

Engaging the Community

by **Pastor Helga Jansons** Director for Evangelical Mission

Have you ever experienced a transformation in yourself or seen it in someone else? It is a change that happens on the inside and is also noticeable to others. It affects the way we relate to and even care about others. Mostly it is God's doing, but we can also prepare for renewal. It includes reading the Word of God, praying and some reflection upon our lives. When God changes our lives our response takes some effort on our part; to discern what matters to us and how we can make a difference in the lives of others. There may be a qualitative shift in the way we connect with and treat people. Transformation affects how we live out our faith.

Transformation can also happen in a congregation. It still happens one person at a time. God's Spirit can renew the life of a congregation internally as well as the impact the church makes in the community. It begins with an internal commitment: studying the Word of God together, praying for God's Holy Spirit, and reflecting upon identity, guiding principles (values) and discipleship. Discerning the purpose (calling) of a church is based on the gifts and passion of the members as well as the community context and needs.

Demographic studies like www.city-data.com or www.elca.org (type in Research and Evaluation) inform us who is in the community, but only at arm's length. The newspaper can tell us what is happening in the culture and in some people's lives. Real connections come from meeting community leaders, business people, and residents. By going out into the community and getting to know the people - their lives, hopes, hurts, fears and what matters to them - relationships can be built. Acts 1:6-8 and 17: 16-34 points us in this direction and also Jesus set a precedent by going out to the people.

By listening to the community, themes can emerge of needs or desires. From these a congregation may get an inkling of what God might be calling them to do. Perhaps it is an After School program, a Community Choir, or a Citizenship class. It could lead to a partnership with the local community.

If the congregational leaders decide they would like to engage the community in this way, there are steps to this process and skills to develop. For example, Mapping the Community and practicing One to One Conversations. These conversations are intentional but not manipulative. When parishioners practice among themselves even that process can be transformational. In some circumstances it is better to go out in the community in pairs. In both cases it is important to know your motives and what you want to know or to talk about; are you seeking information or relationship or both? Then there is the question of what to do with the information and how to follow-up with those you have met. At which point do you talk about faith or invite people to participate in the life of your church? Lots to think about before heading out.

Several congregations have sent leaders to workshops that have been offered by our synod's Transformational Ministry (TM) team. These are designed for several churches at once so people can also learn from each other. Leaders learn how to create a climate in which transformation is more likely. A coach is recommended to help a congregation see themselves better, be more intentional, and to ask questions that will further the process of renewal. Trained coaches are available in our synod. TM part 1 which focuses on the internal work of a congregation can still be offered in your area upon request.

TM part 2 "Engaging your community" is the next educational opportunity that is being offered by the TM team to church leaders around our synod. Those congregations that have taken part 1 or have people who attended a workshop on the topic at the Synod Assembly will be well prepared to attend this next half day workshop. However, you may still attend it even if you have not attended part 1.

Please let me know if you are interested in hosting a TM part 2 workshop as we will hold them for the next year in response to your interest and location. Helga.
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