

ENLIST SPECIALISTS TO IMPROVE OUTREACH MINISTRY

Leading a congregation often demands the skills of a generalist, whether it's the pastor or a team of lay leaders. Yet expert knowledge has its place. Specialists such as social workers, economists, city planners, and rural sociologists can help to navigate a complicated world filled with systems and technologies requiring professional knowledge. If used correctly, their knowledge can deepen church leaders' understanding of patterns that shape our lives.

Adopt-a-Family: Failure to Use Expertise

Enlisting a specialist may seem like a lot of work, yet the failure to do so can create problems. The case of Adopt-a-Family provides a case in point. Paul Lichterman, a sociologist, studied this faith-based program, whose purpose was to target African American families in order to “pull them” out of poverty.¹ Sponsored by a cluster of evangelical churches, the program intended to improve the lives of low-income families by building strong ties to middle-class volunteers from churches in the area. Adopt-a-Family centered its model on the concept of what they called “Christ-like care.” In this model, specialists would not be required and would only hamper the operation of Christian love.

At their orientation, Teri, the keynote speaker, explained the importance of recognizing an individual's gifts without reference to race, cultural background, or economics. Cultural differences were not the point. ‘I'm not going to do a cultural thing. I'm going to speak from what I know from God,’ Teri said. Lichterman comments, “What she knew with quiet certainty was that each individual was special and deserved to be treated as one would serve God.”

For Teri, dwelling on social or cultural differences detracted from the idea that we are all made in the image of God. Volunteers would not need the cultural, social, or economic knowledge that experts provide.

Instead, they would focus on what everyone—whites and blacks, rich and poor—held in common.

The decision not to use specialists hampered the effectiveness of the Adopt-a-Family program. One group's experience illustrates the point. Community in Christ Church adopted a family headed by Quenora, a young single mother, but within six months they terminated their relationship.

Quenora's behavior frustrated and puzzled them. In their first activity, two volunteers, Pat and Kara, took Quenora to a doctor's appointment. Afterward, they offered to take her out for a snow cone. But here was the surprise: instead of taking them to an ice cream shop, they stopped at a street vendor's cart instead. Kara told her pastor, “This is where she lives! This is what she's about. . . . My immediate reaction was ‘I want to move her out of here!’ That's my long-term prayer.” Pastor Nick remarked, “It sounds like you had some culture shock.” A social worker with expertise and deep knowledge of the neighborhood might have



helped Kara gain a better appreciation for Quenora's neighborhood.

Yet the group never sought a social worker's help. Instead, they talked with themselves endlessly about what made Quenora tick. Why did she need rides from us to everywhere? Why did she not ride the buses? Why was she not always home when she had promised to be there? Why was she so often hard to contact? Without a specialist, the group was left to figure it out on their own. After six months, the group decided to terminate the relationship, citing Quenora's apparent unwillingness to partner with them. The social worker's expertise might have helped them understand a young mother's situation.

Social workers and other specialists can assist church leaders in understanding the neighborhoods they serve. Learning to use a specialist, without overly relying on them, can present challenges. Yet church leaders have more power than they realize to use specialists and paid professionals to serve their agendas rather than relinquishing their authority to make decisions.

Park Cluster: Using Knowledge Wisely

Paul Lichterman studied another group of church leaders that shows how using specialists is beneficial. The Park Cluster, a group of a dozen white volunteers from affluent neighborhoods, ventured three miles away to the Park community, a low-income neighborhood of mostly African American, Hmong, Vietnamese, and Spanish-speaking Central Americans.² Each month the group drove over to "help out" and "build community." When they approached the director of the local neighborhood center to ask what they could do, she recruited Kendra, a social worker who knew the neighborhood well.

For Kendra, the Cluster represented a pool of volunteers who could be plugged into short-term assignments—setting up party tables, picking up food donations from grocery stores, collecting donated goods from churches, and repairing shelves in the food pantry. For the volunteers, however, Kendra could provide them much-needed knowledge of the community until they could navigate the culture of the neighborhood on their own.

Initially, Kendra ran everything. Volunteers did not often think for themselves or investigate their own experience. Their monthly meetings were businesslike,

with members reporting on the tasks accomplished or asking simple questions. Yet over time, the group's operating style began to change.

They began spending less time talking about tasks and focused more on the neighborhoods they were getting to know. They also asked Kendra more in-depth questions about why the community was so poor and services so few. They became curious about the institutions that held the community together—the neighborhood center and other helping agencies, the stores, the schools, the banks, the churches. They spoke less about a community in need and more about the neighborhood's remarkable diversity of black, Vietnamese, Hmong, Latino, and white residents.

The Park Cluster volunteers demonstrate this new way of using specialists. Instead of relying solely on Kendra's expertise, they developed their own set of goals and used Kendra to serve as a resource. When selecting a specialist, try to get a sense of their willingness to work cooperatively with non-experts. Will they do more than simply providing technical answers when asked? Are they committed to helping the non-specialist learn about their field of knowledge? Are they willing to let the individuals they advise use that knowledge in whatever way they see fit?

Expert Help Can Be Pivotal

Church leaders can benefit greatly from the knowledge that specialists provide. Experts can offer judgments that prove to be pivotal for church leaders trying to navigate a complicated social situation. In many cases, these individuals have spent years researching the social, cultural, and economic systems that influence the communities they serve. Their help should be enlisted whenever possible.

1. Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 133–70.

2. *Ibid.*, 171–215.

