



Local church, local business

Businesses are part of every local community. Some are obvious, like shops, and others may be tucked away in side streets, offices and homes. Some will be locally owned and others will be branches of regional, national or even international organisations. Some will employ mainly local people, others will commute in and know little of your area, but all will have an impact on the local community

In developing relationships with local businesses churches can help build community and reach out to people they may not otherwise meet.

In the current economic situation it's important that the church supports employers as well as those experiencing unemployment.

Businesses may also be a source of help with church based community projects.

Corporate Social Responsibility [CSR] is often thought of as something done by larger companies, often through charitable giving or philanthropy but many small and medium size companies also want to build community links and make a contribution in some way.

Below are some suggestions of how to approach relationships with companies and involve them in church projects.

Reaching Out.

Mapping - First you need to know the businesses in your area, mapping who they are and what they do. A walk round the area noting all the places of work you can find is a good place to start. Church members will also have information to share.

Meeting - Relationships with High Street shops and others are often very natural because church members are their customers. It's easy to meet people and to ask how things are. If it's a larger store you can ask for an appointment with the manager.

Other companies will need to be visited. Contact the most senior person on site, explain who you are and that you are interested in all that happens in your neighbourhood, ask for a meeting so that you can understand what they do and perhaps be shown around. At the meeting check how many people they employ, where are they from, what sort of issues the business faces, how they see the local area.

Some churches hold regular prayers for the community and company visits might inform those prayers. You may feel it appropriate to ask if there are any issues that the manager would like you to pray for.

Growing relationships

Meetings with companies and conversations in the congregation will enable you to learn the interests and issues for local businesses and to begin to think how these may link with church activities and concerns. Having looked at the possibilities you will need to select those that look 'do-able' and choose from them.

It may be an awareness of stress on managers trying to make a business work and employees trying to hang on to jobs, in which case the church response might be prayer and pastoral support, perhaps popping in every quarter to see how things are or go more regularly if invited.

If there's a sense of people working in isolation in their homes or people being so busy that they can't stop, the church might consider developing a space where people can meet or a space where people can be refreshed by quiet.

A company might be concerned about local skill levels and recruitment. Church links with schools and youth work might create an opportunity for young people to visit a business and see what jobs and skills might be open to them in future or for the manager to visit a school.

Tapping into 'Corporate Social Responsibility'

National companies generally have policies about how they support local communities. Some companies will have a structure for giving community grants. In retail, policies tend to be around contributions to raffle prizes, small monetary contributions / collections or working with larger agencies around recruitment among the long term unemployed or disadvantaged groups.

Small and medium size companies may have a willingness to contribute to the community but not know how and do not have time to make it a priority. The church knowing both the community and the company can be the connection.

One off donations or fund raising opportunities have their value but an on going relationship is likely to be more productive and possibly lead to a widening network of connections as business speaks to business.

Tight budgets mean that grants and donations may not be easy to get but companies might offer skills, such accountancy or communications, or gifts in kind, such as free printing/ copying or recycled materials for craftwork.

It's important to match the need or project and with the interests of the company being approached. Asking a baby clothes shop to support a project with the elderly means you'll have to work hard to make the link with the importance of grandparents to children. It might be easier to ask them to develop a relationship with a parenting class. If a company has environmental aspirations they might be interested in a recycling or local wildlife project

Business thrives on a good reputation which attracts customers. Accept that a company will want some acknowledgement of its involvement.

It's right to help meet a business need if it has a direct social benefit. You don't want to be on the sales team but encouraging young people into engineering by arranging a visit helps the company's future recruitment as well as raising aspirations and potential incomes.

Donations of all types will support your project but it's often an experience that changes someone's life, both the 'giver' and the 'receiver'. So look for ways of working together that allow a meeting of different groups and a new experience. The Princes Trust which has a lot of experience in this area arranges 'Seeing is believing' visits for business people to experience the community

Continue to build relationship. If a company prints the posters for an event, make sure they are invited or at least to get a report back.

Be open to new possibilities as the relationship grows.

Business in church premises?

Churches are used to renting out their premises to community groups and voluntary sector organisations which support the community. Some are already providing space for businesses such as Weighwatchers which operate on a franchise basis.

Churches might consider other business relationships. For instance, an artist might rent some space as a studio on the basis that they will offer learning opportunities to the community and arrange selling exhibitions which enhance the locality.

In this way, employment is supported, there is a theological/ spiritual connection with the business, and the community benefits. To work at their best these types of relationships require a good level mutual understanding and common values. In some churches a cluster of small businesses have developed in this way.

A mainstream local business may be able to help support this sort of development with experience of such things as rental agreements.

To explore this approach further see the 'Church based business check list'

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