

# INSIGHTS INTO:

## The Compassionate Congregation

Is your congregation considering becoming more involved in social outreach?  
Is it debating why you should? Does your congregation want ideas on  
how to select or start a new program?

Most congregations sense a responsibility to reach out to the people outside their walls, according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “but they respond to this call in different ways.

Some...focus on the spiritual dimension of human need, helping people develop a relationship with God. Others emphasize people’s social and emotional well-being by providing services or advocating for justice. Still others attempt to blend these priorities.”<sup>4</sup> The article goes on to describe five different ways congregations integrate sharing faith and meeting social needs. Well-known theologian John R.W. Stott asserted that sharing faith and social outreach are like the two halves of a pair of scissors: the one cannot operate without the other. In this study guide we focus on the socially compassionate congregation and its ministry of outreach.

Once and large and active urban congregation, St. Peter’s Church had dwindled in 2006 to 15 mostly elderly members. Today the membership has more than doubled and a Saturday morning worship service has been added. What happened? The congregation began to focus on neighborhood needs with after-school activities for children, substance abuse recovery programs, and weekly food distribution.<sup>1</sup>

A study of all congregations in one Michigan county reported thriving congregational life with extensive social outreach ranging from day and soup kitchen to nursing and tutoring. For other institutions to replace those services would cost an estimated 100 million dollars.<sup>2</sup>

In the midst of huge unemployment, hundreds of people in Detroit are flocking to congregationally sponsored workshops on finding employment. There they learn new ideas, and get fresh motivation to start over.<sup>3</sup>

*The Central Question: What is happening outside our walls?  
How can we affect positive change there and meet needs?*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.courierjournal.com/article/20090510/NEWS01/905100393/1008/Struggling+congregations+look+to+change+and+grow>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mlive.com/living/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2008/11/kent\\_county\\_study\\_aims\\_to\\_bett.html](http://www.mlive.com/living/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2008/11/kent_county_study_aims_to_bett.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2009906300371>

<sup>4</sup> [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick\\_question21.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question21.html)

## Congregations involve themselves outside their walls in at least five ways:

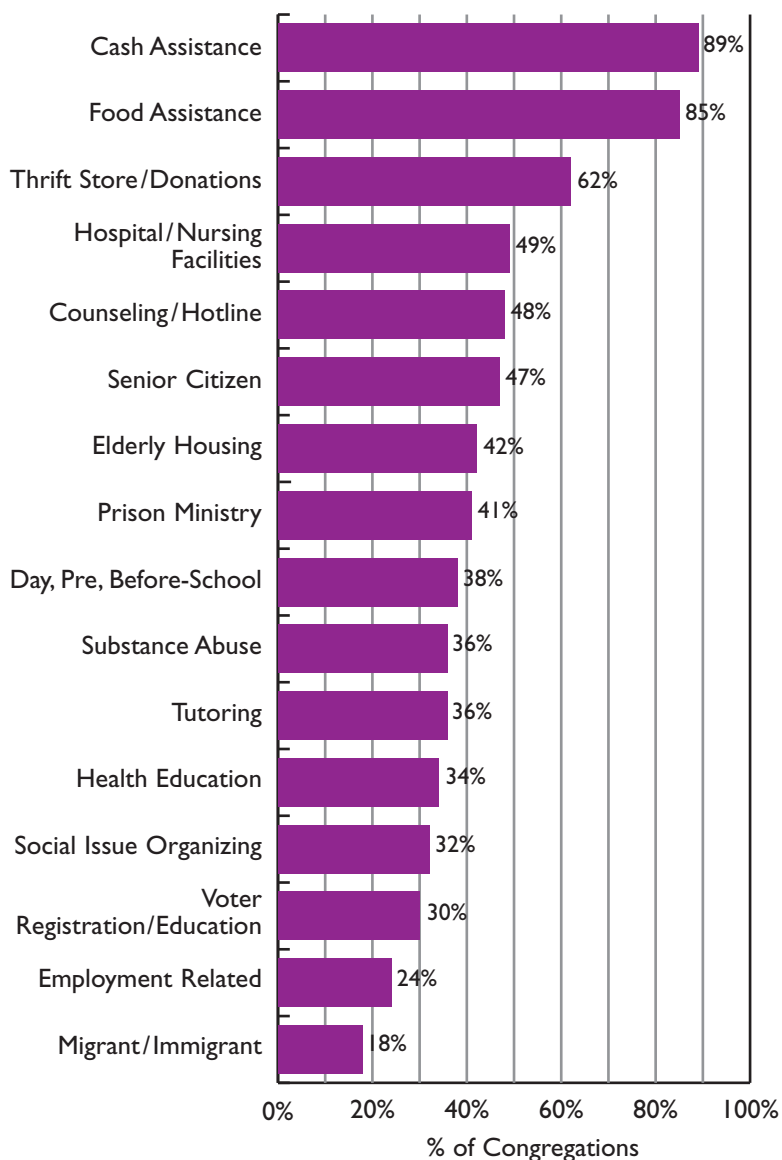
- Social service/direct services
- Education of congregation and community concerning issues and needs
- Social witness involving public statements of views and desires through such actions as press releases, fasting, demonstrations, boycotts, and prayer vigils
- Political action by attempting to influence the decision-making process in ways ranging from letter writing campaigns to direct action to visiting elected officials
- Encouraging and supporting individual members to be compassionate in daily life and to serve as volunteers and board members for helping agencies

## What kinds of social outreach do congregations do?

Almost nine out of ten congregations report that they serve their neighbors in need. In this nearly universal practice of caring, congregations with widely different beliefs in all kinds of settings respond in times of personal need with cash (88%), food (85%), clothing (60%), shelter (38%), medical attention (45%) and crisis counseling (46%). At another level of response, about a third of these churches, synagogues, and mosques support nurturing ministries in education, health, and quality of life. These congregations are likely to be actively engaged in programs for day care (36%) and tutoring (32%), programs for seniors (45%), programs of employment assistance (21%) and programs for migrants or immigrants (14%).

Fewer, but still significant numbers of congregations engage in social services designed to achieve community or personal change. These programs include prison ministries (38%) and drug rehabilitation (33%); or are part of a larger effort such as advocacy for issues (29%) and voter education (26%). Often these programs involve cooperative efforts with other churches. A strong emphasis in all faith traditions on compassion is why congregations are especially responsive to people in need. It explains why so many people across the country view congregations as “first responders” in times of need.

**Percent of Congregations Supporting at Least One Program in the Listed Area**



## Vitality, Growth, Commitment and Social Outreach

Congregations working for social justice with a broad array of outreach ministries are more likely to express that their congregations are vital and alive. A strong, positive correlation exists between having a wide breadth of social ministries and having a high-vitality congregation. Almost 90% of those with a high level of justice programs are vital, compared to only 46% who have little involvement in justice issues. Almost 80% of those congregations with a great deal of involvement in outreach show high vitality, compared with 56% of those with low involvement and 46% of those with limited.

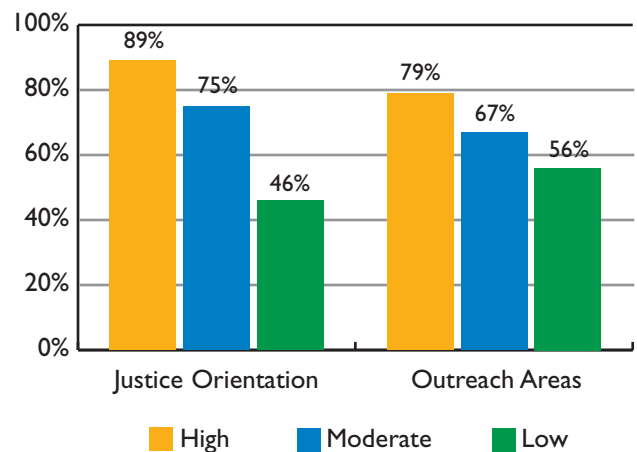
Congregations with a strong commitment to social justice and with direct participation in community-outreach ministries are also more likely to be growing than other congregations. Sixty percent of those who have a wide breadth of social ministries are growing while only 40% of those without a variety of outreach programs are growing. Likewise, 57% of those congregations highly involved with working for social justice are growing compared to 44% of those minimally involved.

While strong correlations in the data do not prove that being active in social outreach will bring about growth and vitality, there are reasons to believe that it does so. It is clear that such programs reach beyond congregational walls to expose more non-members to the congregation and it offers more opportunities for members to become involved and committed. Anecdotal evidence supports this:

*“We lost a lot of people initially. That was tough, but eventually the levels of commitment went up, and today we have a more highly committed congregation. Our attendance and giving are still*

*A strong, positive correlation exists between having a wide breadth of social ministries and having a high-vitality congregation.*

**Percent of Congregations With High Vitality**



*rebounding, and we have a much higher level of commitment in almost every measurable way. Our average attendee gives 50% more than a year ago, we have more kids in Bible study, and more people in our teaching experiences. Interestingly, our demographic is shifting younger, because the younger people want a call to commitment, not another call to be a consumer. For them, being a consumer is not compelling. If we had not weaned ourselves off the consumer model, we'd never have gotten to the level of commitment we are today.”<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> “Community Church of Joy,” Mike Breen, Glendale, Arizona (*Leadership Journal*, January 28, 2008)

# How Can Your Congregation Get More Involved in Social Outreach?

## Assess Interests, Resources and Needs

If your congregation is contemplating more involvement in social outreach, ask yourself these questions:

- 1. Which level do you most wish to impact: local, national, or international?** (Or if you want to pursue multiple levels, what are your priorities?) What are the local, national, and international ramifications of the issues you wish to pursue? What can your congregations do at one or more of these levels?
- 2. What are the needs and issues in the area you wish to serve/impact (local, national, international)?** Get to know your wider community and its needs (see Exploring Community Needs sidebar). What are the root causes of these issues? Demographic studies and other sociological data gathered by the local, state, and federal agencies may be helpful, as might interviews with relevant people and agencies.
- 3. Which of the types of congregational outreach listed above (social service, education on issues, social witness, or political action) is your congregation interested in pursuing?** Does the congregation want to pursue multiple types? What is your vision?
- 4. What length and intensity of involvement do you want?** Some types of outreach are crisis-care with brief, low investment contact and some are longer-term, heavy commitments. Be sure not to get involved beyond your capacity to sustain the project.
- 5. What are the resources available to you in terms of time, money and human resources?** How many people in your congregation might be interested in donating time and/or money to this effort? What is the extent of their commitment?

**6. What other services already exist to address these needs/issues and which organizations are currently addressing them? What gaps might there be in current services?** If there are gaps in the services being offered, these may be the best focus for your congregation. If no gaps exist, determine if current programs fully address the needs. You may decide to start your own program or to partner with an existing program, depending on the answer to these questions.

**7. Should your congregation partner with other congregations or organizations or go it alone?** While this might be determined primarily by the resources available, it may be impacted by the congregation's vision for the project.

## Exploring Community Needs

To get an overview of community needs, do some research. You can begin with demographic summaries from the latest census. For example, type a zip code in your search engine and you will find several resources including [brainyzip.com](http://brainyzip.com) and [factfinder.gov](http://factfinder.gov). Or to dig deeper you can purchase analysis from [missioninsite.com](http://missioninsite.com) or [perceptgroup.com](http://perceptgroup.com).

Armchair analysis is not enough, however. Do a windshield survey of your community and write down what you see as possible opportunities for service. Make an appointment with your local family or community welfare services and interview the director or other knowledgeable person. Do the same with a grade school and a high school principal or superintendent and the chief of police. Keep adding to your list of service opportunities and see what concerns come up most frequently.

## Determine the Best Fit for Your Congregation's Interests and Resources

Ask yourself the following questions to determine the best fit:

- Why should we be involved in the issue under consideration?
- What type of social involvement might we carry out in relation to this problem?
- Does this project fit with our expressed interests in terms of scope and approach?
- How much money and time will we need to put this plan into action?
- Do we have enough human, material and financial resources to do the job right?
- Will our resources make a difference in the outcome?
- Can our congregation develop the vision to inspire, motivate and sustain a number of members' involvement in the issue over the needed period of time?

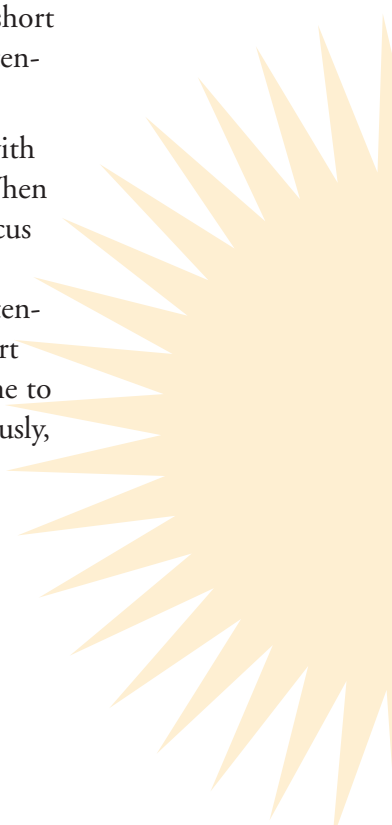
Once there is agreement on the program(s) that best fit both the needs of the wider community as well as the interests and capacities of the congregation, develop a strategic plan and budget for presentation to decision makers. There are many resources available to assist with the development of strategic plans.

## Challenges Arising from Making the Switch to a Social Outreach Orientation

This is often a time of high stress for a congregation as it can be a big change if the focus switches from a culture of getting their needs met to one where they are more involved in meeting the needs of others. (This will vary depending on how large a focus the social outreach is to become.) Some may perceive that such social outreach work is supposed to be the responsibility of the minister or paid

leader. As such there can be a sense of anger or stress and loss. This can potentially lead to conflict. Steps you can take to help with this challenging time include the following:

- Be prepared for possible conflict and how to work through it (refer to *Insights into Congregational Conflict* for tips).
- If the minister is leading the congregation to change its focus he or she must, after doing the leading, release control to the congregation when it takes ownership
- Recognize any sense of loss and depression. This may be true in the minister as well as congregation and staff.
- Recognize that the role of the minister may switch from “doing” to “conducting/facilitating.”
- Help the congregation understand and accept that this change may have a short term negative impact in terms of attendance and giving
- Have a long term vision and stick with it. Things will eventually change. When transitioning to a social outreach focus some congregations may experience temporary declines in giving and attendance but, congregations often report that this situation improves over time to levels above those experienced previously, as seen in the quote on page 3.





# References and Resources

## Books:

- Ammerman, Nancy T., *Congregation and Community*
- Baum, Gregory, *Compassion and Solidarity: The Church for Others*
- Claman, Victor, *Acting on your Faith: Congregations Making a Difference*
- Dudley, Carl S., *Community Ministry: New Challenges, Proven Steps to Faith-Based Initiatives*
- Dudley, Carl S., *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-First Century*
- Dudley, Carl S., *Basic Steps Toward Community Ministry*
- Durall, Michael, *Creating Congregations of Generous People*
- Emmel, Aaron, *Taking Action in a Changing World*
- Granade, Nelson, *Lending Your Leadership: How Pastors Are Redefining Their Role in Community Life*
- Green, Clifford J, *Cities and Human Community: Urban Ministry in the United States*
- Hessel, Dieter T, *Social Ministry*
- Jacobsen, Dennis A, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*
- Roozen, David A., William McKinney and Jackson Carroll, *Varieties of Religious Presence: Mission in Public Life*
- Wallace, Jim, *The Great Awakening: Seven Ways to Change the World*
- Webb, John David, *How to Change the Image of Your Church*
- Winseman, Albert L, *Growing an Engaged Church*

## Web Resources:

- Faith Communities Today**  
<http://www.fact.hartsem.edu>
- Congregational Resource Guide**  
<http://www.congregationalresources.org/article0132.asp>
- Hartford Institute for Religion Research**  
[http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/charitable\\_choice.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/charitable_choice.html)
- Leadership Network**  
[http://www.leadnet.org/LC\\_ExternallyFocusedChurches.asp](http://www.leadnet.org/LC_ExternallyFocusedChurches.asp)
- Sojourners**  
<http://www.sojo.net/>
- Christianity Today**  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2008/cln80128.html>

- Leadership Center at Morehouse College**  
<http://www.morehouse.edu/centers/leadershipcenter/fcuf/reports/BTBReport2003.pdf>

Using your favorite search engine, type in “church social outreach” for many examples of how congregations reach out.

## How to Use This Resource

- Appoint a task force to thoroughly study the issue of the compassionate congregation and to come up with recommendations for action. Include both younger and older people as well as long-time and newer participants.
- Systematically move through this resource, including some of the materials in the footnotes and web links. Purchase two or three of the books listed and ask task force members for a brief report on what struck them as relevant and possible for your congregation.

...continued on page 7

**How to Use This Resource** continued...

- Keep asking what is appropriate for your situation and should be explored further.
- Keep a list of all community needs you discover and towards the end of your meetings, prioritize this list.
- Keep a list of all community service opportunities you think are within your capacity and towards the end of your meetings, prioritize this list.
- Issue a preliminary report with your findings and recommendations and hold “hearings” or congregational meetings for discussion. Talk with some key leaders one on one for their evaluation.
- Finalize your report to the congregation and its governing board. A few key recommendations is better than a list of ideas. Include implementation steps and recommended completion dates. Try to build in a review process.

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*Insights Into The Compassionate Congregation* was written for **Faith Communities Today** by Theresa Zingery and David Breeden.

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