

# “YOU’RE THE FIRST CHURCH THAT EVER ASKED”

*“How to Be a Good Farmer—Even in a City: Creating a Community-Based Ministry” appeared in the January–March 2011 issue of Elder’s Digest. This article proposed 10 “farming commandments” which systematized Jesus’ ministry method into 10 intentional action steps for our time<sup>1</sup> and served as an introduction to a series of Elder’s Digest articles that will address these commandments in more detail.<sup>2</sup> The following article is the fifth in the series and will focus on the seventh “farming commandment.”*

“We don’t want your water project!” said the women in the village. The government of an African country had received funding from the World Bank for community-based development projects. Bank officials and representatives from the government selected a water project for a certain village in this large country. They knew that this village did not have a water tap and that the villagers had to walk far to find water each day.

These officials were bound by law to visit the community where the project would be done and talk with the village leaders before starting the project. When the officials met with the chief of this community, he informed the government and bank officials that the women in the village did not want the water project; instead, they wanted processing/grinding machines for the shea fruit that grew in their village. Many companies in the neighboring areas needed the processed fruit as



raw material for their products. The women already supplied the fruits to the companies through middlemen, but they knew that if they could get the fruit in partially-processed form as the companies wanted it, they would be in a position to sell more to the companies than they were able to at the time.

The water project was cancelled because a major requirement for funding was that the project had to be selected by the recipient community. The World Bank introduced this rule after observing that projects selected by government officials did not necessarily match the needs of the community.

In the fall of the same year, after all the documentation had been dealt with, several grinding machines were purchased and presented to the community, and there was a ceremony to mark the occasion. The women could now grind the shea fruit themselves, skip the middlemen, and sell the partially processed fruit directly to the factories which made shea butter.

One year later, bank officials made a follow-up visit to the community to see how it had fared. The project was successful beyond expectation! The women now operated as a cooperative, and, from the proceeds of the shea butter business, the community had installed *several* water taps in a central area of their village!

What can you as a church leader learn from this story? What does it teach you about assessing community needs before launching your outreach projects? A great weakness of many community ministry projects is that church leaders assume they already know what the community needs, as did the bank and government officials in the African country. Assessment is the essential first step in reaching out to any community.

After you have studied the demographics of your community and have done a walking or driving survey<sup>3</sup> through it, you will need to get direct input from the people in the community by talking to them. This leads to Farming Commandment 7: "Thou shalt talk to community leaders and business people to discover community needs as they see them."

You can acquire worthwhile information about community needs from a random sample of 12-18 civic thought leaders. The main kinds of leaders in each community are found working in business, education, government, health and social services, media, and religion. If you line up a sample that includes these types of leaders, you will have a balanced view of the community's needs.

Begin this process<sup>4</sup> by arranging an appointment ahead of time, either by phone or by visiting the civic leader's office and speaking with his or her scheduler. When asked about the purpose of the interview, you can say something like this: "My church (or Adventist Community Services organization) is doing a community assessment, and we want to interview civic leaders to listen to their views on the needs in the community."

When you arrive for your interview, briefly introduce yourself and thank the civic leader for the opportunity to interview

him or her. Assure the leader that no names will be mentioned in any reports and that all comments will be anonymous. *Listen carefully* and take notes. Do *not* use a recording device. *Remember that you are not there to share your opinions* or give a Bible study. If you notice that the interviewee is interested in spiritual things, silently ask the Holy Spirit to guide you on how to respond. You are not there to push your beliefs, but allow the interviewee to openly share his or her opinions. Don't correct statements about your church that are untrue. Perhaps later you will have opportunity to clarify what the interviewee has heard. In this way you are gaining the leader's confidence so he or she will be more open to the gospel in the future.

Ask core questions:

1. What are the biggest assets and strong points of your community? What services does your organization provide?
2. My church wants to help with some of the most important needs in your community. What are some of the important needs you think might be good for us to focus on?
3. What could a church group do that would be helpful in the needs you have mentioned? (Go through the list item by item and ask for specific suggestions for each one.)
4. Who are some of the influential leaders in the community we should interview with the same questions? Do you have contact information for them? May I tell them you referred me?
5. What do you know about my church? What is your impression of its contribution to the community in the past?

Be flexible. Feel free to ask follow-up questions to clarify what you are hearing. It would also be good to share with each leader what you have discovered so far in your community assessment process. For example, mention ideas for community projects that you thought of while doing the walking/driving survey. Ask each leader whether these projects would be needed or if someone else is already addressing those needs. When finished, thank the leader and leave.

When you do personal interviews such as these, you are not only obtaining valuable information, but you will become known among key people in the community. This will help you gain their support for your community-service activities, and you will have gained a friend.

When your team has completed all the interviews, compile a written report of your findings. Monte Sahlin, an expert in community organizing, suggests that after you collect all the interview notes, you should:

1. Organize the responses under each question.
2. Count the number of times similar responses were given.
3. Note the key themes and specific opportunities that have surfaced.

4. Ask how you can use this information in your planning.

In your report, also include documentation from all four assessment steps:

1. The map showing your territory
2. Findings from your walking/driving survey
3. Key demographic information
4. Results from interviews with civic leaders

You can then make recommendations for future planning which will lead into crafting your wholistic mission action plan (strategic plan). An upcoming article will review the process of strategic planning for your church.

A local church's Social Action Leadership Team (SALT) was interviewing local community leaders. A few team members were meeting with the manager of a certain community within a large city. The manager gave valuable input as she answered the interview questions mentioned above. When the team asked her the last question—"What do you know about my church?"—she answered, "I don't know very much about your church, except that you are involved in the annual July 4 parade we organize; however, I am now very impressed with your church, for you are the first church that has ever asked me for input on what your ministry should be."



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<sup>1</sup> The 10 Farming Commandments are: (1) Thou shalt study Jesus' ministry method and pray for...; (2) Thou shalt assess the resources in thy church; (3) Thou shalt establish a Social Action Leadership Team (SALT); (4) Thou shalt choose and narrow down thy territory; (5) Thou shalt do a demographic analysis on the chosen territory; (6) Thou shalt drive or walk around the chosen territory and note the homes, businesses, churches, people, etc.; (7) Thou shalt talk to community leaders and business people to discover community needs as *they* see them; (8) Thou shalt earn "Social Capital;" (9) Thou shalt develop a church strategic plan for church community involvement based on the felt community needs thou has discovered and the resources and dreams of thy church; (10) Thou shalt look for ways that God is already working in thy community. Celebrate, acknowledge, cooperate.... *and* an 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not ignore commandments 1-10, and thou shalt remember to *reap* where thou hast farmed and *keep* what thou doest reap (disciple, preserve the harvest)!

<sup>2</sup> So far, these follow-up articles have appeared in *Elder's Digest*: (1) "Once a Month Jesus Comes and Holds My Hand . . ." (Oct.–Dec. 2011); (2) "Our Community Does Not Know Us . . ." (Jan.–March 2012); (3) "Help, Lord! I've Been Asked to Plant a Church!" (July–Sept. 2012); and (4) "As I Walked Around and Looked Carefully . . ." (Oct.–Dec. 2012). To access these articles online, go to [www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/acsi](http://www.sabbathschoolpersonalministries.org/acsi). Click on "Articles & Media." To access a comprehensive curriculum about community outreach, click on "Resources" and "IICM Community Services Certification Program Curriculum."

<sup>3</sup> See previous articles in this series.

<sup>4</sup> This assessment process is adapted from a module in the IICM Community Services Certification Program Curriculum—"CS 102: Community Assessment and Social Capital," by Monte Sahlin.

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The next article in the series will discuss the eighth "Farming Commandment."