WRITING AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Writing can help church leaders in their efforts to reach out to the community. Typically seen as a solitary activity, writing may seem like the opposite of active engagement. Yet writing creates a space for reflection that could benefit even the most hands-on activist. The journal, the mission statement, the memo of understanding, and the program history can help teams in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of outreach work. Beyond the team itself, writing can empower our neighbors as they tell stories about themselves in their own words.

After the Mission Trip

Ten years after the event, Dee Ann reflected back on her time as a student on a travel and study seminar to Central America sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She described a feeling of "danger and cautiousness" in visiting Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua during the El Salvador civil war and recounted visits with business, church, and social justice leaders that gave her "new eyes, new heart, new view of life." She remembered that "Through many of the people we met . . . we experienced a level of faith that before had been unimaginable." Writing can be used not only to recollect but also to maintain a real-time record of events. Some mission teams keep a group journal, asking a different person each day to record the group's experience from his or her perspective. The resulting account can be copied at the end of the trip and shared with everyone, or excerpts can be used for articles and presentations about the trip.[1]

Keeping a Journal

Church leaders can benefit from keeping a daily journal, or two journals: a spiritual journal and a management journal. The spiritual journal provides a way of listening to God and reflecting on feelings, prayers, readings, or critical incidents that lead to spiritual discernment within one's life experiences. The management journal, while no less honest or personal, can be more focused on the work of ministry (whether lay or ordained) in guiding the team or congregation. What key people, events, challenges or experiences does the leader or group face? Record in each journal at different times of the day, and review them every month to gain a broader perspective by reflecting on recurrent themes in the daily writing.[2]

When Clarifying Purpose

Some outreach teams find that a mission statement helps clarify purpose. Describing briefly why the team exists helps members focus on what's really important and enables the group to achieve a shared understanding. For that reason, be sure to include time for discussion and debate before writing it down. Before beginning the process, instruct the group in this way: "When we craft a mission statement, the statement is more than words. It represents the debate and discussion we've gone through to write it. It gets pulled out and used regularly. It helps us make good decisions."

The revision process helps to focus on the group's broad intentions rather than on wordsmithing. The end result should be a brief, clear, inspiring statement describing why the group exists. Read it aloud
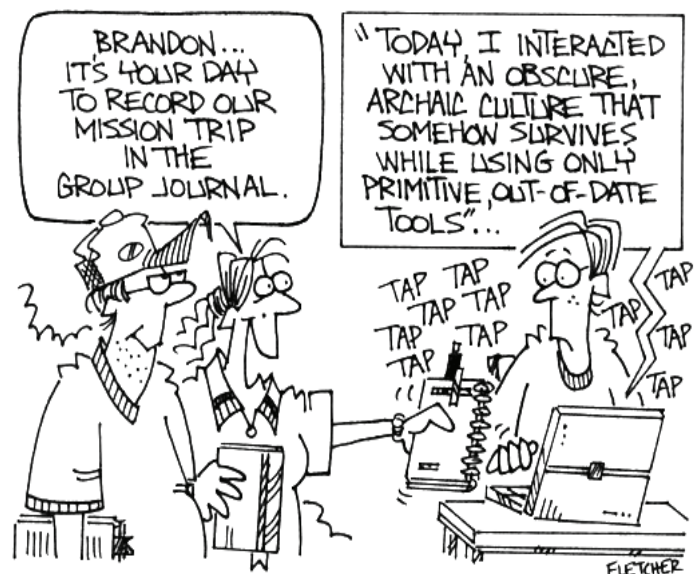
at meetings and spend a few minutes discussing key words or sharing stories about how you fulfilled it. A large Presbyterian women's group worked hard on a shared statement at a retreat. Three months later, the senior pastor approached the group with a request for them to take on a new task. After spending a minute to review their mission statement, the members decided the project was not in alignment with it. The pastor was impressed with their focus. The statement made it easy to decide what action to take.[3]

When Collaborating with Others

A memo of understanding (MOU) functions somewhat like a mission statement, though its focus is more external. The MOU serves to clarify how the team will collaborate with others, ensuring that its partners, including donors, expert advisors, social service agencies, and even the program's beneficiaries, are all on the same page. A typical MOU creates a blueprint for action that states the goal of the program, the activities to be carried out, and what is expected of each partner. How will differences be resolved? Will a pastor or wise elder be consulted, or will an arbitration team consisting of representatives of each partner group be appointed?

The final product could be brief, usually no more than one or two pages long. Not a legal document, the MOU simply ensures understanding by everyone involved. For example, a church mission team wants to develop a community garden in order to supply the neighborhood with fresh produce. Partners might include volunteers supplied by the church or community, expert gardeners from the local garden club, and city officials who give approval. A well-written MOU could ensure that the partners do not work at cross purposes due to misunderstanding.[4]

Keeping Track of Actions over Time

A program history, written to keep track of actions taken over time, offers another writing tool for ministry teams. Christ Lutheran Church in Whitefish, Montana, created a program history after it developed Shepherd's Hand Clinic, a free medical clinic for people unable to afford health care. As the ministry began to expand, its leaders felt compelled to keep track. They decided to document their steps in a simple record of what steps were taken when. This running history gave the leadership an idea of the amount of time needed for each step and allowed them to look back and evaluate how they met their initial goals or fell short.[5]

Empowering Low-Income Neighbors

Everyone should be invited to write, including the low-income residents that so many churches serve. Brown Memorial United Methodist Church in Syracuse, New York, offered writing exercises for customers at its food pantry. Located on the city's impoverished Near West Side, the church serves as a community center for the neighborhood. After shopping at the pantry, residents were invited to sit at a table in the corridor where people lined up to enter. Writers were offered printed sheets with a writing prompt at the top of a page, which was otherwise blank. One topic was sidewalks, with the prompt: "Do you use the sidewalk? What do you think of the sidewalks?" Spanish speakers were offered prompts in Spanish, with the account to be translated into English later. Those who could not write could draw a picture, and others chose to both write and draw pictures. Used initially as an organizing tool for resident groups to seek action from the city council, these writings were also published in a small, inexpensive paperback, *West Side Walks*. The program's director, Steve Parks, associate professor of writing at Syracuse University, got the idea from the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers in the United Kingdom, a thirty-year-old network of community writing groups. Parks notes that "Our mission is to provide opportunities for local communities to represent themselves by telling their stories in their own words."[6] Church leaders wanting to empower the neighbors they serve should consider asking them to write.

It's for Everyone

Writing belongs to everyone. For some people, writing may seem to be a difficult, unpleasant, and nearly impossible task. For others, it can be exhilarating, satisfying, and self-revelatory. Everyone should have the opportunity to try it.

1. Debby Vial, *When God's People Travel Together* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, 1999), 46, 54.

2. Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 34-36.

3. Susan Waechter and Deborah Kocsis, *How to Energize Your Volunteer Ministry* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004), 37, 42–43, 104.

4. Sandra Swan, *The New Outreach* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 156–57.

5. Linda-Marie Delloff, *Public Offerings: Stories from the Front Lines of Community Ministry* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 73.

6. New City Community Press, www.newcitycommunitypress .com.