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Service Identities Church Roles for Community Interaction

For churches that want to grow with a strong community service DNA, they need more than just organizational structure or specific community services. It's critical to select the *service identity* by which the community of faith will be known. There are at least seven different identities that churches may adopt, and each church may live out more than one. The identities selected need to line up with the unique character of the church, the needs of its' community and both the resources and ministry philosophy of its leadership. Whether you choose one or more, each church has a community service identity, by default. For some, that is the identity of "no service to others", or "service offered in distant lands by our representatives." We have left out two identities from our list: the identity of no service others; which doesn't deserve much consideration; and the identity of community development corporation or CDC, which has not yet been shown to result in significant church growth or church replication, and mixes an organizational approach with a service identity beyond the scope of most churches.

The identity selected will have a big impact on the type of corporate structure, program offerings, staff and volunteer involvement that result. For many churches, more than one identity may be selected. Make no mistake, each identity will take you deep into community service territory, creating new opportunities for ministry and challenges for leadership. Each identity presented is a big step forward in making your church more relevant, moving your people toward greater impact and re-connecting your church to its redemptive purposes in the community.

Identity #1--Church as Listener

When we are living out this service identity, people have a strong sense that we believe in their value. Instead of being known for always "telling and preaching," we are known for our ability to listen and understand the needs and values of people. It is simply arrogant to not stop to listen to people before we seek to meet their needs, spiritual or practical. When we do listen, not only is our preaching and church style more congruent with the culture in which we serve, but people come to trust us because we ask and listen before we respond. Listening is not just becoming a student of our culture, or teaching our people to use better relationship skills, listening must "have a moment", a focal point in which we intentionally ask for opinions and insights.

Keys to this Identity: An intentional listening process like "needs assessment" precedes our service activity, clear identification of a ministry "sweet spot" that aligns our calling with the needs of our community.

Identity #2--Church as Cultivator of Service and Purpose as a Lifestyle

Both churches and our culture at large are plagued by the dominant culture of self interest that robs us from real meaning, draws us away from a life surrendered to Christ, and keeps our civic institutions from thriving. It affects everything from good Sunday School to participation in the voting booth. From the Christian perspective, serving others is meant to be a lifestyle. Not only are we each created with a unique grace, but we do not become mature until we employ our gifts in the service of others. Churches with this identity make serving others, "normal" as a part of church life, and this service is infectious both within the fellowship and in the community. Spurred onto "good works" its members breath life into everything they touch, as they set a new model for sacrificial and energetic service in the



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schools where their children attend, community institutions and an endless variety of community organizations.

Our mission focus in service is also clear. We avoid the problem of becoming another group that is drawn from one area of service to another, stuck in a cycle of experimental services that never grow beyond the impact of a short term mission experience, and we avoid the trap of becoming known for our breadth of involvement that has little quality or impact. People find their life mission in churches with this identity, and churches become places where mission focus is not only normal, but it is

Keys to this Identity: Develop a ministry sweet spot for the church as a result of needs assessment, and create clear mission purpose. Ensure that church values emphasize service and mission as clear priorities.

Identity #3--Church as a Service Project Partner:

Since most churches do not have a history, staffing or experience in providing direct social service, the best initial approach is to partner with other organizations to support their efforts. By mobilizing volunteers, providing critical supplies or resources your church gains valuable experience, a positive track record and you can explore this activity while you are involved. Since your goal should be to compliment and build your community, not compete head to head with every service provider, this approach allows you to have a low risk entrance, no long term commitment and the benefit of joining others in an established activity. For some this will lead to long term partnerships and for others it will become a launching pad to developing services of their own. It will prove to the community that you are team players, and allow help you to determine whether this service area really is a good fit your church before you make long term commitments.

Keys to this Service Identity: Engage with service partners that fit your ministry sweet spot (finish the needs assessment and community asset survey) and look for those that hold promise as potential long term partners. Make short term or project commitments and mobilize and then-debrief as many people as possible in the process. Make clear commitments and keep your side well organized.

Identity #4--Church as a Volunteer Center:

Many communities have officially designated “volunteer centers.” These organization’s community purpose is to find volunteers and match them up with community organizations. We aren’t suggesting that you take on this formal role, unless perhaps your community doesn’t have a volunteer center. The function however is a key opportunity. Most community agencies and organizations have big needs for volunteers, especially skilled and motivated ones. When your church members have been properly encouraged and trained to serve in the community in a way that brings honor God through their integrity, compassion and energy the word will get out. If you are more focused on impacting your community than you are keeping all the volunteers available for your own programs, you can become an invaluable feeder to community organizations. The difference here is that you are sending agents of reconciliation into places where faith may not be the norm. If you want serving others to be normal for the Christians in your care, then you will have a hard time inventing enough work for them to do, and it wouldn’t be healthy to keep all volunteerism focused only on what is internal to the church. You can become known as a highly coveted locations from which community organizations gain volunteers, they will come to you in large numbers to gain access to what they see as a precious resource.



Keys to this Service Identity: Prime the pump toward service by starting with service project partnerships. Look for ways to make sure that people view volunteers at the SPCA as just as important as those who work in children’s ministry or the choir. Overcome the temptation to believe that you won’t have enough help if you encourage believers to serve outside the church, and make the need for community volunteerism a part of the public effort to make serving others normal in your church.

Identity #5--Church as Center for Community

The legacy church has a building that is empty most of the week. Some have overcome this by forming Christian schools that fill their halls, but this does not overcome the issue that our churches are isolated from the main flow of social activity. Our roads and transportation all flow to other places, mostly those that offer entertainment and commerce. No longer do our churches become the place of pilgrimage, rather, we have to locate our churches along the traffic route to the other centers of modern worship—the mall and the school. One of the ways to move ourselves back into the flow of community life is to use our single largest financial asset as a community gathering place. This is an intentional effort to unlock the doors to the church, so that others can use our classrooms, meeting facilities and educational venues. The best thing about this is that you don’t have to invent any programs, you get to have people in your facility, and hopefully around believers as a normal part of community life. For many, this will be the first time they have been inside your church, or any church for a very long time. You will be breaking down barriers and stereotypes just by having them in the facility.

Keys to this Service Identity: Make sure that you are prepared for the maintenance, coordination and other responsibilities that come with community facility use. Make your facility inviting and functional, and above all make sure that people feel welcome—not as if they are imposing. Create information and other connection points that will foster relationships with those who venture in.

Identity #6--Church as Service Provider

Some needs in our communities simply aren’t being met. Careful consideration should be taken before deciding that they church itself should become the or “a” primary service provider in any specific area. Common areas for this approach are educational or recovery related activities that must include a strong faith component to create impact or evangelism, as well as innovative services that have been developed from a faith perspective like Dave Ramsey’s Financial Peace and Angel Food Ministries. While no service arena is beyond the community of faith, all services require serious planning prior to launch. For service areas in which there is some service, but not enough, we have to weigh out whether we support others that are offerings services by helping them to grow, or to add additional services ourselves. We must take care that we really do understand the requirements and needs of a specific service area, before we launch these.

Keys to This Service identity: Complete the Community services asset map to grow a deeper understanding of services already being provided and to understand the interrelationships and dynamics of the service. Before launching new services, complete the Blueprints for service program process, business planning, ensure that you have written role descriptions and have secured adequate resources to provide high quality services.

Identity #7--Church as Network Facilitator

While almost all service agencies and organizations know the value of networking, few have

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the additional resources required to start, facilitate and sustain networks of service providers. This is an important opportunity for the church. In many instances, the impact of service providers will be maximized and expanded when someone comes along to build a network of like providers that will share lessons learned, identify new resources and better coordinate services. The resources required for this role are often available to us—meeting and communication facilities and leaders who can spend time with other leaders.

Keys to this Service Identity: First get to know the needs of the community and the way that its organizations interact and cooperate (or fail to cooperate). Complete the needs assessment and Community Asset Map and do some service projects with organizations in the service sector.