

REACHING OUR NEIGHBORS

A Prayer for Mission

O gracious and loving God, you work everywhere reconciling, loving and healing your people and creation. In your Son and through the power of your Holy Spirit, you invite each of us to join you in your work. We ask you to form us more and more in your image and likeness, through our prayer and worship of you and through the study of your Scripture, that our eyes may be fully opened to your mission in the world. Then, God, into our communities, our nation and the world, send us to serve with Christ, taking risks to give life and hope to all people and all of your creation. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Background

A Changed Religious Context

Since the Fourth Century, we've primarily looked to the church to help people see Jesus and learn how to walk with him; we would bring people to live in Christian community or to participate in church programs.

During the last 50 years, churches have quickly lost their general acceptance as social and religious institutions.

- Fewer and fewer people feel a spiritual or social need to attend church; over 25% of people identify themselves as "Nones" (atheist, agnostic, no church affiliation) and the number is probably higher (stigma)
- Less than 1 in 6 people seek direction in their spiritual life from a church
- Less than 1 in 10 attended church last weekend
- We are in our third generation of people who have never been to church and believe it is unimportant, alien or foreign, or scary – all reasons not to come on their own.
- Many people believe churches are "un-Christian" (judgmental, hypocritical, unloving); they ask, "Why would I want to be part of that?"
- When 70% of people in this country still say they are Christians, most people now believe they can be *spiritual and not religious*
- Most people today are not consciously looking for a church community as a possible way of life or a supportive community for their faith

Framing Our Response

Several of our congregations are working on revitalization and growth. Revitalization doesn't happen without an intentional choice and commitment. These congregations have each come to the decision that they're not where they need to be and they're asking, "How we can get there, what do we need to do differently? What is God calling us to next?" They are paying close attention to three key focus areas for health and growth:

- Beloved Community (belonging): a community who cares for us
- Mission (purpose): a community who serves others
- Discipleship (Christian formation and stewardship): a community who helps us develop and use our individual gifts

We need to turn away from a wholly congregational focus and direct our focus intently upon the community in which God's placed us. We need to become missionaries in the most positive sense of sharing God's love and Good News. As we care, comfort, heal, empower, and share hospitality, safety, and hope with our neighbors, we will also find new life in our church communities and ourselves. The question is not "How can we get more people to join our church?" but "How can we move beyond our church walls to live with Jesus and serve, love, and learn from God's people living around us?" Whether we are starting a new church, revitalizing a church, or extending faith communities in new ways, we need to help people belong to community, help people with physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual needs, nurture people in faith, and send them out to love and serve others.

Our church communities need to fully embrace the mission and adventure of reaching the ever-increasing number of non-church yet deeply spiritual people who live all around us. Few will come to church on their own. We are called to leave the comfort of our buildings and practices and journey to meet and serve the majority of people around us who may not have a spiritual home. The process of strengthening relationships is very personal. We would like to have evangelism done for us through some tool or method, but evangelism is nothing less than offering love, building trust, and personally engaging people in the Way; and that requires caring, personal relationships.

At the same time, several of our churches are experiencing increased lay leadership and involvement and improved financial stewardship. This happens because more people are involved; there is more energy from a greater sense of belonging and purpose and a focus on spiritual growth and generosity (not budget needs); and they have strengthened stewardship processes and encouraged percentage giving.

Becoming Missionaries

A missionary model goes to people in their own setting and community, becomes part of that community and serves it so that people can experience Christian life.

Traditional churches often avoid this “missionary” model of going into the world and living with others who need God’s healing love, unless they are sending gifted specialists to do this work.

Going beyond church walls opens up far more possibilities for new relationships and activities.

Churches that grow identify who they are called to serve

- Go directly to and connect with the identified group
- Understand what these people need
- Let people know that we care

A missional church asks:

- Who is our neighbor (mission field)?
- Who are our missionaries (disciples and leaders)?
- How are we connecting relationally with people around us (serving others)?

Step 1: Know our surrounds: Who is our neighbor?

Identify Mission Fields: Growing church communities clearly identify who they are called to serve and go out to reach new people. The old attraction slogan (“All are Welcome”) and good hospitality are not enough. It is important to identify who you are trying to reach so that you can understand their specific needs and imagine unique ways to make connections and build relationships. Be aware both of people the church already serves and of new potential mission fields. Growing church communities clearly identify who they are called to serve and go out to reach new people.

1. Presence

- a. Walk the neighborhood (esp. neighborhood prayer walks: https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/attached-files/neighborhood_prayer_walks_tec.pdf)
- b. Community outreach (e.g., companionship, neighborhood cleanup, food, clothing, shelter, education, jobs)

2. Conversations and partnerships

- a. Local agencies (e.g., city, chamber of commerce, economic development, police, nonprofits, community associations)
- b. Community Organizing Model (see, e.g., One-to-One Relational Meetings: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/evangelisminitiatives/one-one-relational-meetings>)

3. Studies

- a. *ExecutiveInsite Report*/Community Profile (<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/research/study-your-congregation-and-community>)
 - i. To get a Community Demographic Profile for a 3-mile radius from your church, select the Diocese, then select your church, then click on “View Community Profile”
 - ii. To interpret the “Mosaic Households” in your community, find descriptions of the demographic groups at <http://missioninsite.com/missionimpact-guide/> and <https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/mi-docs/Mosaic+USA+E-Handbook.pdf>.
- b. Mapping America: Every City, Every Block: <http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/explorer?ref=us> (census information)

Who are we already making close relational connections with and who could we make close relational connections with?

Step 2: Identify, train and support our missionaries

Develop disciples and leaders: The most important factor for success is good leadership. Leaders provide structure and create a safe space for members to interact; convene the group; make sure everyone participates; encourage each person to experience caring, support and growth; help the group develop an atmosphere of prayer, openness, faith sharing, trust, safety, honest respect, tolerance and love; and show enthusiasm and energy to attract and encourage other members. Notice that these are not just task-focused activities but are relationally-focused activities which create belonging in addition to purpose.

1. Who are our missionaries?

- a. This kind of leadership is not limited to “experts” or specially gifted individuals
 - i. The subject matter, content or task (theology, ministry) of the group or team is less important than the relational connections. We too often rely on (require) subject matter “experts” (such as clergy) to lead groups.

- ii. Leadership studies confirm that leadership skills are quite broadly distributed among people, and leadership is not limited to “natural born leaders” or people with special gifts for leadership.
- iii. People can develop leadership skills and abilities through practice, experience and learning
- iv. Any Christian involved in serving others will ultimately discover that the Holy Spirit provides gifts and helps us do far more than we could ever do on our own
- b. Part of growing and replicating groups or teams is always apprenticing other members to lead them
 - i. Have designated co-leaders so the group is covered when the leader is absent and so a second leader develops to lead future groups
 - ii. Over time, select and support apprentice leaders and help them to develop leadership skills and abilities to lead teams of their own

2. Support missionaries with training, coaching and resources

- a. Communities trained in pastoral care and small groups are most effective.
- b. The objective is not just to prepare people to provide pastoral care, but to enable them to create stronger and deeper relationships that share God’s love with others (by listening, caring, offering prayer, deepening conversations). Programs for training in pastoral care are Community of Hope, Stephen’s Ministries, or Befrienders.
- c. Small group training helps prepare people to create strong relational connections in group settings and to lead, grow, replicate and divide group ministries.

Who are our missionaries and who could be our missionaries?

Step 3: Connect relationally with our neighbors

Develop deep, caring personal relationships: Belonging comes before belief: More than 80% of people who come to church and stay come on the arm of someone they know We need to ask where we have opportunities to develop powerful connecting relationships (belonging) with people within and beyond the church community

How Jesus Connects with People¹

We intentionally develop deeper relationships with others by asking:

- “What are you going through?” (listening, caring, deep conversation)
- “What do we need to pray about?” (prayer)
- “Who isn’t here who needs to be here?” (openness and growth)

¹ Jim Gettel, *Where Jesus Leads: Helping Christian Communities to Follow* (Deep River Books, 2017), 159-161 and Small Groups and Ministry Teams Help Create Christian Community (https://docs.wixstatic.com/uqd/4cee70_86601c77c5d84802af7b6dccb918af71.pdf)

Some tools for creating personal and community relationships:

- 1. One-to-One Relational Meetings** (Community Organizing Model, e.g., <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/evangelisminitiatives/one-one-relational-meetings>)
- 2. Small Groups**
 - a. Formation or conversations (Bible or book studies, Pub Theology, etc.)
 - b. Prayer groups
 - c. Shared experiences of specific needs along life stages of their journeys (e.g., youth, young parents, seniors, grief groups)
- 3. Ministry Teams**
 - a. These relationships can be supported in all ongoing ministries. We can invite new people (even non-members) into ministry teams, especially for Pastoral care and Outreach ministries (e.g., community gardens, feeding programs, knitting groups)
 - b. While these teams are accomplishing specific tasks, they can also help support each person's spiritual journey – if they are intentional about this. We engage in a more integrated/holistic Christian Way that all at once invites us into loving community, serves the world, and transforms our lives.

This can begin in groups where two or three are gathered – not the whole church. (There can be parallel development of multiple groups and everyone doesn't have to participate.) Try to create these strong relationships within all of your groups in the congregation and beyond.

The relationships in small groups and ministry teams help the teams grow. People who are involved in small groups and ministry teams are also more active in worship and other church activities. *Evangelism, discipleship, leadership development and church growth occur primarily in small groups and ministry teams.*²

*How are we developing deep, caring personal relationships with people other than ourselves and how could we?*³

² See also Tools for Discerning and Reaching Mission Fields (https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/4cee70_98c54effdc0c47fabd7f63966371554c.pdf)

³ "Mychal's Prayer" was composed by Fr. Mychal Judge, a fire department chaplain, and worn in the helmets of New York firefighters. Fr. Judge died responding to the 9/11 World Trade Center attack with New York firefighters. The day before his death, he said at a firehouse rededication: "Good days, bad days, but never a boring day on this job. You do what God has called you to do. You show up, you put one foot in front of the other, and you do your job, which is a mystery and a surprise. You have no idea, when you get in that rig, what God is calling you to. But he needs you . . . so keep going. Keep supporting each other. Be kind to each other. Love each other. Work together. You love the job. We all do. What a blessing that is."

Mychal's Prayer

Lord, take me where you want me to go;
Let me meet who you want me to meet;
Tell me what you want me to say;
And keep me out of your way.