

COMMUNITY STUDY GUIDE: CONNECTING WITH YOUR CHURCH'S CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY

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INTRODUCTION: WHY AND HOW TO STUDY YOUR COMMUNITY

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.

~ Phil Tom and Sally Johnson, *Handbook for Urban Church Ministries* (Metro Mission, 1996)

Why Study Your Community?

According to Ray Bakke, many Christians have "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 order to become its servant.

A community assessment has seven main goals:

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

The process of networking and listening nourishes a church's sense of belonging to and identification with the community, and prepares the way for ministry partnerships. The more a church comes to regard its community as a familiar friend, the more it yearns to see God's "kingdom come" in its context.

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

Without an accurate assessment, ministry may reflect the church's interests more than the community's real needs, dreams and strengths. Information improves a church's aim in making relevant, strategic ministry investments. Identifying trends also helps the church to be proactive, beyond merely responding to crises.

3. *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.

4. *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 study can reveal dynamics – sometimes hidden beneath the surface – that influence people's opportunities, choices, and perceptions of self-worth.

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

A church that is ignorant of external influences on its ministries can easily become discouraged, or 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.

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

The relationship between church and community is a two-way street of influence. 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 learn to be aware of and adapt 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 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. 6 below) so that you have identified a distinct geographical area or people group for your 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, to give you a well-rounded picture. It may be helpful to start by creating a preliminary profile of the community (see the Preliminary Community Profile tool).

After completing the community study, prepare a **report on your findings** to share with the church's leadership and those interested in community ministry. Also consider sharing your findings with key contacts you have made in the community. The community study outline (see p. 10) provides a suggested framework that you can adapt 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. 21) suggests a few creative ways of supplementing a written report with more "right-brained" presentations.

The community study **reflection questions** (see p. 16) will help you process the implications of this report for ministry. The information and insights from this study can then inform the process of vision discernment and ministry planning.

It is helpful to set a time frame for the community study, so that the research and reporting stages do not continue indefinitely. However, the process of learning about the community is ongoing. Beyond gathering data, a community study entails active **networking** with people and institutions in the community (see p. 9). Through networking, your church builds relationships, captures vision for ministry opportunities, connects with community assets, 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. We approach the community more like getting to know a friend than like studying a subject for a school report. This kind of study values building relationships with and seeking input from members of the community. It's fairly easy to find statistics on a community. Taking the time to be inclusive and relational will allow you to get beyond raw data to the heart of the matter. Forming relationships for the long haul also discourages the temptation to look for a "quick fix" for entrenched problems.

Think of your community study as a treasure hunt for the wheat of God's gifts and activity, often hidden among the tares (Matt. 13:24-30). Begin by asking the Lord of the harvest to show you where His reign is already evident. A "need-based" paradigm—defining a community primarily in terms of needs and problems—can become demoralizing. It can lead to a patronizing attitude that perpetuates dependency by rescuing people rather than empowering them.

In contrast, an *asset-based* approach embraces four main principles:

- ***God is already at work in the community.*** There is no place on earth that God has abandoned, that is excluded from God's loving presence and redemptive plan. God's work is not limited by funding, education or abilities. God can use people who do not claim faith, and institutions such as schools and businesses, as instruments for good.
- *We are defined not by our problems but by our potential.* Each person is precious, uniquely created in God's image. Each person has God-given gifts to offer and capacities to develop. Those we serve have more to offer back to us and to their community than we can imagine. The goal of ministry is not only to meet people's needs but also to release individuals to share their gifts with others.
- *Do ministry with people, not to people.* The vision and plans for serving a community need to engage the input of people in the community. True development means empowering individuals and communities to achieve their own goals. Bringing people's dreams to light provides energy to work toward change.
- *Effective ministry builds on assets.* Our first question is not "What is wrong?" but "Where is God at work?" We seek to get on board with the gifts and initiatives in the community that reflect what God is already doing. Beyond simply doing things for people, the church has a valuable role in coming alongside a community to help build people's capacity and unleash their potential.

A relational, asset-based approach nurtures relationships that connect members of the community to God and to one another. (See the asset-mapping tools on p. 31-33.) This approach, writes Jay Van Groningen in *Communities First: Through God's Eyes, With God's Heart*, leads to "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." This paradigm helps a church in moving from analysis to action.

For more help on an asset-based approach to community study, see the resources available on the website for the Communities First Association (<https://cfapartners.org/page/Tools-Archive>).

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's *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." They follow the model of a parish church, considering the whole neighborhood to be their parish.
- *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 forge a bond with a particular inner city neighborhood, or a church might locate a ministry in an apartment complex 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, or church members with disabilities), special concerns of the congregation (such as immigration or children) – 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 the key goals that would make life better for everyone in the community? Most of these methods are most relevant to a geographic neighborhood (*settlers* and *gardeners*), but some can be adapted for people groups (*shepherds*).

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. 22) 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, assets and ideas. 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 Listening Survey" provides a sample survey format (p. 23-24).
4. **Interviews:** Identify leaders and "insiders" in the community (elected officials, business leaders, community organizers, other pastors, long-time residents) to interview. 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. 9) and the "Networking Interviews" and "Networking Log" tools (p. 25-26).
5. **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.
6. **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).

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. 30-31, 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" and "Community Ministry Prayer Guide," p. 28-29).
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);
 - worshipping 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, aim for at least three different approaches. 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 LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY

Networking is the exchange of information, ideas and resources with key individuals and organizations in the community. The community study and networking go hand in hand: through the community assessment process, you discover good prospects for networking; and as you network, you gain more insights about the community. The process of networking does not stop when the community study report is done. Building connections between the church and the community is an ongoing, long term project.

Networking enables a church 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. The relationships forged through networking help to build the community's trust and sense of investment in the church's ministry, while providing valuable "insider" input and access. The discipline of intentional listening helps to ensure that the church engages in ministry *with*, not simply *to*, the community.

Organizational contacts for networking include other churches (and non Christian houses of worship); social service agencies; neighborhood associations; schools; police; social security and welfare offices; real estate agents; businesses; health clinics; foundations; and public officials. Seek out both "anchor institutions" that have played a key role in shaping community life and providing stability, and "catalyst institutions" that are on the cutting edge of change.

Every community has its leaders — official and unofficial. Community leaders can be obstacles or assets to efforts to improve the community. They can block or open doors, cause trouble or become allies. Either way, it's important to know who they are. Get acquainted with those in the key roles of gatekeepers, caretakers, flak-catchers, and brokers, as described by Oliver Phillips, in *The 12-Step Program: Steps to Starting a Compassionate Ministry Center*.

- The **gatekeeper** is the person who decides whether or not someone "gets through the gates" of the community, the official permission-giver. If the gatekeeper says you're in, you're in.
- The **caretaker** is usually the "Mama," or the "shepherd." Their home is the gathering place.
- The **flak-catcher** gathers the gossip in the community, 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 asking, "Suppose there is a street light that 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?"

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. Also build on pre-existing points of connection with members' professional or personal relationships. For example, talk to businesses in the community who employ members of the church, or schools attended by youth in the church.

The "Networking Interviews" tool (p. 25) suggests questions you can ask. Use the Networking Log (p. 26) to help you keep track of your networking contacts and ideas for follow-up.

PRELIMINARY COMMUNITY PROFILE

Preparing a preliminary profile can be a useful first step in a community study. The aim of this profile is to capture existing knowledge about a community; no significant new research is required at this stage. The person(s) on the community study team who are most knowledgeable about the community can prepare this basic overview. This profile can serve as an orientation to the community (a "Community Who's Who") for the rest of the study team, as well as the starting point for networking and building an asset inventory.

1. Provide a short (less than 1 page) description of the community in ministry context – where it is located, key demographics, unique features, what is known about its challenges and its potential, a history of the church's connection with the community (if any).
2. List the most significant individuals and organizations in the community (this doesn't have to be an exhaustive list – identify the names that you are most familiar with or that are most important for people to know about):
 - (a) leaders and gatekeepers (see p. 9 for a description of types of informal leaders)
 - (b) institutions (e.g. schools), associations (e.g. neighborhood association), non-profits (e.g. Salvation Army)
 - (c) churches
 - (d) key businesses or economic engines
3. List the most significant organizations or programs based outside the community that serve or are involved in the community (e.g. city-wide housing coalition, welfare office)
4. List reputable sources for information on this community (e.g. reports or published articles); if there is a good, concise description of the community that would be helpful for all the team to read, attach it to this profile.
5. Big picture question: Based on what is already known about the community, what is most important for the team to discover or understand about the community in order to be an effective ministry partner? What are main themes or questions to research further in the community study (if one is planned)?

COMMUNITY STUDY OUTLINE

This outline of questions 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. 27.)

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 makeup 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
 - h. Housing types / home ownership rates
- 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 worldviews (such as Christianity, 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: 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 concerns are associated with these institutions? Which institutions develop, and which drain, human resources, economic resources, and social capital?
 - b. What associations and networks are organized within the community? What issues and interests bring people together? How are people in the community organized to address local concerns?
 - c. 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?
 - d. 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 (political leaders, big businesses, HMOs, etc.)?
 - c. What are the channels of access (official and unofficial) to those in power? Do members of the community have 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. 22) 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). (*The "Community Needs, Assets and Dreams" tool*, p. 31, offers a way of organizing this information.)

1. Needs associated with people groups

- poor persons
- elderly
- single parent households
- disadvantaged / at-risk children
- persons with disabilities / mental illness (and their caretakers)
- prisoners / ex-prisoners
- refugees / immigrants
- persons with addictions
- disaster / crime 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, disabilities, 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, 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 past accomplishments can the community point to with pride?
- c. What past events or trends — catastrophes, industry changes, political decisions, demographic shifts — have a bearing on current conditions?
- 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

A word of caution: 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 serves a purpose: to equip the church to share the Good News of God's kingdom in a community by word and deed. 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. Also seek input from people in the community you have come to know and respect. The insights yielded by this analysis, together with the ministry audit and church self-study, can then inform the larger process of working with the community to discern a vision for holistic mission and to develop a strategic ministry plan.

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

Start by looking at strengths. This is especially critical for distressed neighborhoods or people groups that are usually viewed in terms of their problems. We need to trust that God has not abandoned this community. Our first goal is to get on board with the gifts and initiatives in the community that reflect what God is already doing.

Make a list of assets in the community – things that contribute to the well-being of people and their environment (see the Community Asset Inventory). Include spiritual, institutional, financial, cultural, political, and natural assets. Think of the *gifts that individuals possess*:

- **Gifts of the head:** What valuable knowledge and information have people in this community learned through education or life experience?
- **Gifts of the hand:** What practical and artistic skills do people in this community possess?
- **Gifts of the heart:** What do people in this community most care about? What are people passionate about working together to change?

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 coaches. Identify individuals and groups who have a heart of compassion or a "fire in their belly" for justice. Don't limit your search to Christians — God can work through any person or institution to accomplish His aims (see Jeremiah 27:6).

How might the church nurture a relationship with these assets and support the good work that is already taking place? How might the church encourage members of the community to share their gifts to bless one another, to work together toward common goals, and to join the church in doing the work of the kingdom?

2. What needs or problems diminish God's intended wholeness in the community?

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?

Your responses should reflect what members of the community themselves say are priority concerns, not just the needs that seem most obvious to "outsiders." What would people most like to change that could make this community more like heaven? What takes away from people's potential to "have life to the fullest" (John 10:10)?

List the needs and issues affecting the community's quality of life. 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).

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, 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—our sights should be focused on what God cares about most: the people.

3. What is the dream for God's intended wholeness in this community?

What might God's "shalom" (peace and wholeness) look like in your community? Drawing on the extravagant stock of biblical promises, and the hopes and dreams expressed by members of the community, ask what it would mean if the prayer, "Your Kingdom come," were answered in this community. Describe a vision that captures the community's potential.

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?

Again, we must never assume that we know what is best for other people. This *shalom* vision must be grounded in the hopes and dreams of the people themselves. This entails building relationships with people and really listening to them. It also entails reflecting theologically on passages of Scripture that describe God's intentions for human society (such as Isa. 61, Isa. 65:17-25, Mic. 4:1-7, Matt. 5:1-16, Rev. 21:1-4). Where do the community's goals and God's desires for our preferred future intersect?

4. How could our church participate in God's kingdom vision for the community?

Having laid out the assets, the needs, and the long-range vision, now is the time to ask: "So, what can we do about it?" What can the church do to share God's Good News in word and deed with people who are struggling? How can the church build on the dreams and potential in the community for a better life for all? Where can the church reach out with a redemptive, transformational presence?

Brainstorm possible responses to shared concerns. Include potential ministries as well as non-programmatic goals like encouraging appreciation of cultural diversity. Reach for ministry options that are holistic—that touch people's lives spiritually, physically, and relationally. Consider

also how to seek the good of the community on a more structural, systemic level. It is vital that this step be informed by community input.

Connect these ministry ideas with the assets noted in the first question. Pay particular attention to opportunities for ministry partnerships. Who is already pursuing this vision in the community, and how could the church come alongside them? Who has expressed a willingness to offer their time and talents for these concerns? How could the church help to organize and connect the various gifts of individuals and organizations? (See the tool, "Mapping Connections among Community Assets," p. 33.)

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 is a first step in the process of narrowing down the options to discern a specific ministry plan. (See the *Vision Discernment Guide: Establish a Direction for Your Church's Community Ministry*.)

5. Pray, listen and love!

Once you have completed your community study reflection and report, you will find yourself looking at complex layers of information, many options, and a lot of work. In the meantime, there are three simple ways the church can act on the study to keep momentum toward transformational community ministry.

- Continue to make "your kingdom come" in the community a matter of persistent and informed prayer (James 5:16). Lead groups from the church in occasional prayer-walking. This is one way to expose and connect an expanding range of people in the congregation with daily life in the community.
- Continue networking and building relationships with people in the community. Hold listening conversations to seek feedback on your community study findings and ideas for the church's response. As ambassadors of Christ, you are interested in what people in the community have to say to the church.
- Love your community! A church doesn't need a new program or strategic plan to find ways to bless its neighbors. Given all that you have learned, what is one simple thing your church – and your household – can do *next week* to express God's love to a neighbor, or to show appreciation for the gifts God has planted in the community?

SUPPLEMENTAL

TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY STUDY

Creative Community Presentations
Mapping the Community
Community Surveys
Networking Interviews
Identifying Community Leaders
Guide to Prayer-Walking in the Community
Community Ministry Prayer Guide
Community Observation Guide
Community Needs, Assets and Dreams
Community Asset Inventory
Mapping Connections among Community Assets

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. And charts and graphs rarely inspire anyone to throw themselves into local missions. You will need to find creative ways of communicating what you are learning about the community—of putting names and faces to the 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 people of all ages 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. 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).
- Get your youth or young adult group involved. Give them the basics of the report, and set them loose to create an artistic complement to the information and analysis.

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, main meeting spaces (like a YMCA or popular pizza joint)
- 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
- Government agencies:** Public service centers (like the police station or welfare office)
- Service agencies:** Private nonprofits (like a day care or rescue mission)
- Congregations:** Other houses of worship (including non-Christian)
- Districts:** Areas of recognizable character (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 nonprofits, cultural 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 leader, public school, or garden club).

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. See also John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann, *Mapping Community Capacity* (Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Northwestern University, 1990).

COMMUNITY LISTENING SURVEYS

A survey is a systematic way of gathering information about the neighborhood that also opens doors for dialogue. The most important skill in an effective survey ministry is to be a good listener. Surveys are best conducted door-to-door by pairs of church members. This creates opportunities for your congregation to develop personal relationships with residents 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.

Note that this survey asks people to describe what they like about the community, not only the problems. It also asks people what interests and gifts they might have to share with others. Through this conversation, your church may discover community leaders and ministry partners. These questions can also be a step toward bringing people together to discern a community vision – "a process through which any community can develop a picture or series of pictures for its future" (Jay Van Groningen, *Communities First*).

It may help to practice giving the survey to one another until you are comfortable asking the questions, wording them in a way that feels natural to your context. Do not ask to come in to people's homes. Many people are, rightfully, uncomfortable talking with strangers let alone inviting them into their home. If you encounter someone who is reluctant to participate, end the survey early and graciously rather than prolong an unwelcome intrusion on their time. It is more important to make a positive connection with residents than to comply with the survey format.

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.

DO wear a name badge or give the person surveyed a contact card to identify the members of your survey team. However, *DON'T* convey the impression that the ulterior purpose of the survey is to recruit people to your church (because it's not!). If you want to lay the foundation for future contacts, one non-intrusive option is to coordinate the timing of the survey with a special event — like a church barbeque or a concert — and invite the people you survey 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 for feedback: "Our church is considering getting involved by in this neighborhood. Do you have any suggestions for how you'd like to see us do this?" *Warning:* Only ask this sort of question if your church is, in fact, on track to develop a community ministry. Otherwise, you risk damaging your reputation in the community by generating false expectations.

After gathering sufficient surveys, compile a report of the major themes that were expressed, which you can share with church and community leaders. The tools, "Community Asset Inventory" and "Community Needs, Assets and Dreams" provide tools for summarizing key information. In particular, take note of people who indicate they would like you to follow up with them about working together to benefit the community (see the last question on the survey).

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 help us plan how we can be involved in positive ways with the neighborhood.

Name: _____ Address: _____

Length of time lived in this community: _____

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

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

3. Do you have any ideas about ways a caring church or community group could make a difference in this neighborhood?

4. Can you share a story about a time when people in this neighborhood helped one another out? Or about an organization that is having a positive impact on the neighborhood?

5. Do you or your family participate in any local clubs, groups, or organizations? (for example: sports league, school booster club, church, Boy/Girl Scouts)

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

7. Would you like us to be in touch with you about working together to benefit the community?

No Yes If Yes: Phone: _____ Email: _____

Tell them: "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 and long-term relationships.

As much as possible, hold meetings in person and on site. Get out into the community! Offer to take people out to lunch, arrange to meet for coffee, or ask for a tour of their facilities.

Interviewing is best done in pairs. It's helpful if one person takes notes or records the interview 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.

Be sensitive to the spiritual and personal concerns of those you contact. Be on the lookout for hidden "family" -- brothers and sisters in Christ working for secular organizations. As it seems appropriate, offer to pray for or with people.

The following questions are suggested for meetings with government officials and leaders of nonprofit agencies, schools, police, churches, civic clubs, neighborhood associations, or other groups. Also seek to identify and contact unofficial community leaders like long-time residents, community activists, and "block mamas". (For more on who to interview, see p. 9.) Use the Networking Log on the next page to keep a record of your contacts, opportunities for partnerships, and follow-up ideas. The Chart of Community Needs, Assets, and Dreams and the more detailed chart in the Community Asset Inventory provide other tools for summarizing your networking learnings.

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? What seems to be getting better, what seems to be getting worse, what is just different from the past?
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? Tell us about your activities and goals.
7. Our church is considering ways to serve this neighborhood. Do you have any suggestions? Are there ways we might support the work of your organization or 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?

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 blessing, 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 guides at waymakers.org/prayerwalking.html; see also Jay Van Groningen, *Communities First*, p. 30-31.)

Become more aware of what you see while you walk and pray by connecting prayer-walking with structured observation. The discussion questions in the observation guide (p. 29) 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 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, be open to opportunities to interact with and bless people that may grow out of your experience. Waymakers highlights the connection between prayer and 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?

- *Pray for discernment* -- seek the gift of seeing the community through God's eyes, and ask the Spirit to help you discern what God is already doing and wants to do among the people.
- *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* -- intercede 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 other specific prayer points on the next page.

COMMUNITY MINISTRY PRAYER GUIDE

Immerse your community study in prayer. In prayer we join ourselves with God's work of transformation in our communities, and we ourselves are transformed. Through prayer, God opens our eyes to signs of the kingdom, empowers us to do good works, guides our ministry decisions, frees us to witness, and renews our hope. Here are some suggested prayer points for your church and community.

Pray for our church:

- ❖ Pray for a spirit of love, unity and harmony around our church's mission (John 17:21, Phil. 1:1-2).
- ❖ Pray for vision, wisdom and discernment in making ministry decisions — that church leaders and the congregation as a whole would do God's will in God's way (Col. 1:9-10).
- ❖ Pray that we would be guided by Christ's example: that we would be renewed by having the mind of Christ, see our world through the eyes of Christ, serve with the love of Christ, and seek God's Kingdom with the humble obedience of Christ.
- ❖ Pray that God would give us a burden for the things that grieve the Spirit, and the courage to act.
- ❖ Pray that we would serve in the power and love of the Spirit, not merely in human strength and goodness (2 Cor. 4:7).
- ❖ Pray that God would overcome any obstacles to effective ministry, and that we would be convicted of attitudes and actions that do not promote God's righteousness, justice and peace.
- ❖ Pray that God continues to work in and through our church to break down barriers of race, gender, class, and culture (Col. 3:11)
- ❖ Pray that we would be equipped to use the gifts God has given us for ministry, and would be faithful stewards of the resources God has given us to bless others (1 Peter 4:10-11).
- ❖ Pray that we might deepen our faith and grow in Christ's love as we serve those whom Jesus names as his family (Matt. 25:40).
- ❖ Pray that we might live our daily lives as salt and light in the world, spreading the aroma of Christ by word and deed (Matt. 5:13-16, 2 Cor. 2:15).
- ❖ Praise God for the power at work within us to accomplish far more than we can ask or even imagine, to the glory of the Father (Ephesians 3:20-21)!

Pray for our ministry community:

- ❖ Pray for specific needs and issues that we see around us or in the news.
- ❖ Pray for neighbors – where we live and where we worship.
- ❖ Pray for unity among the churches and Christian organizations in this area.
- ❖ Pray for schools, hospitals, government social service offices, the police, courts, and other public institutions that serve our community.
- ❖ Pray for leaders who hold power within our community or make decisions affecting this area.
- ❖ Pray for the "invisible" people, those who are on the margins of our community, whose hurts are hidden from others, and whose voices are seldom heard in places of power.
- ❖ Pray that God's justice and righteousness would increasingly reign in our community — that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10).
- ❖ Pray with confidence that our Lord would triumph over spiritual powers set against God's good plan for our community, and that God's people would be delivered from evil (Eph. 6:12, Luke 11:4).
- ❖ Ask God to search our hearts and lives, and ask forgiveness for any ways that our own actions, lifestyle, or prejudices may have contributed to problems in our community and world.
- ❖ Give thanks for those who in ways big and small are sharing God's love and serving this community.
- ❖ Thank God for the positive aspects of our community, for the God-given uniqueness and giftedness of each resident, and for all there is here that brings delight to people and glory to God.

- ❖ Praise God for His amazing love and grace for the world (and for *you!*) in Christ Jesus.

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 "Guide to Prayer-Walking," p. 27), and/or with a neighborhood survey (see p. 23-24). 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. 22). 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 might come alongside members of the community to help 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

COMMUNITY NEEDS, ASSETS AND DREAMS

Use this chart to identify opportunities for expressing God's love in a community.

	Needs <i>Problems facing the community</i>	Assets <i>Resources in the community</i>	Dreams <i>Hopes, goals identified by the community</i>
Dimensions of well-being:			
<i>Physical / financial</i> EXAMPLE	Families run out of food at the end of the month Lack of insurance	Food pantries YMCA - gym and exercise facilities	Community garden Sliding scale health clinic
<i>Physical / financial</i> <i>e.g. health, sufficiency, safety, access to capital</i>			
<i>Relational / emotional</i> <i>e.g. families, mental health, racial reconciliation</i>			
<i>Environmental</i> <i>e.g. natural environment, urban planning, aesthetics</i>			
<i>Educational / vocational</i> <i>e.g. education, jobs, entrepreneurship</i>			
<i>Spiritual</i> <i>e.g. salvation, spiritual nurture, faith community</i>			
Special populations:			
<i>Poor</i>			
<i>Single-parent families</i>			
<i>Immigrants / refugees</i>			
<i>Prisoners / former prisoners and families</i>			
<i>Homeless</i>			
<i>Sick / disabled</i>			
<i>Children / youth</i>			
<i>College / young adult</i>			
<i>Elderly</i>			
<i>Other</i>			

This chart is indebted to Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church (Group, 2004)*, p. 166.

COMMUNITY ASSET INVENTORY

A community study is like a treasure hunt, discovering assets that often go hidden or unrecognized. *Assets* include gifts, resources, knowledge, capital or capacities that enable individuals and neighborhoods to experience life as God intended. The power of hidden assets is unleashed by connecting entities with similar goals and passions. (See Jay Van Groningen, "An Introduction to Asset-Based Community Development for Church Leaders", on the ESA Ministry Resource Center, esa-online.org.)

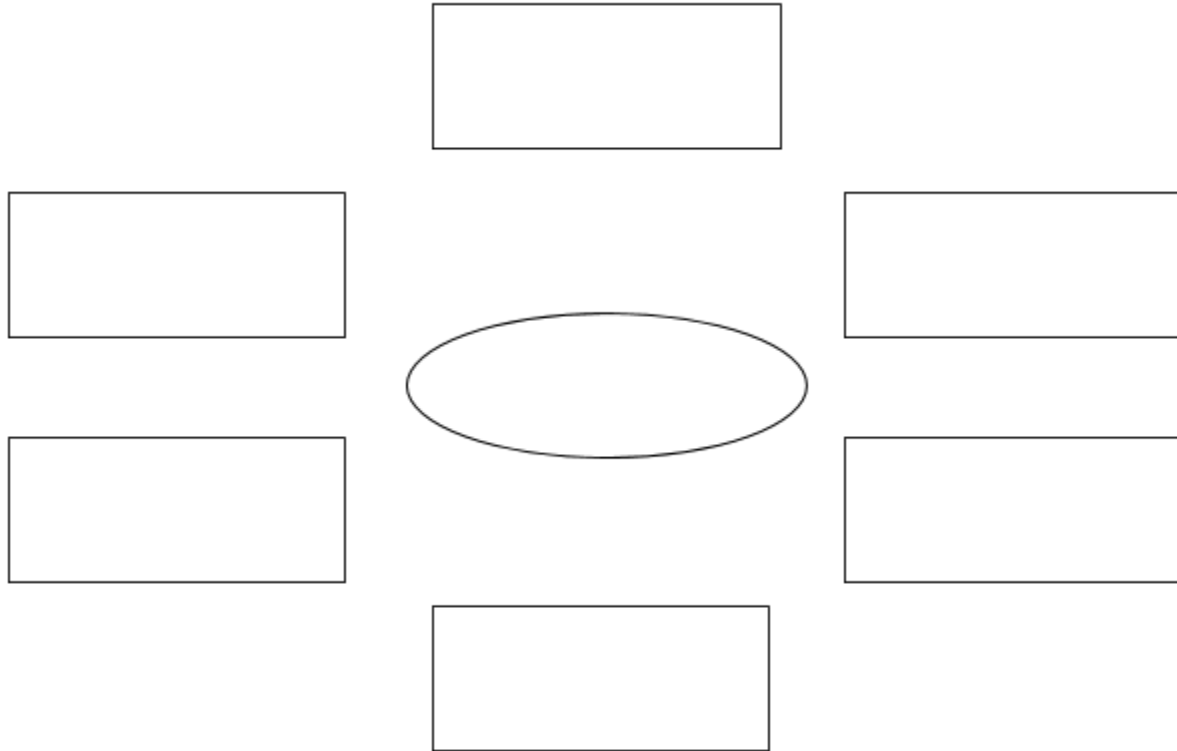
Look for assets belonging to *individuals* (residents, leaders), *institutions* (for-profit, non-profit, and public organizations) and *associations* (clubs, coalitions, networks, and other groups). Use the chart below, and the exercise on the next page, to help track and connect the potential in the community (you can use this to supplement the Networking Log, p. 26, or the chart of Community Needs, Assets and Dreams, p. 31).

- **Name** of the individual, organization or association; representative contact person (if organization or group); and contact information.
- **Contact:** Person in the church who has a relationship with this entry, or would be the best person to make the connection.
- **Connections:** Relationships that this entry has with other persons, organizations or groups in the community or in the church's network.
- **Assets & resources:** Tangible or intangible resources that this entry has available to share with others for the good of the community.
- **Interests & ideas:** Opportunities or dreams for improving the community represented by this contact.
- **Notes:** Include possibilities for follow-up.

Name & Contact Info	Church Contact	Connections	Assets & Resources	Interests & Ideas
(EXAMPLE) Mary Smith 123 Elm 123-4567 msmith@email.com	John Doe (interviewed Mary 1/1/01)	Mary is the aunt of John's co-worker Works in the middle school cafeteria	Committed Christian long-time resident, knows everyone loves to cook	Interested in starting women's Bible study Wants to see more after-school activities for middle school youth

MAPPING CONNECTIONS AMONG COMMUNITY ASSETS

This tool can help you identify connections between your church and the individuals, associations and institutions that represent community assets. This exercise is best done as a group with the community study team along with community stakeholders.



Directions:

1. Using a flip chart or a computer projection screen, display a diagram that looks similar to the one above.
2. In the center, write the name of your church. In each box write the name of an individual, association, or organization from the Asset Inventory (e.g., city council member, food pantry, parent-teacher association, daycare).
3. First, identify any kind of connections that exist between these community assets: collaborative programs, funding sources in common, leaders who have a good relationship, shared concerns, proximity? For example, the head of the parent-teacher association may use the services of the daycare. Draw lines representing each connection.
4. Next, identify any connections, or potential connections, that these community assets have with the church -- for example, if a city council member attends the church, or if the church supplies funds or volunteers to the food pantry, or if there are members who have expertise in child development. Draw lines to represent these connections
5. After completing the chart, discuss the significance of this web of connections. Which relationships are particularly important to the well-being of the community? Which connections offer untapped potential for collaboration? Who is *not* connected that could be? What does this diagram say about the church's role? What common relationships and concerns could be key to organizing broad support for a shared community vision?
6. Record key themes or ideas that emerge from the discussion, and decide how you will follow up.

Adapted from Communities First: Through God's Eyes, With God's Heart by Jay Van Groningen (CRWRC, 2005).