



Community Building: The Case of Nehemiah

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IN JESUS' KINGDOM, DISCIPLES ARE CALLED TO BE "SALT" AND "LIGHT." AS CHRISTIANS, we are made agents of preservation and people of vision in our communities. We are to leave them better places than we found them. Christians are to be salt and light on community and global levels; we are meant to have moral influence and to illuminate Jesus as the light of the world.

Christians are rediscovering an important value associated with the kingdom—community building. Community building has many names, such as community development, economic development, social justice, and community ministry. Scores of organizations have emerged where Christians are reclaiming this birthright: Voice of Calvary Ministries, Habitat for Humanity, Koinonia Farm, World Vision, Mile High Ministries, Church of the Messiah Housing Corporation, and Jesus People USA's Cornerstone Community Outreach, to name but a few.

Nehemiah provides a case in point demonstrating how people of faith can

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Nehemiah's program for rebuilding Jerusalem provides a model for the kind of community building Christians are called to do in rural America.

participate in building their community. The book describes a man whose love for God and his people translated into rebuilding his hometown, Jerusalem. Many of the steps he used in community building are the same time-honored steps used today by community development professionals. Nehemiah could be considered the patron saint and role model of those who see community building as an outcome of their Christian discipleship. What steps did Nehemiah use?

1. First, he *recognized the need*. Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who had risen to prominence in King Artaxerxes' court in Persia. Although he was away from Jerusalem, his family's hometown, he knew of that city's conditions. He described the dismal condition of Jerusalem's houses, businesses, and infrastructure: "the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire" (Neh 2:1-3).

Take a walk or drive around your community and ask yourself some questions: What is the condition of our streets and bridges, public utilities, and public buildings? What impression would people form as they see our community? Are the houses liveable and well-maintained? What is the condition of the businesses on mainstreet? What is the condition of the school, clinic, library, and churches? Are there employment opportunities in the community's businesses and industries? Is this a community to which I would be proud to invite people to move? Would I want my children to live here? The answers to questions like this form the beginning of a needs assessment.

2. Second, Nehemiah recognized the need for building a community of faith, and that meant *prayer*. His concern for the condition of his hometown must have shown in his demeanor. The king questioned him about it. This frightened Nehemiah and caused him to pray. It is unlikely that his prayer was a long, verbal petition when he "prayed to the God of heaven" (Neh 2:4), maybe just a simple "Lord, help!"

Gary Farley, a Southern Baptist rural church sociologist, differentiates between social action and social ministry. He points out that social ministry is social action that emerges out of our Christian faith. Social ministry is action in our communities that is biblically and theologically based, undergirded by prayer, and held accountable by fellow Christians. Put another way, the motto of the Christian Community Development Association is "People—empowered by God—redeeming their communities." Prayer meetings need to address the concerns of our churches, our members who are ill, our missionaries, and our pastors. But we also need to pray for ways the church can be on the front lines of social justice, improving the quality of life in our communities.

3. Third, Nehemiah needed not only to know the problems and concerns of the community, he needed also to know what resources were available—*resource assessment*. Nehemiah explained Jerusalem's needs to King Artaxerxes, who offered him a leave of absence. Nehemiah asked that "letters be given to me" (Neh 2:5-9).

This placed a broad array of the king's material and human resources at Nehemiah's disposal.

Community building requires many resources: natural and industrial resources, financial capital, access to transportation and telecommunication, tax incentives and infrastructural accommodations, energy and utilities. But the most important resource in community building is people. Economic development requires people to be innovative entrepreneurs, energetic organizers, and skilled laborers. More broadly, community development needs people who participate in creative innovations to improve the quality of life, offer a vision for what the community could be, serve as leaders, and volunteer time and energy to community projects.

Cornelia Flora, a rural sociologist at Iowa State University, uses the term "social capital" to refer to the glue that holds people together in a community. Together, they can accomplish more than if each worked individually. Social capital in a community can be seen in the number of organizations; the degree to which residents participate in these organizations; the number of people who volunteer services, monetary, and in-kind contributions to community projects; the patronage of local businesses and services; and the level of support for community-wide activities. Clearly, the churches can be leaders in helping to build social capital in their communities.

4. Fourth, since community building involves change, leaders must be sensitive to the impact of this change on others. Not everyone in a community supports change or those who are agents of change. The local elites—Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem—despised Nehemiah and laughed at him for his community development plan. He experienced the need to *be sensitive to opposition*: "when [the elites] heard this, it displeased them greatly" (Neh 2:10, 19-20).

Newcomers sometimes find rural communities difficult places to fit in. In her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris describes a circular pattern that she calls the "no hope cycle." A rural community may revere the ideal of changelessness, which can be another way of describing insular thinking or a rejection of outside values and ideals. Professionals, ministers, school officials, and other change agents who take jobs in the community face opposition and rejection of their new "outsider" ideas. When they become frustrated, accept jobs in new communities, and move away, the residents feel abandoned and exploited. This adds to their resistance to outside thinking or outsiders in general. It reinforces their reverence for the ideal of changelessness.

Church leaders need to ask how much support they offer their pastors and the new ideas that they bring. Long-term residents have been known to say, "We've seen pastors come and we've seen them go. These new ideas are only fads that we've tried before. They didn't work before. This, too, shall pass." School board officials may say the same thing about the new principal; farmers may say it about Cooperative Extension Agents; town council members say it about event organizers; and

economic development boards say it about young entrepreneurs. As members of rural congregations, are we willing to work with the “Nehemiahs” as part of the solution to community problems? Or are we one of the Sanballats, Tobiahs, and Geshems—part of the opposition?

5. Fifth, Nehemiah knew he must *do his homework*. Along with several other people, he arose one night and went and “inspected the walls of Jerusalem” (Neh 2:11-15). The passage describes the various gates, pools, and sites that he inspected before completing his study and returning home. The ravages of war and the decay of time must have left the walls and gates of Jerusalem in a discouraging state of disrepair. After completing his research project, Nehemiah knew specifically what the problems were and what would be needed to make repairs.

Too much or not enough homework sometimes can be detrimental to community building projects. They can die if a committee is asked to study a project’s feasibility and report on their progress a year later. People eventually lose interest in the project and become discouraged. On the other hand, a project can be killed if relatively little thought goes into determining its scope and the steps needed to complete it. People may spontaneously start a project without a plan, coordination, or an agreed-upon outcome. This ultimately results in failure, hurt feelings, blaming, and a reluctance to attempt new projects.

There are many ways for a church to do its homework in preparation for a community project. They can contact regional development and state government agencies, land-grant universities, and rural electric cooperatives for technical assistance. There are numerous internet sites (e.g., www.census.gov) that provide demographic and economic data. It is important to collect information and to coordinate with various agencies. But, it is extremely important that self-development efforts include participatory research—planning, leadership, and work by residents in the community. Remember that the local residents who will have to live with the results of a community building project usually have the best ideas for what they want their community to look like. They also have the motivation to provide leadership.

6. This leads to step six: *enlist the aid of the people*. Nehemiah went to the Jews, priests, nobles, rulers, and workers and said, “Let *us* rebuild the wall of Jerusalem” (Neh 2:16-18, emphasis added). Chapters 3 through 7 of the book of Nehemiah describe the efforts of the people in the community development project of rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall. One of the first groups to be mentioned was the clergy—Eliashib (the high priest) and the other priests. Even today, there is an important role for the clergy in community betterment. Next, whole families (the sons of Hassenaah) and individuals (e.g., Meremoth, Meshullam, and Zadok) participated in the work.

Community building must be based on broad participation rather than on select groups or individuals. If not broad-based, the efforts will not be owned by the majority of the people. They will feel disenfranchised from the process. And if

not broad-based, those who invest disproportionately of their time and money will become burned out, discouraged, and disillusioned at others who are unwilling to help. Participatory development projects must be *of* the people, *by* the people, and *for* the people. Anything else becomes a paternalistic, top-down maneuver done *to* the people.

Once the local rural church accepts its role in participatory community building, its leaders must address several questions: Will we provide a forum in the church to discuss community issues? Is it appropriate for us to offer sermons and/or Sunday school lessons on the issue? If so, should they be in the form of challenge, information, encouragement, or motivation? Should the congregation establish a committee or formal organizational structure to engage in community action? Should the church make a public pronouncement, take a formal stand, or offer legitimacy to the action? Who will participate in the action: the congregation as a whole, groups within the congregation, or individuals? Will the church provide funding for the action? Will the church commit to promoting participation across the community?

7. Once a community building project has been completed, those who participated in the effort are ready for the final step—*evaluation and celebration*. Chapters 7 through 12 of Nehemiah describe the reestablishment of governmental, familial, and religious systems. Having completed these organizational concerns, Jerusalem was once more ready to be a community that provided for the needs of its residents. The time had come to celebrate: “Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with rejoicing, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres” (Neh 12:27).

Project evaluation allows those involved in the community building effort to see the degree to which they accomplished their goal. Evaluation has more and more become a requirement of projects that receive funding from outside agencies. Project leaders need to review the outcomes they had hoped to achieve (such as gates built and walls repaired), determine if the outcomes were accomplished, and list those who had participated in the effort.

Celebration cannot be overlooked. It is important for those who participated in the project to be recognized and feel a sense of accomplishment. Celebration of successfully completed components of a larger development project can build momentum during the project. Celebration at the end of the project gives participants the motivation and incentive to take part in more and bigger projects. Examples of celebrations used in some communities after completing projects range from ribbon-cutting ceremonies to neighborhood parties, church pot-lucks, awards banquets, all-community picnics in the park, and newspaper pictures and articles.

For congregations and individual Christians to be “salt” and “light” in their rural communities, they need to look to Jesus, the God-Man. He “was in

the form of God” and took on “the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:6-8). Jesus’ incarnation allows us to see the connection between the spiritual and material worlds. As we make our rural communities quality places for residents to live, here and now, we exemplify what the kingdom of God will be like in eternity.* ⊕

*For more information on how a church can begin to get involved in community building, consult the following references: John Perkin, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Anthony Campolo, *Ideas for Social Action: A Handbook on Mission and Service for Christian Young People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Gregory J. Reed, *Economic Empowerment through the Church: A Blueprint for Progressive Community Development* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). See also the Christian Community Development Association, at <http://ccda.org/>; National Congress for Community Economic Development, Faith Based Program, at www.ncced.org.