

## **Networking for Transformation** *Bringing a Gospel Change to Your Community*

Isaiah 65:17-25 speaks of a new kingdom that is coming. A kingdom where there is joy, food, and housing for all. It is a kingdom where there is long life, meaningful work, peace, and family unity. The words were meant to be a specific response from God to give encouragement to those who were pouring out their hearts in prayers and lamentation, thinking God had abandoned them (see Isaiah 63-64). This text paints a picture of God's heart for what a healthy community should look like.

As people of God, we long to see our communities reflect God's heart. We long for a day when babies don't die after a few days—at least not from a lack of nutrition, because their mom was hooked on crack, or because they were born with a disease. We, too, long for a day when everyone is afforded the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor and live in a community without violence. This is not the prosperity or social gospel, but a desire of God's heart. When our churches engage a community, we begin to experience a small part of God's heart for the people of that community. We are able to notice things about the physical and spiritual condition of the people. By engaging, we can receive an agony to see Christ's kingdom seep into every crack of the community so that there may be healing and hope where it does not exist.

Seeking to see the ramifications of the gospel become a reality in their cities and neighborhoods, *Community Transformation Networks* focus on making a significant and substantial difference in the lives of people around them. These networks try to transform their communities through activities such as painting inner-city schools and homes, or providing sports camps and block parties in under-served neighborhoods. They work closely with non-profit organizations to provide relief to the homeless, hungry, and disenfranchised. Sometimes they collaborate to provide cleaner and safer parks, or counseling in the days following a tragedy.

The gospel has the power to change not only the life of an individual, but also the community by extending God's grace. Churches involved in *Community Transformation Networks* matrix across many lines to see this become a reality. They are likely to partner with churches of other denominations, local businesses and industries, government agencies, school and health care systems, and first responders.

Surgance ([www.surgance.com](http://www.surgance.com)) is an example of a *Community Transformation Network*. It is an initiative designed to transform communities by mobilizing and networking resources and servant-hearted people to address debilitating community issues. Surgance is not, however, considered a religious organization or an organization that plants churches. Yet, the network works closely with churches and church plants because of their strong desire to serve the city.

Another approach is a network like Reproducing Churches ([www.reproducingchurches.com](http://www.reproducingchurches.com)) in Florida. They are a network of local churches that focus on the multiplication of disciples and churches. Community transformation happens as disciples are developed. Their website states, “Healthy New Testament churches are seen not only in the daily, disciple-making activity of each Christ-follower, but also in the unified purpose of reproducing that effort in new ways and in new contexts. Local churches that unite in this purpose become so significant in shaping the culture of a region, a country, and the world.” The network of churches has community transformation in their DNA as they engage in church planting. They are convinced they can have a greater Kingdom impact by being relationally-connected.

Mark Weible, Reproducing Churches team member, shared, “Communities are transformed by the power of God through the agency of disciples of Jesus. Churches are communities of disciples who follow the commands of Christ.” Weible goes on to say, “If disciples exist, church exists and transformation happens by God through them.”

To maximize the impact on our communities—urban, suburban, or rural—our churches can facilitate networks that address the most pressing physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of where we live. New churches interested in community transformation need to consider the following:

- **Building bridges with your community.** The new church must see herself as a vital part of the community. While we are called to be a holy people, we are not to isolate ourselves. Jesus said we are to be salt and light ... “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13,14). Being a part of transforming a community means being an active part of the community. A great starting point is to identify community organizations that already exist and build a partnership with them.
- **Serving the community in meaningful ways.** In most churches, people are asked to serve in the children’s program, choir, usher/greeter, home groups or Bible study program, or to serve on a committee/team. In a typical church plant, people are asked to serve in all of those areas! While these may be good activities, they are not the best when it comes to community transformation. Equipping people to serve outside the church can bring a gospel influence to a nonreligious organization and feed the passion of the one serving. Effective ministry is holistic and includes serving and preaching. Paul was both “eager to remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10) as well as “eager to preach the gospel” (Romans 1:15). Trained volunteers are vital to *Community Transformation Networks* and are a resource that new churches can provide.
- **Measuring the impact your church has on the community.** Being the church is about impact! Impacting lives, families, and communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Often, the measure of our impact is merely counting attendance—the larger the attendance, the greater the impact. The lost world is no longer

impressed with the size of our churches and the great shows we can put on. Rather, they are affected when our faith results in acts of service they can observe. This is how Jesus did ministry—“The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Networking with others to change a community may be the most effective sermon your church “preaches.”

- **Loving your community like Christ does.** We cannot claim to love our community and be a church for the community without demonstrating love. We are not dealing just with beliefs. We are engaging people; people who feel emotions, struggle with life issues, and people who are created in the very image of God. I suspect that is what Jesus was thinking when He looked over the city of Jerusalem and was moved to tears. Jesus had compassion for the people. He saw a broken city with messed up relationships, corrupted religion, and people who were lost but who were created in the Father’s image. Facilitating a *Community Transformation Network* can open your members’ eyes to the love God has for all people.

**What’s next? Ask yourself these questions:**

- What impact is our church having on our community? Would they miss us if we no longer existed?
- What opportunities does our church provide people to serve in and outside the church? How do we prepare them for service?
- Have we, as a church, asked our community what the greatest needs are?
- Who can we develop partnerships with to address some of these needs?

*Community Transformation Networks* are dotted across the American landscape, but it may take a little digging to find them. Some are a loose network of individuals, groups, or churches. Others have official 501c3 status, a website, paid staff, and board of directors. Every type of network is essential and helps meet the needs of the community it serves.

The *Missional Networks Team* of the North American Mission Board exists to aid in the formation and strengthening of all types of networks. Please contact Steve Canter at [scanter@namb.net](mailto:scanter@namb.net) or call (770) 410-6225 if we can help you begin a new network or connect to an existing network.

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