

# CHURCHES MOVING INTO THE COMMUNITY



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Creating Capacity and Increasing Velocity through Leadership Communities

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*by Eric Swanson*

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## Churches Moving Into the Community.

All around the nation there are pastors and Christian leaders who are beginning to think differently about church. Independent of one another, there is a growing awareness that effectiveness is not measured by what happens inside the church but rather by the impact the people in their church are having on their city or

community. These are the externally focused churches. They are internally strong and healthy but they are outwardly focused. There are movements of thought and practice that bring weight and influence to the 340,000 churches of North America. The church growth, church health and church planting movements have created new paradigms of what a church can be. The challenge to be “seeker

sensitive” or “purpose-driven” has created new paradigms that have influenced sermon preparation and style of music. But there is something on the horizon of the spiritual landscape—churches that have not only built capacity but are releasing their capacity through the ministry and service of every member. We sense that this is a movement that will be a challenging and significant model for this decade and beyond.

In November of 2003, fifty-four leaders from thirteen externally focused churches began the first of four meetings over the next eighteen months as part of a Leadership Community for Externally Focused Churches. Leadership Communities are sponsored by Leadership Network—a Dallas-based organization whose purpose is to identify, resource and multiply strategic leaders. The member churches of this inaugural Leadership Community are:

**Cornwall Church**, Bellingham, WA  
[www.cornwallchurch.com](http://www.cornwallchurch.com)

## Creskide Community Church

San Leandro, CA

[www.creskidecommunity.org](http://www.creskidecommunity.org)

## Episcopal Church of the Ascension

Dallas, TX

[www.ascensiondallas.org](http://www.ascensiondallas.org)

## Fellowship Bible Church

Little Rock, AR

[www.fbclr.com](http://www.fbclr.com)

## Grace Brethren Church

Long Beach, CA

[www.gracelb.org](http://www.gracelb.org)

## Greenwood Community Church

Greenwood Village, CO

[www.greenwoodcc.com](http://www.greenwoodcc.com)

## Hope Presbyterian Church

Cordova, TN

[www.hopepres.com](http://www.hopepres.com)

## Lake Avenue Church

Pasadena, CA

[www.lakeave.org](http://www.lakeave.org)

## LifeBridge Christian Church

Longmont, CO

[www.lbcc.org](http://www.lbcc.org)

## Mariners Church

Irvine, CA

[www.marinerschurch.org](http://www.marinerschurch.org)

## Northland, A Church Distributed

Longwood, FL

[www.northlandcc.net](http://www.northlandcc.net)

## Perimeter Church

Duluth, GA

[www.perimeter.org](http://www.perimeter.org)

## The River Church Community

San Jose, CA

[www.the-river.org](http://www.the-river.org)

These externally focused churches range in size from 350 to 10,000 in weekly attendance. Each of them, in their own way, is taking the church into their communities.

## Something is Missing.

No church that we know of calls itself an “internally focused church,” but they exist just the same. Internally focused churches are those churches that focus their attention and energy on getting people into the church and what happens inside the church. They may be strong in worship, teaching, youth programs and small groups but at the end of the day what is measured is people and

EITHER GOD HAS  
CAUSED THIS WAVE OF  
EXTERNALLY FOCUSED  
CHURCHES OR MAN  
HAS CAUSED IT AND  
GOD IS BLESSING IT,  
BUT EITHER WAY THE  
WAVE IS HERE.

– Rick Rusaw

LifeBridge Christian Church



RICK RUSAW

## EXTERNALLY FOCUSED CHURCHES MEASURE WHAT MATTERS



RAY WILLIAMS

## WE WANT TO BUILD BRIDGES TO OUR COMMUNITY THROUGH MEANINGFUL SERVICE.

– Ray Williams  
Fellowship Bible Church

activity that happens within the church. These are good churches filled with good people. And what they do is vital but not sufficient for a healthy church. Worship, teaching, personal devotions, etc. are absolutely necessary for building the internal capacity that is needed to sustain an external focus, but if all the human and financial resources are expended inside the four walls of the church, then no matter how “spiritual” things may appear, something is missing.

Externally focused churches are internally strong but they are oriented externally. Their external focus is reflected in what they staff and budget for. They are those churches that engage their communities with the good works and good news of Jesus Christ resulting in the community being a better place to live. They look for ways to be useful to their communities, to be a part of its hopes and dreams. They build bridges to their communities instead of walls. They determine their effectiveness, not just by “internal measures”—attendance, worship, teaching, small groups, etc., but also by “external measures”—the spiritual and societal effect they are having on the community around them. Externally focused churches don’t just measure what can be counted but they measure most what matters most—the impact they are having outside the four walls of the church. Whose lives are different because of their church? Most everything that is done inside the church prepares and equips people not just for personal growth but also for personal impact. Externally focused churches have their problems and challenges just like every church but they are determined to make a difference.

**Who Is the Target Audience?** Although everyone outside the church is a potential

ministry focus for the externally focused church, the externally focused church moves towards two specific groups. *The first group the church is called to minister to are those on the margins.*

God has a special place in his heart for those on the margins of society and a plan that his people should have in ministering to these broken people. There are nearly 400 biblical passages show-casing God’s concern for the poor, the hungry, orphans, widows, the sick, disabled, prisoners, aliens, homeless, etc. “[God] defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18, 19).

God also made provisions in the law for his people to look out for those living on the edge through special offerings. “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 14:29). He commanded the farmers and vintners to not squeeze every bit of profit out of the land but always leave some behind for the poor to harvest (Deuteronomy 24:19-22). “Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your

## WE HAVE MOVED FROM A CULTURE THAT RESPONDS TO PROGRAMS TO ONE THAT RESPONDS TO FRIENDSHIPS.

– Jim Reiner  
Greenwood Community  
Church

## GOD CARES FOR ALL THOSE WHO ARE MADE IN HIS IMAGE AND HE WANTS HIS CHURCH TO DO THE SAME.

land" (Deuteronomy 15:10, 11). God cares for all those who are made in his image and he wants his church to do the same.



LAURIE BESHORE

WE OFTEN SAY  
AROUND HERE THAT  
WE NEED THE POOR  
AND NEEDY MORE  
THAN THEY NEED US.

– Laurie Beshore  
Mariners Church

**Mariners Church** of Irvine has come a long way since 1984 when a small group began to investigate where they could invest \$10,000 into the community. For one year, they met together to study everything God had to say regarding ministry to the poor and needy. Their

core verse was from Jeremiah 22:16 "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord." Beginning with this Scripture, Mariners began with two overarching questions—"What could we do?" and "What should we do?" Today they have grown their volunteer

ministry to over 4,800 people who, in 2002 gave over 110,000 hours in serving the poor and needy people of Orange County.

**The second recipient of the externally focused church's energy is the city.** Externally focused churches have moved past being angry with the city to wanting to be a blessing to the city. Much has been written about "taking back our cities" for God, but really, much of this is testosterone-

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driven language that reinforces the idea of being at war with the city. This is not the language of Jesus. Probably the verse most of us remember from Jeremiah 29 is verse eleven: "'For you know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you not to harm

you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" Those are the kinds of verses everyone likes to hear. But have you ever gone back to the beginning of the passage? It's really a message from God to those

"Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jeremiah 29:1). The Israelites were now captive people living in a foreign land in what is now Iraq. God gives them advice in how to live as strangers and aliens. He tells them to join in the life and rhythms of the city—"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease" (Jeremiah 9:4-6). The key verse in this message pertains to their relationship with the city—verse seven. "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper!" So, the believers were to do two things—actively seek the peace and prosperity of the city and they were to pray for the city. (By the way, this is how both Daniel and Nehemiah gained such favor with those in the city.) Externally focused churches look for ways to seek and promote the welfare of the city.

Several years ago **LifeBridge Christian Church** in Longmont Colorado made a conscious decision to "care for their community." They invited local human service agencies to office on their campus and encouraged members to get involved in the life of the community.



JACK HAY

"We're just looking for ways to help the city," senior pastor Rick Rusaw explains. "For example we decided we didn't want to start a Christian school but to get involved in serving the needs of the existing public schools of our community. We don't need to duplicate what is already out there." In December of 2002 over thirteen

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MY TOWN. I FOUND  
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TO THEM.

– Jack Hay  
LifeBridge Christian Church

## ALWAYS LEAD WITH RELATIONSHIPS AND NOT MONEY.

– Pete Menconi  
Greenwood Community  
Church

hundred people from LifeBridge donated thousands of hours of community service over during their “Time to Serve.” Partnering with 29 human service agencies and local ministries they cleaned three elementary schools top to bottom and then spent another six weekends fixing up a mobile home park. Five auto mechanics from LifeBridge serviced over 300 cars of single moms in the Longmont area. Recently, LifeBridge members came up with 5,000 new ways they could serve their community. They have become a blessing to their community through genuine love and service.

For many years founding pastor, Robert Lewis, of **Fellowship Bible Church** (FBC) in Little Rock was content to be growing a successful suburban mega church. By his admission, FBC was a “success church.” Success churches seek to grow by having attractive programs and offerings that people can come to and benefit from. But Robert grew increasingly dissatisfied with the impact FBC was having on the community. So he made an appointment with the mayor of Little Rock and asked one question, “How can we help you?” The mayor responded with a list of challenges facing the greater Little Rock area.

FBC then challenged themselves with the question, “What can we do that would cause people to marvel and say, ‘God is at work in a wonderful way for no one could do these things unless God were with them?’” That one question was the first step in becoming what Lewis calls a “bridge-building church.” For the past four years, FBC has joined with over 100 other churches and over 5,000 volunteers in the greater Little Rock area and served their communities by building parks and playgrounds and refurbishing nearly 50 schools. They set records for Red Cross Blood donations and have enlisted thousands of new organ donors. They began reaching out to the community through “LifeSkill” classes (on finances, marriage, wellness, aging, etc.) in public forums like banks and hotel rooms, with

over 5,000 people attending. In the past four years, the churches of greater Little Rock have donated nearly a million dollars to community human service organizations that are effective in meeting the needs of at-risk youth. They have renovated homes and provided school uniforms, school supplies, winter coats, and Christmas toys for hundreds of children.

**Externally Focused Churches Are Not Limited by Size, Location, or Denomination.** *Size is not part of what it means to be externally focused.* Small churches can be externally focused and being a large church is not a barrier to having an external impact. How small can a church be? Is there a critical mass a church must possess before it has the capacity to be externally focused? Most likely any number that

qualifies as a church can be an externally focused church—*“...where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:20). Being externally focused has much more to do with mindset than size. Episcopal Church of the Ascension is not a large congregation but their size does not inhibit their effectiveness. They have aggressively reached out to African immigrants in their community and have developed relationships with the schools, apartment complexes, and neighbors of their zip code.

**Location is not part of what it means to be externally focused.** Sometimes, we associate ministering to the needs of the community exclusively with the urban church. The truth is, externally focused churches can be found in urban, rural and suburban settings.

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– Rev. Kai Ryan  
Episcopal Church of the  
Ascension



The Compassion Ministries of The River Church Community exist in the gap between the church and the marginalized of our society and our world; creating partnerships which share the wealth of spiritual, financial and human resources available at The River with communities in need of these resources; doing all of this in a way that helps the people of The River focus outside themselves and creates transformational alternatives to the lifestyle dictated by our Silicon Valley culture.

– Jim Martin, Compassion Pastor  
The River Church Community

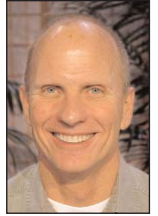
**Externally focused churches are not determined by denomination or style.** No single denomination has the inside track on external impact. “Seeker-sensitive churches,” “purpose-driven churches,” “mega-churches,” “equipping churches,” “multi-ethnic churches,” “house churches,” “connected churches” or “multi-site churches” can maintain their distinctive characteristics and still be externally focused. To be externally focused probably means returning to the reason your church was founded in the first place. Being externally focused cuts across all denominational and racial lines. Being externally focused is about the perspective and purpose of the church more than any singular program the church might engage in. Once a church decides to become an externally focused church by joining in the life and conversation of the community, the possibilities of how it engages the community are endless.

**Four Characteristics of Externally Focused Churches.** Regardless of size, location or denomination, externally focused churches have four characteristics in common. *First, they are convinced that good deeds and good news can't and shouldn't be separated.*

Just as it takes two wings to lift an airplane off the ground so externally focused churches employ good news coupled with good deeds to make an impact on their community. The good deeds, expressed in service and ministry to others, validates the good news. The good news explains the purpose of the good deeds.

Good news and good deeds are, after all, the summation of Jesus' ministry. Acts 10:36-38, says that God proclaimed the “good news... through Jesus Christ... and... he went about doing good... because God was with him.” When the crowds were following Jesus, “He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God (good news), and healed those who needed healing” (good deeds). When Jesus sent the twelve disciples out, “he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God (good news) and to heal the sick” (good deeds) (Luke 9:2).

Engaging the community with good news and good deeds is not just a tactic or even a foundational strategy of these churches; it is, at the core of their being, who they are. These churches have come to the conclusion that it's really not “church” unless good deeds are inextricably linked with the good news. To externally focused churches, you just can't have church without being engaged in the life of the community through ministry and service to others. Ministry and service is not a program reserved for a few overly dedicated individuals but are woven into every aspect of the church. It's certainly not the only thing they do, but to



JOHN BRUCE

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ANY EVIDENCE.

– John Bruce  
Creekside Community Church

GOOD NEWS AND  
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stop ministering and serving in the community would be to cease their very existence as a church.



CORNELIUS SANDERS

EVERY FALL SINCE  
1989, HOPE HAS  
BUILT A HOME WITH  
A WORKING POOR  
FAMILY. THIS PROJECT  
IS COORDINATED  
THROUGH  
NEIGHBORHOOD  
HOUSING  
OPPORTUNITIES.

– Cornelius Sanders  
Hope Presbyterian Church

pray for it. They are part of the defined assets of the community, not a liability.

**Third, they believe that ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living.**

SALT, LIGHT AND  
LEAVEN ARE AGENTS  
OF INFLUENCE, NOT  
CONTROL.

percentages of congregations serving and ministering outside the walls of the church.

**Second, they see themselves as vital to the health and well-being of their community.** They believe that their community, with all of its aspirations and challenges, cannot be a healthy place apart from the church engaging in the life of the community. They have moved beyond thinking about their own health apart from the community to what the community would be like apart from the church. They recognize that God has placed them in their community (whether they feel wanted or not) to be salt, light and leaven to the community. In joining in the life and rhythm of the city, externally focused churches seek to serve and bless the city, not control it. After all, salt, light and leaven are agents of influence, not control. Thus these churches build bridges instead of walls. They bless their city and

Wanting to be like Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve and to give (Mark 10:45), externally focused churches serve and give themselves to others. They are convinced that Christians can learn through good instruction but they really cannot grow apart from ministry and service.



DIANE DEVER

**Fourth, externally focused churches are evangelistically effective.** It is no

secret that the church in North America is hardly hitting the ball out of the park evangelistically speaking. Less than one half of churches in the US added a member by conversion last year. In fact, conversion growth in the US has dropped from 15% to 6% in the past few years. Much perceived growth is simply transfer growth or rechurcing. Two thirds of churches in the US have either plateaued or are declining. Our post-modern world will be more influenced through demonstration than mere proclamation.

Although these churches serve their communities expecting nothing in return, through their presence, service and love, many people are drawn into the kingdom. In Acts 9:33-35 the Scripture records that Peter encountered a *“paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. ‘Aeneas,’ Peter said to him, ‘Jesus Christ heals you. Get up...’ Immediately Aeneas got up. All*

IT BECAME CLEAR TO US  
WHAT OUR GLARING  
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AND FOCUSED.

– Diane Dever  
Northland, A Church  
Distributed

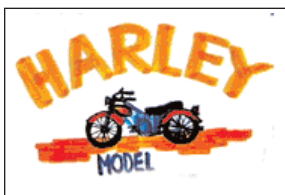
WE BELIEVE IN ORDER  
FOR GOD-SIZED STUFF  
TO HAPPEN IN OUR  
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GOD-GIVEN DREAM, A  
WELL-ORGANIZED PLAN  
AND LOTS OF  
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LOTS OF PEOPLE TO  
SERVE.

– Chip Sweney  
Perimeter Church

*those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.*" Now it could be argued that these folks turned to the Lord because their friend was healed. But the healed man was simply the evidence of the existence, love and power of the healer... Jesus.

In our evangelistic zeal we often think people just need more or better information in order to believe. What they long for is authenticity. Fewer are asking, "What must I do to be saved?" Instead their question is "What can I do to make my life work?" When the people who talk about a loving God demonstrate love, the gap between doubt and faith is narrowed and they often find themselves wanting to believe.

**Two Strategies of Externally Focused Churches.** Models represent a simplified view of reality. Different models give us different options. Models can represent "what is" or "what could be." The point we want to make about models is this: There are a number of effective ways to engage your community with good news and good deeds. We will present a lot of models but there is no "right" model. A good model is one that accomplishes the desired outcomes and is consistent with the heart and desires of our Lord. So look for principles within the models that you can apply.



**NO MODEL IS PERFECT...  
SOME ARE USEFUL.**

– Christian Washington  
Team Facilitator

Churches that are externally focused usually have variations of two strategies at their disposal. First they identify needs of their community and start ministries or programs to meet those needs. They may start food banks, learning centers or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for immigrants, etc. Often experienced churches form separate non-profit spin-offs (501(c)(3) under which the ministry can be organized. The separate 501(c)(3) status often allows them to receive outside corporate and government

funding to get the resources that such large-scale endeavors like affordable housing, food banks, and homes for unwed mothers require.

**By starting a foundation, we expanded our budget from about \$300,000 to \$660,000 the first year, and were able to expand our ministry... receive grants from local businesses that would not normally give to a church while still carrying out kingdom work and sharing the gospel.**

– Andy Bales  
Lake Avenue Community Foundation

**Secondly, they partner with existing ministries or human service agencies that already are accomplishing a shared mission in the community.** They recognize that other church or parachurch ministries are effective in ministering to specific target audiences (unemployed, youth, unwed mothers, etc). Rather than starting a new ministry, these human service agencies, para-church or church organizations can serve as "partner ministries" of a local congregation. Churches can simply join in on what is already happening in the community through big-hearted people.



ANDY BALES

**Results of the First Leadership Community Meeting.** The collaborative learning process was energizing and stimulating. Working with cross-functional teams for the first few hours, utilizing assorted readings, videos and breakout sessions, leaders went through the

**WE ARE LOOKING  
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COLLABORATION WITH  
OTHER CHURCHES IN THE  
CAUSE OF COMMUNITY  
TRANSFORMATION.**

– James Avinger  
Cornwall Church



process of discovering new ways of thinking about ministry by exploring together the six “realities”:

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IS GET US SITTING  
DOWN AND REALLY  
CONCENTRATING—  
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GOT DONE IN A  
COUPLE OF DAYS.

– Bill Taylor  
Episcopal Church of the  
Ascension

- What was
- What is
- What might be
- What could be
- What should be
- What will be

For the second half of the gathering, ministry leaders met with their teams to dream and plan together. For most teams this was one of the surprise benefits of the Leadership Community.

Because one of the purposes of the Leadership Community

is to cause exponential growth as opposed to incremental growth, each team produced a two year “dream” of where they wanted to be along with the “strategic path steps” that would take them there.

The teams also came up with their “Six-month Action Plan” against which they are holding themselves accountable for when we convene again in May. These action plans translate their intentions into milestones.

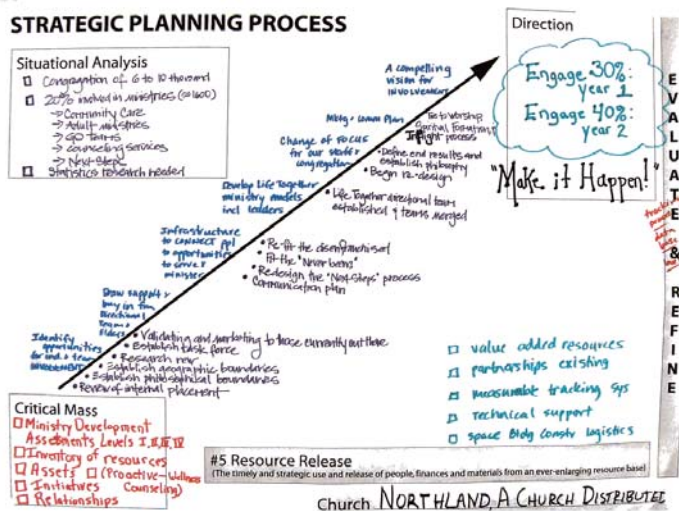
## Action Learning Plan for Cornwall Church

Goal	Desired Result	Measurement	Action Steps	Point Person(s)	Target Completion
Sarah's House OPEN!!	1 year funding in place; sustainable income project identified	At least 2 girls “housed”	•Management hiring •Operation (business plan) •Licensing acquired	Anne	09/01/04
Rebound Foundation in place	Funding external outreach ministries	Tax status & “in the black”	•Filing paperwork •Marketing plan	Scott	06/01/04
Whatcom Dream Revival	TWD operating again in the Roosevelt neighborhood	Classes in session	•Community collaboration meeting scheduled •Identify site •Business plan in place (revised)	James	06/01/04
Foster relationships with organizations	Increased connection, coordination, cooperation, & collaboration	•Double our referrals •Monthly tracking of contact	•Create list of desired organizations	James	06/01/04
Establish presence in the Roosevelt neighborhood	25 families participating in programs	•Tracking usage	•Establishing teaching database •Servant evangelism projects (service projects) •Door knocking •Mass mailings •Referral requests	James	06/01/04

There were six “Ah-hahs” that were surprise discoveries of the Leadership Community

1. The need for theological / biblical underpinnings of externally focused ministry.
2. The need for measurement and metrics
3. Assessment of needs and opportunities
4. Collaboration and partnering
5. Creation of “Safe First Steps” to enhance volunteer involvement
6. Inventory of “influencers”
7. Raising up and enabling ministry “champions.”

Each of us sensed that we were on the beginning of an exciting journey. We’ve met our traveling companions... and they are good people. We are among kindred spirits and it feels good to be in the company of the committed. It’s good to be part of the journey.



WE HAVE BEEN IN  
OUR CITY A LONG  
TIME AND BELIEVE  
THAT LEARNING FROM  
OTHERS IS THE BEST  
WAY TO MAKE SURE  
THAT OUR NEXT 90  
YEARS IN LONG  
BEACH LOOK  
DIFFERENT THAN THE  
FIRST 90.

– Eric Marsh  
Grace Brethren Church



ERIC MARSH

Mounted on a donkey, Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The crowds were cheering and shouting out praises to Jesus. The people were lopping off palm fronds and laying them on the ground for the donkey to walk on. When they ran out of palm branches, they gladly laid their own cloaks on the ground and walked ahead of Jesus and the donkey shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 21:9).

For a moment perhaps the donkey thought it was all about him. After all he was doing all the work that morning... but it wasn’t. He was simply carrying the Message. The externally focused church is a good donkey to take Jesus into places where he hasn’t always been welcome. The serving church is just the donkey. It’s still all about Jesus.

## WEB RESOURCES

Christian Community Development Association (CCDA)—[www.ccda.org](http://www.ccda.org)  
FASTEN (Faith & Service Technical Education Network)—[www.fastennetwork.org](http://www.fastennetwork.org)  
Network 9:35—[www.network935.org](http://www.network935.org)  
Steve Sjogren—[www.stevesjogren.com](http://www.stevesjogren.com)  
The Institute for Youth Development—[www.youthdevelopment.org](http://www.youthdevelopment.org)  
We Care America—[www.wecareamerica.org](http://www.wecareamerica.org)  
Ten Paradigm Shifts (web download)—[www.leadnet.org/externallyfocusedresources.asp](http://www.leadnet.org/externallyfocusedresources.asp)

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*The Church That Never Sleeps*, Matthew Barnett, Nelson, 2000  
*The Externally Focused Church*, Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, Group, 2004  
*The Kingdom Assignment*, Denny and Leesa Bellesi, Zondervan, 2001  
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