Though we’re all in survival mode right now, it’s important to remember that in the aftermath of COVID-19, your community’s needs will shift. New vulnerabilities will emerge while preexisting issues will be exacerbated. At this time, LMPG aims to help you and your church better care for your community as it changes. Though it’s not exhaustive, this list provides a place to start as you assess your community and congregation in light of the pandemic.

Focus on your local community.
There are universal needs and highly visible needs, but the most important needs are those impacting your immediate context. For example, are people in your neighborhood disproportionately experiencing homelessness now? Do you see an influx in your immigrant neighbors? Are youth at risk in your community? How has the spike in unemployment affected your area?

Create a team.
As a church leader, you probably have far too much on your plate. For that reason, empowerment is critical. Think of your congregation, and choose 5-7 people who have previous experience working with vulnerable populations. This team will lead as your church’s first responders, identifying and addressing needs as they then work to empower those most vulnerable.

Assess the needs of your community.
Start with Google as you pair your zip code with search terms like vulnerable populations, homelessness, immigration, poverty, or incarceration. Research all the various groups that could be most at-risk in your area. You can also use resources like the COVID Community Vulnerability Map. Click here to explore your community. Next, contextualize the data you see by building a comprehensive list of resources and nonprofits already present in your community.

Focus on relationships.
All of this research is only as valuable as the relationships built. Have your team set up appointments with local stakeholders, nonprofit representatives, social service workers, and law enforcement officers. Listen to what these community leaders are seeing on the ground. Ask about the needs they see and meet, what assets are available, and what a successful partnership with a church would look like. Consider how their work, funding, or impact has changed in light of the pandemic. Keep in mind, answers will vary based on each organization’s interest and expertise.

Focus your approach.
As you talk with organizations and assess your community, you’ll gain a clearer understanding of your church’s role. Set aside time to learn about your team’s findings, and identify areas of overlap in conversations. Isolate one to two major vulnerabilities that are prevalent in your community and church. Remember that addressing too many needs will be exhausting and can cause your mission to drift. Find the need most prevalent in your community and start there.

Lead with a spirit of collaboration.
Once you identify the most vulnerable local population, consider the organizations you’ve already met with. Many of them are desperate for safe places to send their people, so these partnerships rely on working together, building mutual trust, and sharing resources. Your church needs your new partners as much as they need you—you bring a much needed spiritual community to those at-risk. This is an opportunity to help each other.
Build your partnerships.
Based on the major vulnerability your church has identified, choose 2-3 local organizations and begin conversations about long-term partnerships. Ask how your church’s strengths and resources could best support the work already being done. What would a mutually beneficial partnership look like? As you build each relationship, record the name of your contact, a phone number, as well as the function of the organization. Make sure to make this list available to leaders in your congregation.

Be trauma informed.
Caring for others can be organic, but it should also be organized. Because the most vulnerable communities are also those most likely to have experienced significant trauma, our knowledge of trauma must create and shape the services we offer, ensuring they are engaging and effective. Think through your church’s approach: How can you be more trauma informed? How can your preaching, greeting ministry, use of space, fiscal resources, and volunteer ministry better focus on caring for the various needs around you? In fact, ask your new partners these questions as well. Given that they work with those most vulnerable in your community, they will be a huge resource in reshaping your work.

Know your own vulnerability.
The trauma experienced by others will have an impact on you and your team. And in light of COVID-19, we’re all collectively impacted by recent events. As you care for others, your own unresolved issues and experienced trauma will be exposed. If left unchecked, this will impact how you care for your community. Remember, God isn't calling you to be a hero, just a neighbor. Unlike heroes, neighbors know they have limits and are willing to work within them.

Create a strict self-care routine that helps you process the secondhand trauma you will encounter. Make a short list of the people caring for you who you can call on anytime—it’s important to have people investing in you as you invest in others.

Don’t do this alone.
This is hard, tiring work that will introduce questions and complexity that your church may not be used to. Partnering with a network like Let My People Go allows you to share your experiences and concerns with those most familiar with facilitating care for the vulnerable. LMPG is now offering coaching and strategy sessions to pastors and church leaders around the country, at no charge. Let’s work together to address your church’s immediate needs and your community’s long-term vulnerabilities. For more on our programs, click here to visit our full website.