

Community Engagement through Holistic Ministry

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Introduction

What is the Christian faith about? What does that mean exactly – to be Christians? How are we to live? What is God asking for us?

Throughout Jesus' ministry, we witness a genuine servanthood approach toward humanity, especially people who were marginalized, disadvantaged, and disenfranchised from society. They were the poor, the sick, the unclean—all outcasts as sinful people. Jesus expanded the kingdom of God to places, people, and cultures that some people had never considered God to be interested in (Conn and Ortiz 2001).

Therefore, community engagement is not about building bigger churches – instead, being human – in communion with God and one another, as God intended. As we fulfill God's missional engagement intentionally and sustainably, the church's growth will be the byproduct of being faithful to God's calling.

This is the reason why the holistic ministry begins with *Who* – the God who loves us and those whom God sends us to love (Kenda Creasy Dean. 2022). Community engagement through holistic ministry is not about *What* and *How* but about seeking His kingdom and righteousness first (Matthew 6:33). Therefore, the fundamental question is: Are we the people God calls us to be? Are we faithful expressions of the kingdom of God in our homes, neighbors, communities, and the world – tangible, recognizable, and visible?

Part I - God's Holistic Missional Engagement

David J. Bosch said, "Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God...Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people since God is a fountain of sending love."¹

Missio Dei can't be an activity of the church; we must follow God's inspiration and instruction to make the journey to be a sign of the Kingdom of God, a faithful expression of God's engagement in our communities tangibly, recognizably, and visibly.

John 1;14 The Message (MSG) Bibles says, "The Word became flesh and blood, and 'moved into our neighborhood.'" God came from heaven to earth; God has reached out. God sent His beloved Son – Jesus, to the earth. Now Jesus is sending us with Holy Spirit into our homes, neighbors, and communities to make a difference for the Kingdom of God. Therefore, we must reach out to our communities if we are to call ourselves Christlike.

Eric Jacobsen said, "God's missional heart is what [motivated Him] to send Jesus into the world; the church is first and foremost an expression of God's missional heart...The Church's entire reason for existence is to be a faithful expression of God's missional purpose."²

Therefore, the Christian journey is not about "how can we build a better church"? But "Are we the people Christ calls us to be"? Are we human beings in communion with God and one another? We are

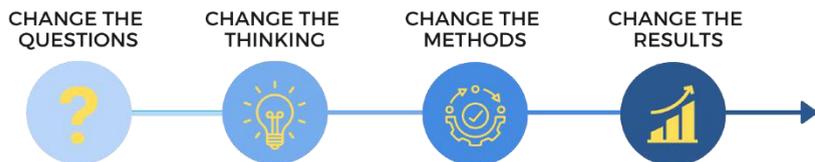
¹ Bosch, D. J. (1991). *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Orbis books. p. 389-390

² Jacobsen, E. O. (2012). *The space between (cultural exegesis): a Christian engagement with the built environment*. Baker Books.

called to be better at being human, better reflections of God’s love,³ wherever we are as individuals as followers of our Jesus Christ and collectively as a community of believers who live out the Kingdom values and principles to create a long-term sustainable community that develops and engages with God’s missional purpose.

Perhaps we should stop asking ourselves, “What can we do to bring people into our church?” Instead, we should ask, “What is God up to in this neighborhood?” and “What are the ways we need to change in order to engage the people in our community who no longer consider church a part of their lives?”

We must change the questions; when we change the question, we will change our way of thinking, which will change the course of methods – the way of working, and then we will have different results. We must change our questions; instead of asking, “How can we be the best church *IN* our community?” we should ask, “How can we be the best church *FOR* our community *WITH* our community?”



As Ellen G. White summarizes Christ’s method as a lifetime commitment to the investment of the community—because it is relationship building, and we must establish a faithful presence until the second coming of Christ.

“Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior *mingled* with men as one who *desired* their good. He *showed* His sympathy for them, *ministered* to their needs, and *won* their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”⁴

³ Dean, K. C. (2022). *Innovating for Love: Joining God’s Expedition through Christian Social Innovation*. Market Square Books. p. 8

⁴ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1942), 143

It is the responsibility of every person who believes in Him—to become a disciple and make disciples through personal engagement and relationship building. Putman said, “Relationships are the method. Jesus invited people into relationships with himself; he loved them and, in the process, showed them how to follow God. His primary method was life-on-life.”⁵ Christianity is a progression; it is about connecting the church with the community through life-on-life evangelism.

We see a blueprint we can also follow by studying Jesus’ method for making disciples and then studying how the early church repeated this pattern. This simple blueprint is based on four words: share, connect, minister, and disciple. “Jesus *shared* who he was through words and deeds,” Putman and Harrington write. “When people accepted his message, he invited them to *connect* with him in relationship. During that time of sharing life together, he taught them the truth about himself. As these disciples grew, Jesus trained them to *minister* to the lost and to his other followers. Finally, after Jesus rose from the dead, he deployed his followers to *disciple* others.”⁶

Christ’s methodology of reaching out to people was based on personal relationship development through sharing, connecting, ministering, and discipling others. It was holistic engagement and a strategy for drawing people closer to God. Christ’s methodology was personal relationship building: sharing the good news and sharing the love of God, connecting people to God through life-on-life evangelism and worship, connecting people through community and discipleship, connecting people to the community through mercy and justice, connecting people to the culture through the integration of faith and work, ministering holistically, ministering for the betterment of life – physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually – and making disciples. Through life-on-life evangelism, we are building a trust relationship.

⁵ Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington with Robert E. Coleman, *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples*, Exponential Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 25–28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

The word *holistic* comes from the Greek word *holos* (all, entire, total), which implies that all aspects of human life (biological, chemical, social, economic, mental, spiritual, etc.) cannot be determined or explained by the sum of its component parts alone. It also takes into account the root word *shalom* (peace, well-being, welfare, prosperity, safety, health, perfect, whole, full, just), indicating that God wants us to have a complete and full life. In fact, it is the most important covenant that God made with His children, and keeping the covenant relationship is our duty and responsibility as Christians—not only to God, but also to others.

Christ’s method is THE community outreach strategic engagement plan that we must implement, and as a by-product, the church's growth will be an inevitable reality. Therefore, Christians should not divorce the teachings of Jesus from the method of Jesus and expect the same results of Jesus.

Alan Kreider observes that early Christianity grew explosively – 40% per decade for nearly four centuries, which means that about 200 small groups of followers of Jesus became over 30 million movements, approximately half of the Roman Empire’s total population.⁷

Alan Kreider said, “People were fascinated by it [Christianity], drawn to it as to a magnet. Christians’ *lives*—their concern for the weak and the poor, their integrity in the face of persecution, their economic sharing, their sacrificial love even for their enemies, and the high quality of their common life together—attracted nonbelievers to the gospel.”⁸

Christians were champions of the poor, healers of the sick, and vessels of grace. Christians demonstrated how they love one another. As “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.” (Matthew 9:35). Christians were social innovators; rather than being “self-serving corporate Churchianity”;

⁷ Rodney Stark, 1996, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 7-10.

⁸ Kreider, Alan. *They Alone Know the Right Way to Live: The Early Church and Evangelism*. 169-170.

they were “other-serving Christianity.” Therefore, Christian social innovation is all about innovating for LOVE – God’s love, self-giving love, intentionally, provisionally, and sustainably.⁹ In ways, Christianity is about adding values to people’s lives and communities; as Apostle Paul said, “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)

In fact, the early Seventh-day Adventist Church was known for its Christian social innovation. Among many Dr. John Harvey Kellogg was convinced by Ellen G. White’s counsel and initiated inner city ministries in Chicago, providing holistic ministries – physically, mentally, socially, and spiritual well-being. Dr. Kellogg established small hospitals, sanitariums, free clinics, soup kitchens, visiting nurses’ programs, emergency residences, lifeboat missions, etc. As a direct result, the church has experienced explosive growth in Chicago as a by-product of its services and community outreach ministries.¹⁰

The Chicago Mission inspired Adventist Church members in San Francisco, and they became known for their benevolence in San Francisco and have experienced similar church growth. The movement was known as “San Francisco Beehives”; visiting the sick and destitute, finding homes for orphans and finding work for the unemployed, distributing literature and conducting classes on healthful living and care for the sick, a school for the children, treatment rooms operated as a branch of the St. Helena Sanitarium, operating vegetarian café, etc. They were Christian social innovators.

⁹ Dean, K. C. (2022). *Innovating for Love: Joining God’s Expedition through Christian Social Innovation*. Market Square Books. p. 8-11

¹⁰ Schwarz, Richard W. *Dr. John Harvey Kellogg as a Social Gospel Practitioner*. Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984) [Vol. 57, No. 1 \(Spring, 1964\)](#), pp. 5-22 (18 pages) Published By: University of Illinois Press

Part II – Creating Collective Impact

So as Christian social innovators who order their lives around missionary purpose and who believe there are responsible for fulfilling the Great Commission.¹¹ We must measure our effectiveness and collective impact of ministry beyond the walls of the church by asking:

- How is our dependability – are we doing what we say we will do?
- How is our timeliness – are we doing it when we say we will do it?
- How is our empathy – are we helping with an eye to the needs of the community?
- What is our tangible evidence – are we doing our service in ways that let communities know their needs have been met?

As we serve the community with Christ’s love and faith in action, Christians will demonstrate what it means to be servant leaders through social innovation; and we will begin to knock down the barriers between church and communities.

John Kania and Mark Kramer (2011) published the first article about Collective Impact in the Stanford Social Innovation Review¹², and quickly the Collective Impact framework was implemented to solve the most complex issues facing communities and organizations; and has five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results:

1. **Common Agenda:** all participants have a shared vision for change, including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed-upon actions.
2. **Shared Measurement:** collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** participants' activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
4. **Continuous Communication:** consistent and open communications are needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate the common motivation.
5. **Backbone Support:** creating and managing collective impact requires dedicated staff and specific skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

The above five conditions of Collective Impact are critical elements, especially when we incorporate

¹¹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

¹² Stanford Social Innovation Review (Winter, 2011): Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change - https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

an asset-based community engagement strategy, whereby community and church members work as equal partners.

The South Side Health and Vitality Studies (SSHVS)—the research and evaluation arm of the University of Chicago Urban Health Initiative— developed a model to: (1) identify community priorities, (2) track community assets, (3) leverage community assets, (4) conduct research, and (5) generate new knowledge that is then used to reset priorities.¹³

Rather than focus on the challenges of our complex communities' environment, such as high cost of living, corruption in government, gang activities, illegal drugs, poor public education, homelessness, and so on; we need to focus on community assets by asking:

- What are the biggest assets in our community?
- What are the most important needs in our community?
- What are some of the important needs that have not been met?
- Who are the other social innovators in our community that we should partner with?

By adopting the asset-based community engagement strategy and collective impact framework, the church should involve the following six principles¹⁴:

1. Involving diverse community members in key decision-making processes.
2. Building mutual respect and trust between the church and community.
3. Addressing issues that are most important to the community.
4. Maximizing participants of and leadership by people living in the community.
5. Jointly learning and discovering – together and from each other – the value of research for improving and sustaining community development.
6. Creating learning opportunities by involving students, teachers, church, and community members.

The church must involve community members as a vital component of the community outreach engagement strategy. In his book *Empowering the Poor*, Robert Linthicum indicates the three types of churches.¹⁵

First is the ‘church *IN* the community,’ which refers to location; members are not from the community and have little or no involvement in the community. It is based on the

¹³ Community-Engaged Urban Health Research Methods and Applications, <http://compact.org/resource-posts/community-engaged-urban-health-research-meth-ods-and-applications/>

¹⁴ Adapted from the University of Chicago Urban Health Initiative (UHI), a model of community and university engagement.

¹⁵ Robert C. Linthicum, *Empowering the Poor* (MARC Publications, 1991), 21–30

internationalization paradigm based on the colonization siege mentality. Dr. May-Ellen Colon, former Adventist Community Services International director at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Church, said, “This type of church is like a saltshaker inside a loaf of banana bread.” Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). However, some have lost their saltiness. Russell Burrill said, “Far too long Adventists have isolated themselves in safe havens and ghettos as if the rest of the world did not exist. That time has ended. We cannot, we dare not live in apostasy any longer. It’s time to enter the community as individuals and as a church.”¹⁶

Second, ‘the church *TO* the community,’ which refers to some sense of responsibility to do something for the community; however, decisions about what the community needs are made without consulting community leaders and members to find out what the community needs and assets. Colon said, “If we don’t meet people in our communities and seek to meet their real needs, what we sprinkle on the banana bread community may be downright inappropriate or irrelevant – like sprinkling garlic salt on banana bread.”

Last, ‘the church *WITH* the community,’ which sees its mission to the community as a partnership, collaborates with the community leaders and members, brings the ministry of the church out into the community, and nurtures personal relationships with individuals in the community. This is the church that asks the community leaders and members – *What does this community need? What are the community assets?* – and incorporates the community engagement principles into their strategic engagements. Colon said, “In this loaf, the salt is with the other different ingredients in the bread. It’s mixed in with them, flavoring and enhancing the resulting bread. Salt does more good when it is mixed with ingredients different than itself.”

Therefore, Linthicum urges the church to intentionally engage with the whole community as partners, including the public, private and nonprofit sectors. We must see and approach our community as assets, not just being service recipients. We need to seek partnership in our communities.

John Fuder, in his book *A Heart for the Community: New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministry*, recommends the following ten tips to exegete a community:¹⁷

1. *Go as a learner.* This requires humility, persistence, and the courage to push past your fears. We need to approach as students and listen to what community members are saying to learn about the community—its political environment, socioeconomic status, civic history, concerns, lifestyles, values, and challenges. Psychographics gives much more insight than demographics, the insight we can obtain only through listening and talking to community

¹⁶ Russell Burrill, *How to Grow an Adventist Church* (Hart Books, 2009), 50.

¹⁷ John Fuder, “‘Exegeting’ Your Community: Using Ethnography to Diagnose Needs,” in *A Heart for the Community: New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministry*, ed. John Fuder and Noel Castellanos (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), Kindle edition, chap. 3.

members in person.

2. *Seek out an "informant."* Find an individual who is a gatekeeper, an insider, "someone who promotes peace" (Luke 10:6). This is someone who will let you in to his or her lifestyle or subculture, an expert who can teach you about his or her journey as "lived experience" in the community.
3. *Build a relationship.* As much as you can, be a "participant observer" in that person's life, culture, and activities. A relationship, growing into a friendship, is key because a trust bond is formed, and trust is the collateral of cross-cultural ministry. In the process, God works to break your heart for that community (Matthew 9:13; Luke 13:34).
4. *Use an interview guide.* It is helpful to work from an outline, even though you may not always stay on script.
5. *Analyze your data.* Depending on the formality of your community analysis, you will likely end up with some form of field notes. A crucial step is to examine your data for holes, patterns, and hooks. *What missing pieces could your informant provide? What interests, activities, or values recur? Is there anything that can help you enter your informant's world more deeply?*
6. *Filter through a biblical worldview.* What scriptures speak to the information you are discovering? What does the Bible say about the activities, lifestyles, and beliefs in your neighborhood? What would Jesus do, or have you done, in response to the needs? A biblical framework is the strongest platform on which to mobilize your church/ministry/ school to action.
7. *Expand into the broader community.* Your informant can act as a "culture broker" to give you entry into the additional lifestyles and subcultures within the broader community. As you learn to read your audience (become streetwise) and develop credibility in the neighborhood, you can leverage those relational contacts into greater exposure and deeper familiarity with the needs in your area.
8. *Network available resources.* As your awareness of the community grows, you will invariably feel overwhelmed by all there is to do! But you do not have to reinvent the wheel. *Is anyone else working with that audience? If so, can you partner with them? With whom can you share and gather resources and information?*
9. *Determine what God is calling you to do.* With the knowledge you've picked up about your community, what do you do now? Plant a church? Start a new ministry? Refocus your current programs? Much of your response will depend on your personnel and resources. But you are now poised to do relevant, kingdom-building work in your community.
10. *Continually evaluate, study, explore.* Our hope in Christ is firm, but everything and everyone around us in our world are in constant motion. *Is your neighborhood changing (again)? Who is God bringing to your community now? Is your church or ministry responsive to those opportunities? Are you winsome, relevant, and engaging?* We must always ask these questions in every generation to "serve the purposes of God" (see Acts 13:36).

Through practicing the above assets-based community engagements, we can find ways of working together more effectively not only internally but also externally with community partners. The multidirectional collaboration will find new or better solutions to challenges in our communities and be able to do more with fewer resources. We can discover and create ideas for new services and community outreach ministry opportunities. As a result, the

members of the church will feel energized and committed to tangible outcomes and developing real changes in our communities.

To change the concepts of community outreach ministries and volunteerism, we must incorporate service-learning data as a critical mechanism, and which is both reciprocity and pedagogy.¹⁸

Here is an example of a conceptual framework of service-learning presented by Tania Mitchell in four levels of engagements:¹⁹ (1) service, (2) learning, (3) service-learning, and (4) critical service-learning.

- First, **service** is like cleaning up a riverbank by picking up trash, which is relief ministry.
- Second, **learning** is like sitting in a science classroom, looking through a microscope at water samples the students collected from the riverbank that they cleaned, which is individual development.
- Third, **service-learning** is like students taking samples from local water sources, analyzing the samples, documenting the results, and presenting the scientific information to a local pollution-control agency, which is community development.
- Fourth, **critical service-learning** is like science students creating public service announcements to raise awareness of the human impact on water quality in order to change community attitudes and behaviors, which is structural change.

For example, a student could initiate a field education by partnering with a local family-owned small grocery store to implement the service-learning by helping the owners develop an innovative marketing strategy. The student could also renovate the store with fellow students from various majors, such as engineering, interior design, and social work, to improve the condition of the store, improve its efficiency of service, and discover other areas of service that the store could provide, including community services. This relationship between the educational institution and the family will continue, even after this student who initiated the relationship graduates, because other students will continue the engagement. It is a lifetime commitment between the institution and family.

Perhaps, if we continue this type of engagement with community members around all Adventist institutions, we will soon begin to see the impact and positive results in students' learning experiences, institutional reputation and growth, and betterment of the community.

¹⁸ Andrew Furco, "Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education," *Expanding Boundaries: Serving and Learning*, 1996, 2–6.

¹⁹ Tania D. Mitchell, "Critical Service-Learning as Social Justice Education: A Case Study of the Citizen Scholars Program," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 40, no. 2 (2007): 101–112.

In conclusion,

As Jesus commanded to the witness [church], “Unbind (untie) him and allow him to go” (John 11:43-45); the witness removes the grave clothes that are causing Lazarus to trip on his way out of the tomb as he stumbles into the light - Jesus. Jesus is telling us (the church) to remove whatever binds people to death, whatever makes them stumble, whatever prevents them from flourishing in the new life God offers them.

Therefore, the local church should identify the core values of its ministry based on a fundamental question - *Why do we exist in this community?* Then the church can build ministries based on relevant values to create a collaborative structured working environment. When we share the resources and workers across departments within the church, we create synergy in ministry and function in a unified way.

Since God is the head of the organization and there are many parts of the body, all are important. We must learn to collaborate with each unit of the organization. For individual and community development to succeed, it is necessary to guide people's behavior. Leadership requires leaders to improve their skills, not so much their technical skills that develop methodology, but to focus on educational and structural aspects of understanding a person's problems and circumstances. The ability to support and analyze a situation and recognize the diversified points of view is one of the most important leadership characteristics of world changers and difference makers.

Our task as Christian social innovators is to untangle people from the grave clothes, that are preventing them from living the life God intends for them.

Let's unbind one another, untie one another!