COMMUNITY STUDY:

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHURCH'S CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY

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Community analysis enables you to choose a ministry that is really needed, take best advantage of existing community resources, and convince your congregation and other friends that your program is worth supporting. In order to do that, you need to create as thorough and as balanced a profile of your community as you can. . . . God is already at work in your community. Your task is to find out where you can enter the picture.
*(*Handbook for Urban Church Ministries*, p. 13)*

INTRODUCTION: WHY AND HOW TO STUDY YOUR COMMUNITY

Why Study Your Community?

According to Ray Bakke, "Evangelicalism has had a theology of persons and programs, but it lacked a conscious theology of place." To develop effective community ministry, churches must learn to do "exegesis of environments." You must become a student of a neighborhood in order to become its servant.

A community assessment has seven main goals:

1. *To guide strategic planning and the development of new ministries.*

   Information improves a church's aim in making prudent, strategic investments with its ministry resources. Without an accurate assessment of the community's needs and strengths, ministry designs may be flawed. Identifying trends also helps the church to be proactive, beyond merely responding to crises.

2. *To help understand the forces that affect the lives of people in the community.*

   Individuals are influenced by the demographic, cultural, and institutional forces around them. A community assessment reveals (sometimes hidden) dynamics that influence people's opportunities, choices, and perceptions of self-worth.

3. *To help understand community factors that influence ministry effectiveness.*

   Ignorance of external influences on its ministries can lead a church to become discouraged, or to fight the wrong battles. Researching community assets allows a church to connect with other resources, to prevent the duplication of services, to identify potential allies, and to take the culture of the community into account.

4. *To draw on stores of motivation and vision in the community.*

   For people in the church and community to join together in working toward transformation, they must have a shared vision. A community study process that engages the input of the community, identifying people's passions and potential, can help generate momentum toward organized action.

5. *To build connections between the church and the community.*

   A well-drawn portrait of its context can mobilize the church's yearning to see God's "kingdom come" in the community. The process of networking and listening also nourishes the congregation's sense of belonging in the community, and prepares the way for ministry partnerships.

6. *To help understand how the church itself is affected by the community.*

   It is important to understand how your church's specific geographic and cultural setting has helped to shape its identity. To remain relevant and viable, churches must be willing to accept and adjust to changing environmental factors.

7. *To discern how your church is perceived by the community.*

   Taking the pulse of the community gives you the opportunity to see your church from the community's perspective. Churches are sometimes woefully unaware of, or misled about, their local reputation. "Outsiders'" views of your church can represent a stepping stone—or a barrier—to building effective ministries.

Community Study Process

The community study can be undertaken by a group of 3-4 persons. The best candidates for this group are observant people who appreciate the community and feel that they have a stake in its well-being; who are good networkers and enjoy getting "out and about"; who have a knack at listening to people and pulling together various points of view; and who have time to dedicate to this project.

The first step of a community study is to **define your community of ministry** (see p. XX below) so that you have identified a distinct geographical area or people group for your community study (and ministry focus). The next step is to gather information about your community, using the variety of methods outlined below. Try to select at least three different methods that fit with your context, so you are getting a well-rounded picture.

After completing the community study, prepare a **report on your findings** to share with the church's leadership. The community study guide (see p. XX) provides a suggested outline which may be adapted for your purposes. Keep in mind that the goal is a brief overview of the key points, not a doctoral dissertation! The "Creative Community Presentations" tool (see p. XX) suggests a few creative ways of supplementing a written report with more "right-brained" presentations.

The community study **reflection questions** (see p. 11) will help you process the implications of this report for ministry. The information and insights from this study can then be incorporated into your process of vision discernment and ministry planning.

It may be helpful to set a time frame for the community study, so that the research and reporting stages do not continue indefinitely. However, the goal of learning about the community is ongoing. Beyond gathering data, a community study thus entails active **networking** with people and institutions in the community (see page XX). Through networking, your church builds relationships, captures vision for ministry opportunities, and identifies potential ministry partners.

A Relational, Asset-Based Approach

A community study with the goal of transformation does not mean academic analysis or armchair observations. It entails having a posture of serving "with" and "alongside" the community, rather than doing ministry "for" the community. Thus it is vital that the community study involve building relationships with and seeking input from members of the community. It's fairly easy to find statistics on your community. Taking the time to be inclusive and relational will allow you to get beyond raw data to the heart of the matter.

Note that the community study takes into account the strengths and resources of the community, not just its needs and flaws. A relational, asset-based approach to community study keeps a church from having a patronizing attitude -- thinking that they (in the community) have all the problems, and we (in the church) hold all the answers. Forming relationships for the long haul also discourages the temptation to look for a "quick fix" for the community's needs.

Our understanding of common grace assures us that God is already at work in the community, that each person has God-given gifts to offer and capacities to develop, and that the church has a role in discovering and unleashing this potential. We are to build redemptive relationships that help connect members of the community to God and to one another. The value of this approach, Jay Van Groningen writes in *Communities First: Through God's Eyes, With God's Heart,* comes from "seeing all things in a community that can be used in some way to make life better for everyone" and "connecting people in wonderful exchanges of neighborly love."

Think of your community study as a treasure hunt for the wheat of God's activity, hidden among the tares (Matthew 13:24-30). Begin by asking the Lord of the harvest to show you where His reign is already evident in the community. This approach will prove most fruitful as your church moves from analysis to action.

DEFINE YOUR COMMUNITY OF MINISTRY

"Community of ministry" — the particular arena where the church concentrates its ministry — can mean several different things. Which of the following (from Amy Sherman, *Restorers of Hope,* pp. 23-29) best describes the way your church defines its ministry community?

- *Settlers* concentrate on the geographical neighborhoods where their churches are physically located and "work for the transformation of these neighborhoods from the inside out."

- *Gardeners* develop ministry ties with neighborhoods outside their immediate area, which they view "as extensions of their own churches (spiritual homes), in the same way that homeowners view their gardens as an extension of their houses." For example, a suburban church might "adopt" a particular inner-city neighborhood, or a church might locate a ministry in a senior center or a mall.

- *Shepherds* "primarily serve one targeted population . . . rather than a specific geographic neighborhood." A church with a commitment to persons with HIV/AIDS, low-income senior citizens, disabled persons, or Haitian immigrants, for example, might have ministries spanning several neighborhoods.

The way you define your community of ministry should take into account existing patterns of outreach, the residential and employment patterns of the congregation, natural connections between the congregation and a community (such as ethnicity), special concerns of the congregation, and the leading of God's Spirit.

If your church is a shepherd, describe the targeted population, and the reasons for the church's relationship with this group. If your church is a settler or a gardener, identify the boundaries of the neighborhood as specifically as possible. Take note of the relationship between your ministry community and the area(s) where most church members live. Also observe significant similarities and differences (like culture or income levels) between church members and the people in the community.

Unless you already have a clearly defined ministry community, one suggestion is to settle first on a limited geographical area, then focus on a population group emerging from your study. For example, you might select your school district. From your study of this community you may decide to focus on single parent families. Start small, while leaving room for future evolution and growth.

Check whether your church has defined different "neighbors" for different aspects of ministry — meeting social needs here while targeting evangelistic ministry there. A holistic approach ministers across the spectrum of spiritual and social needs in a community.

METHODS FOR LEARNING ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY

Information about the community of ministry can be gathered in a variety of ways. Each of these methods can help you get at the core question for a community vision: What are one or two things that would make life better for everyone in the neighborhood?

1. **Census data and other published reports:** The census (available on the Internet, http://www.census.gov) provides a wealth of demographic information and tracks changing trends. Ask your local librarian for help in accessing the census data for your community. Other kinds of reports on your community may also be available from a local university, the school board, the chamber of commerce, or another church.

2. **Maps**: Detailed street maps can be obtained from the planning department of your municipal government. Or download a map from mapquest.com. (The Mapping Center for Evangelism and Church Growth, mappingcenter.org, is one of several Christian mapping software programs.) You can also draw your own map of your community based on your observations. Use the "Mapping Your Community" tool (p. XX) to fill in the map with important characteristics of the community.

3. **Surveys**: Written or oral questionnaires ask community members to identify local needs, issues, and assets. If church members are not from the community, try to pair each member on the survey team with a local resident who knows the people in the neighborhood. While surveys can also gather information about people's background and interests, they should not be too personal or intrusive. The "Community Survey" tool provides a sample survey format (p. XX).

4. **Interviews**: Identify leaders and "insiders" in the community (elected officials, business leaders, community organizers, other pastors, long-time residents) to interview. Also include interviews with "ordinary" members of the community. Ask about their experiences and views of the community, their perceptions of your church, and their suggestions for how the church could impact the community's well-being. See the information on networking (p. XX) and the "Networking Interviews" and "Networking Log" tools (p. XX).

5. **Focus groups**: Gather a group of community members to share their insights. Groups can either reflect the diversity of the community or share a common key characteristic (such as seniors, or parents of teenagers). It is helpful to start by asking broad questions about people's opinions and observations of community life — their fears and hopes, gripes and prides. As your ministry focus narrows, focus groups can target specific questions (such as what kinds of ministries for seniors are needed, or why people think so many local teens are becoming pregnant).

6. **Community informant panel**: Invite a selection of experts on the community — e.g., a school principal, city council representative, police officer, business leader, and neighborhood association representative — to a meeting at the church where each can give a brief presentation on the community and answer questions.

7. "**Insiders**": Use church members as a resource: members who live in the community of ministry, or who work in the community, particularly in service positions such as health care providers and teachers.

8. **Observation**: Go through the community by foot ("walking surveys") or by car ("windshield surveys"). See the "Community Observation Guide," p. XX for focus questions. Make an effort to seek out the hidden corners, the people living on the margins. Ask a resident to give you a guided tour of the neighborhood. Combine observation with prayer for the community (see the "Prayer-Walking Guide," p. XX).

9. **Participation**: Participant observation in a spirit of Christian servanthood is especially important if your community of ministry is geographically, culturally or economically distant from your own. Suggested activities to help church members soak in community life and become more familiar with the area include:
   - shopping, eating, and walking in the neighborhood;
   - riding public transportation into and around the community rather than driving;
   - spending an hour in the waiting room of the local emergency room, municipal court or public welfare office;
   - hanging out in public spaces like parks or libraries;
   - checking out community bulletin boards (often posted at places like rec centers and grocery stores);
   - volunteering at a homeless shelter or other local service agency;
   - attending civic, cultural, sporting, or seasonal events (town meetings, concerts, Little League games, Easter parades);
   - worshiping at church services in the neighborhood.

10. **Documents**: Collect neighborhood publications, articles about the community in city newspapers, and newsletters from nonprofits that work in the community.

In selecting your community assessment methods, seek a balance of qualitative and quantitative information, as the *Handbook for Urban Church Ministries* explains:

> You are looking for both objective and intuitive information. Intuitive insight about the neighborhood, as you can gain from conversations with residents, for example, puts living human faces on social circumstances. Objective information, as found in sources like census data, broadens individual experiences to community trends. Based on intuition alone, you might end up creating an entire program to meet needs that only one or two families are experiencing. Working with data alone, you risk becoming simply another social service agency, missing the warmth of gospel love for God's people around you.

NETWORK WITH PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE COMMUNITY

Networking is the exchange of information, ideas and resources with key persons and institutions in the community. The community study and networking go hand in hand: through the community assessment process, you will discover good prospects for networking; and as you network, you will gain more insights about the community. While the information you gain from networking interviews is useful for preparing the community study report, the process of networking does not stop when the report is done. Networking is an ongoing, long term project.

The goal of networking is to build relationships, to scout out potential allies, and to let others know about your church, while gathering information about the community and ministry opportunities. Networking also builds the church's reputation as an entity that cares about the community's needs and respects others. Networking is vital to the larger goal of vision discernment and holistic ministry development.

Targets for networking include other churches (and non-Christian houses of worship); social service agencies; schools; police; social security and welfare offices; real estate agents; businesses; health clinics; foundations; and public officials. Focus on "anchor institutions" that play a key role in shaping community life and providing stability. Also become acquainted with key individuals in the community: gatekeepers, caretakers, flak-catchers, and brokers (see the tool "Identifying Community Leaders" for an explanation). Offer to take people out to lunch, arrange to meet for coffee, or ask for a tour of their facilities—and leave a packet of information about your church. The "Networking Interviews" tool suggests questions you can ask.

As a clearer picture emerges of the kinds of holistic ministry your church may undertake, pay special attention to potential ministry partners — programs your church could come alongside and support; sources of client referrals, volunteers or funds for your own programs; coalitions your church should join; people who can provide special expertise; churches to team up with. Keep track of your networking contacts and any ideas for follow-up toward potential partnerships, using the "Networking Log" tool.

Another fruit of networking is the development of relationships with members of the community who can walk with your congregation as you learn about the community and lay the groundwork for outreach activities. These relationships help to build the community's trust and sense of investment in the church's ministry, while providing valuable "insider" input and access. The relationships forged through networking help to ensure that the church engages in holistic ministry *with,* not simply *to,* the community.

Whenever possible, try to link church leaders with people in the community according to their area of ministry. The youth group leader, for example, could connect with public school principals and teachers, the director of the local Boys and Girls Club, and people associated with the juvenile court system.

COMMUNITY STUDY GUIDE

This guide will help you know what you are looking for as a "student of the community." Some of the questions will apply more to "community" in the sense of a geographical area; others apply more to "community" in the sense of a people group.

You can use these questions as a framework for reporting your study group's findings to the church. Feel free to add, subtract or adapt questions as appropriate to your particular context. The goal is not to answer every question, but to gather the information most relevant to your unique context and concerns.

A. **Look up: seek God's perspective on the community**

Community study should be grounded in prayer. Our ability to interpret the complex realities of the community is necessarily limited and biased. Seek the gift of seeing the community through God's eyes. (See the "Guide to Prayer-Walking" on p. XX.)

B. **Look around: describe the community**

To create a thorough portrait of a community, you have to look at it through several different "lenses."

1. Demographics: the make-up of the community. What is the current composition of the community in terms of:

    a. Total population

    b. Race, ethnicity or language groups

    c. Age

    d. Education

    e. Employment

    f. Income

    g. Household size / family structure

- How have these characteristics changed over the last ten years?
- What trends are anticipated for the next ten years?

2. Culture: systems of meaning, values, and practices that shape how people in the community live. Consider:

    a. What do people in this community value most — family, career, homes, etc.?

    b. What are the dominant religions or world views (such as individualism or humanism)? What gives people's lives meaning and hope?

    c. How do people in this community like to spend their free time?

    d. What unites the community, and what divides it? What are sources of tension or conflict among different groups?

3. Organization: underlying structures and systems that uphold the community's quality of life.

    a. What are the major institutions that serve the area or people group (schools, businesses, churches, banks, hospitals, nonprofits, etc.)? What strengths and needs are associated with these institutions? Which institutions develop, and which drain, human resources, economic resources, and social capital?

    b. What are the major systems that get important functions done (the criminal justice system, the local economy, garbage collection, public transportation, etc.)? What are the strengths and needs associated with these systems?

    c. What is the condition of the physical infrastructure that sustains community life (housing stock, streets, parks, water or waste treatment plants, etc.)?

4. Power relationships: how decisions are made that affect the community.

    a. Who are the individuals and institutions who hold power in the community? (See the "Identifying Community Leaders" tool.) Power-brokers can be both formal (ward captains) and informal (block "mamas"). Consider political power (e.g., zoning board), economic power (e.g., banks), and cultural power (e.g., media).

    b. What powerful outside influences affect the quality of life in the community (neighboring municipalities, national government, business headquarters, HMOs, etc.)?

    c. What are the channels of access (official and unofficial) to those in power? How much opportunity do members of the community have for input into decision-making processes?

    d. Who in the community is active in challenging or influencing those in power as a response to community needs? Who speaks up on behalf of the community?

    e. Who in the community has the least power? Who is most "invisible"?

5. Social capital: intangible resources for building community life.

   a. Civic life: What civic organizations exist in the community to bring people together and reinforce common interests and values (e.g. amateur sports leagues, Boy/Girl Scouts, parent-teacher associations, Town Watch, block captains, book clubs)?

   b. Collaborations: What networks or collaborations exist in the community that allow shared information, resources, and support (e.g. clergy coalitions, social service consortiums, leadership councils, public-private partnerships)?

   c. Community identity: To what extent do people have a common community identity, a sense of belonging and attachment to one another or to the neighborhood?

   d. Community cohesion: Do people know who their neighbors are? Do people look out for one another — do they monitor the behavior of other people's kids, take pride in keeping their streets clean, alert police if they see something suspicious in their neighbor's yard? (See the "Six Neighborhood Types" tool.)

   e. Community linkages: To what extent is the community connected with outside resources and cultural influences? Is it isolated and stagnant, or does it attract investment of outside resources and participate in the broader metropolitan area?

6. Spiritual life: spiritual realities that impact the tangible attributes of the community.

   a. What is the level of church attendance and other signs of religious commitment in the community?

   b. Does the community bear any spiritual scars from destructive events or demonic influences?

   c. What spiritual assets, such as Christian families who pray for their neighbors, uphold the fabric of community life?

   d. What are the likely sources of resistance to the gospel? What factors might contribute to openness to the gospel?

7. Geography: the location of boundaries, institutions, and special features.

   Find or create a map of your area of ministry focus. If your community is a people group, map where concentrations of these people live in your city or region, along with the key institutions that serve this community. If your community is a particular neighborhood, use the "Mapping Your Community" tool (p. XX) to map the location of key sites, assets, problems, and potential partners.

C. **Look out: identify problems faced by the community**

Report the problems that threaten the goodness of life in the community. There are two ways to organize this information: in terms of people-groups, or in terms of felt needs. Choose the format that best applies to your context (or use both).

1. Needs associated with people groups

- poor persons
- elderly
- single parent households
- disadvantaged / at-risk children
- sick / disabled (and their caretakers)
- prisoners / ex-prisoners
- refugees / immigrants
- persons with addictions
- disaster victims
- other _____ (add as needed for your context)

2. Felt needs

- spiritual / moral needs (guilt, spiritual healing, emptiness, greed)
- family needs (parenting, marital problems, divorce, abuse, foster care)
- physical needs (food, shelter/housing, clothing, problems of aging)
- health needs (lack of access to quality care, disabiilties, mental health)
- emotional needs (loneliness, grief, suicide, stress, recreation)
- addictions (drugs, alcohol, sex, food, co-dependency)
- security (violent crime, property crimes, juvenile delinquency, hate crimes)
- cognitive needs (literacy, English as a second language, tutoring, drop-outs)
- employment needs (un- or under-employment, job training, living wage, day care)
- environmental needs (pollution, garbage, blight, hazards)
- sexual issues (prostitution, teenage sexuality, homosexuality)
- justice/legal concerns (legal aid, discrimination, law enforcement, political corruption)

For each major problem identified, consider:

a. How intense or widespread is this need? Where is it most concentrated?

b. What existing programs (public, private-secular, or faith-based) serve the people group or address the need? What dimensions of need remain unmet?

D. **Look back: trace the community's history**

Construct a basic timeline of the community's history.

a. What major transformations has the community undergone?

b. What happened in the past — catastrophic events, industry changes, political decisions, demographic shifts — that has a bearing on current needs?

c. What past accomplishments can the community point to with pride?

d. What key events or people may have affected the spiritual condition of the community (e.g., revivals, occult activity, church foundings / closures)

e. Who are the latest newcomers to the community, and why are they coming?

E. **Look within: examine the church's perceptions of the community**

Your preconceptions are the colored lens through which you interpret and apply information. An important step in studying your ministry context is to check the congregation's perceptions of the community.

a. How do members of the congregation describe the community? What kinds of adjectives and images do people associate with it (needy, promising, dependent, oppressed, wasteland, harvest field, danger zone)?

b. How (if at all) is the community referred to in sermons, in prayer time, in the church newsletter? Is the community on the church's radar screen?

c. What kinds of interactions has the church had with people and organizations in this community — positive, negative, indifferent? Have any conflicts arisen?

d. What kinds of natural connections exist between the church and community, such as members who live, work, own businesses or go to school there? Are these people excited about the prospect of serving the community?

F. **Look in the mirror: see your church through the eyes of the community**

"O wad some Power the giftie gie us / To see oursels as ithers see us!" (Robert Burns, "To a Louse") As you research the community, ask questions to help you see your church from the perspective of people in the community.

a. What comments do people make about the church's reputation or role in the community? (Were there any surprises?)

b. What would people like to see the church doing to help the community?

c. How welcoming and neighbor-friendly is your congregation, in terms of signage, parking, access, cleanliness, politeness, etc.?

PROCESSING THE COMMUNITY STUDY REPORT: REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Sometimes when churches do a community study, they write the report, file the report — and forget about the report. But a community study is not information for information's sake; it is gathered for the purpose of equipping the church to share the good news of the Gospel in word and deed. Keep this goal in mind. If you allow your study to get bogged down in statistics or overwhelmed with details, you will end up with "paralysis of analysis."

Use the following reflection questions to guide the analysis of the report. Dedicate time in this process to prayer. The insights yielded by this analysis, together with the ministry audit and church self-study, can then inform the larger process of discerning your church's vision for holistic mission and developing a strategic ministry plan.

1. How is God is already at work in the community?

To be effective in ministry, we need to get on board with what God is already doing. A community study becomes a treasure hunt for the wheat of God's activity, hidden among the tares (Matt. 13:24-30). This approach is especially essential for distressed neighborhoods or people groups that are usually viewed in terms of their problems. Ask the Lord to show you where His reign is already evident in the community.

While we naturally gravitate toward the movers and shakers, Scripture makes it plain that God also (or even primarily) works among those at the margins. Look for the people who demonstrate God's love and build up the community through the rhythms of ordinary life, like teachers, homemakers, and sports league coaches. Identify those who have a "fire in their belly" for justice. Don't limit your search to Christians — remember that God called the idolatrous king Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" (Jer. 27:6). God can work through any person or institution to accomplish His aims.

Develop an appreciation for assets in the community. How might the church nurture a relationship with these assets and support the community development work that is already taking place? How might the church invite members of the community to share their gifts to bless one another, and to join the church in doing the work of the kingdom? Consider also the ways your church is already being used by God to bless your community.

2. What aspects of community life call for transformation by God's holy love?

Seeing brokenness around us should stir up what activist David Frenchak calls a "holy discontent." The whole creation groans under its bondage to decay, says Romans 8:21-22, and we too groan in our spirits as we yearn for Christ's complete redemption. What about the community grieves you, raises your hackles, fills you with a yearning to see things change? Who in the community is crying out for God's healing touch?

List the needs and issues that the church could respond to. Consider both the needs that are manifest in the lives of individuals (divorce, addictions, disabilities), and the problems that affect systems and institutions (immigration policies, juvenile courts, access to health care). Make sure that your responses reflect what members of the community themselves say are priority concerns, not just the needs that seem most obvious to "outsiders."

Address this question from a holistic perspective, tuning in to both spiritual and material needs. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the community through God's eyes, looking past the outward appearance of things to the heart of the matter (1 Samuel 16:7). In more affluent communities, we may be inclined to conclude that everying is fine. But polished exteriors can mask many forms of brokenness—family conflict, addictions, the scars of abuse, spiritual emptiness. And in low-income communities, while the eye is naturally drawn to physical evidence of need—graffiti, abandoned buildings, trash in the street—God can redirect our vision to the asset He cares about most: the people.

3. What would God's intended wholeness look like in this community?

What would God's "shalom" (peace and wholeness) look like in your community? Drawing on the extravagant stock of biblical promises, ask God what it would mean if the prayer, "Your Kingdom come," were answered in this community. This is the time for exercising the sanctified imagination, for holy dreaming. What could this community be like if people embraced God's transforming redemption, if neighbors loved one another, if the natural environment was flourishing, if social institutions treated people as responsible, valued creations made in the image of God?

This step requires caution, however. There's a fine line between dreaming of desired changes, and imposing your will on others. Never assume that you know what is best for other people. Your vision must take the hopes and dreams of members of the community into account. This means building relationships with people and really listening to them.

4. How could our church participate in God's redemptive plans for the community?

Having laid out the needs, the assets, and the long-range vision, now ask: "So, what can we do about it?" Brainstorm a list of possible church responses to community issues. Include potential ministries as well as non-programmatic ideas like "making church services more appealing to the dominant culture in the community." Take special note of ministry ideas that have some grounding in things that your church, or individual church members, or people or agencies in the community are already doing. Push for ministry possibilities that are holistic — that touch people's lives spiritually, socially, and relationally, as well as seeking the good of the community on a more systemic level.

At this point, don't try to limit your ideas to what is practical or realistic. Make room for possibilities that are so big that only God could bring them about. This step is part of the process of narrowing down the options to discern a specific ministry plan.

SUPPLEMENTAL

TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY STUDY

CREATIVE COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

To really grasp the heart of your ministry community you have to get beyond data. Humans are not reducible to mere facts. Moreover, charts and graphs rarely inspire anyone to throw themselves into holistic ministry. You will need to find creative ways of communicating what you are learning about the community -- of putting names and faces to facts -- to help move your congregation toward a dynamic, informed response.

Here are a few exercises of a more "right-brained" nature:

- Make a video of old-timers telling stories about their memories of life in the neighborhood, along with young people talking about their hopes and dreams for the future.

- Choose a city block (the block where your church is located, or a block that represents the focus of your ministry) as a case study of the history and characteristics of the larger community. Create a timeline representing major events, changes or social forces affecting the people who have lived or worked there.

- Interview residents representing each of the major key demographic groupings in the community (e.g. seniors, young married couples, Hispanics). Ask permission to record their reflections on life in the community, or about a particular issue that has emerged as a major concern. Make a video of the highlights from their interviews to share with the congregation. You can also include footage from interviews with key leaders and community servants (school principal, police officer, business leader, social worker, etc.).

- Make a collage of photos, newspaper articles (the local library might have archives of old papers), drawings, and other illustrative material that captures the essence of the community. Also include images that represent your hopeful vision for the community.

- Ask a group of neighborhood residents to help you design a web page about the neighborhood (this can be a great way to connect with young people). You don't have to have the computer skills to actually create it (though that would be a bonus!) — just plan what would be on it if you did. Include items such as a neighborhood emblem, slogan, the "go-to" person for information, landmarks, and a directory of services, churches, and favorite hang-out spots.

- Create a video or photo essay of "a day in the life of our community" that illustrates the rhythms of neighborhood life. Highlight key institutions, gathering places, recreational activities, problem areas. Weave in stories of real people who live, work and worship in the community (with their permission, or else with changed names).

MAPPING THE COMMUNITY

Get or make a detailed map of your community of ministry. Add symbols for the key components of community life, such as:

- **Landmarks**: Significant physical objects (like prominent buildings or a big mural)
- **Arteries**: Major traffic routes —
- **Gathering places**: Centers of activity and main meeting spaces (like a recreation center or popular restaurant)
- **Public spaces**: Places open to the public (like parks or libraries)
- **Businesses**: Major businesses or industries that serve as economic anchors for the community (like a factory or much-used check cashing place)
- **Schools**: From elementary schools to universities Y
- **Government agencies**: Public service centers (like the police station or welfare office) ι
- **Service agencies**: Private nonprofits (like a day care or rescue mission) !
- **Congregations**: Other houses of worship (including non-Christian)
- **Districts**: Areas of recognizable character 9 (Draw lines around the district and label it)

You can add your own symbols to represent specific concerns of your church — like youth-oriented places, drug corners, or senior housing.

Now color code the map, using three different colors (highlighters, markers, stickers) to highlight symbols or areas that fall into these categories:

- **Assets**: Things that residents like and that enhance the quality of life in the neighborhood (like a good school or bike path); note which assets are largely under neighborhood control (like community-based cultural and religious organizations and small businesses), and which assets are largely controlled by outsiders (like rental housing, chain restaurants, and public schools).
- **Problems**: Things residents don't like and that detract from the quality of life in the neighborhood (like an abandoned house or trash dump); note which problem sites are largely under the control of people or institutions within the neighborhood, and which are largely controlled by outsiders.
- **Potential partners**: Individuals, institutions or associations that the church could work alongside in ministry collaborations (like a "block mama," nonprofit agency, or neighborhood watch)

Adapted from *Establishing Public Value: A Tool Kit,* "Discovering Your Partners" (Philadelphia: Partners for Sacred Places, 2002), 21. Original source: *Neighborhood Assessment Workshop Participant Workbook,* FOCUS Kansas City, Kansas City Planning and Development Department.

COMMUNITY SURVEYS

A survey is a systematic way of gathering information about the neighborhood. Surveys are best conducted door-to-door by pairs of church members. This creates opportunities for your congregation to develop relationships and name recognition in the process. If most church members are not from your community of ministry, it is a good idea to pair a church member with a local resident who knows the people in the community.

Although the primary purpose of the survey is not evangelistic, you can be sensitive to the spiritual and personal needs of the people you contact. If people have immediate needs, you can ask how the church might be able to help. If you offer prayer or aid, however, be sure that you follow up and keep your promises! Enlist volunteers to pray for the needs revealed by the survey.

After finishing the survey, you can give people a brochure or card from your church, with information about programs and worship services. One option is to coordinate the timing of the survey with a special fun event — like a church picnic or concert — and give the people you survey a flyer inviting them to participate. Later, follow up with a thank-you note to residents who completed the survey to show your appreciation for their time.

On the next page is a sample survey. The questions are open-ended, with space for survey-takers to write in people's responses. You can adapt or add questions as appropriate. For example, you can list several possible initiatives that are being considered by the church and ask people which ones they think are best suited to their current needs. If you already have a service project in mind, you can change question #3 to ask: "Our church is considering doing ..... in this neighborhood. Do you have any suggestions for how you'd like to see us do this?"

Community Survey

Hello, my name is ..... and I'm with ..... church. We are conducting a survey of residents to help us learn more about this community. The information will be used by our church to plan how we can serve the neighborhood.

Name: _____ Address: _____

Length of time lived in this community: _____ Ages of children at home: _____

Congregation (if any): _____

Local clubs, groups or organizations your family participates in: _____
(for example: sports league, parent-teacher association, Boy/Girl Scouts, Neighborhood Watch)

1. What do you like best about this community? What makes this a good place to live?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What are up to three changes you'd like to see that could make life better in this community?

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Our church is considering ways to bless this neighborhood. Do you have any suggestions?

   _____

   _____

4. Are you currently involved in any volunteer work, or are you interested in volunteering? Do you have special skills or interests that you might want to contribute toward improving the community?

   _____

5. Is there any way we as a church can specifically pray for you?

   _____

Would you like us to follow up with you about working together to serve the community? _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Thank you very much for your time and information!

NETWORKING INTERVIEWS

The purpose of networking interviews is to learn from people who are knowledgeable about the community, and to make connections that can lead to fruitful ministry partnerships.

Interviewing is best done in pairs. It's helpful if one person takes notes while the other person asks the questions. Begin the interview by identifying yourself and your church. Explain the purpose for the interview (e.g., "Our church is exploring new ways of serving the community, and we're interested in learning more about the community and about your role here."). Afterwards, follow up with a thank-you note to show your appreciation for people's time.

Although the primary purpose of these visits is not evangelistic, be sensitive to the spiritual and personal concerns of those you contact. As it feels appropriate, offer to pray for or with people. Be on the lookout for hidden "family" -- brothers and sisters in Christ working for secular organizations.

The following questions are suggested for contacts with leaders of neighborhood associations, nonprofit agencies, schools, police, churches, civic clubs, or other groups. Your local government can help provide you with information concerning the most active organizations and leaders in the community. Also seek to identify and contact the "unoffcial" community leaders (see p. XX). Keep a record of your contacts, opportunities for partnerships, and follow-up ideas in the Networking Log on the next page.

Questions for community contacts:

1. What are the greatest assets and strengths you see here? What gives you hope when you think about this community and its future?

2. What are your main concerns about life in this community? What do you see as the major social, economic, cultural or spiritual challenges here?

3. What kinds of changes have you seen in the community? Overall, are things getting better or worse?

4. Finish the sentence: "The most important thing for people to know about this community is ..."

5. Finish the sentence: "This community will be stronger and better for everyone when ..."

6. How have you and your organization been working to improve life in the community?

7. Our church is considering ways to serve this neighborhood. Do you have any suggestions? Are there ways we might partner with your organization to serve the community?

8. Can you recommend two other people or organizations that we should talk to, to help us learn more about this community?

Networking Log

cord information about each networking visit. Note ideas for partnerships and directions for follow up (such as prayer requests)

of Contact n	Institution	Address	Phone #	Name of Networker(s)	Date of Contact	Notes / Follow-up Ide

IDENTIFYING COMMUNITY LEADERS

Every community has its leaders — official and unofficial. Community leaders can be obstacles or assets. Some leaders can prevent things from happening. They can block, harass, and cause trouble. Rarely do they initiate positive action. There are also leaders who make a community function, and may ally themselves with your efforts to improve the community.

Every community has its "gatekeepers, caretakers, flak-catchers, and brokers." Identify who fills this role in your community of ministry:

- The **gatekeeper** is the person who decides whether or not someone "gets through the gates" of the community. He or she is the official permission-giver.

- The **caretaker** is usually the "Mama," or the "shepherd." Everyone always seems to gather at this home, especially the young.

- The **flak-catcher** gathers the gossip in the community, using it either constructively or destructively. This person can usually tell you the "inside scoop" on what is happening in the neighborhood.

- The **broker** is the person with access to influence. The broker can be identified by hypothesizing, "Suppose there is a broken street light on the block, and it has been broken for months, and the city just has not come out and gotten it fixed. Which person is most likely to make sure it gets fixed?"

Your church should seek to befriend these persons. They may never become members of the congregation, but they can open (or block) the doors for opportunities to minister to the disadvantaged.

Adapted from Oliver Phillips, *The 12-Step Program: Steps to Starting a Compassionate Ministry Center* (Kansas City, Mo.: Nazarene Compassionate Ministry USA/Canada, 2001), 10-11.

GUIDE TO PRAYER-WALKING IN THE COMMUNITY

What is prayer-walking? One simple definition: "Praying on-site with insight." The purpose of prayer-walking is to seek God's guidance, mercy, and transforming power -- both for the community, and for ourselves as God's servants in the community. (Read more about prayer-walking and download detailed guides at www.waymakers.org/prayerwalking.html.)

Become more aware of what you see while you walk and pray by connecting prayer-walking with structured observation (see the Community Observation Guide on p. XX). The discussion questions in the observation guide can help participants "debrief" after a prayer-walking experience.

General guidelines for prayer-walking

* Meet at an assigned time and start with group prayer.

* Walk in groups of two or three. Plan your routes ahead of time to cover as much of the area as possible.

* Pray aloud in a quiet, conversational voice, if you feel comfortable doing so. Or pray silently, letting your prayer partner(s) know what you are praying about. Don't call attention to yourselves. As the Waymakers website puts it, "You can be on the scene without making one."

* If anyone asks what you are doing, be prepared to respond: "We're praying God's blessing on this neighborhood. Is there any special way we can pray for you?"

* Although it is not the primary purpose of prayer-walking, be open to opportunities to interact with and bless people that may grow out of your experience. The Waymakers website explains the connection between prayer-walking and faith in action:

> *As you pray God's promises with specific homes or work sites in view, you'll find that hope for those people begins to grow. You'll begin to see people as God might view them. You'll likely find yourself becoming more interested in the welfare of the people you are praying for. ... Watch for the ways God impresses you to display his love in practical acts of kindness.*

* Plan to walk for about half an hour. If anyone in your group is not comfortable with walking, they can prayer-drive around the neighborhood instead.

* Afterwards, gather to share your prayers, observations and experiences. What did you learn about the neighborhood? How was God manifest in this experience?

* Encourage people to continue praying for the community during the week.

How do you pray?

Here are some pointers:

* *Pray for discernment* -- seek the gift of seeing the community through God's eyes, and to discern what God is already doing among the people; ask God to reveal what you need to know to inform your prayers for the people, events, and places in the community.

* *Pray for blessing* -- over every person, home and business you encounter; for God's intervention in each life, so that each one can be fruitful in God's kingdom; for God's will to be done in this community "as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

* *Pray with empathy* -- see and feel what residents live with every day; offer intercession for those things that express brokenness and grieve God's spirit, and give thanks to God for the blessings and gifts that exist in the community.

* *Pray from Scripture* -- prayers based directly on God's word can be especially powerful. You may want to bring a Bible with key passages highlighted, or copy verses onto note cards.

* *Pray in God's power* -- allow times of silence for God's spirit to speak to you, or for you (Romans 8:26). Ask with confidence in the power of Jesus' name (John 14:12-14)

(See Jay Van Groningen*, Communities First* [CRWRC, 2005], pages 30-31.)

COMMUNITY OBSERVATION GUIDE

Even if you have been in a community for a long time, you can learn to see the familiar with new eyes, alert to indicators of need as well as signs of God's reign.

Walk through as much of the community as you are able; if the area is far-flung, or if the weather is bad, a driving ("windshield") survey is another option. If possible, ask a resident to give you a guided tour of the neighborhood.

It is helpful to open your observation time with prayer, that God would allow you to see with His eyes of love and discernment. You can combine observation with more in-depth prayer for the community (see the "Prayer-Walking Guide," p. XX), and/or with a neighborhood survey (see p. XX). You may find it useful to complete this exercise more than once, with a different focus for your observations and prayers each time.

Use the categories on the next page to organize your observations. Respect the dignity of community members by recording your notes as unobtrusively as possible. Be present as servants, not tourists!

After the visit, take time as a group to compare notes and reflect on your observations. You can use this time also to generate a map of the community (see p. XX). Discuss the following:

- What positive qualities, opportunities and benefits does the community have to offer? What are signs that God is already at work in the neighborhood? Identify potential partners (people, churches, organizations) that the church could come alongside in serving the community.

- What needs and concerns are in evidence? What do you see that might detract from people's quality of life or hinder people from developing their potential? What challenges are people likely to face as they go about their daily life?

- How might community residents view your congregation? Would you be perceived as allies, foreigners, friends, helpers, annoyances, or simply irrelevant?

- Take note of your own response to what you see. What kinds of "vibes" do you get from your encounters in the community? What feels familiar / strange, safe / dangerous, friendly / hostile, happy / sad, pleasant / uncomfortable?

- Do you sense any barriers to "fitting in" between yourself and the community -- language, culture, class, ethnicity, age? What stereotypes about people and places might you have to address in order to build healthy relationships with people here?

- How is the Good News of salvation through Christ relevant here? What might it look like if God's kingdom were realized "on earth as it is in heaven" here in this community? Imagine how your congregation alongside members of the community might participate in helping the neighborhood experience God's design for a good life.

Close with a time of prayer for the community and for your congregation's witness and service there.

Community Observation Guide

Look for evidence of the following:

- *People groups:* Who is standing at bus stops, hanging out on street corners, going into businesses, playing in the park, waiting in line at the store? Note ages, ethnicities, languages, apparent economic status. How much do you see people interacting with one another?
- *Places of activity:* A pizza joint crowded with youth, a shopping plaza, a heavily trafficked intersection, playgrounds, school zones
- *Structures:* What are the types and conditions of the structures (homes, businesses, roads, parks)? How much "free space" is there in the community? What is the mix of private and public space?
- *Services:* Where can people go to shop, eat out, get an education, worship, receive assistance? What appears to be the quantity and quality of available services? Who is providing services, and who is receiving them?
- *Signs of change:* Businesses opening or closing, housing construction, sales or demolition, languages added to shop signs, buildings used in ways different from their original purpose. Overall, do conditions appear to be getting better or worse?
- *Signs of hope:* Evidence of God's grace and God's people at work: churches and nonprofits, playing children, uplifting artwork, Christian symbols, social gatherings, gardens. Look especially for local assets that could be connected with neighborhood needs.
- *Signs of need:* Evidence of hardship, hurt or injustice, specific to particular areas or affecting the neighborhood as a whole. Be aware that marginalized people and social problems are often hidden, especially in communities that appear well-off.

People groups	Places of activity	Structures	Services	Signs of change	Signs of hope	Signs of need