contrast these three case studies, then answer the following questions.

Church One

This is an older congregation. The building is at least 80 years old—stately in its own way, its architecture even a bit reassuring. On Sunday, those who gather still worship pretty much as people did in past decades. To an outsider, members seem to be involved in the worship, the singing is familiar to them and they engage in it, they follow the liturgy and participate well. The crowd is thin, and older, but there are a few families with children too. All but two of the members commute in to worship. They come from miles around. They all have ties to the church that go back in time at least five years or more. Their primary activities are Sunday worship and a mid-week Bible study session. Something is offered for the children when the adults meet.

A summer Vacation Bible School is their big event every year, and almost every member helps out. They invite the neighborhood kids to come by mailing a flyer to homes in the area. Most of the participants are friends and children of members. A handful of kids from the community usually show up. Running the week-long VBS experience takes a lot of energy, and everyone is relieved at the end of the week. They did their mission task!

The pastor is not involved beyond visiting the sick and preaching. He serves another congregation in the city too. The members are good about serving on their standing committees, and they keep the core activities going and the building in good repair.

This church is defined by her members and their needs, and not by the neighborhood. It is close to a city center with more stores and offices than residences, but only a block from the edge of the older residential neighborhood that is deteriorating. Police are reporting more and more incidences of crime in several categories. A public housing community a few blocks away is in poor condition. To those familiar with the area, there is a noticeable increase in the homeless population. It is the kind of neighborhood people want to leave.

Church Two

This too is an older congregation. The brick building is at least 70 years old—functional for worship and small meetings. On Sunday, those who gather at 9:30 a.m. still worship pretty much as people did in past decades. But this congregation has added a second, more contemporary service at 10:45. People dress more casually and there is a band instead of the organ. Worshipers seem to be familiar with the music and they expect to follow an overhead screen and power-point outlines. They communicate the message of the day through video, film, drama, music, and brief sermons. The people interact; they talk back to the worship leader and raise their hands. There are two pastors (a senior pastor and a youth pastor) as well as a full-time church secretary.

The total crowd from both services has increased to more than 300 over a span of two years. There is a more even mix of ages. All but a handful of the members commute in to worship, most drive more than 5 minutes. They seem to be attracted by denominational loyalty, vibrant

worship, and some good family-strengthening programs. It seems like something is going on at the church at least three days per week. There are youth activities to cover all of the age groups. There are discussion groups, book clubs, Bible studies, mid-week prayer meetings, women's groups, a small day care, and more. Mostly these serve members, but there are almost always visitors. It is not a diverse crowd. Growth seems to come by way of members inviting their friends to church.

The church emphasizes spiritual gifts and they have a great gift-assessment tool. They emphasize small groups, which meet in members' homes a couple of times a month. But the members are not so good about serving on standing committees. It seems like the church leaders have to beg people to join committees, and those who agree to serve don't stay long.

This church prides itself on its legacy of community service. It has begun many helping agencies that it continues to support: a housing organization that renovates old homes and helps low-income families become homeowners, a health clinic serving the neighborhood, an affordable daycare center, Saturday morning food distribution from the church parking lot every week, an employment program, and more. All of these institutions and programs serve people from the neighborhood. The church is committed to setting up agencies and programs to help the poor.

Members have just celebrated the completion of more than \$3 million in building additions — a new gymnasium, renovated offices, and additional classrooms. They had to tear down three adjacent homes to do it. The way they saw it, this was a great statement to the community about their commitment to the neighborhood. They were going to stay! Coincidentally, when the church was adding space and upgrading facilities, the city was also doing a street renewal (new sewer, road improvement, beautification of sidewalks, increased lighting etc) on the main thoroughfare running in front of the church. It looks grand—like a page out of a magazine.

The neighborhood is an older residential neighborhood. Almost 40% of the available housing is single-family rental—way too high of a percentage to be a stable community. Crime is high and education at the local public schools is a problem. Almost 80% of the kids are low-income from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Gang activity is increasing. Police are reporting more and more incidences of crime in several categories. Within two blocks of the church drug deals go down in plain daylight. The church now has a high fence around its expanded parking lot.

Church Three

This is also an older congregation. Members worship in a brick building that is at least 70 years old—functional for worship and small to medium-sized meetings. Its architecture is common and functional for a 200-family congregation. On Sunday, those who gather at 9:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. experience a somewhat liturgical service with contemporary blending of instruments and organ/piano/orchestra. Some people dress formally, others casually. The total crowd from both services has increased to more than 500 in the last few years from a prior platform of about 120 worshippers following a change in pastoral leadership. There is a mix of ages. Approximately 25% of the members live in the neighborhood; the rest commute in to worship

from many parts of the city. They seem to be attracted by a variety of things like vibrant worship, healthy small groups, a place to serve, genuine spirituality, and more. It seems like something is going on at the church all the time. In fact, to an outside observer it seems a bit chaotic. Facilities and staffing are always in short supply, but they don't seem to limit what goes on. Members are encouraged to use their gifts and lead the programs they are most passionate about.

Membership in this congregation looks like the membership of the neighborhood (almost). The leaders decided last year that it would discourage new people from joining if they did not live in the neighborhood. They would encourage them instead to find or begin a church like their own near their homes. The church would even help get the new churches off the ground—they had helped six other congregations begin in the last four years. Growth seems to come by way of members interacting with, serving, and inviting their neighbors. The church has a senior pastor, a part-time worship pastor, a youth pastor, and a part-time church secretary.

The neighborhood is an older residential neighborhood. Five years ago, it was in serious decline. Too much of the housing stock was single family rental and the local public elementary school was failing. Crime statistics were high. Social and family breakdown were evident. The community was filled with abandoned cars, unkempt yards, trash strewn about, and a growing number of vacant lots. Graffiti adorned most buildings with a public facing.

Following a pastor's sabbatical and intense struggle with his vision and calling in life, this church was led to a change of heart. It turned its eyes and its heart to its neighborhood. It created a target community and declared this to be God's community. The church saw her members as God's ambassadors, but the church also was taught that this was not a community of problems, but a community of opportunity filled with people with gifts, talents, and resources to offer. This church could help the community become a great place.

The church surveyed the community and sent members to prayer-walk in the neighborhood every week, walking through the area and praying for it block by block. After a short time, members started identifying strong families and businesses who wanted to work with the church to improve the community. They began to map out the strengths and weaknesses of the community, got to know neighbors, and responded to little things they could do to start improving the community. With a neighboring congregation, the church formed a community development organization. This organization created an agenda for positive change in the community based on what the residents said they wanted to see. They began several programs that responded to the needs of the residents, and whenever possible invited residents to participate in running them:

- They started with youth programs.
- They soon added English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for immigrants.
- They began programs for strengthening families.
- They found ways to bring neighbors together to interact with each other.
- They partnered with an existing housing organization.
- They organized clean-up days and heavily recruited resident participation.

- They provided food by inviting a national gleaning organization to use their site as a distribution center.
- They targeted homes in the community that needed to change hands and began making that happen.
- They identified a need for changes in the local elementary and junior high schools. They started organizing neighbors to work with the schools to make the necessary changes.
- They began a city-wide campaign to bring public transportation to the community.

In the meantime, the church did some things for itself:

- It created incentives for members to return to the community as homeowners.
- It began weekly family dinners at the church for anyone in the community (\$10 per family).
- It recruited several member families who lived in the community to host monthly backyard barbeques for their neighbors (to become strategic neighbors in loving and securing the neighborhood).

Questions

	Scenario One	Scenario Two	Scenario Three
1. What are the key differences in each scenario?			
2. Does one of them seem more biblical than another? Why?			
3. Which scenario will have the greatest impact on its neighborhood, and why?			
4. Which scenario most approximates your church? How?			

3. What is Your Church's Reputation in the Neighborhood?

Exercise

Which one of these choices do the residents of the neighborhood in which you worship consider the church to be?

- A pariah institution: one that takes up space, uses city services, inconveniences the neighborhood with parking and other nuisances, and does not pay taxes.
- A neutral institution: one that quietly comes and goes a couple of days per week and has little impact one way or another in the neighborhood.
- A service institution: one that attempts, in addition to serving its members, to provide some good programs and services to neighbors.
- A community servant: one that cooperates with its neighbors to make life in the community better for everyone.

	Which of these scenarios apply to you? Yes/No	Would the community view this activity as being consistent with: → servant presence → neutral presence → pariah presence
1. Our church has an annual VBS		
2. Our church regularly partners with more than four public agencies to bring services into the neighborhood		
3. Our church was given a community service award in the last two years		
4. More than 80% of our members commute to church		
5. A public service institution (community mental health, department of corrections, public schools, etc) asked our help in making life better for their clients		
6. Our church pays security fees to ensure the premises are secure		
7. Our church has denied requests from social agencies or non-profits for use of space even though there was no competing interest vying for the space		

	Which of these scenarios apply to you? Yes/No	Would the community view this activity as being consistent with: → servant presence → neutral presence → pariah presence
8. The primary use of our church signs is to communicate worship times, church meetings and the pastor's name		
9. Our church name/logo is often seen on announcements of community events as a sponsor		
10. Our church has taken one or more homes off the neighborhood tax roll by demolishing residences to build larger facilities or added parking space		
11. Our church has a large fence around the parking lot or facilities		
12. Our church has a dynamic servant relationship with our local elementary school		
13. Our church partners in annual community clean-up days in the spring or fall		
14. Our church has been turned down for zoning variance requests		
15. Our church has never shown an interest in city/township planning meetings		
16. Our church participated in a door-to-door campaign for public transportation in our community		

4. Building a Sense of Community

Churches can cooperate and even lead a group of people in building a sense of community. The question is how a church contributes to each of the following characteristics. Add your ideas to the suggestion for each:

Characteristic	An idea	YOUR IDEAS
shared space or geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church “adopts” a township, a neighborhood, or a specific set of blocks; 	
shared interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church institutes a listening process with the community to define interests/opportunities. 	
shared values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church articulates and shares core values in a variety of media and trainings in the community. 	
common problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through a listening process in the community define one or two of the community’s greatest felt needs. 	
mutually supportive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for and utilize a variety of individual and institutional gifts from within the community. (Do little or nothing in isolation as a church). 	
intimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize backyard barbeques and events that help neighbors know and appreciate other neighbors 	

Characteristic	An idea	YOUR IDEAS
face-to-face interaction at specific times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church convenes residents at specific times to address common felt needs or opportunities (sometimes donating church facilities) 	
a means of self-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church members show up and are among the civic leaders making decisions for and with the community. They seek elected and volunteer posts to serve the community. 	

A sense of community is a vital part of a healthy community. It encompasses elements such as those listed below. How can you imagine your church creating these with your neighbors?

	What ideas do you have to create or influence these?
Community image	
Community spirit	
Community character	
Community pride	

A strong community values different people with different interests, experiences, backgrounds, and traditions. It also appreciates their interdependency. Strong communities find ways for people to connect and contribute within the entire spectrum of community life. Involve all groups, value differences, and view diversity as a strength!

Towns and cities with a sense of community include those where all members:

- contribute to and hold a common vision for the future
- respect and celebrate their heritage, diversity, and resources (When a variety of people groups and cultures gifts are present and active).
- share information and have a means of communication that reaches most neighbors
- develop and sustain social networks and relationships across diverse groups economically, socially, and culturally.

Rate each of these in your neighborhood and list one thing you or your church could do to raise your rating:

Signs of Community	Rate your community Poor 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 Great	List additional ideas for influencing this item
All members contribute to and hold a common vision for the future		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a visioning session for the neighborhood
All members respect and celebrate their heritage, diversity, and resources.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaign to elect people from many national and cultural backgrounds to public positions
All members share information and have a means of communication that reaches most neighbors.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a monthly community news and announcements bulletin or work with the one that exists.
All members develop and sustain social networks and relationships across diverse groups economically, socially, and culturally.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never do a program or activity with the community in isolation (as a church only). Always invite a partner.

5. Programs that Strengthen Community

Throughout North America, a variety of programs have proven track records of strengthening community. Many are birthed and managed by faith-based organizations that have found great satisfaction in their ministry. Others are birthed and managed by secular organizations that have also been effective in strengthening communities. All assets belong to the Kingdom of God and should be utilized. Collaboration between ministries and services provided by others is essential to community strengthening. Collaboration allows for shared leadership, decisions, ownership, vision, and responsibility. It discovers solutions and expands capacity within an organization and the community. Collaboration can be defined as exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and *enhancing the capacity of another* for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Every community will have a somewhat unique answer to this phrase:

“Our community will be stronger and better when...”

Often through a listening process, one or two clear focus areas will surface. Examples of programs that strengthen communities are:

Programs	Would this help your community? Yes or No?
civic education	
voter registration	
home ownership	
public transportation	
educational improvements	
community policing	
improvement of local parks	
adding/improving community recreation programs	
increase in political influence (a greater place in regional and state politics)	
increase in locally owned businesses	
restorative justice program	
transitional housing and recovery program for people with addictions	

6. “This community will be great for everyone when...”

In this workbook we will look at four dimensions of community life: strengthening relationships, improving the geography, redirecting institutional inputs for the benefit of the community, and improving public services.

A. Strengthening Community Relationships:

Communities are stronger and more like heaven when people know each other and live together in harmony.

1. Celebrate community!

In North America, we need help getting to know our neighbors. We use our homes as places of respite rather than engagement. The biblical practice of hospitality is hard to find.

Churches can do a lot to help neighbors meet and get to know one another. Complete the chart on the next page:

Activity	Does your church do this? Yes/No	List ideas that make sense for your church/community
A church has an annual “Celebrate Diversity” party for everyone in the community. They have all kinds of ethnic foods, dances, songs, and art exhibits.		
A church does “Classic Chariots” every summer in the parking lot. They bring in dozens of restored classic cars. Neighbors come to admire them and participate in a free pig roast for the community (grilled chicken for those who can’t eat pork!)		
A church hosts a Martin Luther King Day celebration in the park with all kinds of food and treats for the kids (face painting, organized games, dunk tank etc.)		
A church hosts a dinner every Wednesday evening. Any family can eat for \$10 (which nets the church a small profit.) Anyone in the community is invited every week and many stay for youth and adult programs.		
A church has trained conflict resolution teams that serve the community at the call of the police or the courts.		
A church invited its whole neighborhood to participate in racial reconciliation learning events at the local elementary school.		
A church hears testimonies once a month from members who host neighbors in their homes.		

2. Create venues where neighbors' gifts are recognized and valued.

One of the most common excuses churches make about their inability to serve their neighbors is that they just don't have the money. In almost every case, these same churches could do so much if they would simply channel the gifts God has already put into the community.

Neighbors are willing to be good neighbors, they are willing to use their time, talents, and even money to help their neighbors when there is good cause. Complete the following chart:

Activity	Does your church do this? Yes or No
A church has a free dinner one night per week for the homeless in their town. They invite everyone that comes through the line to tell them one thing they are really good at, and they work hard to find a way to use that gift within a few days.	
A church has identified its members' gifts/passions and it now offers regular classes to the community to help neighbors identify their gifts/passions in life.	
Some churches systematically identify residents' assets and gifts in their neighborhood. They invite those residents to use their gifts for community and church benefit. (Example: a community baker now provides free day-old goods to an ESL class at the church; a church puts on a banquet to raise funds for community outreach programs and the banquet is donated by a local restaurant; a local garage invites single parents to get a free oil change and vehicle inspection once per month).	
A church regularly invites community residents to make a contribution to their community benevolence work. They send a flier with a return envelope enclosed (free) in a local coupon insert that goes to every household in their neighborhood.	
A church uses neighbors' gifts to give classes for the community on topics like financial fitness, homeownership, job-readiness and computer skills.	
A church brought together a botany teacher and her class, a neighbor market gardener, the local toy store manager, a representative of the township, and neighborhood residents to design and beautify a vacant strip of land in order to create a park between two neighborhoods near the church. The church agreed to maintain it with the help of neighbors.	
Five businessmen formed a limited liability corporation and bought two homes as an investment. They invited a local church to use the homes for transitioning families. The investment is secure, the property appreciating, and low-income families can transition to home ownership.	

Reread these ideas and then list three or four activities that make sense for your church and community. How can you recognize and utilize your neighbors' gifts?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

God's gifts are liberally distributed in every neighborhood, but we need to look beyond the church in order to access some of them. Every good and perfect gift comes from God! He has much we can do regardless of how poor we may believe we are.

Below, list two or three things your church might do to benefit your community. Then list some of the resources that might already be in your community to help do those things:

What might you or your church do to benefit your neighborhood?	List some of the "assets or gifts" God might already have in the community to get this done.
1	
2	
3	

3. Create links between neighbors who can serve one another

- Grandpa Joe is a Christian and everyone on the block knows it. Everyone goes to him when they need help. If he is unable to help, he always knows someone in the church or community who can.
- A neighbor named Dawn has somehow amassed 12-15 long tables and 50-60 chairs and anyone in the community holding a celebration knows that Dawn is the person to talk to.
- Another neighbor, Vern, is an all-around fix-it guy. When someone needs an egress window installed in the basement, or when their lawnmower won't start, Vern helps them figure it out.
- Several Christians on one block convened their neighbors to pool funds together in order to loan another neighbor an interest-free down-payment on a house. They wanted to get the house out of the hands of an absentee landlord and into the hands of a "good" neighbor!

List below the names of four of your neighbors and think about at least one gift they might have that others in the neighborhood might benefit from:

Names	Gifts
1	
2	
3	
4	

Strategic Neighbors

A church in Washington is beginning a "strategic neighbors" program. On each of several blocks around the church, a "strategic neighbor" (church member) hosts a community barbeque and potluck once a month in the summer for anyone on the block who wants to come.

In a few communities, Christians are serving as "community/block chaplains." One of their roles is to help neighbors identify neighbors who can help them with a need. (Examples include sharing a lawnmower or a chainsaw, providing child care, bringing a meal to someone who is caring for a sick spouse, assisting an elderly resident with tax preparation, or helping celebrate birthdays and weddings).

Can you imagine your church supporting a network of strategic neighbors or block chaplains? List some names of people in your church who might be gifted and willing to be a strategic neighbor on one of the blocks surrounding your church:

Can you imagine creating incentives for a few young married couples to live in your church neighborhood on the condition that they take on the role of strategic neighbor?

- a. What kinds of incentives can you imagine would attract a young couple? (an interest-free down payment, for example).

- b. How would you recruit young couples? What characteristics would you look for?

- c. Who would train, support, and encourage these young couples?

4. Creating times, places, and events that celebrate life in the neighborhood.

- A church has a crew of volunteers that personally deliver a gift pack to every family with a newborn within their target area.
- A church does a weekly scan of the local newspapers and radio stations and keeps an updated bulletin board on local people and events to celebrate. They frequently send a message of love, support, or thanks from the church identifying the gift they celebrate.
- A church has an annual service of thanks and appreciation for public servants and sends a written invitation to police, firefighters, township trustees, and other public servants to attend, be recognized, and be matched to a local prayer partner.

Think of two things you would like to celebrate in your community with neighbors and list one or two ways you can imagine celebrating them:

I want our church to celebrate...	Ideas for how to celebrate
1	
2	

B. Improving the geography

Communities are stronger and more like heaven when the physical area is beautiful. Christians are called to bring harmony to creation; to take care of land, plants, animals, air, and water. Communities that take care of the land become preferred places to live.

- One church convenes Christians from all of the churches in town two times per year. Together they form work teams and do whatever the town officials or other public service agencies recommend for cleaning up the town.
- A Christian school cleaned up a watershed (a creek) that ran from farmland through towns all the way to ocean. Today it is clean and salmon hatch there.
- Churches volunteer to keep stretches of highway clean.
- A desert church could become water self-reliant by recycling and using all of its building and parking lot run-off water. Or a church could reduce its dependence on gas and oil consumption by installing solar equipment.
- A church in Jamestown does bi-weekly “random acts of kindness” in its neighborhood as weather permits. Most of the acts are related to beautification projects. (Painting fences and homes, planting flowers, building wheelchair ramps, cleaning abandoned properties, etc). They invite neighbors to join them. Almost 50% of the workers are not members of the church.
- A group of Christians convened their neighbors and successfully claimed “imminent domain” over a property that was neglected, abused, and a source of community problems. There, they built a beautiful two-flat home that a local organization uses to help families transition to home ownership in the neighborhood.

Cleaning up the geography of a neighborhood has many dimensions:

- Cleaning up trash in public places
- Cleaning up water supplies and bringing water to dry places
- Maintaining natural wildlife spaces
- Reducing harmful effects of fertilizers
- Replacing rundown properties with redeveloped properties
- Fixing housing stock
- Reducing air pollution
- Cleaning up toxic sites
- Repairing sidewalks
- Bringing lighting to public places

What would you add to this list?

Churches and Christians can do so much with their neighbors to make their neighborhoods preferred places to live:

In terms of physical conditions, life in this community will be more like heaven when...	Two things we could do to make this happen are:	We could invite neighbors to help us with...
	1 2	
	1 2	
	1 2	

C. Directing the Contributions of Institutions

Communities are stronger and more like heaven when institutions serve and are accountable to the neighborhood and their customers.

Institutions generally exist to provide particular services to a community. Thankfully, most do! A sad reality is that many institutions become self-serving at the expense of those they are supposed to serve. In poor communities this is especially true. Here are some examples:

- A public elementary school routinely sends students that cannot read or write at a third-grade level on to middle school.
- A mental health board suddenly decides to pull funding from a local workshop that employs people with disabilities. They do not consult with the consumers of their services or their guardians.
- A local police station in the neighborhood is shut down for safety reasons.
- A community housing authority pumps millions of dollars into rents and subsidies to landlords that provide unsafe housing to poor families.

Below, add to the list of institutions that exist to “help” the poor in your community:

Public Institutions	Non-Profit Institutions	Businesses
Department of Social Services	Food bank	Health clinics
Community Mental Health	Drop-in center	Instant cash services
Courts	City mission	Rent-to-own businesses
Police	Housing/rehab non-profit	Absentee landlords
Public schools	Treatment centers	Retirement centers
	Group homes	

Institutions exist to provide their service(s) and/or satisfy their owners or boards. In the end, they are *not* responsible to the citizens they serve unless people they serve(d) are on their boards. Churches and Christians can help neighbors direct or re-direct institutions and businesses services in ways that add value to the community, rather than prey upon it.

- In one community Christians went door-to-door and asked: “If you could wave a magic wand and fix one thing in this community, what would it be?” The number one answer was: “Fix our elementary school. Our kids are failing!” Together, the Christians began a campaign in the community, encouraging families to get involved. They talked to the administrators and teachers, they volunteered in the school, and they showed up *en mass* to school board meetings. In a short while student performance improved dramatically.
- In another community, churches helped to quickly bring out hundreds of citizens to a Community Mental Health (CMH) board meeting. They wanted to protest an announced shutdown of the local sheltered workshop due to drastic reductions in funding from CMH. They formed a citizen advisory panel and worked with CMH to a peaceful and satisfactory resolution. Because of their actions, the workshop is still funded.
- Christian citizens in another community began round-the-clock vigils and peaceful interactions with potential customers until an instant loan business was forced to shut down for lack of business. Potential customers were steered to a local church and other agencies for the help they needed.
- In another community, Christians worked together to form a credit union as an alternative to banks to serve the particular needs of poor people.
- In another community, churches and neighbors worked together to convince a regional hospital to open a clinic in their neighborhood to make services more accessible to the poor.

Four things you can do to start keeping institutions accountable to their communities:

1. Walk the community and catalog the businesses and institutions in your neighborhood—especially those that regularly serve poor people. Document the businesses and services that would make life better for everyone if they were added to the community.
2. Discern the value of institutions to the neighborhood:
 - a. After talking with the neighbors, decide if you want to re-direct or get rid of any of them. Create a plan with the neighbors to do what needs to be done.
 - b. After talking with the neighbors, decide if you want to somehow recognize, support, and utilize those that add value to the neighborhood. Create a plan with the neighbors to support them.
3. Identify businesses and institutions that can link willing Christian volunteers with people who need help. Find ways to support them in what they do best, and use their services to help middle- and upper-class Christians develop relationships with poor people.
4. Bring to the neighborhood those businesses and institutions that will help make life better for everyone in the community—especially the poor.

D. Improving Public Services:

Communities are stronger and more like heaven when people share basic services.

The communities of greatest poverty usually exist in isolation from communities with means. It is a sad and predictable fact that poor communities are the last to get basic public services. Add any additional public services you can think of to this list:

Public Transportation
Utilities: clean water, adequate and reliable electricity, trash services, sewer and sanitation
Maintained public parks with ball fields, tennis courts, picnic areas, swimming pools etc.
Foot and bike paths in good repair
Street repairs
Street and sidewalk lighting

1. Walk your community, interacting with neighbors, and notice how low-income and poor families are most affected by the absence of public services.
2. Prioritize with your neighbors what they most want/need and plan with the residents how you can go about getting what is needed.

E. Working with Networks for Neighborhood and City Change:

Communities are stronger and more like heaven when people work together to make life better for everyone. It takes more than the actions of an individual or a single congregation: it takes collaboration and networking to cause change in faulty systems or policies.

Sometimes a single change in a policy can eliminate a problem. For example:

- adding a tax to provide initial funding for public transportation,
- implementing a policy that says public benefits will supplement work (no work, no benefits)
- implementing a policy that says public benefits will be used in ways that create incentives for people to work.
- providing a living wage policy
- Sometimes changes in social/cultural behavior can lead to sustainable changes:
- encouraging families to eat one meal per day together without the TV
- a policy that denies marriage licenses without 4 classes on healthy marriages.

Agencies have to look at causes and systems that produce and maintain poverty in communities if they really want to see poverty end. It is not good enough to be in the rescuing and training business when a little prevention and systems-change can significantly stem the tides of poverty.

Three stories follow the chart below. Try to fill out the chart as you read the stories.

	As you read these stories, what caught your attention	What examples seem easy to replicate? What examples seem hard?	What challenges would you face in engaging in something that already exists or starting a new work?
Sun Valley			
Templo Calvario			
Buena Park			

Sun Valley Ministries wanted to help young people in the city, so they started an after-school program. However, they quickly found that the number of children they were helping was only a fraction of the people that needed help. They realized that if they were going to respond to the bigger need, they needed to work with the schools, parents, and children. To their surprise they found the schools receptive to their help. Even after the schools opened their doors they were still overwhelmed with the need. They are now reaching out to businesses and other agencies in town. Together they are developing a multi-faceted ministry that engages people and organizations to create hope and opportunities for the community children.

Templo Calvario is an Assembly of God church in the city of Santa Ana, California. The church realized that if they were going to make an impact in the gang-infested community of Buena Clinton, they were going to need the help of residents and landlords. The church began working with the families of the most high-profile gang members. It took close to a year just to develop the relationships. They began recruiting and working with strategic families on every block. The mothers of the gang members would invite other women on the block to their homes for coffee where they would talk about neighborhood matters. After three years, things began to change and the neighborhood became a more peaceful place. A major landlord in Santa Ana has now invited the church to work with him in the neighboring Steward Street community, which is another high-crime area.

In the city of Buena Park in California, a Latin American congregation began a ministry of providing food to help immigrant families subsidize their income. The pastor of the church would drive to the local stores and pick up donated food. He delivered it to elderly church members and their neighbors who needed it to make ends meet. He found the relief needs to be overwhelming in addition to his pastoral duties. By collaborating with a relief and development agency he was able to recruit a woman named Thu to serve as a two-year intern in the community. She helped develop relationships with other relief and development agencies in the area.

This allowed the church to work with residents on the issues that were keeping them poor. They began a weekly meeting called *Viernes Social*, which in Spanish means Social Fridays. During these meetings the women decided they wanted to learn English and become more involved in their children's schooling. Thu arranged for the women to meet with the local school district. School officials provided an instructor free of charge and Thu opened up her home to host the classes. A member of the Latin American church started volunteering to tutor the women's children as well. She soon began asking her friends to come and help.

The ladies began to work with the local school. Though reluctant at first, the principal and teachers became more and more supportive. The city of Buena Park helped the women by awarding them a small grant. This group has now formed an organization called Orange County Christian Charities. They are collaborating with other groups in the cities of Buena Park and Anaheim. These community women, with the help of several churches and agencies, are now helping to improve other dimensions of community life such as housing, security, and family strengthening.

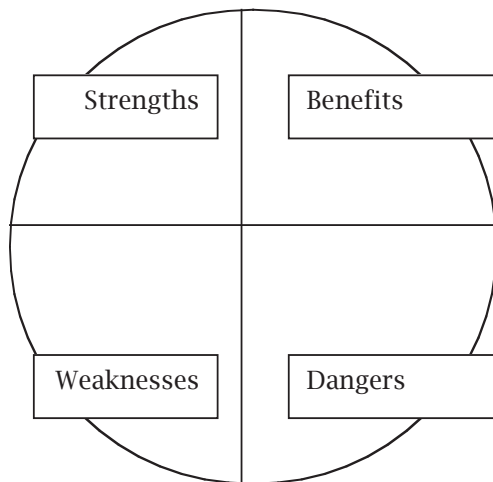
F. Creating a Community Agenda for Change

Consider this method creating a common agenda for changes in your community:

1. Gather people from your church and neighborhood.
2. On a large piece of paper, draw a circle that everyone can see. Call the circle a Victory Circle. Ask the participants to complete this statement: Life in this community will be better when...

List their ideas in different colors on the circle.

3. From the list, choose a few victories that this group can achieve fairly quickly to start with (within six months).
4. Take another sheet and draw a second circle. Divide the circle into quarters. Label the left top quarter **Strengths** and the lower left **Weaknesses**. The left half represents the condition of the group. List your groups' strengths and weaknesses to accomplish what is in the circle.



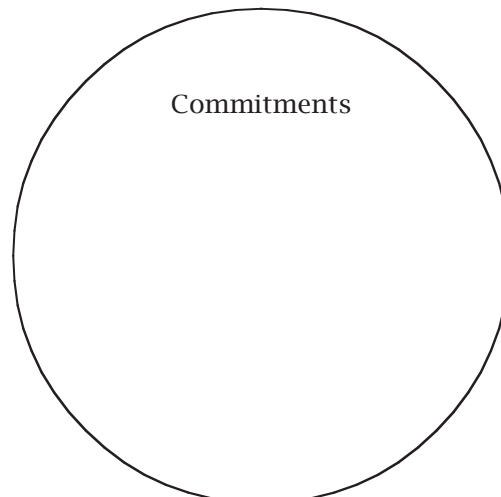
- a. Cluster these commitments into three groups that make sense to participants. Which items belong together?

Victory Circle



5. On the right half label the top **Benefits** and the bottom **Dangers**. List the benefits you will experience if you accomplish your goal. Then list the dangers you might face if you are successful.

6. Take another sheet and draw a circle. Call the circle **Commitments**. Based on the victory circle, list a few things the group is committed to accomplishing.



- b. Invite people to self-select into the three different groups based on the tasks that interest them most.
- c. Have each group begin to work out action steps to accomplish the things on their lists and then create a schedule for continuing the action steps over the next six months.
- d. Bring the groups back together and integrate their results into one big calendar that includes planning for all three groups. This will give you an opportunity to see where groups can coordinate or where you need to add more actions steps. Have someone create a master calendar and scorecard to monitor progress of all teams.

Bring the groups back on a monthly basis to review progress. At the end of six months, have the group repeat the process.

COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING

In this workbook you will:

- Understand the role of the church in strengthening community
- Discover what your church's reputation is in the neighborhood
- Get ideas for motivating church involvement in strengthening the community
- Find unique ways to make communities "stronger and more like heaven"

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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