

Courageous Community Engagement



GROWING THROUGH SERVING OUR COMMUNITIES

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy? and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

The Church of England has five 'Marks of Mission'. They are:

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Just as a pair of scissors has two blades by which it functions, the mission of the church has two key elements: evangelism and serving our communities through loving action. This often involves transforming unjust structures of society, and challenging violence of every kind. It involves care of creation and sustaining and renewing the life of the earth.

'Over the past decade, the contribution that the Church of England makes to society through its social action has increased, reflecting an increase in the demand and expectation for it. At the same time, church attendance in the country has continued to decline; by most key metrics, attendance at Church of England services fell by between 15% and 20% from 2009-2019. This is the paradox facing the Church of England in 2020: the national church of a nation which is increasingly reliant on its social action and yet less and less spiritually connected to it.'

From **'Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England'** by Hannah Rich

There has been a change in how the church serves local communities – a move away from 'doing things to people' to working with people. This results in long-term change rather than a 'sticking plaster' that covers the symptom but doesn't address the cause.

As a simple example of community engagement, consider a scenario where leaders in a church are concerned about the safety of families, particularly children, when visiting the local park. The park is not well maintained by the local council. It is overgrown with no toilet facility and there are areas where the rubbish from drugs and alcohol abuse are evident and are a health risk.

The leaders of the church gather a small group in the church community who they know are concerned about this issue and want the park to be more of a community resource for communal well-being.

The small group agreed to have a significant number of one-to-one meetings with people, especially leaders of other centres of community in the locality. The listening campaign leads to a large gathering of people, from different communities, with a unified vision for change.

As a result of this members of the church community, along with representatives - from the housing association, food bank, and with the support of the local MP (whose support they have gained) have a meeting with the local council at the Town Hall. The Council agree to upgrade the park environment because of the power and representation of the local community. Furthermore, members of the local community have agreed to do some of the planting themselves and create some healthy and social activity in the park for the wellbeing of the community with the financial support of the council.

For the church, through listening and using their influence, good changes have been made by working with other centres of community. A further result is that there has been growth in community relationships and cohesion, all of which is a big sign of the Kingdom of God.

Questions for churches to consider that want to grow in serving their communities might be:

- 'We cannot do everything, but we can do something: what are the needs of our community?'
- 'What would Jesus do and where would Jesus be found in our community?'
- 'Who would Jesus go out to and sit and listen to? Whose hand would he reach out to?'

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- The GRA:CE Project Report published in 2020 looks at how churches have grown and do grow as a result of serving their communities and responding to injustice. <https://cuf.org.uk/what-we-do/the-grace-project>
- Liveability & Church Urban Fund <https://cuf.org.uk/resources/fullness-of-life-together-reimagining-christian-engagement-in-our-communities>
- Faith in the City <https://www.chpublishing.co.uk/books/9780715143261/faith-in-the-city>
- Community organisers <https://www.corganisers.org.uk/what-is-community-organising/>
- Citizens UK <https://www.citizensuk.org/>
- Setting God's People Free <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/setting-gods-people-free>

“We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.”
Dallas Willard, **‘Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ’**

FOUR KEY VALUES UNDERPIN THE DIOCESAN VISION OF LIVING GOD’S LOVE:

- **Imagination**
- **Joy**
- **Generosity**
- **Courage**



Serving our communities requires all four of these values. We have to be imaginative in how, as a church community, we can engage with the community outside of the walls of the church.

Our service needs to aspire to be full of joy – a reflection of the joy that God has in being with us. It is not to be a burden or duty or endless rota of activity that weighs us down.

Our service needs to be both generous and courageous as we seek to consider the needs of those in local community and globally, and then to take action. We may be called to venture out into new places and new spheres of life, but we do so knowing God is with us and we seek his courage.

Are we generous enough to lay aside our own wants in order to put the needs of others first? Do we have the courage to prioritize the needs of others to the point of self-sacrifice as Jesus did in his ministry?

“We entreat you, brothers and sisters, as earnestly as we are able, to have charity, not only for one another, but also for those who are outside the church”
Saint Augustine, Psalm 32

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There follows a ‘tick-box exercise’. This tool is designed to be something that can be a conversation starter in a PCC meeting. If you spend 15 minutes going through the questions you will be able to identify some opportunities for Christian outreach.

Why not create a ‘working group’ to turn these opportunities and concerns into actions that will make a difference?

Don’t forget to be in touch with the Flourishing Churches team – we may have some advice and resources available that will make your mission and ministry a bit easier.

	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
We have current examples of how our church is regularly and frequently 'present' in our communities and visible to those who don't attend Sunday worship.					
The church is clear and open about the Christian faith when working with and for others within the wider community.					
Our church challenges issues of injustice and inequality in our community and the wider world.					
Our church works with other faiths and community groups on local initiatives that make our community a better place to live.					
Our church is actively involved with other community partners e.g. schools, housing associations, etc.					
Our church consults and learns the needs of the wider community and of the world.					
Our church works to make the church buildings and its life environmentally sustainable.					
Our church helps those in need (food, clothing, education, counselling).					
Our church actively supports Christians working in agencies in the UK.					
Our church actively engages with mission partners outside of the UK.					
Our church challenges the congregation to think about how their discipleship is expressed through action – and we give them opportunities to serve inside and outside the church.					