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What is community action?

Community action is a church-led project designed to serve the local community, either in response to an immediate and obvious need there, or, following a survey of needs which has uncovered an issue.

The nature of projects can vary widely, from tackling loneliness, isolation, poverty, hunger and abuse, to finding ways of addressing a lack of integration between ethnic groups, right through to promoting local recycling initiatives.

[Read more about different types of projects.](#)

Why start a project?

Community action shows God's love transforming people's lives in amazing ways through the practical support given by volunteers (and sometimes paid workers). Regardless of how "humble" a project is, good things can come out of it, perhaps in more ways than we can imagine when we first begin.

Community action is right at the heart of the work of our church and has been for centuries

For example, the second great commandment asks that we love our neighbours as ourselves. In answer to the question "Who is my neighbour?", Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37), to show that *everyone* is our neighbour, and in the parable of the Sheep and Goats he says: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me".

Luke 10: 29-37

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

and this is a Biblical foundation of a phrase that is repeated in Church of England worship:

"Honour one another and seek the common good."

Finally, three of the **Five Marks of Mission** make clear that the Church of England's mission includes pastoral care, social action and engagement with the social, economic and political structures that affect people's lives:-

1. To respond to human need by loving service
2. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
3. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

The church engages in community action because, quite simply, through loving our neighbour, God gives us a passion to help others.



Different types of community action projects

These are just few examples of the type of projects which you might consider in your local community, but isn't an exhaustive list:-

Bereavement care

Being bereaved can be one of the most difficult times in life and most people need some kind of support in the weeks, months and years after losing someone they love. With understanding, friendship and support, most people will learn to process their loss and come to a healthy place of new meaning and hope. Churches can provide that hope - they are in every community, locally placed to provide the welcome and support that is needed at the time of a funeral and long afterwards. Bereavement also raises spiritual questions and can leave people wondering about the goodness and existence of God, and the afterlife. There is therefore an opportunity to show grieving people that God is good, that God is love and that there is hope for the future.

Support/Befriending

This is a role for suitable individuals to draw alongside people with specific difficulties and support them with friendship, sometimes advice, and sometimes practical support. It is vital the befriender is matched well to the project user and this can be done through formal channels such as social services, or involving other agencies. Examples of befriending might include supporting vulnerable or isolated families with children who are referred to them by other agencies, visiting frail elderly people in their home, working with offenders and their families, or supporting people in police custody who have no other responsible adult to accompany them. Refugee support can include befriending too.

Women and children's work

Many projects include work with children and might provide, for example, parent and toddler groups, out-of-school clubs and holiday schemes. Some partner a Sure Start or Children's Centre and also have nurseries. These activities can be linked with other supportive involvements such as work with parents and carers on how to play creatively with children, or working with women experiencing domestic violence.

Drop-ins

Some church community centres have drop-in sessions intended for people who may need some support but do not want or need a formal service. Drop-ins give them the chance to get together for mutual support, perhaps through craft or sporting activities, or just getting together for a chat or a meal. The sessions may prove to be stepping stones for individuals to try other activities and give the opportunity for the centre staff to find out more about services that are required

Financial and in-kind assistance

A number of projects supply information and advice of different sorts or host advice sessions provided, say, by the Citizens' Advice Bureau. Some projects specialise in specific areas like accommodation, benefits or debt. Others focus on particular user groups such as asylum seekers or ex-offenders. Many others will serve as information hubs, signposting local services or other sources of help. A mental health project could offer more specialist counselling.

Credit Unions

Credit Unions can be an alternative to payday lenders. Follow this link for more information: [Association of British Credit Unions](#). You'll also find a Credit Union nearest to your local area on the site.

Emergency accommodation

Both housing and asylum seeker organisations sometimes manage properties that can be used by people. Examples might include supported accommodation for vulnerable young people, or asylum seekers. You might consider making working links with the local authority and housing support groups and use these links to get accommodation for homeless people.

Food aid

It is evident that there are increasing numbers of people in extreme hardship and consequently there are more foodbanks being set up. A project to support them may be a simple food parcel or voucher-distribution scheme, or a means of re-distributing good quality surplus food from the food industry to charitable support groups for low income, homeless and other vulnerable people. Other examples might include community larders or soup runs.

Lunch clubs and caf s

The purpose of serving food in church centres is often primarily a social one: to bring in elderly people, for example, to mix with others. For this reason, there are often associated activities, from quizzes to tea dances. In other cases, going to a caf  may be a less intimidating way for someone to enter a centre for the first time to get a feel for it before going on to access other services. A caf  can have a two-fold benefit, for example in a rural area, the development of a coffee shop could be a valuable village amenity, but could also be an opportunity to support fair trade and ethical suppliers.

Education and training

In youth work organisations, this might be mentoring those at risk of dropping out of education. Organisations focusing on asylum seekers generally make ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes available, either supplying them themselves or hosting other organisations. In community centres, there are frequently courses which are usually demand-led, focusing on subjects people say they want or need, such as first aid, food hygiene, cooking, gardening, IT, dressmaking, art, parenting skills and introduction to citizenship. These and other courses are very often delivered in partnership with a local Further Education college.

Employability

Sometimes the specific purpose of training opportunities is to help people become more employable by teaching them new skills and giving them greater self-confidence. Courses will then be associated with careers advice and guidance, help with writing a curriculum vitae and interview training.

Opportunities for personal development

For young people, there could be sports and leisure activities, residentials, opportunities for community work and young leaders' programmes. Health-related activities such as exercise, yoga and healthy eating workshops or arts projects are all examples. Scope for volunteering – sometimes within the organisation or a trading arm – is another way of giving valuable experience to people who would benefit.

Outreach and preventative work

This type of project works with others to help minimise the risk of problems recurring, for example, homelessness, misuse of drugs/alcohol or offending. This frequently entails active outreach work, personal support and assisting people to overcome the barriers they encounter, whether these are physical, emotional or financial. A key factor in all these relationships is that the process is voluntary. One example of preventative work in relation to youth homelessness, which frequently occurs because of family problems, is mediation to enable all parties to deal with disputes.

Street pastors

A number of organisations supply volunteers for ecumenical Street Pastor schemes, which operate collaboratively with the police and other statutory agencies to work with people, especially young people, hanging out on the streets or pubs or clubs at night. The role is one of listening, caring and helping unconditionally.

Community links

The focus for this type of project is bringing together people of different faiths and cultures for dialogue and joint action. It can also work with intergenerational groups. It can be done through sharing a meal, sharing memories, or bringing together people to do activities together, such as arts, crafts or sport.

Networks and forums

Forums are a means of providing support to specific groups and enabling them to have a voice. For example, members of a refugee forum might use it to better understand their rights and enable them to deal with those in authority. It can help them take an active part in the local community, to make new friends and link with other refugee groups. Ex-offenders might be helped to set up a support network for those in similar situations. Ecumenical prayer networks could be another example, focusing prayer on the needs of the community.

Recycling and environmental concerns

Recycling furniture can provide practical help to people in need, such as single mothers coming out of refuges, or other low-income individuals or families. It also helps to reduce the amount of material going to landfill. Reduction of waste is also one dimension of food distribution projects. Gardening and food growing projects can be a vehicle for community building and skills development, as well as having environmental and health benefits.

Social enterprise

As financial sustainability is a key challenge, a number of organisations are now setting up social enterprises of different sorts for all or some of their activities. For example a Post Office could be run by the church as a community interest company (CIC). A café could also be a CIC with the potential to earn a surplus that can be returned to the church to support local and international mission charities. Other projects are developing trading organisations, both to market goods and to undertake work.

Advocacy and campaigning

Working to address individual and community issues can reveal the causes of problems and the impact of public policy. Very often, as a result, organisations are keen to speak out on behalf of those in need. Sometimes this will be as intermediaries with public sector agencies; sometimes to raise awareness to prompt churches to respond; sometimes it will be in wider campaigning.



How to get started

If you have a project idea and are keen to make a start, [visit this page for tips and guidance](#).

If you're interested in background reading, [Church of England report produced in 2012](#) in answer to the Government's Big Society initiative may be a helpful way to think about the bigger picture. It may also help you reflect on national developments since then and how this could affect certain types of community projects. Although the Big Society is no longer talked about in the political sense, the report celebrates the church's role in building better neighbourhoods. It is an encouragement to consider this form of ministry, and a practical tool for anyone thinking of embarking on a venture.

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