HOW TO BECOME THE CHURCH *your neighborhood* NEEDS



CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENT

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Exegeting a Neighborhood within the City

JR WOODWARD

If we want to meaningfully connect with our neighborhood, we need to be able to read the city and neighborhood well. Exegeting a city or neighborhood is a basic task of a missionary, where you seek to "draw out" the meaning of a people and place in order to see the power of the gospel more fully transform the neighborhoods in which we live. When we live with a missionary mindset, like Paul, we will meaningfully walk around and live in our neighborhood, taking the time to observe what people consider most important (what they worship), what they fear, what they believe, and what they idolize.

Acts 17: 22-33 is one of the classic texts to exegeting a city. Take a moment to read through that passage, with the mindset to pick up clues to how Paul interacted with Athens and the people living there. Take special note to what he saw, what he felt and how he engaged the people. For when you engage in the work of exegeting a neighborhood within the context of the city, you will need to know what to look for, allow time to honestly respond to what you see, and find ways to interact with people of peace and others in the neighborhood.

One of the reasons we need to exegete the neighborhood and city to which we have been sent, is because we need to find the best way to take the whole gospel into the real context in which people are living. As Rene Padilla has said, "To contextualize the gospel is to translate it in such a way that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not an abstract principle or mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life in all its dimensions and that basic criterion in relation to which all cultural values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without contextualization, the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant."

EXEGETING THE NEIGHBORHOOD WITHIN THE CITY

So how do we go about reading our neighborhood within the context of our city? While neighborhoods within larger cities are quite different from one another, it is helpful to give some focus to the neighborhood within the city and the city itself. One of the ways to do this is by understanding the basic culture of the neighborhood and city. While there are many good ways to do this, I want to show you how to do this by looking at some of the key elements of the cultural web that I developed to understand the cultural of a congregation. For the same elements are essential to any culture, and can help us to discern the nature of our neighborhood within city.

In its most basic form, culture includes six elements – language, artifacts, narratives, rituals, institutions and ethics. These elements interrelate to create culture and make up what I call the "cultural web."

To simplify things even further, there are four basic questions you can ask to gain a fairly good understanding of a particular neighborhood and/or city, based on the key elements of a culture.

1. (Narrative) What story is the city calling us to embody?
2. (Rituals) What is the core practices that people engage in which shape their identity and sense of mission in life?
3. (Institutions) What are the primary institutions that are shaping the city, and how are they shaping people's identity and destiny?
4. (Ethics) How would your neighborhood and/or city define success?

As a way to help you answer these four primary questions, we will dive a bit deeper into each element of culture and consider a number of other questions, with the goal of being able to answer these four primary questions with greater depth.

1. Narrative: What story is the neighborhood within the city calling us to embody?

When seeking to understand the narrative of a people, you need to consider what they believe about God, or if they believe in God (theology), what they believe with a sense of confidence (doctrines), and the (stories) that they tell each other, the stories that they live into based on the music they listen to, and the various kinds of media that to which the continually expose themselves.

Here are some questions that help us get to the heart of the overarching story that our city is calling us to embody.

- What are the key slogans of the city or neighborhood?
- What are the prime landmarks, and how do they shape the narrative of the neighborhood?
- What kind of music do people tend to listen to?
- What lyrics do they have committed to memory, and what story is that calling them into?
- What are people's favorite films and what lines can they quote by heart?
- What are people's dreams and hopes?
- What are their fears and stresses?
- What do people think about God, about Jesus, or about the church?
- What places of worship are in the neighborhood and what do they tell us about the neighborhood?
- How do people think about money and power?
- What are the idols of the neighborhood?
- Who has "played God" in the city and how has that shaped the cities story?
- What are important moments in the history of the city, or kairos moments in the life of the city or neighborhood?

> "In its most basic form, culture includes six elements – language, artifacts, narratives, rituals, institutions and ethics."

2. Rituals: What is the core practices that people engage in which shape their identity and sense of mission in life?

To understand the life shaping rituals of the neighborhood within city, you need to observe the formal ceremonies that are fused with meaning that people engage in (rites), the common (practices) in which people routinely engage, and the everyday (liturgies) that people partake in that shape their ultimate desires, identity and sense of the good life.

Here are some questions that help us to understand the thick practices that people routinely engage.

- What activities do people engage in which give them a sense of worth?
- What holidays are celebrated with the most vigor?
- How are these holidays celebrated and in how do they shape people's ultimate desires?
- How do people approach their work, as a career or a calling?
- What do people do in their "free" time and how much "free" time do they have?
- Other than work, what do people devote the most time toward?
- What third spaces do people engage with the most?
- How do people spend their time, their money and their talents?
- In what ways do people seek to meet their need for beauty?
- Do people tend to work for the common good of the neighborhood or for their own good?

3. Institutions: What are the primary institutions that are shaping the city, and how are they shaping people's identity and destiny?

Institutions have certain (structures) that speak to the distribution of power and decision making, (systems) that either encourage the flourishing of the city or demise of the city, and (symbols) of success and failure that shape people's sense of worth.

- Which companies are the primary employers of the city?
- Do the primary employers look out for the common good of the city or their own good?
- Is the government centralized or decentralized giving power to the local neighborhoods?
- Does the police force look out for the underprivileged or add to the divisiveness of the city?
- Do the lawmakers and judges treat the people with fairness or with favoritism?

> "Do the primary employers look out for the common good of the city or their own good?"

- How do the various institutions deal with immigrants as people made in the image of God or a problem?
- If there is gentrification happening in the neighborhood, are the displaced treated as full human beings?
- Who founded the hospitals, how do they operate and do people have equal access to health care as people made in God's image?
- Is it easy or difficult for small businesses to flourish in the city?
- Which institutions are caring for the homeless in a God honoring way?
- Are churches seeking to bring a greater sense of the kingdom to their neighborhood or looking out for themselves?
- What is the reputation of the religious leaders churches in the neighborhood?
- Who are the most powerful people in the city and do they promote justice or their own welfare?
- What are the most influential media institutions and how does their reporting influence people?
- What are the primary educational institutions and how are they shaping the life of the children and the city?
- Does everybody have equal opportunity when it comes to education?
- What are the significant universities in the city or neighborhood and in what ways are they influencing the people in the neighborhood?
- What is the built environment of the city (the cities approach to architecture, parks and sustainability), and does it add to the flourishing of the city or not?

4. Ethics: How would your city and/or neighborhood define success?

Ethics are the moral convictions that shape the life of community and speak to people's sense of (being), which in turn shape people's (doing). Ethics require space and time for people to engage in (reflecting) on their lives and their neighborhood, in order to examine if they are promoting the common good.

> "Ethics are the moral convictions that shape the life of community and speak to people's sense of (being)..."

- Does the pace of life in the city aid or hinder people's ability to engage in solitude, silence and reflection?
- Does the built environment (design of the city, neighborhood) help people be fully human or add to agitation people feel?
- Does the art scene help people in the neighborhood and city to consider the important questions the community ought to address or add to the duress of the people?
- How do the primary modes of transportation shape people's sense of being?
- Who promotes and hinders justice in the neighborhood?
- How does the city shape people's conception of the good life?
- Does the city promote the "American dream" or God's vision for the future, and how does this shape people's imagination?
- Do the laws and enforcement of the laws help each person of the city, no matter what class or ethnicity they may be, feel like a person made in the image of God?
- Does the cities description of the "good life" cause people to consider others more important than themselves or to look out for number one?
- What behaviors are rewarded and what behaviors are punished?
- How does the city government budget reflect her understanding of success?

While this is not a comprehensive approach to exegeting the neighborhood within the city, by answering these four primary questions, you will have a greater ability to understand how to be the good news in your context. For the more we understand the culture of our neighborhood, the better we can bear witness in word and deed to our neighborhood, bring the transforming power of the gospel to our neighborhoods within our cities, and make the invisible kingdom more visible.

> "For the more we understand the culture of our neighborhood, the better we can bear witness in word and deed to our neighborhood"

5 Primary Shifts to Become a Place-Based Church

DR KAREN WILK

What if God is inviting us to let go of some of our defaults in order to join the Spirit in our neighborhoods? As those on the Neighbourhood Life (NL) journey in Edmonton attempting to do just that, we are discovering, among other things, a number of shifts in our thinking and doing that illustrates for us the new ways God is calling us to be a place-based church and participate in God's mission right where we live.

SHIFT #1. NO LONGER FOCUSING ON THE EVENT

We are learning through experience that it isn't about what we are doing —the event, gathering or project—as much as it is about the being: being there, being ourselves, being available and attentive amongst our neighbours. Neighbourhood get-togethers are opportunities for connection and for nurturing relationships. Participants share how freeing it is to just hang out (and not worry about inviting people to church or making a Gospel presentation). One participant with evident enthusiasm, amazement, and gratitude relayed how it felt so good just to walk down their street as a family and enjoy numerous chats and spontaneous visits with neighbours. They talked about how often the Spirit led them into deeper conversations.

SHIFT #2. FOLLOWING A GOD WHO HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

Participants in NL are amazed, motivated, and intent on discovering what God is doing beyond the (church) building. Stories are about God at work in their neighbourhoods and their neighbours. They talk about how every neighbour bears God's image. They share stories about neighbours ministering to them and exhibiting Kingdom character and care. There is a profound recognition that God is so much bigger and better "than we have made Him." As one participant often responds, "Yeah God!"

SHIFT #3. RECOGNIZING IT'S NOT ABOUT BEING VOLUNTEERS OR SERVICE PROVIDERS

The question is, "Are we good neighbours and how can we be better ones?" NL participants recognize that what our neighbours (and our churches?) want and need in each other are allies, citizens, and authentic relationships that enhance the social fabric of the community and the well-being of all. Conversations emphasize the incarnational, coming alongside nature of the Gospel and its significance in our neighbourhoods.

> "The question is, "Are we good neighbours and how can we be better ones?""

SHIFT #4. APPRECIATING SMALL AND SLOW

We lament how ingrained the cultural assumption is that more, bigger and faster are better. And we find it liberating to trust and embody small and slow, letting go of the need to prove ourselves, get results, and make it count on the church success or growth chart. We celebrate ordinary conversations over the fence, families helping other families and kids setting up lemonade stands while figuring out the next small steps to which God might be calling us. Stories about the spiritual interest and engagement of neighbours remind us that the Spirit is leading us into deeper conversations and insights into the lives of our neighbours without feeling any pressure to "seal the deal."

SHIFT #5. INVOLVING CHILDREN AS NECESSARY MEMBERS

Our children seem to naturally and imaginatively live into neighbourhood life. They, as one parent exclaimed, "love it!" Another family told of how their boys were frequently having difficulty at "regular" Sunday school but were eager to participate in NEW Community. These same boys recently explained to their parents that they needed to have a spring party so that everybody (that is their neighbours) could be together again.

Another parent told of how their daughter decided that she and her family would host a front lawn neighbourhood tea party one afternoon and they did! One Mom confessed that it was their child who pushed them to "do something" for the neighbour down the street who was not well. My own daughter too feels a part of our communitas, shares her musical gifts, and participates in the community life.

> "Our children seem to naturally and imaginatively live into neighbourhood life."

A NEW SET OF 'P'S FOR THE PLACE-BASED CHURCH

It seems that, as "out there" as this Neighbourhood Life sometimes seems to be, God is at work in us! We are making a shift to a new set of 'P's as we engage in our neighbourhoods. We are moving from ordering our lives around pews, programs and professionals to postures and practices shaped by place, proximity, presence, particularity, people, and of course—pubs! We are more and more aware that "our conversations, which prompt and surround and shape our common life, [are] connect[ing] us with the wind of the Spirit as we live in gratefulness and engage such imaginative futures."

One Simple Practice When Evangelism Completely Freaks You Out

DEB STERNKE

I don't know if you're like me, but when I hear the word evangelism, I have a visceral response. My heart sinks, and one of three images usually comes to mind:

1. The bearded, scruffy-looking man walking down the sidewalk with the cardboard sign declaring, "The end is near!"
2. The street preacher dressed to the nines on the corner, bullhorn in hand, shouting out a pointed sermon to a mass of weekend shoppers, all of whom are nervously trying to avoid eye contact.
3. The kind, old lady attempting to pass out tracts to anyone who will slow down long enough to see what is in her little, frail hand.

I have had so many fears when it comes to evangelism. The training for sharing faith that I've learned in the church has, more often than not, been far from helpful. For me, it's honestly just something that doesn't come very naturally. The tension I have felt is that I really want my neighborhood and city to experience the good news of Jesus, but I haven't known how to do evangelism in a way that looks like Jesus.

PRAYER WALKING

One day, I was sharing this struggle with a friend. She suggested prayer walking as a simple way to start. She said to me, "You're more prophetically gifted, Deb, so use that area to grow in evangelism!" This sounded like a great idea, but all sorts of questions came to mind:

- Where do I start?
- How do I even begin?
- What exactly do I pray for?
- Do I just meander around the neighborhood trying to come up with good ideas of things to pray for?

I had visions of walking through our neighborhood looking like a strange, wandering nomad!

Eventually, I began to practice, and I got some help and training from others who were prayer walking their neighborhoods regularly. We got some practice and then began training our missional communities in a simple, prayer walking practice.

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THE 13 STEPS

1. Gather up in groups of 2-4 people.
2. Imagine Jesus walking with you.
3. Simply talk and listen to Him as you go.
4. Ask God to give you a sense of what He feels for the people in the neighborhood.
5. Ask what would it look like if the Father's Kingdom came more fully in this place? What would be different?
6. Ask God for insight on how you can serve and love the people here in ways they can understand.
7. Pray that the Spirit would make the Father known to the people who live here.
8. Ask God to provide opportunities for conversation and interaction with people while you're out walking.
9. Stop and talk to anyone you see while you're out walking, or simply say hello.
10. Ask God to give you People of Peace in the neighborhood.
11. Ask for grace in everything you do as a missional community in this neighborhood.
12. Write down pictures, scriptures, words, impressions, etc.
13. Take some time to debrief and discuss with your team anything you noticed or heard from God as you walked.

This has frequently been an incredibly powerful time for us, especially for the kids in our community. Kids often have a particular sensitivity to God that is absolutely beautiful. We all have begun to see with new eyes and feel God's heart for the neighborhood.

Prayer walking is a way of simply looking and listening. We want only to do what we see the Father doing (John 5:19), so we ask to see what He sees. We ask for His heart. We ask for His Kingdom to come. God loves to speak to us, and prayer walking is a simple way of doing evangelism that helps us to look for where He is already at work and to join Him in it!

"We all have begun to see with new eyes and feel God's heart for the neighborhood."