

12. Reaching Out: One Church's Story

by James Bosscher and Carol Doornbos

HOW CAN WE as a church respond meaningfully to the social needs in our community?

To answer that question, the members of Shawnee Park Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, formed a Social Justice Committee. Our committee's assignment was to assess the needs in our community, then to select one or two areas in which our church could actively respond to need.

Four years later, our committee is about to open a short-term shelter for abused mothers and children. We have raised funds, purchased a house, and enlisted the support of six congregations. We are now forming an independent, nonprofit corporation to govern the ministry.

Ours is the experience of just one committee, but the steps we have taken in moving from research to action might prove useful to other congregations seeking to address local social needs.

107

1. Study the issues

The first thing our committee did was identify and study several social issues that interested committee members. Each committee member researched one issue. One studied pornography; another researched right-to-life concerns; another, earthkeeping. We knew we wouldn't be able to act on every need we found. But we hoped to identify one or two areas that would become our action issues. Here members of our congregation could actively work together for greater social justice.

2. Develop project criteria

Next the committee spelled out what characteristics we were looking for in an action project. We came up with six.

First, does the proposed action have the potential to make a significant *long-term contribution* to social justice? Or will it simply have a cosmetic or temporary effect?

Second, does the action offer the possibility for *viable spiritual involvement*? Will it provide natural opportunities for Christian witness through both deed and word?

Third, can the project be *shared*? Does the proposed action allow us to work cooperatively with other churches?

Fourth, will the project provide opportunity to *build interpersonal relationships* between those served and those serving, not just opportunity for the serving community to supply material resources?

Fifth, will the project provide *opportunities* for people with a wide variety of gifts, skills, and schedules to contribute meaningfully? Will there be a place for the lawyer, the handyman, the counselor, the seamstress, the babysitter?

Sixth, does the proposed project have "stretch" potential? Can it expand and grow?

While other groups might not necessarily look for the same characteristics in a project, these were important to us.

3. Identify needs and opportunities

Our study of the problems in our community revealed that some needs were already being effectively addressed. Others were not. The right-to-life movement, for example, was already well organized with strong leadership in the Grand Rapids area. A couple of churches had recently launched shelters for homeless people; thus the need for leadership in that area wasn't so urgent. We did find pressing, unmet needs in the area of domestic violence, however.

We considered several ways of approaching this need. We could work to raise community awareness of the problem. We could focus on prevention. We could operate a shelter, either long-term or short-term, for victims of domestic abuse. We could form support groups for abuse victims, or offer treatment for abusers. As we continued to learn about the needs in our community, our group was drawn more and more toward the possibility of opening a short-term shelter for abused mothers and children.

Finding answers to such questions as "Is there a real need?" and "Would we be able to work effectively within the existing social services network?" took the better part of a year. Committee members talked with hospital social workers, the Department of Social Services, several police departments, judges, and the Domestic Crisis Center (which was the only shelter for abused mothers and children in Grand Rapids).

We learned that the Domestic Crisis Center had

room for seven families and had to turn away seven to fifteen families every month. Once assured we would not compete with them for funds, the staff said they would be thrilled for us to open a shelter. This would give them a place to send those they had to turn away.

After talking to representatives of all these agencies, we were convinced not only of the need but also that we could count on their cooperation. Hospital social workers, police departments, and other social service workers would be willing to refer people to us. The Domestic Crisis Center offered to train our volunteers. Other churches pledged to join us in supporting such a shelter. So far as the community was concerned, the door for starting a short-term shelter for abused mothers and children was wide open.

4. Evaluate potential projects in light of your criteria

Our project evaluation actually took place simultaneously with evaluating the need and opportunity. We were helped in this process by a social worker on our committee who had experience working with this kind of shelter. As we compared this possible project to our six criteria, we concluded that it was a good match for all of them.

It had potential for making a significant contribution in the lives of hurting women, children, and families at times of serious crisis.

Spiritual involvement and witness would often be possible since overt Christian concern (deed) would be immediately apparent. And hurting people tend to be more receptive to the gospel (word) offered in a thoughtful, nonthreatening way.

The project would lend itself well to the cooperation of churches and agencies in providing funds, materials, governance, and volunteers.

Operating the shelter would require seventy-five volunteers who would take turns relieving paid staff. It would also create many other volunteer opportunities, most of which would involve personal relationships between those serving and those being served.

The project could provide service opportunities for parishioners with many kinds of gifts, skills, and interests. It would also provide opportunities for Christians from various faith communities to work together.

The project had "stretch" potential. It could expand in any of several directions—broadening the mission, serving more clients, extending care to long-term, or widening the geographic area served.

5. Seek the church's approval and support

We took our proposal to our church council first. Then it went on to a congregational meeting, where it was approved enthusiastically, with only one or two people objecting. While the church did not budget any funds for the project, they did authorize us to raise funds within the congregation.

We're not a big church, but we're a suburban church with considerable resources. Besides the presentation we made to the entire congregation, we also made presentations to three adult church-school classes. Several families gave gifts of a thousand dollars. One family, whose daughter had been abused and murdered by her husband, gave us a large gift, saying they wished the shelter could have come about sooner.

Altogether the people of our church gave gifts totaling \$20,000, one-fourth of the funds needed to start the shelter. Other members provided interest-free loans.

6. Share ownership with other churches

We realized from the beginning that a project like this was too big for our church to handle alone. So we structured the ministry as a nonprofit parachurch organization. So far, six churches have agreed to support the project.

Each church has agreed to take two offerings a year for the shelter, primarily to promote awareness among their members. They've agreed to provide volunteers and participate in clothing drives. Initially, the board of directors will include representatives from each church, though that may change.

Our church's role in this process has been to start it up, then give it up. That doesn't make giving it up easy. Our committee has grown close over these years. As we get to know the people who make up the new board, it's obvious they don't have the experience in working with this project that we do. Two members from our church will serve on the board; others of us will be available for consultation during the transition.

But we're still giving up our baby, this thing we've given birth to, and it hurts. If we want it to be something bigger than us, however, we realize we have to give up control. To symbolize that this is not Shawnee's but a shared ministry, we have held off on naming the project, leaving that for the new board.

7. Get your people personally involved

For a suburban church like ours, which has been somewhat introverted, a ministry like this is a big step forward. All of the six churches, including Shawnee, has pledged to provide at least twelve volunteers, each working three to four hours each month, to relieve the staff. This will mean that many people in our church will be intersecting with human suffering and need in

ways they never have before.

Though there may be wonderful moments when someone comes back to say thank you, most of the time it won't be glamorous. We're going to make mistakes. We're going to be tempted to prescribe, to give pat answers. We're going to get our noses bloodied. We may not be thanked. But that is all part of learning what selfless servanthood means.

8. Go back to step one

Four years of work for our Social Justice Committee is culminating in the launching of this shelter. Once we turn control of the shelter over to the new board, what will there be left for us to do?

Believe it or not, the committee is eager to move on to something else. Once the shelter is running on its own, it will be back to step one. Once again the committee will survey the social justice needs in our community. It will sort through potential projects in light of our project criteria and the needs and opportunities in Grand Rapids.

The process can be repeated again and again. Each time it will teach us more about how our local church can respond meaningfully to needs in our own community.

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