

SEND ME ST. LOUIS

KEEPING YOUR SOCIAL SERVICE OUTREACH MINISTRY CONNECTED TO YOUR CONGREGATION

Whether a social service outreach ministry (social ministry or mercy care program) is being carried out by a single congregation, a partnership of congregations, or by a faith-based nonprofit organization, the relationship with the supporting congregation(s) can be critical to the ministry's success. Congregations usually show high interest in a newly launched ministry that is touching the lives of hurting people. However, over time, the enthusiasm can wane as the ministry settles in and the communication to the parishioners loses its priority status. The social service outreach ministry may begin neglecting one of its greatest assets: a Christ-centered, multi-gifted and faith-motivated mass of helpers – the congregation's members.

A support group of St. Louis area social service outreach ministries funded by Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis recently brainstormed a list of areas to which their congregations can bring needed assets. Their list included:

- **Manpower:** many hands and strong arms to get some tasks done well and quickly
- **Skills:** a pool from which to draw a specifically skilled and experienced volunteer when the occasion presents itself
- **Finances:** donors committed to seeing a valuable ministry be successful
- **Advocates:** members ready to tell the stories and connect others (servers and those needing service) to the ministry
- **Prayer**

Once the support group of social service outreach ministries identified assets that their congregations might be able to provide, they went back to the brain-storming mode to produce a list of ways to solicit the assets, develop ownership in the ministry and strengthen the body of Christ in their church. Their list included:

- **Communicate** the need
- **Verbally ask** for support/help
- **Ask!**
- Make "asks" **personally**
- Make **specific requests**
- Make a **wish list** – be specific about needs
- Find out **people's skills/talents**
- Conduct **gifts inventory** and help members understand their own gifts and **skills**
- Invite people to **observe the program** at work
- If possible, provide **flexible** times and days to volunteer

- Provide **home-based** service opportunities
- Ask for special event assistance (**short term commitment**)
- Develop **ownership**
- Provide **training & education** to the volunteer
- Help volunteer **develop needed skills**
- Build **relationships**
- Offer **appreciation/recognition** for the volunteer
- **Support** the volunteer

You can replicate this process with your staff and/or leadership group and develop your own plan for connecting with your congregation(s). Begin by brainstorming your own list of areas to which your congregants can bring needed assets. You may be surprised to see your list include some very specific assets that are needed for your particular ministry in addition to many of those mentioned in the above list.

Once your group has developed its list of asset areas, you can use that list as a guide for brainstorming methods to capture the attention of the membership and ask for their assistance in ways appropriate for their gifts and skills. While you are brainstorming, accept any idea that is thrown out and make sure everything is recorded. Then your group can go back and develop the ideas that seem the most appropriate. Consider creativity as a way to open up new possibilities.

Develop your plan for connecting with the congregation(s). Put it into action. Remember that these are some of the most important relationships you can have in ministry. Your congregants can have a profound effect on your success. God is in charge and we are his instruments.

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” - EPHESIANS 4:11-13