

Practical Helps for Smaller Membership Churches—Projects

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Pleasant Hill is a project-doing congregation. It usually has fewer than 30 in Sunday worship. It is growing older. Yet, the people there want to do ministry. They amaze me at the string of ministry projects they do. Let me share but five or six.

- Lois Bruce and several other ladies have been sewing what they call “ugly quilts” for a couple of years now. The third Monday of each month they gather at the church and fashion from polyester scraps a variety of “sleeping bag” like quilts. Recently, they gave about 25 of these creations to the Salvation Army to distribute to persons they provide for at their shelter. Occasionally, Lois or one of the others sees along the highway, attempting to hitch a ride with one of their ugly quilts rolled upon his back, a vagrant. She rejoices. As word has spread about this project, women from neighboring church have come to help.
- The Lees are in their 70s. They have become concerned that the old cemetery at the now defunct Big Creek Church has grown up and needs a good cleaning up. They have recruited family members and others to refurbish that sacred spot. It is looking up.
- Frank Grammer rents a hunting lease from an infirmed old man who lives in an old trailer house. The roof leaks. Frank has raised money and recruited workers from his church and two others to re-roof the shed that the man built to keep water off of the old roof. Frank is not a church member. The sick old man is African American. Pleasant Hill has long prayed for Frank. They are hoping that by working with him on this project, they will earn the right to talk to him again about becoming a Christian.
- Two young boys in the Sunday School at Pleasant Hill wanted to go to church camp last summer. But the money was not available from their families. Quietly, the church raised more than \$200 to send them. Both made professions of faith. Pleasant Hill rejoiced.
- Union Chapel, a small sister church in another part of the county has experienced amazing growth in the past two years. They are needing to add space. They hope to build next spring. When they do, most of the work will be done by volunteers. Men from West End will be actively involved.

Projects are how much of the work gets done in thousands of small, rural churches. Pleasant Hill has many sisters. I am constantly amazed at how well these small “bodies of Christ” can generate great projects. Someone has a vision. It is shared. Others catch it. They organize and it happens. Further, it is interesting to see how they network resources and workers. Good things happen with very little cost to anyone. What I am providing here is a check list of projects. It is organized by five of the six functions or tasks of a church. Since fellowship is a byproduct of most projects, I did not address it specifically. Mission is often tied to denominational agencies, so I thought about not including it, but decided to do so with a few parachurch examples. Some of

the projects that I list might also be an event. They can be handled either way. Use the list to see what you are doing and might do. Again seek some balance among the functions. But recognize that there are times in the life of a church and its context when an emphasis on one or two the functions is appropriate and in keeping with the will of God for that congregation. Consider carefully, however, if this is true in your setting. It may be that it is time to redirect the energies of the church.

(continued on following page)

Outreach

Evangelism Training
Visitation related to an annual event
Booth at a community event
Advertisement of the church
Mission trip
Local mission project
Sponsor a new congregation
Fishing Rodeo
Wild game supper
Senior Adult events

Tutoring
Adopt a refugee
Action on community issue
Aid to the poor
Help for unwed teens

Nurture and Education

Satellite Bible Study
Weekday Bible Study
Survey of Bible History
Winter Bible Study
Missions Conference
Doctrine Study
Mayberry Study
Family Reading Plan

Christmas Craft Class
Prayer training

Ministry

Migrants
Jail/Prison
Military
Health Care
Nursing home
Hospital

Sports
Start Library
Repair/Expand church

Worship

In a park or campground
Exchange with neighbor church
Do a musical
Series on family
Series on social issues
Series on character

Series on doctrine
For folk in a nursing home

Mission

VBS in a trailer park
Habitat for Humanity
Heifer Project
Support a new church

Builders for Christ

Have Done**Doing****Might Do**

| Have Done | Doing | Might Do |
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Now that you have looked at the Programs, Events, and Projects of your church and checked them over against the basic functions of a church, you have set the stage for some strategic thinking. (A subsequent article will deal with long-range strategic thinking. Here I am wanting you to look more in terms of annual planning.) Among the things to consider is whether or not some of the work of a current, weak program might be better handled by converting it into a project, or a series of projects. For example, if your men's organization has turned into a kind of Sunday morning breakfast club with an occasional speaker, you might be able to get the men to organize a mission trip/project. A common one is to help build or refurbish another church. You can accomplish much of what the men's organization was created to do, but is not doing very well, by refocusing it on a project, or projects.

Looking for a Signature Ministry

It is time for me to suggest a second principle for small church work. *For many congregations, their future will be tied to finding and doing a ministry that is significant, needed, and to which it is identified.* America was churched, that is churches were planted across the nation, prior to automobiles. People walked or went by horse, or horse drawn wagon, from place to place. Since a person could only walk about three miles in an hour, churches needed to be close at hand. People now drive to church. Many of them travel far more than three miles to attend a church they enjoy or in which they can be of significant service. A church can no longer demand loyalty from a family simply because it is the one they are closest to. Further, many large, well-staffed and nicely housed congregations have appeared. They offer attractions and programs with which a small rural church cannot compete. So, the best hope for many is to target a group of people, or provide a ministry that the large church does not provide for.

A project can be the key that unlocks the door to the future. To mind comes several churches who are doing great things with country music, trail rides, and related projects and events. People find a home where they can use their talents and interests to strengthen the body of Christ. A project is probably better here than a single event. If an event were to carry a church, there is a danger that it will become "the tail that wags the dog."

I use the term signature ministry to refer to a project or events, a ministry, that comes to identify that church. "They are the folk who....." Some critically content that the church should be open to every one. Certainly this was true in an earlier age, but with many places having an abundance of churches, it is not a wise strategy to just say, "You all come." People need a reason to select your church rather than one of the many others. Meeting a personal or family need, or providing a setting for giving expression to ones giftedness, seems to be an important way of the future. In have already listed some signature ministries in the opening illustrations:

- Pleasant Hill and the ugly quilt ministry
- West End and construction projects

Here are some others:

- Live nativity scene
- Prayer ministry
- Senior Adult activities

- Singing Convention sings
- Youth Missions Trips
- Southern Gospel Quartet Concerts
- Women's Ministry Events
- Clothes for the needy
- Easter Sunrise Service
- Support of a Children's Home
- Children's choir
- Parish Nurse program
- Wholesome Youth activities
- Activities for Home Schoolers
- Sunday School class for the mentally retarded

In most cases these and other signature ministries got started because someone had a vision for a ministry which sprang from a recognition of an unmet need. When the vision was shared others with gifts stepped forward to cooperate in getting the ministry started. There is a word of warning. I am reluctant to mention it in the fear that it might cool the ardor of some. When a church adopts a ministry and it becomes its signature, there is a danger that the ministry will become dominant, be the "tail that wags the dog. So stay prayed up.