

Building a Bridge into Your Community

Every time I take those spiritual gift inventories, evangelism always ranks as one of my top three gifts. Yet, like so many pastors, most of my time is spent within the walls of the church building and with those who have already crossed the line of faith in Christ. This has often been a frustration to me until I began to pick up on ways to build missional bridges into our community. Here are some of the practical ways that you too can lead your church in letting your community know that you are there for them because you care for them. You will note that a big budget is not necessary to pull off any of these.

- **Meet with Community Leaders:** When I first arrived at my most recent pastorate, I immediately initiated contact with community leaders in business, politics, education, and service organizations. I made a list of all the people I wanted to meet with and then I pursued those people for a breakfast or lunch that was “on me.” I focused my time with these community leaders on two questions, though I’m sure I asked a few more. First, I inquired “what are the most pressing needs in our community” and, second, “in your opinion, how can a local church help to meet those needs”? Most of the people I met with seemed to genuinely appreciate that I valued both the community and their insights. You never know how God might use one of these contacts to further His kingdom. These meetings, over time, allowed me and the church I served to develop great rapport with our community. One of these meetings was the impetus for me being invited to open the meeting of the House of Representatives in prayer at the State Capitol Building in Harrisburg, PA. My prayer for our State Representatives focused on the ultimate public servant, Jesus the Christ.
- **Develop Ministries of Compassion and Recovery:** I know it’s cliché but it’s true- people don’t care what you know until they know that you care. Before the community will open up to our talk *about* the good news of Christ, Christians must first *be* the good news of Christ. One of the ways the church I served did this was by starting a food pantry that now feeds 100 families each month. We also designated a portion of one of our buildings as offices for a community service organization that provides shelter for homeless families. A few years back, we hosted a Thanksgiving Banquet for the poor and homeless in our community. Members of our congregation ate with them in an effort to not just give food *to* them but to share life *with* them. As more and more people in our community struggled with addictions, we added Celebrate Recovery, Narcotics Anonymous, and Gamblers Anonymous programs. Because of these ministries of compassion and recovery people in the community who never even attended our church inadvertently joined our mission by telling people in need, “go to that church on Fifth Street, they care, they’ll help you.”
- **Host a Community Service Sunday:** Another way the church I led sought to build bridges into our community was by inviting representatives from community service organizations like Habitat for Humanity, the Fire Department, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Women’s Resources and the Police Department to come and participate in our morning worship services. I gave each representative 5-7 minutes to share how their organization is serving the community and how we can support their efforts. I realize it’s a risk to give someone you don’t know all that well a voice in your worship services, but it’s worth the risk. On that Sunday I also preached a message proclaiming Jesus Christ, the suffering servant who sacrificed all he had, including his life, in order to serve those in need. When these

organizations needed volunteers, spiritual guidance, or occasional meeting space, who do you think they contacted? You guessed it.

- **Pray Publically for Community Leaders and Organizations:** On the fifteenth day of every month my administrative assistant sent a letter to a politician, school principal, fire/police chief, community service director, and local pastor. In this letter I tell them how much I value their important service to the community and that our congregation wants to support them with our prayers. I solicit specific prayer requests from these leaders and let them know that on the first Sunday of the coming month we will pray for them in our worship services. Of course, I also invite them to be present on the Sunday we pray for them. This letter and the public prayer help a church to build bridges with other leaders, organizations, and churches in their community. This first Sunday prayer for the community also reminded the people of our church that the community matters to God and, therefore, must matter to us as well.
- **Give Money Away:** You have payroll to make, ministry that needs resourcing, and bills to pay. Your worship team is begging for new drums. Your audio visual guy has been saying he “needs” a new projector for two years now. Instead, you decide that your priority will be feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, liberating the addicted, and paying electric bills for families so they have heat in the dead of winter. This was the ministry philosophy of the church I led. Did we get new instruments and a projector? Eventually, but only when we had spare change from our missional expenditures. Lots of churches these days boast about being “missional” instead of “attractional,” but I wonder if they really put their money where the mouth is. We did and we saw God bless our risk-taking obedience over and over again in some miraculous ways.

Over time, these five low-cost, quickly implementable initiatives have the potential to pave the way for your local church to significantly impact your community. It won't happen immediately, but a local church that is intentional about building bridges into their community will gain the credibility necessary to be heard when she proclaims, with the angels, that Jesus Christ really is “good news of great joy that will be for all people” (Luke 2:10).

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