

BRINGING A COMMUNITY PROJECT INTO FOCUS

The world experiences its share of problems—hunger, joblessness, crime, environmental hazards—and most of them seem urgent. Yet be advised: it's best to get focused before jumping in with both feet. What problem needs to be solved? It may seem obvious, but it's worth slowing down the process to get this right. Determining the problem to be solved may take time, but this essential step makes the work itself easier and more fruitful.

Don't Focus on Resources

It can be easy to get off track at the start of a community project. Imagine Sophie, the new chair of First Church's mission and outreach committee, who wonders aloud what projects the group should tackle first. She decides to poll the other members for guidance. Andy, who loves gardening and has expertise at it, says, "Let's start a community garden!" Lucy, who has a talent for sewing, loves to shop secondhand, and has noticed new shops springing up around town, suggests starting a thrift shop. Someone else suggests raising money to give to local nonprofit agencies that benefit the poor and so forth.

While none of these ideas are necessarily off track, the group has started at the wrong place. They should identify the problem at the outset instead of deciding what to do based on the resources on hand. First, identify the problem to be solved. What in the community needs to change? Then ask, are we the right people to do it? Do we have the resources?

Don't Focus on Needs

Exclusive focus on resources can sidetrack a project, but so can focusing too heavily on people's immediate needs. While these needs certainly are important, other issues may be the cause of the real problems that need to be addressed! People may be hungry, yet the problem is not their hunger but something else, such as lack of jobs, transportation, or proper training. Along similar lines, try thinking in terms of "solving" rather than

"helping." Sandra Swan, retired president of Episcopal Relief and Development, writes, "The helping that we decry is the helping that is an activity that masquerades as a solution to the problem. If we avoid using the term help, we will avoid falling into the trap of thinking that we have actually changed the system instead of merely smoothing over the symptom." This could be compared to a doctor treating the symptom without diagnosing the underlying cause.¹

Ask Probing Questions

Posing questions can uncover hidden problems, dynamics, and potential in our community projects. Ann Morisy, a lay theologian based in London, tells of visiting a church-run thrift shop located in a mining community in the countryside. Leaders had been frustrated by the lack of volunteers involved in the program, particularly men. They invited Morisy to review the situation, and she began by posing a series of questions:



IT WAS OBVIOUS AT THE VERY FIRST MEETING THAT THE OUTREACH TEAM LACKED CLEAR GOALS.

- *What was the most important thing about the shop?* Almost everyone responded that it was being able to sit around the fireplace and talk about politics or exchange the latest in local gossip.
- *What was it about the fire that was so important?* For some, it brought back happy memories of sitting around the fire at home, enjoying conversation with family and friends.
- *Why did that not happen now?* The problem was that many people had left town, leaving the old-timers behind.
- *Who lit the fire and stoked it each morning?* It was the men who took care of this.
- *Why the men?* Half-mockingly, one woman suggested that's all they were good for.
- *Why is that?* At this point the discussion came alive as those gathered told of the pit closures and the sense of uselessness the men felt. The town had entered decline, many talented young people had left, and only the old or the “good for nothings” (in their words) remained. The men then suggested that the thrift shop run by the church did not really help matters. What man would want to fold clothes and arrange used items on shelves for sale?

These probing questions laid bare the situation for all to see. In response, the shop decided to change its focus. They would take over a warehouse and set up a café for the community. This new arrangement provided jobs for both men and women to do, such as driving to the store with vans filled with clothing and furniture when homes needed to be vacated, but also restoring furniture, delivering furniture to families in need, and sorting goods for sale. Morisy observes, “The church saw that the emphasis on recycling was not limited to material goods; it was people who were being salvaged as well.”² This new direction began with a series of probing questions.

Write a Statement of Purpose

After determining the problem, capture it in a statement of purpose that encompasses the particulars of the situation. The statement should say just enough without being overly comprehensive. A single sentence statement may be too general to be useful. “Our mission is to educate the illiterate” may be accurate but

too vague to be useful. In crafting a statement, the goal should relate to the local community, and it needs to be limited enough that it can be accomplished. Vista Community Church wrote a mission statement for its free store, Bloom, that provides enough detail without being overly specific: “Bloom exists to aid in the flourishing of young families in Columbus, Ohio and surrounding areas. Our mission is to create a supportive community for families by connecting people, providing basic needs, and sharing resources.”³ Developing a statement of purpose can guard against “mission creep,” an evocative term to describe how the objective of the project can become broadened and change in ways never anticipated.

Determining the problem to be solved is a good first step, but it's not the only way to approach community engagement. For instance, an approach called asset-based community development prefers to start with the resources that a community already has rather than the problems that must be solved (see the *Parish Paper* article, “Build Lasting Strength Through Community Development,” August 2021). Both the needs-based and the problem-based approach have their merits. If starting with the problem, capture it in a statement that encompasses the particulars of the situation and be realistic about what can be accomplished. Doing so will keep the team from ending up on a treadmill of activities without a clear goal.

For Reflection and Action

Here is a simple three-step process to try:

1. Brainstorm issues and problems in your local community or neighborhood.
2. Determine which of the issues you wish to address.
3. Create a statement of purpose that defines the issue and what you hope to do about it.

This article has been adapted from Dana Horrell's book, *Engage! Tools for Ministry in the Community* (Fortress Press, 2019).

1. Sandra S. Swan, *The New Outreach* (New York: Church Publishing, 2011), 9.

2. Ann Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 77–78.

3. <https://bloomfreestore.org/our-mission>.