

Prayer idea for small groups

Choose an evening and ask everyone to bring two or three favourite scriptures from the Bible on giving thanks. Next, start to ask everyone to make a list of the many things we receive from God, covering all the spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, material and relational blessings he gives. Share some of those with each other then have a time of prayer inviting everyone to share short prayers of thanksgiving: ‘Lord, I thank you for . . .’ and see how long you can keep going! Encourage everyone to have a thanksgiving week where they take time every day to thank God for all that he gives. Then when the group next meets, take time to share and pray into all that has been learnt.

Get to Know Your Community

We might have some brilliant ideas about how we’d like to be generous to our communities this harvest, but to build up some great relationships and make good use of our gifts it’s important to first find out what it is that our neighbours actually need and to work with them to achieve it.

Here are some ideas . . .

Start by drawing a large map of your community. Plot out the church, the housing estates, shops, community buildings, roads and so on. Then add to it the areas where you sense there is poverty and social issues (from bored young people to substance misuse, homelessness and isolation). Show your map to a wider group within your church – do they agree? What’s missing? Where are the neediest areas? Who are the most vulnerable groups? Do your neighbours and friends outside of church agree?

You could hold a harvest fair or supper or use your harvest service to begin to engage the thoughts and ideas of the wider community. Set up a stall and lay out pieces of paper (or postcards) with various social issues written or illustrated on them – like debt, housing, health care, unemployment, crime, education. Invite people who pass by the table to vote on which issue is the most relevant. Give them five counters and ask them to ‘spend’ the counters where they think is most need in the community by placing them onto the relevant postcards. At the end of the event you should have a good picture of what a sample of the community feel are priority issues of need.

Talk to key contacts in your community, such as doctors, community police officers, social workers, other churches, child care services and others who might have an opinion. Ask them what they think are the key issues in the community, who are the main service providers addressing these issues and what are the gaps.

Look at the statistics for your local area. Try entering your postcode into www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk or www.upmystreet.com. What does it say about public service provision in your area? What do you learn about crime, local schools, health and employment?

Design a questionnaire and carry out a community survey. You can post this out, but you are more likely to get a better response if you do this face to face, plus it allows you to start building relationships with those outside of your church.

This might involve knocking on doors so make sure you prepare yourselves properly: when is an appropriate time to door knock? Explain why you are there, and how many questions you have! Have a good balance between closed questions (yes or no answers) and open questions.

Organise a focus group meeting. This involves gathering a sample of the community together in one place and chairing a discussion about needs in the community. To encourage people to come you might want to provide food and drinks. Also, make sure you keep to time and ensure that participants understand the purpose of the meeting and how you plan to use the information afterwards. Make sure someone is taking notes on the discussion and that key points are recorded. An alternative to this would be to go out and visit other community groups, such as lunch clubs for the elderly, mum and toddler groups, youth clubs, etc. and ask the organisers if you can conduct your focus group at their meeting.

Put on a regular community meal or coffee morning. These are often great ways to get to know your community and also provide a great service for people. Once they begin to feel more comfortable with you and you have built up a good relationship you can begin to ask them about the wider needs they see in the community. What else can the church do to help them and their neighbours?

Finally, once you have conducted this period of research and relationship building, you should have a clear sense of what your community needs – as well as whom you can partner with to deliver it. You can also visit www.communitymission.org to find organisations and ideas of ways you can help meet your community's needs through local advocacy as well as practical support.

Remember, Christianity was never meant to be a solo discipline: we were made to be connected, not only with our heavenly Father, but with our fellow humans. We were made for community, just as church was made to be a source of strength, support and hope for those living around it. To that end it's vital that as we consider ways in which we can connect with the world beyond the doors of the church, we understand that our aim is to work *with* communities, not just *for* them.