

MUTUAL MINISTRY

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

Many members of Hope Congregation care for their older adult parents. These members want to share what they've learned and be of assistance to others. They find enthusiastic support in their congregation. Leaders decide to explore how the congregation can offer services to older adults in their local community, so they form an Older Adult Community Team to get the program off the ground. The leader of the team, a social worker with years of experience, tells them "The richest work is when you work *with* others, not just *for* others."

They talk with older adults in their area and engage in conversation with regulars at the local senior citizen's center. They use conversation starters like:

"What's most important to you right now?"

"What skill or gift do you enjoy sharing with others?"

"What challenge are you facing?"

From these conversations, the team makes lots of new friends. They learn that older adults in the community have many gifts they long to share. The team discovers that those they wish to serve have good ideas themselves about what services would best suit them. As a result, they all work together to create a unique and exciting new older adult program. Their team leader was right — the best programs develop from a collaboration with the very folks they seek to serve.

How does your congregation engage the community? According to Ram Cnaan, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, 91% percent of the congregations in the United States provide services to those in the community.

Congregations can reach out to those who are not members of their congregations in many ways — community meals, math tutoring, elder care and more. Your congregation probably already participates in some activity that is commonly called community ministry.

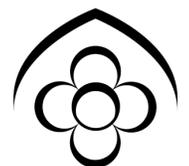
The term community ministry represents many different activities. Congregations practice a variety of approaches to community ministry. One such method is mutual community ministry; a commitment to work *with*, not *for*, the people they wish to serve.

MUTUAL MINISTRY AND CHARITY

Mutual community ministry is different from charity. Many congregations value charity, and for good reason. Your congregation has probably provided a good or a service to someone in need — a meal to a family who stopped by the church during an evening gathering. This is charity. Sometimes it is just what is needed.

MUTUAL MINISTRY AND EVANGELISM

Mutual community ministry is also different from evangelism. Most commonly, evangelism is related to Christians sharing the good news of the gospels with those who are not part of the Christian community. Evangelism is a form of community engagement. However, evangelism is not the same as mutual community ministry.



MUTUAL MINISTRY IS RELATIONAL

Mutual ministry involves congregants, community members, and those they wish to serve, working together to create and build a program to serve a chosen group. Mutual ministry often begins with a few people in the congregation being interested in some subject that, if undertaken, would strengthen the local community by addressing a need.

Mutual ministry is not about implementing programs that congregants have decided on their own would be good for others. Instead, congregants engage people, a chosen community, in conversation about what can be done to help make a particular situation better.

Conversations with community can change and better define the original idea. By joining others, the congregation finds new friends. Mutual relationships develop. The space between them and us diminishes.

Mutual ministry involves a congregation interested in addressing a local community issue. The congregation then listens to and forms relationships with those people impacted by the issue. Based on the conversations and relationships, they plan and start a program together to address the issue.

THREE CHARACTERISTICS

Mutual community ministry has three characteristics. It is relational. It is asset-based. And, it is collaborative.

Mutual community ministry begins with building relationships between people in the congregation and in the community. Such relationships are reciprocal. They move beyond data, demographics, and statistics. The relationships are affirming, and they are about names, faces, stories, hopes and dreams. Congregants understand that they have something to learn from those in the community. The power of interdependent relation-

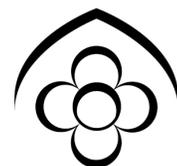
ships creates a community ministry project or program that represents shared work.

Mutual community ministry is asset based. An asset is a resource, such as a building, some volunteers, a skill set, life experience and so on. Both congregations and community members have assets. In mutual community ministry, the team looks for assets in the people they hope to serve and assets in their own congregation. The focus is on, "what do others bring to the work at hand?" "How can we invite others, especially those we hope to serve, to share their gifts?"

An asset-based approach requires an attitude shift for some congregations. A congregation is often drawn to a particular kind of mutual ministry because members want to use their gifts for a common good. When the approach is that of mutual community ministry, congregants learn there are abundant gifts and resources already present in the community beyond them. Mutual respect emerges as congregation and community members learn about one another's talents and dreams. Often, the best assets in mutual ministry are trust, friendship and hope.

Mutual community ministry involves collaboration. An asset-based approach grounded in developing friendships will almost naturally lead to new alliances. In his book *Spiritual Formation*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Ministry is entering with our human brokenness into communion with others." Power dynamics are minimized as much as possible. In place is an honoring of relationships and assets that support collaboration. People know the difference between ministry being done *for* them and ministry done *with* them.

Sometimes a congregation begins mutual ministry with modest steps. For years, a small-town Indiana congrega-



tion hosted a food pantry. Recently, the members of the congregation noticed a change. In addition to handing out food, the congregants remember the names of recipients. The congregational volunteers are pausing long enough to learn that Jeannette's doctor appointment went well on Tuesday and that Allen makes spaghetti for his grandkids with the tomatoes and sauce he receives. While this interaction isn't a fully expressed mutual ministry, it is the beginning of relationship formation and asset recognition that will make collaboration possible at the right time and in the right way.

READINESS

How do you know if your congregation is ready for mutual community ministry?

You can gauge your readiness by listening. You may explore what mutual community ministry is like by listening to your neighbors beyond the congregation. After all, if you pursue shared community engagement, you are embarking on an adventure with your neighbors. They are going to be your partners.

Such listening involves face-to-face conversation. Go to your neighbors. Don't talk about your congregation. Ask about people, about their lives. As you listen, focus on the person. Use open-ended questions that you truly don't know the answer to. If you don't know something, don't fake it. Be curious. Don't equate their experience with yours. Thanks to Celeste Headlee, author of *We Need to Talk*, for these ideas.

If these conversations leave you feeling energized, challenged, curious and wanting to know more, then it is likely that mutual ministry in your community is worth pursuing further.

What community need might be met by a collaborative endeavor? Who in your community might also be interested in this issue? Talk to someone already working in

your area of interest. Remember the subject isn't your congregation. The subject is the person's life experience.

Mutual ministry in your neighborhood is going to be risky. You are serving in the spiritual realm of uncertainty. This isn't for every congregation. That's okay. Or you may end up trying small experiments of mutual ministry rather than going all in. That's okay too.

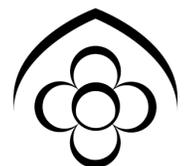
MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Congregations engaging in mutual community ministry have found creative ways to measure success. Once you begin the work of community ministry, you'll want to evaluate effectiveness.

The outcome of mutual ministry is seen in positive behaviors, new friendships, nurturing individual growth and generous gestures. Mutual ministry's end goal is some social good, measured in terms of friends made, shared work accomplished, someone's life improved. These measures are matters of meaning-making and relationship-building and are better represented in stories than in numbers.

If you need to count, you can track figures like how many great conversations you have, or how many people attend a collaborative brainstorm session, or assign a number to the positive feeling present in the room. Measure how the project aligns with the religious commitments most important to your congregation; virtues like patience, joy, curiosity, hope and more.

Many congregations are well-schooled in the measures of success related to charitable causes; the number of canned goods distributed, how many dollars are sent to the homeless shelter and so on. These are important indicators, but they are not the primary indicators of success of shared ministry in your locale.



If your congregation is used to being in charge of a program, relinquishing control to a collaborative effort will leave you in an uncertain place when it comes to results and outcomes. We've seen congregations slip back to taking control because they have a hard time tolerating ambiguity. Yet, such ambiguity is holy space. It may feel like a groan zone, but in reality it is a growth zone. You are being prepared to receive the fruits of learning from people whose life experience differs from you.

MUTUAL MINISTRY

Is your congregation ready to explore mutual community ministry? If so, you will be listening to those in the community who may be strangers, but will soon become friends. You will discover gifts among those in your congregation and wonderful assets among those who are collaborating with you. Through new relationships, discovery of assets, and the power of collaboration, you will design and implement a new program that will make your local community a healthier place to live. This is mutual community ministry.

REFERENCES

In this article, the following resources are referenced: *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict* by George Bullard, 2008; *How's Your Faith?* by D. Gregory, 2015; *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* by John Gottman, 2007; *The Wisdom of Heschel* by A.J. Heschel, 1975; *My Grandfather's Blessings* by R.N. Remen, 2000; *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, by Martin Seligman, 2011; *The Shaking of the Foundations* by P. Tillich, 2011.

Questions to Consider

Who else in your congregation would you like to talk with about this article?

What community needs most interest your congregation?

Who beyond your congregation in your community might you learn more from regarding your mutual ministry interest?

What will it be like for your congregation to work side by side as partners with those you hope to serve? What will it be like to relinquish some control over a program as you become collaborators?

Resources You Can Use

For resources on this subject, you're encouraged to check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>. Suggested CRG search terms: public ministry, community ministry, neighbors, outreach.

Mutual Ministry is part of the Compass for Congregations series. It is intended to provide information and ideas about congregational learning.

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