Symbiotic – District Training Event

Good morning everybody, it is so wonderful to see you all here. As we begin I do have a few disclaimers I’d like to put out there. First, this is my first time leading a district training session – and so I’ll ask you to bear with me if I forget to do things that fit the normal format. Second – my wife is 8.75 months pregnant, and my family decided it would be super fun to get COVID this week. So I’m a little off balance coming into this. Preemptively let me say we’re all doing well thank you for your prayers. It was not how I intended to start my paternity leave, but truly better to have it over before the baby comes than after.

Alright, now before we get into things I want you to know that I’m going to literally share the transcript for what I’m about to say. I figure I can just share the whole thing with y’all, that’s the document called “Symbiotic Training.” I’m going to rattle off books and definitions and such, and it’s probably easier if you just have the whole thing. If you miss a note, I’m happy to repeat myself, but also – I’ll send you my little lecture piece. The last thing I wanted to mention is that they have asked me to record this session – I think they’re going to post the videos on the district website or something later. If anyone is not okay with recording – please let me know during the introductions. I’ll turn on the recording after the introductions.

Okay, so let’s talk agenda. First we’ll do introductions, and then I’m going to start out by giving you guys the answer. One sentence that captures basically the whole thing I’m going to try and teach you today about community outreach. I’ll give you the answer up front so if you get disconnected or need to bow out early, at least you don’t miss it and then I’ll go back to the beginning and explain the steps that get us to that conclusion. We’ll do the answer, then the framework, cover a few important definitions and finish up with practical applications and stories. I think the reason they asked me to do this training was that in my 8 years of ministry we have done SO many super fun community outreach projects – and so I’ll go over a bunch of those. And then we’ll close with an open Q and A. sound good?

Alright, let’s do introductions first – let’s say Name, Church, position (like clergy or laity) and one thing you’re hoping to learn this morning. **[go around and do introductions]**

Introduction: Alright, it is an absolute pleasure to meet you all. And for those who don’t know, my name is Pastor JJ and I am the Pastor over here at Flushing UMC in Flushing, MI – it’s a little suburb just outside of Flint. I’m from the Detroit area originally, went to school over in Grand Rapids, Seminary in Chicago, up to the UP for my first appointment. We absolutely LOVED our time in the UP, but once my wife and I started having babies we really wanted to move closer to family. I put in for a transfer, and I landed in Flushing. I’ve been here for four years, with hopefully many more ahead of me. My wife and I have three little boys, Liam, Amos, and Ezra (and as I mentioned before – another little one on the way). Fun fact, we had our third baby IN the parsonage. A home birth in the living room, which was crazy and awesome and that’s our plan for this next baby as well.

Okay, let’s get into it. This class is about Community Outreach for a Church – specifically, how do you structure your outreach ministries so that both the community and the church benefit – like a symbiotic relationship. Mutually beneficial.

The one sentence answer to the question – listen to this one sentence, and then if you want to take a nap for the rest of the class that’s fine. The key to effective community outreach is to understand that all outreach of the church is an opportunity for sanctification before it is a tool of evangelism or church growth. To put it another way, outreach and missions in the church is not a service we offer that they should be thanking us for, but it is an opportunity to do what God told us to do, and we should be thanking THEM for the chance to do it.

1, Framework

Alright, now let’s back up a little bit to give some framework. Some of this might be very familiar to you, sort of basic – but we need all the pieces for the whole puzzle to come together. And I bet there are a few who have never heard some of these very basic foundational teachings.

Back in the 90’s Rick Warren came out with a book called the “Purpose Driven Church” – most people have heard of the purpose driven life, but Rick’s true gift was the “purpose driven church.” Another key text is a book called “Simple Church” by Thomas Rainer, who is a very famous and well known church consultant. Now there’s a lot of great stuff in those books that we don’t have time for, but the key teaching that comes from both is something called the Ministry Process.

All of us know that our goal, our vision in the United Methodist Church is to create disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The ministry process is the part where we say “okay, how?” What steps do we put in place to take someone from unchurched non-believer to disciple of Jesus Christ. Rather than setting goals and then just hoping it all came together – what if we shaped church on purpose? What if we were intentional about the steps we offer so people can come to know Jesus.

Now, after Rick Warren’s book “visions statements” and “purpose statements” became all the rage in churches. Most of them spent months brainstorming and crafting these careful statements that they slapped on the bottom of the bulletin and completely forgot about. Thom Rainer came along 20 years later and took a look at what happened when churches were intentional with their ministry process.

Very briefly, most ministry processes all sort of follow the same pattern::
There’s three steps and they go in order: Worship, Christian Education, and then Mission/Service
It’s the three steps to the Christian Disciples Life: worship, Christian education, and then mission/service.

For a while it became very popular for churches to come up with cute three word summaries of their purpose statements. And you got extra points if it was an alliteration. Rick Warren’s church, I think theirs is “Seek, Save, Send” – We seek you with our “seeker friendly worship” – you might remember that was a really big thing from his church. Then we save you – teach you all about Jesus, let the holy Spirit do it’s thing, and then we’re going to send you out into the community to love your neighbor. At my first appointment, the big mega church across the street used the purpose statement, “Gather, Grow, and then Go!” Gather for worship, Grow through Christian Education, and then Go out and serve people.

In my church we use the metaphor of starting a fire. There are sparks in people’s lives. Moments when God pulls on their hearts. And our job as a church is to feed that spark. Give them an opportunity to witness God. Feed that spark. You know that part when you’re trying to light a fire, and you’re striking the flint, or matches or whatever and it catches. It’s just this tiny little flame. Baby faith needs to be nurtured and cared for. Then, after you feed the spark, you need to fuel the flame. When you’re building a fire, you don’t drop a big wet log on a baby flame. You give it twigs, right? Little pieces that help the flame grow stronger. In the development of a disciple – this is where you teach someone how to have a prayer life, how to get in the habit of daily devotions – or just in the word regularly. We move from Worship – which is the spark, to Christian Education – which is fueling the flame. In my church we say, “and when the fire has grown big enough, the people around us start to notice. When the Holy Spirit has been working on my heart through my basic acts of piety (to use the Wesleyan word), the fire in our hearts grows big enough that the people around us begin to feel the warmth. If you’ve been hanging out with Jesus regularly, and you’ve been at his feet learning and growing as a disciple – you can’t help but move to the next step to live out your faith authentically in mission and service. As a mature disciple of Jesus, we MUST serve people. It has nothing to do with the needs of the community, or even the needs of church. This is about the developmental needs of the disciple.

Here's the two common problems.
First, most churches stop at step two. I’ll go to worship, I’ll go to bible study, and that’s all I need to do as a good Christian. We treat consuming knowledge as the end of the process. But the whole point of growing in knowledge is that it will equip us to live it out practically in loving our neighbor through service and outreach. Francis Chan has a great quote – it’s something along the lines of, “we don’t need another feast on doctrine, we need to get off the couch, go for a run, and work off the teachings we have already consumed. Most churches stop at step two.
Second big problem comes when churches fill step three with baby flames. You get a new person in church, they sort of believe in Jesus – sure why not. You don’t want to lose them into a bible study, so you put them in charge of outreach. They come in with all this excitement and energy, and it’s all really great – for like a minute. But it’s a lot like dropping a big wet log on a baby flame. They burn out. Their fire has not had a chance to grow, and if their motivation is not that serving others as an overflow of love as a disciple of Jesus Christ – they won’t last.

We have to flip our mentality. So many of us as church leaders, we create outreach programs and then we beg our people to participate so it will make our church more popular in the community (and then maybe more people will come to our church). But if we flip the mentality, we see the real picture: Service in the community is a necessary outpouring of authentic faith, and our church is providing an opportunity for disciples of Jesus to grow.

Disciples are made when the church is intentional about encouraging people through a ministry process, an intentional pathway for people to grow in their faith. And the third step is missions and outreach.

2. The mentality

Okay, so the ministry process is our framework, now I’m going to turn to the work of Nelson Searcy for our mentality. For those who don’t know Nelson Searcy is one of Rick Warren’s proteges who served at Saddleback and then moved to New York to launch his own mega church. He’s written dozens of books, they’re very short, quick, practical books that I highly recommend. Specifically I’ll give you three. First – Maximize, which is his book of giving and financial practices in the church. It’s revolutionary. Second – his book Connect – which is about how to improve volunteer recruitment, and finally Activate – which is his breakdown for small group ministry. He’s got a lot more books, but Maximize, Connect and Activate are all very, very helpful.

The reason I bring those books up is that there is a common theme. Once you understand how this plays out theologically, it actually makes it a lot easier to do practically. I know some of you might be wondering, okay – but when are we going to get to the outreach stuff, but stripping it down to the basics, and getting the mentality right will actually be more useful than a list of projects. Your church, your context is going to need different types of outreach than what I’ve needed in my context – but if we can nail down the theology no matter what your practical application looks like, you’ll be in good shape.

Another benefit to getting the mentality right is that it gets rid of our guilt. Let me explain: a lot of us church leader spend an enormous amount of time apologizing for existing. I’m so sorry, but I need someone to run coffee hour. I’m so sorry, but I need help with this project in the community. I’m so sorry, but service starts at 10. I’m so sorry, but we’re going to take an offering now. We feel guilty for asking people to do the basic things we need to do to run church. But if we remember that the pieces of church life are designed to help a disciple develop – that guilt goes away.

For example: a Christian, to grow more like Jesus and to follow his teachings – a Christian needs to develop a generous heart. That is something we all need to do. So instead of apologizing when you pass the plate, you can tell your people – this is an opportunity for us to develop generosity. I used to be really uncomfortable asking people for money – but when I realized how important it is for the people in my church to have a healthy relationship with money, I got a lot more bold with my teachings on money. We are providing them with an opportunity to give, because it’s good for them – not because of the needs of the church. I don’t mind asking people to do something that will help them grow more like Jesus. (that’s from Searcy’s Maximize book)

Another example: Nelson Searcy in his book Connect, talks about how if serving other people is a way of loving other people, and if mature disciples of Jesus must love and serve other people – then the question changes. The question should not be “what’s the minimum amount of people I need to get something done” – the question should be “how many people can I mobilize and because it is our responsibility to give people an opportunity to serve” Think about this, if every person in your church needed to volunteer for something as a part of their spiritual development, you’d probably run out of volunteer slots. It’s not about the needs of your church, it’s about the needs of your developing disciples.

And here’s a fun piece of this. If the framework and the mentality are in place properly, it can shift the morale of your organization. So many of us are frustrated with community outreach because we feel like our projects fail – because we thought the goal was to do something big and splashy – to advertise our church and hopefully get more butts in the pews. But IF the goal is to provide opportunities for disciples to grow, then you can’t have an outreach project that fails. You might think, “my church has five people in it – we can’t do anything” Yes you can! If you provide those five people with a chance to serve – you have succeeded. Even it’s not a flashy headline or a major project. Five people, slapping together PB&J for homeless people, or an after school program or something like that – that’s effective community outreach. Effective because it helped those five people grow more like Jesus. You have to change the score card. I’m going to update a familiar quote: if you shoot for transformation in the community, without discipleship – you’ll fail at both. But if you shoot for effective discipleship, you’ll get transformation of your community thrown in.

I hope I’m being clear, I do want to pause – I have one more big piece to cover, but let me ask are there any clarifying questions so far – on framework and mentality?

3. The world we live in

The last piece I want to talk about is the world we live in. When we’ve got our framework set, and our mentality is flipped around correctly the third piece of effective community outreach is understanding the context. Your community has specific needs, and there are partnerships all around you that can help you be effective.

First let’s talk about Christian partnerships. If you live in Michigan, there are probably at least two denominations in your town. The more open you are to working with other denominations, the more you can accomplish for God in your community. I run a relatively small church in a small town in Michigan – half the projects we do we would not have been able to do without our faith partners. Most towns have some sort of Pastor collective, council of church’s sort of thing. Make sure your pastor is a part of that. You should know your church neighbors. The biggest advice I can give with Faith partnerships is you need a kingdom mindset. You need to be focused on building up the kingdom of God, not your church building. Church’s have a nasty habit of poaching other church’s people. But if you can convince other churches – I’m just trying to do a good thing, for God’s glory, to give the disciples in my church an opportunity to serve because they need it for their spiritual growth – and if you can prove it, don’t take credit for stuff, don’t hog the spotlight, if you can get a collective of churches together that truly trust one another – it’s amazing the stuff you can do. Now, before I move to the next type of partnership, I do have a story and a warning. First the warning, [working together with other churches can be very tricky. There’s a reason we’re in separate buildings. And sometimes it’s silly reasons. I knew a church that wouldn’t work with us, because we were working with the Roman Catholics. Or because we used a different translation than the KJV, or because whatever. And it breaks my heart that this is true – but there are extra hurdles for women and people of color. Some super conservative churches will not work with a woman pastor. With those sort of things, we sort of have to shake the dust off our sandals and go do great work without them. [Teacher’s Gift Card Story]

Which leads me to non-Christian partnerships. There are three key areas you need to be plugged into for community outreach. Local government, Chamber of Commerce (or some kind of business networking collective) and the school system. There used to be more options like that – Rotary and Lions Club and such – but those are sort of disappearing. In all three places, the method is basically the same – we are simply listening for needs, we want to know how can we help. Go to a chamber of commerce meeting and just listen. Sit in the back of a city council meeting and just listen. Lot of that stuff is available on zoom now. Schools are trickier, don’t go to the schools and lurk. Ask the parents or the teachers, whoever you know. And if you don’t know anyone, bring a box of donuts to the district office and chat with the superintendent: hey, what does your school district need? I say this all the time, I say, “I’ve got this tiny church, we don’t have unlimited resources, but we are looking to serve.” Another group that’s not terrible to reach out to is your police force. I reached out to our chief of police, and said, “hey, I’m new in town, can I come meet you? I just want to learn about this town and what the needs are” – and he came to my office, we had a great chat.

Alright, I’m almost done I promise – I’ve got one final thing I want to teach you guys and then we’ll open up for stories and questions. Our church found it helpful to separate two categories of community outreach.
We use the words: Missions And Outreach to mean separate things.
Missions is the stuff we do that fits nicely with Matthew 25, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick. These are your basic, Acts of Mercy, service opportunities. We do food bank stuff, and gift baskets at holidays, we’re part of a homeless ministry called Family Promise, we volunteer at the soup kitchen every Tuesday, and the angel tree at Christmas, and of course we send a missionary doctor to Africa every year – that’s missions.

Outreach we define as activities that promote our name in the community, without necessarily serving anyone. For example: Easter egg hunt, trunk or Treat, Parade floats, a school rally that we participate in, getting a booth at the harvest festival, in our town there’s a holiday event called the Candlewalk. Our presence at these events is not necessarily missions, but the outreach builds relationships and trust so that the community knows the church. The better the reputation of your church in the community, the more allies you’ll have when you want to do some fun crazy community project later.

Okay – so that was my big lecture dump. All I’ve got left on my agenda is a pile of fun stories of community outreach that I’ve been a part of – but first let me open it up for a Q/A. Does anybody have any questions:

4. Stories

City:
Worship On the Riverfront (and the food trucks debacle)
Mayor – Storm Clean Up
Small Business Helps – Lord Laird.
School:
Hats and Gloves Box (start here)
The Wifi Hotspot (then move here)
Christmas Eve Gift – character development

Chamber of Commerce:
Harvest Fest
Candlewalk
Sponsor A Coupon
Pacski Eating Contest