

## 4 Steps to Community Engagement

I've said many times before that if the 1950s were to make a comeback, there would be all too many churches who could go on without missing a beat. The good news is that they found a ministry strategy that works. The bad news is that the people they reach are now seventy years old.

Many of these churches have succumbed to this tendency: when something works, people work it. This backfires because the more they "work it," the more they get trapped in it. Before long, the ministry strategy is sixty years old and the church that once thrived with innovative ways to reach their community has now shriveled to a handful of people that has completely lost touch with the surrounding neighborhood. In their well-intentioned but often insular focus on strategies and programs within their own walls, they have stopped knowing the people around them in their neighborhood.

Those that are leading local church bodies today know that there is more to pastoral care than simply caring for the needs of the local congregation. While that is certainly a part of it, the church also needs to have an effective connection with the community outside the church. **There should be a difference in the community because the church exists, and if it left for some reason, there should be a void that's felt.** Unfortunately, that's not often the case. We become more about church preservation than community transformation.

When we took on the comprehensive study at LifeWay Research known as the Transformational Church Initiative, we surveyed over 7,000 churches and conducted hundreds of on-site interviews with pastors. We wanted to change the scorecard from strictly looking at numbers to one that really asks if churches and people are being changed. We found that the churches that could be known as "transformational" had a number of characteristics in common. One of those traits was that transformational churches engaged their respective communities on mission.

We found that the common thread was that these churches were willing to invest deeper in the mission than other churches. They wanted to move the mission forward. The priorities were engaging the lost, winning the lost, and maturing believers to repeat the process. What does that process look like? **Four steps are clear.**

**The first step to engaging in God's mission is to define success.**

The standard church scorecard of bodies, budgets, and buildings is too weak. High attendance goals must be a secondary measurement. We must look to seeing that number meeting Christ, and advancing the gospel into the lives of unbelievers. Changed lives are the obsession. The goal is to see lives being transformed by the power of Christ.

**The second step to engaging God's mission is to prepare.**

Churches that reach their communities will always be training their people, in a wide variety of

ways, to reach out to those around them with the gospel. Modeling how to engage people far from God in relationships is a key strategy. Too many churches rely on surface-level orientation when we need training to be on mission.

### **The third step is providing personal leadership to believers.**

The activity of community converged with the value of vibrant leadership provides the right environment to help believers move out into the mission of the church. The most valuable resource for the missional journey is real-life examples and real-time conversations. In order for churches to reach their communities, they must break the clergy caste system and place the mission in the hands of all believers. Believers will respond to the task of being on mission, because God has made us all to be on mission. The clerification of ministry confused this greatly. When we as pastors do for people what God has called them to do, everyone gets hurt and the mission is hindered.

### **The fourth step for engaging in God's mission is moving into the community.**

Many churches seem to struggle with building a good reputation in their neighborhood. But churches that are transformational are not waiting for the neighbors to come to them. Instead, they go out and meet the neighbors. They have abandoned the "come and see" model for the "go and tell" model.

The "come and see" mentality results in pastors who consider themselves "religious professionals who can put on a show" instead of people transformed and sent on a mission. Instead, pastors and church members should have a desire to engage their neighborhood with great passion, and a vision to change the fabric of the community around them. In Transformational Churches, 53% agree with the statement: "Our church celebrates when members serve the local city or community." And 44% agree with "People regularly become Christians as a result of our church serving."

The picture here is of a body of believers that celebrates not just ministry that builds up the local church, but also when the community is blessed and transformed. The opposite effect happens when the vast majority of celebration is over internal ministry engagement. One church feels like a movement into the city. The other feels like an institution seeking self-preservation.

Also, we always want to be intentionally looking for ways to engage their community at large. The mission is "out there" and not "in here." We must go beyond evangelistic presentations in favor of a missional lifestyle. Training in evangelism is part of preparing for God's mission, but not living it. Service is a portion of God's mission, but not all of it. The mission of God should be so apparently active among the people of a church that the city misses them when they are not around.

This is not an abandonment of sharing the gospel in favor of acts of service only. In fact, most members of churches that engage their community are quite comfortable sharing their faith. The mission of God does not progress unless people are talking about God's mission to save. Transformation of individuals and communities happens at the same pace that the gospel is

proclaimed.

Churches that are making a difference engage people in ministry within the church and mission outside the church. The church has made a conscious decision that their existence is directly related to God's mission of seeing people reconciled to God through Christ. A Cross-centered and resurrection-powered life no longer lives for itself. It dies daily for the kingdom mission.

Read more from Ed [here](#).