

The hidden dangers of community outreach events

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[edited and posted by Bob Young]

Large community outreach events in U.S. churches seem to be the status quo. Nearly every church I know...has community outreach events throughout the year—an Easter egg hunt on the church's front lawn, a great day of service for area non-profits, a block party for the community, a back-to-school bash and so on. Add Trunk or Treat, Candlelight Christmas, and many others. How effective are they?

With so many events, immense resources are being utilized. Do churches experience an appropriate return on investment? Are more unchurched folks loving God and others as a result? Both research and my experience suggest "no." Here are several hidden dangers of outreach events:

Hidden danger: Outreach events become an "end unto themselves"

"Let's provide bags of groceries for 100 families!" "Let's put on the biggest and best Christmas drama ever!" These goals are inspirational. However, the problem is that we often do big events and don't ask why we're doing this. What goal do we have? Eventually, volunteers burn out and will not serve at an outreach event unless they have a clear vision of the purpose.

Hidden danger: Outreach events can create a consumer culture

"The church had a Back-to-School outreach event...why can't we put on an event for 'X'?"

The more events a church puts on, the more folks will come forward to request that their project (ministry) is promoted through the church. Instead of events being about the mission and vision of the church, or the completion of the Great Commission in the local community, events are about the interests of individuals.

Hidden danger: Outreach events are often equated to a false sense of missional identity

I have seen many churches make this mistake. They realize they are not engaged in reaching their community and they want to make a change. The question "How can we reach our community?" is often answered by "Let's have a community outreach event."

The danger here is that unless the event is handled correctly, volunteers immediately start asking "When's our next event?" It can then become challenging to get community groups, families and individuals to pursue a missional lifestyle on their own because they can simply wait until the church plans the "next big thing." Through participation in these venues, volunteers often rationalize that they are missional because they have participated in multiple events.

Hidden danger: Outreach events can interfere with a discipleship culture

Becoming more like Jesus cannot be accomplished merely through outreach events. Borrowing from one church's verbiage around discipleship, becoming a disciple is an ongoing lifestyle of obedience "to winning the lost, building up believers and equipping others to do the same." It's hard to do any of these through an event-oriented focus.

Hidden danger: Events can drain and exhaust church resources...staff, volunteers, monies, etc.

Take it from someone who knows this truth all too well—outreach events drain everything! Too many events burn out staff, burn out volunteers to the point where they will not volunteer anymore, and drain ministry budgets so that there is no money to be spent on ongoing initiatives where real transformation (spiritual, economic, mental, social) can take place.

Hidden danger: Events can hurt the under-resourced instead of helping them

If you have not read the book *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, I encourage you to do so. I have made this very mistake through outreach events, as well as through mission trips: I have offered "something" as a "hook" to get folks to come to an event and inadvertently created a culture of dependency.

Plus, offering folks in the community "stuff" can rob them of their dignity and can feel like manipulation.

Hidden danger: Transformation is difficult to achieve through events

Whether it be heart transformation or community transformation, "one and done" events simply don't accomplish the type of change we would like to see in the community.

Transformation comes from relationships, which is extremely hard to achieve through event-type venues. Additionally, the opportunity to share the gospel and follow-up with effective discipleship can be very challenging.

Hidden danger: Deceptive in that they can make you feel you have accomplished more than you have

It feels great to accomplish a project as a part of a group. It creates a sense of fellowship and community among the project participants. The danger in many projects, however, is that they can create a false sense of accomplishment.

Hidden danger: Outreach events often do not motivate people to continued involvement

Outreach events often lack a personal or relational connection to the under-resourced or the unchurched. The less relational an event, the less likely it is to encourage church volunteers to serve on a more regular basis.