

Using Government to Build Community Power for Environmental Justice

Inspired by theology laid out of the book of Job and the gospel of Mark, we will discuss how we as community members and leaders can build community power for environmental justice by asking community members what they need, fostering community champions, and creating opportunities for education, stewardship, and advocacy.

Attendees will learn how to use governmental tools and funding to enable their work, and will be provided with references for national and localized funding resources.

Introduction

My name is Cara Coates and I wanted to preface by saying that I am here at this conference as a Methodist, but in my professional life I am a Volunteer Engagement Specialist with Missouri Department of Conservation, working with Missouri Stream Team and Missouri Master Naturalist volunteers. I am very passionate about community-based conservation and conservation relevancy. I am not representing the Missouri Department of Conservation today, however, I will reference many opportunities for funding and support that I work with in my professional life that, if you would like to contact me about after this, I would love to hear from you.

A Theological Basis

Job 12:7-10

7 “But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
8 ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you,
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
9 Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
10 In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.”

Mark 14:22-25

22 “While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” 23 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Toxic Charity: What is it?

Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help and How to Reverse It by Robert D. Lupton

Toxic Charity, in a very brief summary, is well-intentioned work that does not look at the effects it has on the communities it is meant to serve.

Excerpt from Chapter 2: The Problem with Good Intentions

“With enthusiasm and energy my Presbyterian church missions team laid the groundwork for a partnership with a remote Honduran village. A bishop in that region had told us of their desperate need—an isolated people struggling with daily survival needs. Church leaders determined that this would be

more than a ten-day service trip. They would make a long-term commitment to this village, build friendships and trust over time, have a true partnership. This would be both a sensitive and responsible investment of time and resources. On the initial visit one need became obvious. Water. The village women had to carry water from a supply source miles away, spending hours each day trudging in the oppressive heat. The church could do something about that and had connections with well-drilling engineers. The church also had money to cover the costs. This was a desperate need that could be addressed immediately. And the church did so. When the first water was pumped to the surface and villagers filled their jugs with cool, pure water, there was a great celebration. There were cheers and hugs of joy and many “gracias, señors.” We had changed these people’s lives. The following year, however, as the church’s returning missionaries rumbled up the dusty road toward the village, they observed women carrying water jugs as they had done before. Arriving at the village, the team saw that the well was idle. The pump had broken down, and there was no way to draw precious water to the surface. The ministry team knew what they had to do. They repaired the pump. Soon water was flowing in the village once more. But by the time the team returned the following year, the pump had broken down yet again. And women resumed their toilsome treks. This happened year after year. The village simply waited until their benefactors returned to fix their well. Another remote Central American village had a similar need for water. They, too, were blessed with a partner from the United States. But this Nicaraguan village, unlike the Honduran village, received a mission partner with an altogether different approach to serving. Opportunity International, a Chicago-based microlending organization, commissioned a community developer to assist the residents in creating a plan for their much-needed well. She assisted them in finding information on drilling and material costs. She helped them formulate a budget and a rudimentary business plan. She arranged for a loan conditional upon villagers’ investing their own money from their meager savings. Then she connected them with a reliable Nicaraguan engineer and helped them organize a water commission to set fees, collect water bills, manage finances, and maintain their new utility. Village men provided all the labor, digging trenches, laying water lines, and setting 220 water meters. When the pump was switched on and water surged to the homes, the village erupted with pride. Their water supply, they soon learned, was abundant—sufficient to allow them to sell water to the local government school and negotiate supplying an adjacent village. They now owned and managed a wealth-producing asset.”

Toxic Charity: What is it Not?

The Oath of Compassionate Service

- Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.
- Limit one way giving to emergency situations.
- Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements.
- Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served.
- Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said - unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service.
- Above all, do no harm.

What Most Mission Trips and Service Trips Actually Do

Contrary to popular belief, most mission trips and service projects *do not*:

- Empower those being served.
- Engender healthy cross-cultural relationships.
- Improve local quality of life.
- Relieve poverty.
- Change the lives of participants.
- Increase support for long-term mission work.

Contrary to popular belief, most mission trips and service projects *do*:

- Weaken those being served.
- Foster dishonest relationships.
- Erode recipients’ work ethic.
- Deepen dependency.

How to Create Opportunities: Intentional Work with Communities to Enable Them to Empower Themselves

Combining Mercy & Justice

Mercy Combined with Justice Creates:

- Immediate care with a future plan.
- Emergency relief and responsible development.
- Short-term intervention and long-term involvement.
- Heart responses and engaged minds.

Fostering Community Champions

The first step to serving a community is truly understanding the community you wish to serve. Creating real ties and bonds, true partnerships and relationships, is the key to success.

Trust - The firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.

When We Learn to Trust Them: An Excerpt from Chapter 4: Needs vs. Relationships

"Trust is the foundation of all human relationships. Without trust marriages dissolve, business partnerships collapse, loyalty evaporates. Trust is the bedrock upon which civil society is built. Without it we resort to self-protection, erect defensive walls, remain forever on guard. Trust is also the essence of faith. We Christians believe in a God we cannot see. We pledge ourselves to a community charged with demonstrating selfless love for one another. The interests of others are to be held above our own. Learning to trust one another, to be trustworthy in our relationships, is the foundation upon which such community flourishes. But even the church never measures up to these high ideals. As hard as we try, sometimes we hurt other people. Egos often get in the way. But we continue to aspire to healthy community life. Given that trust is such a high value for people of faith, one would expect their charity to encourage honest relationships between giver and recipient. In practice, however, rarely are recipients members of the disbursing community in the Western church. And as cordial and as genuinely friendly as givers may be, the poor remain on the outside. Resources are owned by insiders. Rules are devised by those in control. The giver-recipient relationship is doomed from the start. Such relationships hardly foster trust. Usually they breed resentment. The recipient must figure out the rules of the system, determine the kind of appeal most likely to secure the maximum benefit, learn the language that best matches the dispenser's values, and, above all, be sincere. Half truths are acceptable. Fabrication may be necessary. It doesn't really matter since this is about working a system, not joining a community. Givers, then, must continually tighten the rules, close off loopholes, guard against favoritism, and be ever vigilant to detect manipulation or outright fraud. The system lends itself to adversarial relationships. If trust is essential for building relationships and making enterprises run effectively, then we have to find a way for outsiders to become insiders. Recipients must become dispensers, authors of the rules, builders of community."

A Case Study in Fostering Community Champions

Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council in Rhode Island

Their Mission - Create positive environmental, social, and economic change by revitalizing the Woonasquatucket River, its Greenway, and its communities.

- Communities impacted by the watershed include 283,757 people, which is 27% of Rhode Island.
 - Olneyville, Providence Rhode Island has a population of about 7,000.
 - 60% Hispanic/Latin Americans, 15% White, 13% Black
 - Median Household Income \$30,000 - 40,000 a year
 - Community members are almost all in the floodplain/floodzone of the Woonasquatucket River.

- Project Goals:
 - Cultivate Engaged Climate Resilience
 - Build Climate Justice Literacy
 - Develop Leadership Capacity
 - Frontline Resident Co-Governance

Initial Survey(s)

Door to Door Canvassing: Bilingual (Spanish/English) Well Known in the Community (paid \$25/hour)

They ask community members these questions:

- How much do you know about Climate Change? (50% little or nothing)
- Is the climate changing in Olneyville? (63% yes, 28% not sure, 9% no)
 - If yes, what risks are there in Olneyville?
 - Major themes identified:
 - Flooding
 - More extreme weather
 - Illness, flu, fever
 - How likely is a disaster here? (71% somewhat to very likely)
 - How severe would the impact be to you? (75% somewhat to very severe)

From the results of this survey, they create **New Voices**, a program for recruitment and program development, created by resident leaders (community champions). Two community champions created a 20-person cohort in 2021, that received \$25 an hour, translation & interpretation when necessary, transportation and childcare for in-person activities, and technology and digital content accessibility (could rent or cost-share computers and have a location provided with wifi).

Mission - Create environmental awareness by providing historical, scientific, and environmental knowledge of our community in order to understand and take action for its protection and preservation so that the generations to come can continue to enjoy their environment.

Objectives

- Foster consciousness around local environmental issues.
- Comfortability discussing environmental issues.
- Build long-term community connections.
- Development of leadership skills and opportunities.

Here is two examples of what they did in the education portion of their cohort:

- Neighborhood Canvassing
- Green Infrastructure Tour

How did they transfer power (empowerment)?

- Two New Voices graduates facilitated the next 2022 Cohort.
- A New Voices Graduate was appointed to represent Olneyville on the Providence Human Relations Commission Board.
- Graduates recruited future cohorts.
- One of the New Voices graduates is now a Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council Environmental Educator on their staff.
- The Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council board & staff actively solicit membership from the New Voices graduates.

Check them out here: <https://wrrwc.org/wp/>

What is a Community Champion?

A *Community Champion* is someone who volunteers within their own local community to promote and enhance people's wellbeing. *Community Champions* are generally people with life experience in the

community that they represent - perhaps they've grown up there or have lived or worked there for many years. They're likely to have good social networks in the area and can tap into these connections in order to improve services and address barriers. They have the inherent **trust** of the community they represent.

Why do we want to foster Community Champions?

- Community Champions are trusted, often socially connected members of the community.
- They know the needs of the community better than we ever could, as an outsider looking in.
- They can empower their community to take ownership of the issues they face.

How do you recruit Community Champions?

- Immerse yourself in the community:
 - Ask community members what they need, and offer your service where appropriate.
 - Let them determine your path.
 - View their problems not as a short-term crisis, but a long-term problem that needs strategic solutions and community buy in.
 - Learn as you go, and most of all, listen.
 - Build trust and create a true partnership.

Education, Stewardship, and Advocacy

Education

- Providing free, public programming on community issues:
 - Examples:
 - How to Safely Conduct a Litter Pick-Up
 - How to Plant a Native Garden

Stewardship

- Providing guidance and equipment to help with community issues:
 - Examples:
 - Guides, Grants, & Cost-Share Opportunities for Litter Pick-Ups
 - Going out there the first (at least) 3 times and doing the work with them.
 - Set them up for success with this model:
 - Teach
 - Show
 - Do
 - Guides, Grants, & Cost-Share Opportunities for Native Plantings
 - Going out there the first (at least) 3 times and doing the work with them.
 - Set them up for success with this model:
 - Teach
 - Show
 - Do

Advocacy

Once folks have the education and the stewardship, they will be empowered to advocate for themselves. Community Champions will be empowered to speak to and mobilize their community, and build on the programs originally established through them. They take true ownership of their community improvement and ensure its success.

How do we define success?

Success can be defined in many ways. But I want us to remember that we aren't looking for outcomes (even though they can be useful) like volunteer hours reported, number of people served, etc. Instead I would like us to keep our mindsets on actionable, long-term change. For example, in North St. Louis County, instead of looking at numbers of volunteer hours in water quality monitoring, my measure of

success would be community involvement in localized stream health, resulting in long-term plans for better water quality maintained by the local community. This might look like a Watershed Association being established with board members representing each municipality, each a Community Champion that lives within those municipalities.

Using the Tools Available to Us

Case Studies

Integrating Environmental Justice with Water Resource Management:

<https://www.epa.gov/watershedacademy/integrating-environmental-justice-water-resource-management-webcast>

Examples of Community Conservation: <https://mdc.mo.gov/community-conservation/examples-community-conservation>

Funding Available

- Federal
 - Environmental Protection Agency: <https://www.epa.gov/grants>
 - U.S. Department of Agriculture: <https://www.usda.gov/topics/farming/grants-and-loans>
- State
 - Missouri Department of Conservation
 - Missouri Stream Team (mini-grants for activities): Cara.Arrigo@mdc.mo.gov
 - Community Conservation:
 - Funding: <https://mdc.mo.gov/community-conservation/community-conservation-funding-opportunities>
 - Resources for Community Leaders & Developers: <https://mdc.mo.gov/community-conservation/resources-community-leaders-developers>
 - Missouri Department of Natural Resources
 - Clean Water Act 319 Grants: <https://dnr.mo.gov/water/what-were-doing/financial-assistance-opportunities/section-319-nonpoint-source-subgrants>

A disclaimer: This is just my personal experience with the grants that I have used and seen partners use in the state of Missouri to work on environmental justice and empowerment projects; there are many other private and non-profit funding sources out there that I am not as familiar with.

Discussion

On the board are a set of questions that I would like you to discuss amongst yourselves and then we will all gather back together and talk about our discussions as a group:

How can you use these principles we just talked about in these ministries?

- Urban vs. Rural Community Conservation?
- Backyard Conservation?

Let's gather back together after a few minutes and share what we came up with. Then end out with this final discussion:

- Questions?
- Round-Robin of Conservation Ideas