

FUTURE CHURCH

Better Together

Combine the best efforts of community churches.

Frank Sommerville | 3/03/2010



Every community has needs that churches seek to address. Unfortunately, individual churches often initiate programs to serve community needs without finding out what other churches in their area are already doing. This silo effect leads to duplicate efforts, which, in turn, leads to the inefficient, ineffective use of ministry dollars and manpower.

What can churches do to avoid operating as independent agents of change?
Collaborate.

One way to understand how such collaboration can work is to consider the benevolence funds that nearly every church provides. Each church typically maintains a fund to assist the needy in their congregation and community. In most churches, someone comes in off the street and requests grocery money or help with rent or utility payments. These individuals may come to the church office at any time, day or night. Since the church staff rarely recognizes these individuals, the presence of these individuals can create security risks. Further, the church staff has very little information about the applicant. Most churches spend little or no time verifying the information on the application. Some applicants may be con artists, while others represent truly desperate situations. In addition, the applicant may have requested and received assistance from four other churches in the community before coming to this one.

As a result, each church must develop a benevolence policy and benevolence application. Usually, a church committee administers the benevolence fund under the approved policy. The committee spends hours reviewing applications and verifying the information contained in the application. It then allocates resources to meet those needs. Unless the applicant is a church member, the church benevolence committee has very little information about the applicant.

Under the silo effect, the church wastes hundreds of volunteer hours on duplicated efforts. Churches become easier targets for con artists. The food pantry and used clothing inventory requires constant monitoring to maintain needed resources.

How would collaboration work differently? I once saw 39 churches band together to serve the needy in their city of about 100,000 people. Under the guidance of an experienced nonprofit attorney, the churches formed a 501(c)3 to operate a community benevolence ministry. The organizing churches met and negotiated every requirement. Here's how it worked:

Each church that wanted to be a member was required to pay dues and provide volunteer hours. Member churches were required to take an annual offering from their congregation, which would go to this new benevolence ministry, and they were required to let ministry representatives share needs of the organization at least once a year. Congregants of member churches received preferential treatment if they needed assistance themselves.

The amount of the minimum dues and required minimum volunteer hours varied with the size of the church. Dues started at \$1,000 annually, and the minimum level for volunteers per church was 50 hours a month. Each church that wanted to participate in the governance of the new organization was required to donate at least \$10,000 a year to the 501(c)3, as well as provide 300 volunteer service hours per month. In exchange for the church's donation and volunteer service, that church received the right to appoint an individual to the board of directors of the new nonprofit ministry. Member churches received monthly reports and financial statements and were encouraged to share that information with their congregation.

The city was surprised to hear that local churches had collaborated to serve their community. In fact, upon receiving the news about this new nonprofit organization, the city rallied around it, designating it as the one-stop help center for the entire city. With no strings attached, the city redirected most of its assistance for the homeless to the new organization. The city also agreed to provide security at the center during peak hours at no charge. The police began distributing cards and fliers when they encountered needy individuals in the community. The city observed a Christian community demonstrating their love to one another. This collaborative ministry became a beacon on a hill.

After nearly 30 years, this organization continues to thrive. It cannot meet all the needs presented, but it does a better job than any individual church could have done on its own. And after having worked with many such collaborative efforts over the years, I can say with all confidence that churches work better together.

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