

Know Your Community

Additional information on researching your congregation's community, an addendum to *From Our Doorsteps: Developing a Ministry Plan That Makes Sense*, by Rick Morse, copyright ©2010 by Rick Morse, published by Chalice Press.

How to Find Out about Your Community

Talk to People

Today there are many easy ways to learn about your community and the unchurched in your area. The easiest way is to just ask people. They love to talk about themselves.

I was with a couple of young pastors in Arizona once who were considering planting a congregation in a city there. We looked at demographics, read Web sites, but the real data were in the minds of the people who lived in the community. They wanted to start a church for young adults, so I asked them, “Where do young adults hang out?” We came up with coffee shops and restaurants, but the real winner was the student union building of a local college campus. We found the college and the student union building, and I gave them the boot out of the car.

They reported being nervous about just going up and talking to a stranger, but I gave them a line by which they could begin a conversation about their community. “Just say you are considering moving to the community and you want to know what people do for fun around here. Once you break the ice you can ask about employment, housing, and church.”

They left while I parked the car. We agreed to meet again in two hours. Needless to say, they were late. They found that the conversations were so easy that they discovered far more about the community than they would have otherwise. The most important discovery they made was that most young people left that community when it came time for seeking gainful employment. This single factor would have made a sustainable new congregation nearly impossible.

It is very easy to enter into conversations with people, provided you start the conversation with safe, neutral issues. People love to talk about their recreational hobbies, about their jobs and their families. When you inquire about church participation, it is best to ask, “What do you know about churches here?” rather than “Do you go to church?” They will automatically tell you about their participation if they feel you are not judging them.

The purpose of these conversations is to learn about the community, not evangelize the individual. That is a completely different conversation. The data can only tell you so much; talking with people in your community is essential for truly informed ministry planning.

Windshield Tours

When we work with older congregations, I usually ask a long-time resident to take me on a ride around the community for forty-five minutes to an hour. We call this a “windshield tour”. It is best to have someone who has lived there awhile lead this trip rather than a new resident or someone who doesn’t live there. The longtime resident really know the inside stuff.

A tour like this should include several sites:

- A school around the time it is letting out
- A large retail store, like Wal-Mart
- The basic retail core of the community
- Active, new residential construction
- Several residential areas where church members reside
- Talks with government officials
- Other churches

What You Can Learn at a School

When you look at a school there is much you can observe. First, does the school have a lot of portable classrooms? Have they been there a long time? Portables are a sign of a growing district and

new children. Old portables are a sign that the community has not invested adequately in the school system.

When you watch the children, do they appear to match the racial-ethnic information given in the demographics? What kind of cars are the parents driving who pick them up? What Can You Learn at a Large Store?

Depending on the time of day, sitting outside a large box store will give you an idea about the community. Again, looking at the cars in the parking lot, you will have a good idea about the cross section of the community. Families with high incomes even occasionally shop at a Wal-Mart. You can measure the racial-ethnic data from those entering this kind of retail outlet (rather than an upscale mall).

I sat in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Arkansas one time and actually observed a man selling drugs through the fence. He met at least three customers in that short time. This told me a lot about the community as others observed it, but ignored it as a part of life.

You can also learn a bit about families. People will often take their children to stores like these while they do their weekly shopping. A picture begins to emerge about family size, how close in age children are, and whether parents are average age or older than normal.

Finally, look at the carts. Are they full of Pampers®, or Depends®? This gives you a hint about whom they are shopping for.

What Can You Learn by Looking at the Retail Core of a Community?

Every community has a retail core, be it the downtown area, or a strip on the main drag near the outskirts of town. It is a place where people in the community do their regular shopping for groceries and incidentals.



You can tell the health of a retail core without going inside any stores. When you look at the stores, you can see if they are up to speed appearance-wise compared with the same chain in another community. You can see if customers are going in and out of stores. Do they have bags that indicate they are actually making purchases? Are there vacancies in the stores? What is the condition of the parking lot? All these things give you an indication about the health and vitality of that market. How old are the stores? Are they part of a chain that sees a need to invest in this community or are they all locally owned? Are the signs bi-lingual, or even monolingual in a language other than English?

Graffiti and litter are also indications about city services to that community. Services are directly related to the tax base. The retail core will tell you about the basic nature of the community you are working in.

Pawn shops, Cash Advance stores, and Western Union offices are indicators of poor economic conditions.



What Can Active New Residential Construction Tell You about Your Area?

New construction is often a sign of new people moving to the area. When you view new construction it will tell you about how many new people are moving in and what kind of people they might be.



Most neighborhoods in suburban communities develop in stages, at the rate of home sales. In the first stage, infrastructure and surface water managements systems are built and buried. Then the first set of streets and curbs are built. Then housing is constructed: first the foundation, then framing and sheeting, then roofs and windows followed by interior work. Once a foundation is poured, a house will appear shortly (three to six months depending on weather and the construction firm).

If you arrive at a new site, and it has streets but not houses under construction, that means the growth that was anticipated is not happening yet. The developer is waiting on the economy or financing to continue. If there are a hundred or so homes being built simultaneously, then you had better brace yourself for some serious growth.

In some communities, you will see a new school spring up at the same time that the housing is being built. You may even see some new roads that are the result of mitigation fees the city collected from the developer.

While looking at new construction, it is important to realize there is a need to consult data. There may be 100 new homes going in, but that might bring the city up to capacity for their sewer system, so the growth will not continue.

What Can You Learn from Observing Neighborhoods Where Current Members Live?

Established neighborhoods can give you more of a hint about the majority of residents in your community. Look for telltale signs of children, such as basketball hoops, bikes in yards, or old cars with high school parking stickers.

If there is seating on the front porch, particularly if there are only two seats, and some cute yard decor, it is likely the house belongs to an older empty nest couple. The condition of the yard indicates the free time and care an individual puts into the place. If it is unkempt, it is likely the occupant works long hours or has little disposable income. It may also be an indicator of a non-owner occupied home, and perhaps an absentee landlord.

The cars in the driveway tell you a lot as well. If there are trucks with company names on the side, you can tell the types of occupations the residents have. Bumper stickers and specialty plates can also give you a hint about the attitude of the residents.

You can also date the community by observing a number of things. How mature are the shrubbery and trees in the community? Windows will tell you a lot, and the style of housing also reveals the age of the housing.

Lifestyles become apparent when you observe people's homes. Recreational equipment in the front yard, political signs, security systems stickers, and the stuff piled around the garbage can all tell you a little bit about the people who live inside. These are all clues about how ministry can begin to make a difference in their lives.

Dating the neighborhoods and having some idea of mobility rates will also give you a general picture about the potential an area may have for your church. By dating neighborhoods and creating a map of housing dates, you will see the patterns leading to the growing edge of the community, as well as the future growth edge. Here are some indicators that might help you date an area:

Pre-1950s Housing

Before 1940, most housing was custom built for the owner. The work was largely hand done and labor intensive. Housing was smaller because of the cost of building. There were few innovations during that period, and energy efficiency was not a factor. There were some early developers during this period who standardized their housing by building the same plan over and over again. Most of this housing had a single bathroom. The roof pitches were moderate to steep.

Utility poles, sidewalks, and mailboxes that are on the porch can distinguish these neighborhoods. They usually had single-car, detached garages with narrow driveways.



1950s Housing

Housing underwent a lot of transition during the 1950s. At the end of World War II there were suddenly lots of veterans with GI Bill benefits (including federal loans) looking for new housing. Because of the opening of educational opportunities, and Being mobile, many relocated away from their hometowns.

In the suburbs, developers used traditional, labor-intensive ways of building. But they soon began to discover standardization and production line methods of building that brought them faster build times and greater profits. That meant one to three designs for homes in these communities with straight streets laid out in a grid pattern. Since the housing was so similar, it would be easy to get lost while trying to find your home. People found great ways to make their house unique.

Housing in this era was lifted up in the popular song "Little Boxes."¹ They were simple two- and three-bedroom home, sometimes without basements.

¹Malvina Reynolds, © 1962 Schroder Music Company. Renewed 1990.



1960s Housing

Houses built in the 1960s were bigger than in the 1950s, though they were still very modest by today's standards, the largest having one and a half baths. Bedrooms and closets were larger than in previous generations. A family room was a rarity in this kind of housing. The innovation for these homes was the fireplace, which was made out of brick. A lot of these homes were slab on grade, stick frame construction. They were largely a single story. The carport was also introduced during this era. Houses were mostly wood clad. However, toward the end of the decade plywood was introduced as a siding material. Many of these homes had a moderate to slight roof pitch. Some even had flat roofs.



1970s Housing

Basements were the feature of the 1970s. While there were basements before, they really became a standard feature in this decade. By the 1970s, the split-level house was becoming the rage. An elevated entrance distinguishes these houses, where the person would either go to the basement or upstairs to the main living area. These houses were larger than the 1960s counterparts. They had brick fireplaces, wood siding or brick lower levels, and fairly low pitched roofs. By now their landscaping is very mature. Many had plywood siding as well as lap siding and brick.

Cul-de-sacs were fairly standard in these new neighborhoods, and underground services were also introduced during this era, removing power lines and telephone poles from the streets.



1980s Housing

Energy efficiency was a hallmark of this decade's construction. You can begin to distinguish 1980s housing by the “zero clearance” fireplaces. When this new building innovation was introduced, they were more energy efficient and added less to the cost of the building. When the fireplaces were first introduced, builders were not sure what to do about the chimney. (Today these fireplaces simply vent out the side of a house.)

These houses were tightly built and more insulated than those of previous generations. The siding could be t-11 or plywood siding. This was also the era in which some clapboard sidings were introduced. High-end residential areas were built in brick.



1990s and 2000s Housing

The 1990s developed two basic forms of housing. The first type was *big* houses. As many Boomers reached affluence, they sought and built larger homes. These homes can be distinguished by half-round windows, brick exteriors, and steeply pitched roofs. The second type was vinyl clad. This kind of housing was somewhat smaller, on smaller lots. These are still larger than previous decades of housing. They have vinyl windows, some of which are also half-rounds. They may also have some brick clad.

Now That I Have Dated the Housing, What Has It Told Me?

Once you identify communities in your area by date of origin you can develop a map of how your context has developed. This is helpful, as it gives you clues to the direction it will continue to develop. It will also help identify the area of greatest potential for future development.

In the 1970s, a historic downtown congregation could see the community developing slightly to the north. The church decided to relocate to what they thought was the growing edge of town. They sold their downtown building and built on three acres on the north side of their city. They struggled because of two issues: They did not take into account that city services had not yet been extended to that part of their city and they “overshot” the growth line. That is to say they built beyond the area of growth, anticipating that the community would come their way in the near future. Unfortunately, it developed to the south.

Needless to say, the congregation was only able to survive with those who were loyal to the church and to the denomination. By the time the community began to grow in their new location the congregation was too weak to reach out to the new population. They sold their facilities and are using capital assets to operate a new ministry reaching out to the fringes of that community.

Dating a community gives you a hint of the direction the community is growing. In the case above, the rings of development were clearly aiming to the south. If they had dated the community, they would have seen that development of housing to the north stopped in the 1950s. They would have noted a gap in decades of building, even in the 1970s when they made their decision.

Another reason for dating a community is to see where the community is in terms of its life-cycle. Are the primary residents' pioneers, settlers, or tenants? What is the next step of development for this community? Will new people be populating the area in the near future?

Talking with City/County Officials

It is worth visiting with your city or county officials. By asking them about future development, you will gain the necessary facts you need to understand your congregation's future and the community in which it resides.

The local building department will be able to point to a map and show new developments and the direction they see the city growing. They are also able to provide city and county plans for specific areas of your community. These plans will show the desires of the city and is an indicator of how the city will incentivize growth in specific areas.

A church in Denver was part of a community in transition. The housing in the area was sixty years old, and the local retail business across the street was no longer a neighborhood store, but a liquor store. During my visit I discovered that there was some vague plan that people knew was going to impact their street. One quick e-mail later, I received a complete plan for development of this congregation's area. This sixty-page plan showed boulevard improvements, housing shifts from single-family to higher density housing, the expansion of the light rail service to their community, and the widening of the road next to the church. This report also outlined how the city was planning to attract businesses and new families to this community. It gave us a certain amount of hope in the future ministry for the congregation, which was considering closure. The conversation was worthwhile.

You can also ask officials about infrastructure issues and how they might impact growth. One city planner in Arizona told me about a lawsuit his city had with a neighboring city regarding sewer treatment. If their city were to lose the lawsuit, it would stop future growth; if they were to win, the rapid growth they were experiencing would continue. In another city in Arizona, an official told us of the changes in the FEMA floodplain area, which would greatly impact future growth and development.

The local chamber of commerce can also give you forecasts for your community. You need to note that these forecasts often overstate the economic development for the future, but they are an indicator of future vitality.

Another great source of information is the school district administration. In some areas they have an individual who monitors population growth and places for future development of new schools. These individuals can share (and love to talk about) social issues that impact many of their schools. They also can show you where growth is occurring and point to other ministry opportunities. In most school districts they submit a written report to their school board on an annual basis. All of this information is very helpful.

What Can I Learn from Neighboring Congregations?

Before I began a new church in the Seattle area, I interviewed all the pastors who would see me in the local community. In those conversations I was able to determine the amount of church participation in relationship to the community by adding up their average worship attendances and doubling that figure. Even taking the notorious "preacher numbers" (a term that means they are likely inflated), I soon discovered there were not a lot of people participating in a faith community in my target area.

Besides measuring participation rates, these conversations will help you to understand the theology and mission of congregations in the area. When they tell you about programs that they are known for, you begin to see the types of programs that people in your community resonate with. You discover the worship styles of these congregations as well, which may even help you see gaps in the community.

I always made a point of asking: “Is there a ministry need in this community that is screaming for attention from our congregations?” Almost every pastor had some excellent insights into ministry opportunities. Usually pastors are also willing to talk about recurring themes that they hear from their parishioners, about the things they struggle with on a daily basis.

Where Can I Get My Data?

A lot of information regarding census data and other demographics related to your community is available on the Web. Your city government and chamber of commerce almost always have data available on their websites. Real estate Web sites are also loaded with information.

Our denomination uses PERCEPT, a church demographic provider (www.perceptnet.com). This demographic service allows for contract participants to draw a polygon on any community and extract the specific data on that area. It includes information from the U.S. Census, as well as updated information from a marketing research company named Claritas regarding community concerns and church participation information. For groups that participate in that service, each congregation has access to the data through www.link2lead.com. These reports are six pages in length and easy for the layperson to read.

Another new service provider is MissionInsite. This demographic provider calls themselves “the next generation in Mission Context Analysis.” The service is new, but shows great promise in being able to provide more depth of analysis. Users highlight the area they want to review and provide a fifteen-page detailed report about the population living in the area, including a lot about their spending and driving habits, household types, and more. Their address is www.missioninsite.com

Wherever you get your data, know that you must confirm it against what you see in the community context. Some immigrant populations are greatly undercounted. Some of the growth predictions can be way off because of changing circumstances, and people move very quickly in our mobile society.