



# Team Works

April 2003

A Resource for Congregations from Hamilton Conference Staff

## REVITALIZING YOUR CONGREGATION'S OUTREACH PROGRAMS

By John Asling

You've just been named to the Outreach Committee of your congregation. You go to your first meeting hoping to get involved in an exciting ministry of your local church but the committee seems to be floundering and you're not sure you want to stay with it.

What should you do?

Don't despair. I get many calls throughout the year from ministers or lay leaders telling me their Outreach Committee (some are called Mission Committee or Mission and Service Committee or Justice Committee etc.) needs some new life. Many other individuals and committees find themselves in this predicament. There is still hope as long as someone recognizes the need for a time of revisioning.

In this article I share some of the insights that I, working with Outreach Committees across the Conference who are seeking new life and direction, have gained over the past 15 years on the Hamilton Conference staff. I will talk about three approaches to determine what an Outreach Committee might do, including how to make some tough choices on what to tackle, the biblical mandate for this important ministry and where to get some help.

If you are a leader in a congregation that does not have an Outreach Committee, there is still some helpful material here for you. Some congregations use a series of ad hoc outreach task groups, with each of its members having a common commitment. For the sake of this article,

members of these groups should consider themselves members of an ad hoc Outreach Committee. Every congregation has to set up the structure that helps it tackle this critical congregational ministry.

So, congratulations! You have been invited to take part in one of the most exciting aspects of congregational ministry. You have an opportunity to lead a congregation as it feeds the hungry, challenges the systems that turn people into poverty statistics and educates itself about the biblical options to greed and violence.

This work can also be very difficult since most of us arrive in church on Sunday morning hoping to find some solace from the world and get perturbed when we hear that there may be a political dimension to the biblical call to love God and neighbour, friends and enemies. The work can be made even more difficult when we consider the state of the world: the war in Iraq, the scourge of HIV-AIDS, the growing gap between rich and poor.

Outreach Committees often feel bombarded by requests for action, education programs or fundraising campaigns. It's often the sense of being overwhelmed or paralyzed by the many issues out there that makes an Outreach Committee stumble. What should take priority? How should we best be spending our precious time?

### Biblical Mandate

Before answering those kinds of questions, it's good to reflect on just what an Outreach Committee's job is. You will want to decide what works for you. But here are some suggestions from Bonnie Greene, Unit Leader in Support to Local Ministries in the General Council offices, from an article written a few years ago:

- An Outreach Committee's first job is to think about who the congregation's neighbours are and what is going on in this part of God's world.

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- The second job the Outreach Committee needs to think about is what the congregation brings to its relationship with its neighbours.
- The third job the Outreach Committee will need to pay attention to is helping the congregation think about its mission in light of the wider church.

There are many places we can turn to in Scripture to remind ourselves why we do outreach in our congregations. I often ask congregations to reflect on Luke 4: 14-30, the story of Jesus' return to Nazareth to announce the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus stands up in the temple and reads from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

How's that for an Outreach Committee mandate!

Jesus is preaching about profound spiritual change that translates into profound social, economic and political change.

In his commentary on this passage (in the book *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible Through Third World Eyes*), Robert McAfee Brown says Jesus is making a promise to all those who lack the basic necessities of life. Jesus is saying poverty is a scandal that goes against the will of God and therefore the social conditions that cause poverty must be condemned.

"If we participate in structures that oppress others, we must either change those structures or break with them," McAfee Brown says. His portrait of the Jubilee justice that Jesus announces and embodies would look like this: "The land is not to be exploited any more. Slaves are to be freed. Debts are to be cancelled. Capital unjustly gained is to be redistributed. Any political, economic, social or religious structures that perpetuate exploitation must be changed to create a society committed to the reversal of

the plight of the poor. The materially poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed or victims.

"The provisions of the Jubilee are not spiritual consolation prizes for those who fail to make it here and now. They are specific descriptions of what the here and now is in the process of becoming."

Or ought to be. That's where our congregations come in, often led by our Outreach Committees. Now that we understand that we are all to be Jubilee Workers, how do the leaders of that work in our congregations get started?

There are many ways to start, but let me mention just three.

## Passion/Gift Audit

Find out what the passions and gifts are in your committee, your congregation and in the community, both near and distant:

- Once a year take some time in your committee to find out where the passions and gifts around mission and outreach are. Is it refugee work, supporting the local food bank, peace work, promoting public health care, eradicating poverty, living simply, selling fairly traded products? If the whole committee is interested in peace work but you're trying your hardest to do some refugee work, for example, you may have a problem. Every year have the Outreach Committee find out where members want to put their energy. Start with an audit of your passions and gifts and have a conversation to identify a few key areas in which to lead the congregation. Then plot a course for the next year, leaving room for flexibility for urgent issues.
- Don't do this in isolation. Make sure you know what the congregation's mission goals are and how your work fits in. Every three years, do a passion audit for the whole congregation to find out what kind of outreach work they are keen for. You may be able to

tie your efforts to the passion and gifts of members of the congregation. You can also make use of information gathered during a Needs Assessment or Interim Ministry. Once you have made some decisions, bring in key congregation members who are not on the Outreach Committee to work on a specific project for a specific period of time.

- Find out what is happening in your community by asking questions like: Who lives in the community? Who is on the fringes? What do businesses, social agencies or community groups contribute to the community? What gaps are there in services? How can your congregation contribute? Are there some partners for this ministry (other churches, agencies, businesses, unions or neighbourhood groups)? The United Church of Canada has created a resource to help congregations through a process that is designed to help them discover their local outreach ministry - *Restoring Communities to Live In: A Community Engagement Handbook*.
- Keep in touch with the issues being raised by the wider church. Hamilton Conference has a monthly mailing (HamPack), which has items listed to go to the Outreach Committee. If you aren't receiving anything from Hamilton Conference, talk to your secretary or minister to ensure you are getting your mail. You can also get a member of the committee on the Urgent Action Network by contacting [elegrand@hamconf.org](mailto:elegrand@hamconf.org). This works as a mini-Amnesty International, asking for brief responses to urgent crises that originate from our overseas partners.
- Make sure your committee reads Mandate, the United Church's mission magazine, and monitors The United Church Observer, Infopack (the regular mailing from General Council) for special projects like the Beads of Hope Campaign on HIV/AIDS, the World Council of Churches Decade to Overcome Violence or the blue ribbon campaign for peace and justice in Iraq.
- Don't try and do it all. That's why the audits of your committee, congregation, the neighborhood and the wider church are important. They expose you to all kinds of possibilities. Then it's up to you to show leadership by saying, "Yes" to the kinds of campaigns, petitions, education events, letter writing or action that makes sense to you in your context. You have done the research - now it's time to make your own plans, shape the outreach to your gifts and passions and to the needs that you see as foremost in your neighbourhood or around the globe.

## Making Choices

Here's a good starting point from Susan Eaton, an adult educator with a special interest in social justice and international development issues who wrote on this subject for Exchange Magazine in the Fall of 1999. As she puts it, "One of the biggest challenges faced by groups and congregations interested in working on social justice issues is determining which worthwhile cause or campaign deserves attention. Invitations to participate in a new education program or urgent action appeal seem to appear every week. With so many options to choose from, it doesn't take long to feel overwhelmed."

Eaton says that most programs have three key ingredients: educating ourselves, educating others and taking action. She says most of the groups she has seen in action spend most of their time on the self-education; then comes those groups that will work on getting signatures for petitions or on letter writing campaigns; and finally there are those who hold public meetings and engage in dialogue with the wider community.

"There is nothing fundamentally wrong with choosing to put our energy into any one of these aspects of the work," she stresses. "It is important, however, to keep in mind that knowledge without action doesn't do much to bring about positive social change. As well, action without any reflection or expanded understanding is easily written off as mere 'activism.'"

"When there are so many worthwhile campaigns, issues and programs that demand our attention, and when so much is expected if we decide to take on an issue, what is the time-strapped congregation supposed to do?"

And how is the extremely busy Outreach Committee going to lead the congregation? Eaton has some suggestions, which I have adapted slightly:

- Narrow your possible issues or program ideas to two or three. Assign two people to do some research on each of the topics and get them to make a presentation to the next meeting. One can be the researcher, the other the investigator. The researcher should order copies of relevant resources, get to know the main points of the particular campaign and use the journalist's five W's as a guide: Who (Who is behind the program? Who is it geared for?); What (What is the main concern behind the program?); When (When is it happening?); Why (Why will it be beneficial?). Investigators might find out what connections there are between the particular program and the services or agencies in the local

How do you do that?

community and whether or not any collaboration is possible.

- At the decision-making meeting, state clearly the goals of the meeting; use Scripture such as 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 to help members reflect on the variety of gifts people have; ask people to reflect on the gifts they bring to the decision table; then ask each researcher to present the information they have gathered in the form of a news report (factual, brief); have each investigator respond to the researcher with information on how it will link with the community.
- Now, in small groups or as a committee, discuss: what the various programs have in common (international debt, violence against women, poverty, the environment); who is likely to benefit from the program; which programs help you form community partnerships; and how it will help your congregational and committee gifts be utilized.
- Finally, ask these questions: Which parts of the campaigns can be consolidated under one theme? What resources from each of the campaigns can be used for our own integrated plan? Which program will offer all three of the keys above: educating ourselves, educating others and wide participation in an action plan?

As Eaton says, “Perhaps it is no longer a question of making a choice. Once we begin to understand the relationship between issues, it is a lot easier to adopt or take on one particular program without rejecting the others. We soon realize that many issues are inter-related.”

### Justice Discernment

A third way of making decisions for an Outreach Committee is offered by the Church in Society Division of York Presbytery in Toronto Conference. It has four key elements as outlined by Bruce Ervin in an Exchange Magazine article from Spring 2000: faithfulness, community, gifts/partners and hope.

- Faithfulness: A key source of discernment when choosing whether to get involved in a particular project is faith. Does the Bible include stories of situations similar to the one you are considering involving your congregation in? What does the United Church of Canada say about the issue (See In the Public Arena, a compilation of General Council statements on social justice issues)? Does the New Creed offer any insights?
- Community: How would this project help to build community in the world around you, become more like the body of Christ? Will it help us see Christ in others?

- Gifts/Partnerships: Who else is working on this kind of issue? What can we add? Can we fully commit our gifts, imagination, courage and will?
- Hope: What do we hope the outcome of this particular ministry will be? Will it deepen our relationship with God?

There is no one right way to do outreach in our congregations. Responding to the love of God in the person of Jesus Christ for our own sake, the sake of our neighbours and our planet takes imagination, guts and faithfulness. Those elements are there in all our congregations and in our Outreach Committees. You can help lead this ministry in your congregation if you are open to the Spirit of God and intentional in working with those committed people on your committee and with the whole congregation in partnership with people of good will in your community and in the wider church of God.

Don't get discouraged by the plethora of issues. Use some of the suggestions above to discern where you are called and remember, you don't have to do it all. As our New Creed tells us, we are not alone. God is already at work on the injustices of the world in ways we haven't yet imagined!

*John Asling is Hamilton Conference's Minister for Mission and Communication.*



## Suggested Reading:

Greene, Bonnie, *Taking Control of Your Mission Agenda*, The United Church Publishing House, 1991.

McAfee Brown, Robert, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible With Third World Eyes*, 1984.

*Restoring Communities to Live In: A Community Engagement Handbook*, The United Church of Canada, 1997.

*ABCs of Outreach*, The United Church of Canada.

*In the Public Arena*, The United Church of Canada, 1988.

*God, Where Are You Leading Us?* Exchange Magazine, Spring, 2000.

*Choosing an Outreach Project: Making Choices, Making Links*, Exchange Magazine, Fall, 1999.