



Water Jar Behind; Community Reach Ahead

by David S. Young

David S. Young, Pastor, teacher and church renewal servant, describes a practical model of renewal he has developed for congregations in his new book *Springs of Living Water, Christ-Centered Church Renewal* with foreword by Richard Foster. With wife Joan, he leads renewal initiatives in three districts of the Church of the Brethren and assists in churches of other Denominations. His web site is www.churchrenewalservant.org



“Then the women left her water jar behind and went back to the city.” As the woman at the well encountered Jesus, her life was transformed, and then she headed out in mission to her home town. (See John 4: 7-42) This story gives us concrete clues as to what it takes to reach out to our home community.

Rather than say, “Let’s meet Monday to decide how to reach out as a church”, we take a longer point of view in our initiatives in church renewal. It may take a year and a half until a church gains energy and discerns what God is calling it to do. It takes time to call and train people and reach out and follow-up.

Let us look at the story of the woman at the well to discover how to reach out to our community. Within the story are four factors: gaining spiritual energy, leaving water pots behind, embracing a mission, and pointing people to Jesus.

Gaining New Energy

The first factor in community reach is to gain renewed spiritual energy both individually and corporately. Many realize today that just having our church doors painted a certain color is not enough to attract people. Nor will just suggesting people spread the Gospel bring many results even with catchy sayings.

Something has to change within so that community reach comes from our hearts. That is what we are witnessing in our work in church renewal known as Springs of Living Water. As individuals encounter Jesus, their lives begin to change. Then they can’t help but tell others about what has happened to them.

In the Springs of Living Water initiative, spiritual energy grows as individuals mature through using spiritual disciplines. Disciplines folders have a theme for a season of the year. The folder goes with an emphasis in preaching, classes on the disciplines, and people practicing disciplines daily. Spiritual energy increases.

The folder invites everyone to ask, “To what next step is God inviting in my spiritual walk?” Many read the daily scripture coordinated with the Sunday text, have prayer, and follow its guidance that day. Some take up other disciplines. By doing this together, the whole church feels they are on a spiritual journey. People talk more about their faith and want to fill the spiritual thirst of others.

Renewed spiritual energy leads to a church reaching out.

The Green Tree Church of the Brethren that has given out 3000 loaves of bread to the community began by entering a faith journey. (Further story below) Corporately they took up spiritual disciplines and had an immersion of preaching, teaching and using daily disciplines folders to develop a closer walk with Christ.

Spiritual energy grew; unity grew; the church began to reach out. They came up with a plan, but met challenges. They were to hand out loaves of bread at a market. At the last minute, the store reversed its permission. The church had to regroup. Meeting challenges in mission invites a deeper spiritual walk.

Leaving Water Pots Behind

This brings us to how new life emerges. Through dialogue the woman becomes curious about this man at the well. In a servant led manner, Jesus meets the woman where she is and calls her to give what she can offer. In turn, Jesus offers her life giving water which becomes an ever flowing well within her.

Her sense of faith shifted. Transformation happened.

The spontaneous nature of her spiritual discovery is striking. This moment has dynamics of conversion within it. New life came through dialogue, servant hood and drawing forth her gifts. The Messiah became real. The woman was touched at her depths. Her sense of faith shifted. Transformation happened.

In Springs of Living Water this same kind of transformation can happen in congregational gatherings which give opportunity for significant conversations. Rather than a leadership team going off on retreat and deciding on goals for the year, the entire congregation gathers six times in a year and a half.

These gatherings reflect the style of dialogue Jesus had at the well. In the first gathering, a church looks at its strengths and what it has to offer. In a second people explore how their lives have been touched spiritually and how they can touch the lives of others. Both are important in establishing community reach.

In renewal churches discover they have something to offer

No wonder the woman left her water pot behind! She has a mission. So do transformed churches. One case where fund raisers became stressful decided to put their energy in a different direction. They shaped a Wednesday evening ministry that reached newcomers. Water pot behind; community reach ahead.

Embracing a Mission

A church embarking on a spiritual journey and discovering its strengths and what it has to offer can discover its identity and call. Often a scripture passage helps a church to clarify its call and give guidance in this whole process. Like the woman at the well, a congregation discerns a compelling mission that comes right out of its heart of faith. That gives real impetus for community reach.

Just as important in community reach is for the entire congregation to embrace its mission. The mission cannot just be given to a committee to implement. Everyone needs involved. This is especially true of inviting new people. The church must be ready to welcome them and receive them.

The level of excitement in a congregation in renewal is contagious. Like the woman at the well, their countenance changes. When people enter, they feel something special is happening in this place. In fact, there is a real sense of the living Christ that emerges in its midst. Christ becomes pre-eminent.

One church that had splits in its past was reticent to face the community. After gaining new strength with the spiritual disciplines folders and having contact with people who left, they entered a float in the community parade. What a step in their local town; it spoke as much to themselves as to others.

A church's mission in community reach originates out of its sense of call of God's leading. Its form is born out of the gifts and creativity of a congregation because that draws on the church's strengths. Looking at the woman at the well, she was changed by the way Jesus drew out her best. She had a model to follow.

The creativity of such missions is astounding

The example of Jesus in John 4 gives clues as to how to draw others to the life giving water. Deep prayer will bring out the best for your situation. Learning what others did can give ideas and principles to encourage you on. The important question for discernment is to ask, "Where God is leading our church in mission?"

After building up spiritually, looking at its strengths and how it touches lives spiritually, its core values, identity and Biblical passage, a church through congregational gatherings can corporately look at how to go about community reach. Two inspiring examples come to mind. Let us look for principles at work.

One example continues the story of handing out the loaves of bread where the church needed to regroup. A member of the renewal team told them about a first Friday of the month event in a nearby town where vendors came. Why not a stand for the church? This was a better location. In this setting people mingled and could talk about their spiritual walk. It is exciting to hear what is happening.

The first night they came with a truck loaded with 500 mini loaves of bread. The place was packed. One parking place remained right by their stand. They unloaded and started giving out loaves. Many passer-bys took them. Conversations were struck up and people shared in a most meaningful way.

There was a platform nearby with a loud speaker where anyone could get up and talk. Unbeknownst to them, a man stood up and began sharing how his life had been changed by faith. He told the crowd that if they wanted the same change they should go over there and talk to the folks handing out the bread.

This ministry continuously done over the summer produced positive results. New people started to come to worship and continued. A young couple who came to get married knew of the stand. The secretary reported excitement about how the church was reaching out. Worship attendance has increased.

In another church, community reach was a mid week ministry that grew out of responding to the needs of children in the church and community to grow in their faith. Such ministries, especially if they include youth and adults, build up the whole church, help reach beyond its walls, and help people grow in faith.

The model which some churches adapt is from Youth Club International. The four fold activities include recreation or cooperative games for the children who come early, followed by a meal with the family, and then a Bible or other topical class, followed by choir which sings Sunday. It runs 6-8 weeks or longer.

One unique principle which initially might seem negative is that every child needs a sponsor who does something in the program. Rather than turn people away, it does just the opposite. People want to sponsor their child or someone else's child. Everyone feels a part and that they have something to offer.

By reaching out to friends and inactives, a significant number of people can get involved. In a church with 150 in worship, an intergenerational Family Night had significant response. We decided to have a combined choir. On Sundays 100 people joined to sing in the Family Night Chorale. The impact was substantial.

Efforts of community reach need calling and training of leadership. Each person needs guidance in their area of service. This includes evangelism lest it falter in its approach or from discouragement. The servant led manner of Jesus models going onto another's turf, using dialogue, and bringing out other's gifts.

The important thing is to spiritually discern where God is inviting a church to strengthen some ministry in the church, especially something needed when new people come. Also a church can explore the open door of opportunity where God is inviting them to reach out to others. Much planning can then be done.

Pointing People to Jesus

At the center is reaching out to point people to Jesus. The purpose is not to be missed. This includes follow-up. With each event the needs of people become apparent. There will be contacts to be made. Those things will lead to other conversations, events and opportunities for other follow-up.

Is that not what happened for the woman at the well? She pointed people to Jesus. They asked Jesus to stay in their home town. Sychar was not just a crossroads, but by John's account a city where impact was made. Others were attracted. Many more believed. Think of each of those persons coming to belief. Think of the follow-up in terms of their faith development from there on out.

Reaching out, a church develops a whole new ministry

Reaching out, a church develops a whole new ministry. People need incorporated into the life of the church. How will their faith be developed, their gifts used, their needs met? And what is next from there? All this is covered in the book *Springs of Living Water, Christ-centered Church Renewal*.¹

Reaching out has an impact on everyone. Reaching out invites spiritual growth and finding a new heart and a new spirit. Each church will have to discern where God is leading. Reaching out is not a peripheral item but at the very core of the existence of a church. Water pot behind; community reach ahead.

For Discussion

Do you agree that community reach is at the very core of the existence of a church? Why and how?

Do you think it may take as much as 1 1/2 years for a church to discern where God is leading it to reach out? Respond to the process suggested.

What strikes you about the story of the woman at the well and its parallels for community reach today?

In terms of the four points suggest in this article, what would be your church's next step in community reach?

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¹ See David S. Young, *Springs of Living Water, Christ-centered Church Renewal* with Foreword by Richard J. Foster, Herald Press, 2008. For a list of resources including this book you may go to the Springs website at www.churchrenewalservant.org.