

Jim's Tool Box

Ideas on How Your Congregation Can Reconnect with Its Community

This month I want to point you to a weblog and e-mail resource that I find stimulating and helpful. Dr. George Bullard describes himself as a “congregational coach and denominational leadership coach.” Currently George serves as Ministry Partner with the Columbia Partnership (TCP; website: www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org). George's background is in the Baptist Church, but he has served as a coach for various North American denominations.

George writes and distributes what he calls an “E-zine” in which he writes about topics related to church growth and transformation in the local church. The e-mails link to articles on his weblog which is the Bullard Journal (<http://www.bullardjournal.org/>).

Low Threshold Community Cultivation Events

In the most recent edition of the E-zine, Bullard discusses how a congregation can reconnect with its community context. He points out that often a congregation has a wonderful fellowship that may be inviting, but many persons who live in the community have no way of learning about the congregation without interacting with congregational participants.

That is where the “low threshold community cultivation events” come into play. Bullard describes these as “...action-oriented events that connect the congregation with its context to meet a real ministry need or a consensus cause that would even attract participation from community residents unrelated to the congregation.”

What events can your church sponsor or participate in your community that will help the members and friends of your church engage unchurched folks in your community?

Bullard notes that these kinds of events are generally easy, do not call on congregational participants to do anything that would fit the category of being

confrontational with people, and a large percentage of the congregation may be willing to participate in them. Also when community residents participate, they do not feel they are being rushed or pressured by the church to do something religious with which they feel uncomfortable.

One example of this kind of event that Bullard writes about is a congregation that was participating in a CROP Walk for hunger relief. About fifty persons from the congregation participated in the walk on a Sunday afternoon. In debriefing that event, Bullard says that he and the congregational leaders realized this was the kind of event that would be a great starting place for a congregation seeking to reconnect with its community. The context

around the church seems to be populated by many people who would be interested in social action that is cause related. So a CROP Walk is perfect.

“Why not next seek to add 50 people from the community who are not related to the congregation to the CROP Walk?” asks Bullard. Why not think of other events in which a congregation engages throughout the year that would connect with the community residents? While many folks may not be comfortable or inclined to do evangelism and recruitment of new members, it might not be as threatening to invite someone to join them for an afternoon walk to raise money to fight hunger.

Bullard says that this is an example of an action-reflection approach to congregational ministry in its context. He suggests, “What better way to reflect on a CROP walk than to reflect on its meaning by talking about Jesus, the Luke 4: 18-19 missional mandate, and such things as feeding the 5000?”

One person wrote back to George commenting on his article and sharing another “low threshold” event. He described how some folks from his congregation have been volunteering to help the booster club by working in the concession stand at football games. The writer said that the contacts that the church folks have made have proven invaluable, and they have had several folks come to check out the church.

How about your congregation? What events can your church sponsor or participate in your community that will help the members and friends of your church engage unchurched folks in your community? What are the “non-threatening” events in which your congregation could engage folks in the community in a way that you begin to build relationships with persons who do not attend church?

If your congregation has tried something like this, please write to me (jvaugh@wocumc.org) and share what you have done. I would like to share some of these examples in a future “Tool Box” article.

These ideas come from George Bullard, Ministry Partner and Strategic Leadership Coach with The Columbia Partnership at www.thecolumbiapartnership.org. George regularly posts similar materials to his weblog at www.BullardJournal.org. Used with permission.