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How to Plan a Community Project

It's time to start a project in the community. Where to start? Let's begin with a definition: a project is an activity that (1) has a specific objective, (2) has a start and end date, (3) may have funding limits, and (4) uses resources such as money, people, or equipment.[1] The important thing—and the definition makes this clear—is that projects are specific and limited. Being clear about what is to be accomplished (the specific objective), the time limit (a start and end date), and what sort of resources will be needed (money, people, and equipment) can be make the task easier. Whether it's a community garden, a food program, or arranging for children to visit their mothers in prison, it will start and end. It's important to keep that in mind at the outset.

How to Get Started

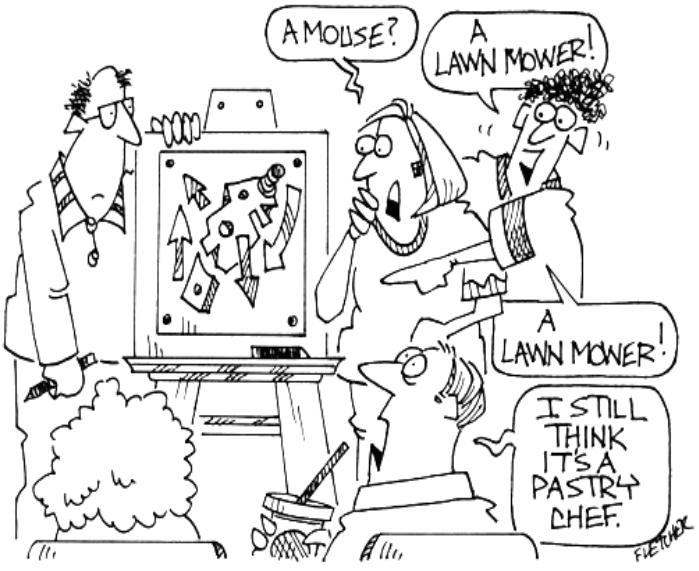
The following seven steps may clear away enough of the confusion to get going. Following the exact order of steps may be less important than getting a sense of the basic pieces. When in doubt, start somewhere, and then do something after that.[2]

Step 1: Have a Clear Goal. It helps to start this community project with a clear goal or statement of purpose. What do you want to accomplish? What results do you want? What in the community needs to change? Many people will engage in a series of activities with no clear sense of what results they want. Whenever possible, identify the root causes of the problem in order to inform your stated goal. Hunger persists in the neighborhood despite the fact that most families are working. Why? What is the underlying problem? This could be compared to a doctor diagnosing the underlying cause instead of simply treating the symptom.[3]

Step 2: Do Research. For some people, the word "research" brings to mind a lonely, isolated process of bringing together dry facts about the situation. Yet the most effective research is relational. Research can be done by meeting one-on-one with community leaders, and perhaps building deeper relationships with a few of them through a series of meetings over time. Attending community events or participating in community groups that convene regularly also qualify as research, as does volunteering in the community, taking a walk around the neighborhood, or going door-to-door in the community, assuming this is safe and that people would respond well to this approach.[4]

Step 3: Communicate. Now it is time to make a case for the project and recruit volunteers. Best practices include developing a purpose statement for the project, creating a recognizable logo to remind people of what it is, and coming up with a "sound bite" statement to sum up the spirit of the effort.

Step 4: Put Together a Team. Effective projects generally start in the mind of an individual. A thought, a dream, or a snatch of conversation might be just the spark that gets the fire going. Yet even when it starts with a person, the fire rarely burns long or well enough without the help of others. Normally, it takes a team to



ANOTHER CHALLENGE OF THE COMMUNITY PROJECT IS CREATING A RECOGNIZABLE LOGO.

provide the structure to fuel that initial spark. A team has been defined as "a small group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they are mutually accountable."[5] As the definition suggests, the group needs to be small enough to make effective decisions together, yet diverse enough, based on "complementary skills," so that the group's strengths can build on one another. Members must also work together with a "common purpose" and be "mutually accountable" for what they do. Regarding skill sets, try searching for these four types: (1) an investor who provides resources such as time, talent, or money to the project; (2) an intermediary who "acts as a bridge between an investor and the program implementers"; (3) an implementer who does the hands-on work; and (4) an innovator who "dream[s] up new ways to solve problems."[6]

If the congregation has a mission team that works on local efforts, start by bringing the idea to this group. Beyond this, consider expanding the group by inviting newer members of the congregation or those not yet actively involved. Invite members to reach out to their circle of friends outside the church. Many times, someone who would never think of setting foot in worship may feel perfectly comfortable volunteering for an outreach project that meets an urgent need. For this reason, keep an open mind about who will serve on the team. Email or social media can be used to get the word out, though for some people, word of mouth still works best.

Step 5: Take Action. It's time to make the leap. For some reason, this can be more difficult for groups than individuals. Congregations can find it difficult to be bold. In a book providing examples of bold ministries, Linda Marie Delloff observes that the most successful ones are able to "recognize, then overcome their fears, or at least they are willing to take risks despite their fears." Fears include failure, rejection by the targeted public, physical or emotional discomfort, or even physical danger. It can also include fear of "the other," that is, people who are different than oneself. She writes, "Such congregations are willing, even eager, to accept these risks because they know that by always being 'safe' they will never change anything."[7]

Step 6: Find Ways to Expand on Your Action. A project usually starts with a single action, such as collecting food for the hungry, but over time it may be expanded by finding additional ways to achieve the same end: adding fresh food with donations from local gardens in the area, teaching classes in nutrition or cooking, asking food recipients to volunteer for the project, or holding a community discussion on what causes hunger and how to change policy. These ideas serve as variations on the theme of hunger, and new actions may help the project expand.

Step 7: Use Sustainability Strategies to Keep It Going. Often people burn out because they have not thought about sustainability strategies. This may include sharing a special meal together to celebrate accomplishments and people, using small-group Bible study as a place to reflect on your action, inviting the people you serve to pray with you, or developing a Sunday worship service centered on a social issue. Sustainability can be as much about mental and spiritual capacity as about finances or volunteer hours. Studying, sharing meals, celebrating—these are sustainability strategies. Do them, or something like them, and avoid burn out.

Framing a community project as a series of steps can serve to sharpen focus. When done effectively, such projects can make a big difference by addressing directly the problems faced every day by the people who live in the community surrounding the church. It's a way for congregations to be neighborly.

This article has been adapted from Dana Horrell's book, *Engage! Tools for Ministry in the Community* (Fortress Press, 2019).

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1. R. E. Quinn, *Becoming a Master Manager* (Boston: Wiley & Sons, 2003), 139.
2. Adapted from Benjamin Shepard, *Community Projects as Social Activism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 3.
3. Sandra S. Swan, *The New Outreach* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 2–14.
4. Joy F. Skjegstad, *7 Models for Community Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2013), 17–26.
5. Jon R. Katzenbach, *The Wisdom of Teams* (San Francisco: HarperBusiness, 1994), 12.
6. Swan, 61–63.
7. Linda-Marie Delloff, *Public Offerings: Stories from the Front Lines of Community Ministry* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 14.