What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.—Micah 6:8

It is a concrete response to God’s call to do justice and love kindness. It builds community within a congregation, makes justice a central focus, enhances spiritual growth, witnesses publicly to our faith, and can even result in media coverage of church activities! What is it? It is Community Economic Development (CED).

CED covers a wide range of projects from childcare and providing services to the homeless to working on living-wage campaigns. CED is gathering data and meeting with a local supermarket chain or bank to convince them to open a branch or outlet in an underserved area. CED is lobbying the city council to make bus service available to serve the needs of inner city residents to reach jobs in the suburbs. CED is building and renovating affordable housing. CED is a way to do justice by working to change the underlying structures that keep far too many Americans outside the economic mainstream.

UCC churches have always engaged in CED and continue to do so:

• Bethany UCC in Randolph, Vermont, is engaged in a number of CED projects designed to raise the incomes of low-wage workers and lower the cost of necessities. The donated-vehicle program, started with a small grant from the Vermont Conference, addresses rural residents’ need for a car to get to work. Working with other members of the community, church members solicit donations of appropriate vehicles, identify garages willing to make needed repairs (at cost), and screen potential recipients who pay about five hundred dollars per car, the average cost of repairs. Low interest loans are also available to cover the cost of insurance, licensing, and other fees. According to church members, “There’s no problem finding money to fund good ideas.” The congregation also places twenty percent of Bethany’s unrestricted savings and investments in alternative funds, where the money will be actively “doing good.” For example, the church has money in the Vermont Community Loan Fund that lends to Vermont nonprofit organizations for support of projects like affordable housing and community facilities. Although the alternative investments do not appreciate in value as stocks might, their rate of return is similar to that of standard ones. The congregation views long-term justice work, not just charity, as a core mission of the church. “We’re in it for a marathon, not a sprint.”
• In the last nine years, Lincoln Memorial Congregational Church, UCC, Los Angeles, has built both a ten-million dollar, fifty-six-unit, affordable housing complex and a Family Life Center to provide needed services to the congregation and the community.

• Christ Congregational Church, UCC, in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., was instrumental in putting together, keeping together, and providing leadership for a community group that constructed a three-million-dollar service center for the homeless.

(See the sidebars for more information about the each of these congregations’ projects.)

To engage in a successful and faithful CED project, a congregation does not need to bring large sums of money to the table. Much valuable work can be accomplished at relatively low cost. For projects that do require a substantial up-front investment, public funds may be available from federal, state, or county governments. In other cases, expected future rents or other fees will allow the needed money to be borrowed and repaid out of future revenues.

What a congregation does need to bring to this effort is a long-term commitment to love kindness and do justice. The congregation must also be willing to work collaboratively with other faith-based and community organizations. And the project must be seen as meeting an important community need.

A new Rapid Response Team, comprised of UCC staff at the national setting, is available to meet with and provide technical assistance to congregations considering or engaged in a CED project. At various stages of the project, team members can provide:

• an initial intake interview and assessment
• a list of suggested resources and training opportunities
• an on-site visit
• a list of other churches that have done similar projects
• names of skilled UCC members who may be able to consult with you
• help with identifying community partners

Christ Congregational Church, UCC, is located in Silver Spring, Maryland, a Washington, D.C., inner-ring suburb that fifteen years ago was in a downward economic spiral. Homeless people were occupying some of the forty vacant office buildings in the city, where some of them built fires and used drugs. In response, the city organized a series of community meetings to address the problem of the homeless. The police saw the homeless as law-breakers. The business community believed they discouraged people from shopping. Nearly everyone viewed them as a cause of the economic decline, not as a symptom, or even victims, of the decline. At this point, Christ Congregational Church and the Rev. Jim Todhunter got involved, along with a small group of other local church clergy and laity. Their agenda was to work for the economic revitalization of Silver Spring but with the homeless as a partner, not a problem. The church people played a vital role as the “honest brokers,” who worked to keep all the diverse interests—business leaders, police, social service agencies, political leaders, and the homeless—at the table. The umbrella group, Silver Spring Community Vision, with leadership and active participation from Christ Congregational Church, succeeded in building a four-million-dollar, multi-service day center for the homeless, funded by a federal Community Development Block Grant. The group also obtained a million dollar U.S. Housing and Urban Development grant to pay for programs. In a Christmas Day editorial, the Washington Post praised Christ Congregational Church, Todhunter, and Silver Spring Community Vision for their work.
Lincoln Memorial Congregational Church, in Los Angeles, with pastor Gailen Reevers is just completing a ten million dollar, affordable housing complex called Amistad Plaza. Plans call for the fifty-six-unit high-rise to also house a variety of services such as childcare and after-school programs that will involve congregation members and serve the residents and community. The church’s efforts, led by Reevers, included building political and community support for the project and putting together the financing, which largely came from public (government) sources. In the midst of the nine-year Amistad Plaza project, Lincoln also constructed a Family Life Center that provides space for a number of programs serving members of the congregation and the larger community. While this building record is very impressive, Reevers says, “The biggest impact has been on our spiritual growth.” The projects have strengthened church members’ faith in themselves and in God, empowering them to tackle other issues in their lives and the community. The neighborhood outreach of the Family Life Center has also attracted new members to the congregation.

Are you ready to give neighborhood development a try? Is it time to expand your ministries to the community? Take this simple self-test:

1. Does a map of the assets of your congregation and community suggest program opportunities?
2. Does your congregation have relationships with local partners that link us to outside human or financial resources? Do you have human and financial resources of your own?
3. Is your congregation experienced in mobilizing the community to support your work?
4. Is there a broadly representative group in the community that can help provide leadership?
5. Is there a strong leader among you with vision for a project or service that would benefit the church and the community?
6. Is there support within the congregation to pursue the practical demands of community economic development over the long run?

Our voices and our actions are needed, speaking out and working to bring economic justice to all God’s people, building God’s reign person-by-person, brick-by-brick, day-by-day. Listen to the spirit as it blows through your congregation—what justice work are you being called to do?

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