

# THE NAKED CHURCH:

## Helping churches go beyond the meeting into the community

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# Chapter 10: The Power of Partnership

By Julian Richards

Partnership is a key area of community development work. There is a temptation for churches to think that nobody else is doing anything in the community or doing anything of real worth. Sometimes as Christians we can believe that it's only a church project that can make a difference. This can very easily cause us to set up our projects in isolation.

Working independently is a big 'no-no' in community development terms, in fact it breaks nearly all community development rules in one go. If you want to create hostility in your community, step on people's toes and gain a bad reputation as a community organisation, there's one easy way to do it. Work independently, set up a project without consultation, launch it without anybody out there knowing about it, and you'll achieve all these things.

Many churches are hesitant about the concept of working in partnership with the secular world, because there is a fear of being "unevenly yoked" or being controlled by others and therefore compromising the faith. At this point it may be helpful to point out that partnership is not merger, it's not losing one's distinctives. Partnership is strategising together, talking together, sharing resources where possible, and not duplicating one another's projects. It's avoiding competition for funds and it's ensuring best value for money on behalf of the clients and beneficiaries.

Partnership is essential if you want to draw any government funding down on your project. These days, evidence that you're communicating, consulting and not duplicating is essential criteria for many grant-giving bodies. In our experience at Cornerstone church, we have found that partnership is not only key for funding, but it's an open door for creating influence in the community. When one works independently, the only people we can influence are ourselves or our beneficiaries. When one works in partnership, we share our salt and light, our wisdom, our good practice and our lives with other agencies working in the field.

It has been a principle of Cornerstone Church to work in partnership from the very beginning. Our first partnership was with a local Anglican church. We wanted to do a holiday kids club, but we were a very young church and had no church hall or premises to work in. The Anglican church was a somewhat older church and had no team but had a church hall. We approached them and said, "We'll run the club for you, and you provide the hall." They jumped at the chance!

This single decision benefited us in the following ways:

1. It removed suspicion amongst local churches and the local community concerning Cornerstone being a new church and being unknown.
2. It gave Cornerstone credibility and a safety factor as we worked alongside a trusted, known and established organisation, in this case the Anglican church.
3. We benefited from profile and publicity in the wider area that we were working in.

After buying our premises, we decided to hold adult education classes in the evening. The first thing we did was contact the local college and university that were already running such classes in the local community at various premises. We could have run adult education classes by ourselves, but we decided to do it in partnership with the college and the university, and the following benefits resulted:

1. We provided a room to the college and they paid for it.
2. The college provided us with laptops and computers, and a qualified teacher to run the computer course.
3. The college supplied the advertising, administration and the registration process for the course.
4. We became known as a church that hosted adult education classes. People came to our centre and our reputation grew as a provider in the community – easy!

One of the most strategic things we did was connect with a local development group, consisting of agencies, community residents, local authority representatives, police and education personnel. Such groups they meet together to develop coherent strategy in your area. Some of these groups are embryonic, some are linked to large, non-profit making organisations or a development trust. These groups have influence, are powerful and are very strategic.

We decided to go along to the embryonic launch of our local community development group. The meetings were dull and often contentious and very long, but we decided to stick in there. Over the years Cornerstone has become a key player in this development group, that now has formed into a large development trust consisting of maybe 30 or 40 agencies, local authority, police and education and community representatives. I was invited to chair this group and it has proved to be a strategic area of influence for us as a church. What does it mean for us as a local church?

1. We are a key player in the community.
2. We are accepted and respected.
3. We have credibility to fund our projects.
4. We have leadership influence in our community.

Partnership is not only essential for funding and delivering projects that are in the interest of the community we wish to serve, but also strategic in networking, building relationships and influencing policy for our community.

### **The way ahead**

Here are some points that may help you discover partnerships in your area:

1. Telephone your local authority and ask to speak to someone responsible for community development in your area.
2. Ask to meet with your local councillor and explain your desire to serve your community and get involved.
3. Contact your local County Voluntary Council (CVC) (see Part 4) and ask who to contact in your area concerning community development. Are there any community development groups taking place in your area?