

ENLACE WHITE PAPER

**THE CHURCH AS EFFECTIVE AGENT OF COMMUNITY
TRANSFORMATION**

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Over the last several decades, development organizations have learned that initiatives that effectively alleviate poverty must be sustainable and integrated. Sustainable projects must have community ownership and participation in the design and management of initiatives. Projects must also be integrated to other initiatives to maximize resources and investments. ENLACE's approach builds the organizational capacity of church and community leaders and associations to identify, design and manage sustainable and integrated projects that have a significant impact on poverty alleviation in El Salvador.

The church as effective agent of community transformation

From the beginning in 1993, ENLACE believed that its focus should be to encourage and equip local community leaders to develop their own solutions to poverty. ENLACE trained local church and community leaders to identify and build upon available resources and experiences in order to design and manage initiatives that would have a long-term impact in their communities. At first, we focused our training on and coaching of community and church leaders, but we soon realized that the church, as a group of people called to fulfill God's purposes in the world, was the best agent of change in their own community for three reasons:

- 1. Only an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ can change people's hearts to create a viable community and therefore community development.** In the first few years, we worked hard to include the community in the design and management of projects so that they would have ownership and participation; however, we realized that no matter how well we helped the community design their projects to be just and efficient we could not change people's relationships to each other. For example, people would work together to build a water system they all needed, but as soon as there was a problem with someone's spigot, they would not necessarily work together to help that person resolve their problem. The project could not restore relationships, which is the first and most important step in community transformation; only an ongoing, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ can truly change someone's heart to think of others before themselves.
- 2. It is the church's mission to restore people unto God and to each other.** Community leaders and associations with whom we first worked ultimately had their own interests in mind and so were influenced by quick solutions or political forces. Additionally, there was a high rate of turnover among community association leaders due to political, personal, and financial reasons (including migrating to the U.S. for work). In contrast, the church's leadership, seen as body and not as individuals, was a continuous and steady presence in the community which did not act, at least when acting correctly, upon political or personal interest. Rather, the church body committed to a long-term process because it believed in a biblical mandate that led them to commit to their communities.
- 3. The church is a reservoir of resources.** ENLACE has worked primarily with churches of less than 100 members located in impoverished, rural areas of El Salvador. Many of the church leaders

believed they did not have the financial or human resources to become effective agents of change in their communities. As soon as they saw themselves as a reservoir and began to partner with their community, they discovered a wealth of skills and resources within their congregations. Churches already had, or could develop quickly, great fundraising skills and could pool resources together effectively. They also had a deep commitment to stewardship and compassion that made them a reservoir of resources to transform their communities.

The mission of the church is to be a restored body that transforms its community

The mission of the church is to be a restored body that transforms its community. The church is a group of people called and made new by the grace of God through Jesus Christ to love and serve one another and the world (Ephesians 2:8-10). This mission has two equally important and integrated elements: (1) the church should **be** a body of vibrant, authentic people relating to one another in love, compassion and justice (Ephesians 4, Ephesians 3:4-6, 1 Cor. 12, Ro. 12:5). And (2) the church should serve its neighbors to create long-lasting change in the relationships, institutions and overall conditions of their communities, especially focusing upon those of greatest need (Mark 12:31-33, Luke 10:27, Matt 22:39;Ro 13:9, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8).

Over the last thirteen years, I have partnered with churches in El Salvador who are committed to alleviate poverty in their communities. I have learned how important it is for a church to understand and define its mission to be a restored body of believers, or as Howard Snyder in his book *The Community of the King* calls it, a “messianic community,” as well as an effective agent of transformation in its community. A church that has not clearly included both elements in its mission has either gone inward and become a “life boat” (simply waiting for Christ’s eschatological intervention) or become externally focused in order to become a social agent without transforming power. In my experience, the church will only accomplish both things when it becomes an authentic community of people actively waiting on God, listening and obeying, and being poured out to transform its community.

It is incredible to experience a church as it begins to focus upon the needs of others before its self. It becomes an unstoppable force within the community, impacting the lives of thousands of people in life-giving ways. When a church begins to see and care for one another as God does a new form of community is created that serves to draw people deeper into the heart of God and also back out to people. As Richard Foster describes, in his book *Prayer*, the deeper you go into the heart of God the less life becomes about you and the more God pours you out to others. The more the church becomes a people submitted to God and to each other, it becomes of one heart and mind (Acts 4:32, 1 Cor. 1:10, 2 Cor. 13:4, Philippians 2:2), committed to meet the needs of those in its community (Acts 4:34, James 1:27).

The loving, caring community of believers that is the church brings you deeper into a relationship with God but also testifies of God’s unchanging love for his world. As Jesus prayed for his disciples, and for all of us, asking God “that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me,” he asked that we would “be brought to complete unity” in order to express the depth of God’s love to the world (John 17:22-23). This new form of community testifies of God’s love and becomes a reservoir

of hope to their neighbors. When a church, as a group of people who love and serve God, begin to lift up their eyes to see each other and their neighbors as God does, they become the salt and light to their community; they become the leaven with spiritual authority to become effective agents of change in their community. It is an often mysterious, amazing, dynamic process where the body is formed and strengthened as it serves effectively and transforms its community.

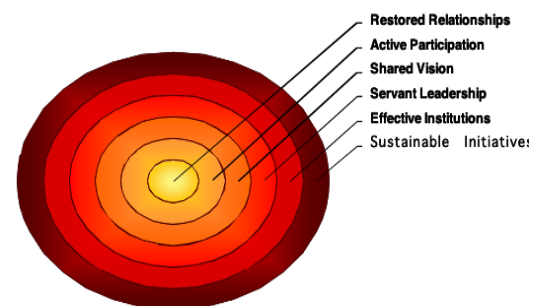
What is community transformation?

Community transformation is a dynamic and continuous process in which people are restored to God and reflect his reign or Kingdom in every area of their lives. Many understand community transformation as the process of change while others focus upon the results or outcomes such as affordable housing, better health or dignified employment. At ENLACE, community transformation is the process in which relationships are restored to God and to each other; a process that enables active participation of all community members under a shared vision to develop responsive institutions and sustainable initiatives that alleviate poverty.

In our experience, community transformation is a slow, arduous, and evolving process. You first see glimpses of transformation in people's hearts, values, attitudes toward God and to each other which after many years encourages and produces sustainable changes to the conditions of their lives such as dignified housing, employment, and health.

ENLACE facilitates the process of community transformation as it occurs in six dimensions or spheres.

Restored relationships: People restored to God and to each other producing a loving, compassionate and just community of servants of God. The community sees each other as children of God, dependent upon God and interdependent upon each other to fulfill his plan for the world. Everyone is restored, called and an active part of fulfilling the purposes of God.



Active participation: A community where everyone participates actively in vision-casting, decision-making, and implementing sustainable solutions that is inclusive, equitable and just. Participation is based upon and encourages the forming and using of gifts and skills given by God to build the entire community.

Shared vision: A vision of the future that is shared by the community, that is realistic and reflects the Kingdom of God. The vision should be developed in open dialog among community members. It should ultimately create a shared sense of identity and purpose.

Servant leadership: Leaders from within the community are committed to listening, learning and caring for the entire community with special care for the most needy. Servant leaders are concerned

with the spiritual and personal development of those they serve. Ultimately they strive to create new servant leaders.

Effective institutions: Public and private organizations and churches that respond to opportunities identified by community servant leaders that fit within their shared vision and are implemented in a transparent, just and effective manner. Effective institutions do not impose agendas or programs but try to facilitate and strengthen local initiatives.

Sustainable solutions: Initiatives that are identified and designed by the church and community leaders based upon existing local resources and skills that have a long-lasting impact on the community.

What impedes more churches from transforming their communities?

Over the years of working with churches in El Salvador, we have identified five general reasons why churches do not engage in or drop out of community transformation which are as follows:

- **Community transformation is not part of the church's mission.** The first and most important reason why churches do not get involved in community transformation is that it is not central to their mission. Most church leaders understand community service to be an important part of the spiritual formation of their members and an excellent way to announce to their neighbors that there is a church in their area that loves them; nevertheless, they do not believe that the church's mission is to make a sustainable change in their communities. They define community transformation as a social outreach project but not as change in the relationships, vision and overall living conditions of the most impoverished of their neighbors.
- **Community transformation is someone else's responsibility.** In different contexts, at different times, the church has found other agents to hold responsible for social change. The church looks to or holds responsible the government, non-profit agencies, para-church organizations or civil society to take care of the long-term needs of its community. Even when they are skeptical of their effectiveness, churches will hold other organizations responsible for transforming their community.
- **Church leaders believe they lack the sufficient resources to transform their communities.** In many cases, churches see themselves as lacking the sufficient resources (such as money, time, and personnel) to effect long-lasting change in their communities. Many churches see themselves as recipients of assistance or as needing resources themselves and therefore cannot contribute to community transformation. Whereas other churches believe that it requires extensive, professional expertise or large amounts of money to effect substantive change so do not begin to connect or have an impact in their community.
- **Prejudice.** Many churches hold deep ideologies of difference based upon race, ethnicity, class, gender and religion that separates them from their neighbors. Churches hold subconscious and conscious beliefs about the differences between people which inform their lack of action. In

some cases, their belief about race or ethnicity affects their relationships and actions toward others. In other cases, their understanding of poverty such as, “people are poor because they want to be,” “or because they are lazy,” prompts a church not to focus their attention on the needs of the poor. Another major reason why churches do not reach out to their neighbors is because of religious differences. Churches are hindered from reaching out to others for fear of crossing lines between major groups of faith (such as Catholic versus Protestant) or even between different denominations.

- **Church leaders state that they do not know how to effectively transform their communities.** Many church leaders state that they want to effectively to their neighbors but they do not know how to discover their church’s resources, connect to their community, or develop sustainable initiatives to transform their communities.

Although I’ve seen many church leaders struggle with these five obstacles, it is an amazing experience to watch those who take a chance to develop a mission for their church that includes community transformation, to reach out and partner with their neighbors, to begin to serve sacrificially, and to ultimately become leaders of long-lasting change in their communities.

ENLACE’s Approach: Equipping churches to transform their communities

ENLACE is a registered, non-profit corporation in El Salvador founded in 1993. ENLACE’s mission is to equip local churches to transform impoverished communities in El Salvador. ENLACE trains church leaders to understand who they are as a body, listen to their community and respond effectively to opportunities to develop sustainable solutions to poverty. ENLACE accompanies church and community leaders to identify and manage health, economic development and community building initiatives.

ENLACE commits to a seven to ten year relationship with a local church in El Salvador. ENLACE’s vision is to see churches become leaders that equip surrounding churches. Churches become leaders when they embody the following values:

- **Servant Leadership:** church leaders committed to listen, trust, collaborate, and empower local church and community leaders.
- **Integral Mission:** a congregation with a shared vision of the mission of the church as a body that testifies to God’s love, grace and justice through worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship and service to transform their community.
- **Sustainable Development Solutions:** church and community leaders partner to identify, design and manage initiatives that alleviate multidimensional poverty.
- **Community Capacity Building:** church and community leaders strengthen the capacity of community-based organizations to understand shared problems, encourage active participation and mobilize local and regional resources.
- **Organic Growth:** church leaders encourage and equip leaders from other churches and organizations to engage in effective church-based community transformation.

ENLACE's approach is an intuitive, fluid, and dynamic process. It is a process that is adapted to every church and community's unique history, vision, resources and opportunities. The process is fluid and dynamic because each stage builds off and contributes to one another. The methodology is structured as a reflexive learning spiral in which the six general steps of the approach are repeated every year using different tools and exercises to institutionalize the change in the church and the community.

The six general steps of our approach that are repeated every year are as follows:

- **Discovering your church.** The first stage of the process is to begin to discover who you are as a congregation. During this stage the church leaders identify attitudes that might impede them from reaching out to their community. They evaluate their current mission and vision statement and organizational structure. They also begin to appreciate the skills and capacities of their leadership and identify resources available in their congregation. Although this stage continues throughout the entire process as you learn more about your church and new members join the church, the initial stage usually lasts between 3 to 6 months.
- **Organizing to serve.** The second stage involves aligning your resources to your mission and vision. In this stage the church leaders work on reformulating their mission and vision statement and aligning their programs and departments to the mission. In this stage the church begins to identify and train servant leaders to connect to their community. In some cases a committee or team (or a set of teams) are organized to lead the community transformation process. This stage can last from 3 to 6 months.
- **Listening to your community.** It is during this stage that church leaders begin to connect to and understand their community. The church leaders will do a series of activities such as interviewing formal and informal leaders, meeting with local organizations, and conducting one-on-one informal and formals interviews to begin to develop a profile of their community. There are other activities the church leaders are encouraged to do to begin to understand the dynamics of their community such as a walk-through at different times and days of the week, hanging out at favorite community places, and participating in community activities such as meetings, fairs, or parties. The central emphasis of this stage is for the church to begin to develop relationships with community leaders and organizations and begins to serve together. This stage can take anywhere from 6 to 12 months.
- **Partnering effectively with your community.** The focus of this stage is to create a common vision for the community and develop the leadership and technical skills required to design and manage appropriate initiatives. This stage involves training church and community leaders to identify, design, manage and evaluate sustainable initiatives. It is also during this stage that we train leaders to mobilize local resources to implement the initiative. The final product of this stage is an equipped leadership team and organizational structure to manage existing initiatives and identify new ones. This stage ranges from 3 to 7 years.

- **Incarnating the mission of the church.** The emphasis of this stage is to institutionalize the mission of the church in the whole body. It is during this stage that the leadership of the church is encouraged to communicate and celebrate what they are doing with the body. The church leadership identifies and trains new leaders, develops new ways of communicating their mission, vision and activities, and hosts church and community events to celebrate transformation. This stage begins shortly after they have started the partnering stage and continues throughout the life of the church.
- **Encouraging other churches.** In this final stage, church leaders train and equip other local and regional churches to transform their communities. It is during this stage that ENLACE provides church leaders with the materials and methodology to replicate the process. This stage ranges from 3 to 5 years.

SUGGESTED READING

To explore the biblical-theological bases of the mission of the church read:

Escobar, Samuel. *Tiempo de Misión: América Latina y la Misión Cristiana Hoy*. Santafé de Bogotá-Guatemala: Ediciones Clara-Semilla, 1999.

Guder, Darrell L., ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

Padilla, Rene, *Bases Bíblicas de la Misión: Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*, Ediciones Nueva Creación, Buenos Aires, 1998.

Padilla, Rene and Yamamori Tetsunao, eds. *La Iglesia como Agente de Transformación: Una Eclesiología para la Misión Integral*. Ediciones Kairos. Buenos Aires 2003.

Snyder, Howard. *The Community of the King*. Intervarsity Press; Revised Edition. 2004.

To explore practical models and methods for church-based development read:

Harvest Foundation. *Leadership Development Training Program*. The Harvest Foundation, Tempe Arizona, USA, 1979.

Lewis, Robert. *The Church of Irresistible Influence*. Zondervan Publishing House. Michigan USA, 2001.

Myers, Bryant L. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Orbis Books. 1999.

Myers, Bryant L., ed. *Working with the Poor: New Insights and Learnings from Development Practitioners*. World Vision International. 1999.

Ministerios Comunitarios. *Iglesia, Comunidad y Cambio*. *Fundación Kairós*. Buenos Aires, 2002.

Sider, Ronald J. *Churches that make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works*. Orbis books, 1999.

Tetsunao, Yamamori, Gregorio Rake and Rene Padilla, eds. *Servir con los pobres en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 1997.

To learn about organizational capacity building and sustainable community development read:

CEDPA. *Diseño de Proyectos para Administradores de Programas: Ejecución de un seminario sobre planificación de proyectos básicos para la comunidad*. Ed. Cedpa, Washington D. C., USA, 1995.

CRWRC. *Asociarse para Desarrollar y Medir la Capacidad Organizacional*. Ediciones CRWC, 1997.

Kretzmann, John and John McKnight. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. ACTA Publications. 1997.