



How to Understand and Engage Your Church's Community



PBA Engage Team | Adapted From the Guide from Barry Whitworth

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UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

When understanding your community, you are observing and conversing with the people in their cultural context, to form an opinion to whether or not there is an evangelical presence that will foster spiritual transformation in that community.

How to Understand the Community

There are many places that you can obtain information about a community. Online you can look up statistics through websites like <http://www.census.gov>, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>, or for smart phones look up ESRI BAO in an app store. Data is collected and is very resourceful to help give a broad understanding of the area but is no substitute for being among the people. Only when you are interactive with the community can you listen to the heart and determine the activity of God.

There are four areas to focus on when you are seeking to understand the community. The *social, economic, physical and spiritual climate* of the culture will communicate the real-time needs your church could engage.

SOCIAL: The social aspect of the community has a lot to tell us. Since we are bringing a gospel of relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, we need to understand how relationship is defined by the culture we are trying to reach. We can try to understand more about that definition by. . .

Observation (what do I see (eyes)?):

- What is the interaction between the generations here?
- What is the diversity of the community and is it interactive or isolated?
- How are people connected to each other, the community, the state and the world?
- Are they open to interaction or resistant to outsiders?
- Who is seen as an outsider?
- Who are the major people or organizations in business/manufacturing, schools/colleges/universities, Financial, Government, Health care providers, and civic organizations (Kiwanis, Rotary, etc.)
- Visit social organizations such as schools, police, hospitals, fire departments, business such as realtors and others who have community data and up to date information.

Conversation (what do I hear (ears)?):

- Talk to the major gate-keepers or power-brokers. Ask them questions about the relationships in the community as well as their perception of what is right about the community, and what can be improved.
- Ask people questions about their community and interaction in it.

Who lives in this community/neighborhood? Are there people of an ethnic background in your community?

Where do they live?

- Listen to what is being said to clerks, waiters and general conversation in the community.
- Try to determine what significant lifestyle and mind-set features you find in them. What significant cultures, institutions, and emphases are integrated into their lives?
- Is there any new construction in the community? How do they view new things beginning in their area?

Implementation (what should I do? (Hands): Once we have a better understanding of the social relational aspect of the community, what can be done that may help the new church?

- Of the gate-keepers, I found these people to be open to help with building relationships in the community...
- To reach a particular group of people, I would recommend contacting and building a relationship with...
- To become socially connected into the community I believe that a new person would be wise to...

ECONOMIC: The second aspect to determine is the economic climate of the area. The economic stature of a community can give the people either a sense of stability or instability, growth or decline. Understanding the economy of the area can also help you to determine what people value. People will invest their time and money in the things or people that they value. So when you are examining the economy of the place it is more than just how much the average income is and their education status.

Ways that you can find out what people value are through...

Observation (what do I see (eyes)?):

- What evidence of struggle, despair, neglect and alienation do you see?
- Is the area stable, declining or dying?
- Who determines public agendas? (Town council, churches, neighborhood associations, organizations?)
- What are some of the strength or weakness in the following systems? (Public schools, housing, police, health care, housing, recreation?)
- Does the community provide assistance for the needy?
- Is there public transportation?
- Are there places/organizations for the children, elderly, singles? (parks, libraries, bars, senior homes, sporting locations)

What is the upkeep of the homes in the area?

- Are there “toys” in the driveway or yard? (boats, atvs, snowmobiles, large play yards, lavish landscaping)

Conversation (what do I hear (ears)?):

Ask questions to community leaders and residents like...

- “How are the local taxes allocated?”
- If your community had extra money, how would you like to see it be spent?
- If you had a week to put toward something that you valued, what would that be?
- What is the average time a person spends at work?
- What is the average commute to work for this community?
- Ask school personnel, “How actively do parents participate in the classroom, at events, in organizations?”
- When is the busiest time of day for shoppers in the mall? Day of the week?
- Ask the local gym how large their membership is and how full the gym is during the week, weekend?
- Investigate what type of entertainment venues are in the area and what draws the largest crowd. What is the 2nd largest?

Implementation (what should I do (hands)?):

- Because the people of the area value ... a way to reach and build relationships would be...
- Because of the strength and stability (or instability and decline) of the economy I would recommend...

PHYSICAL: Third is the physical area of the new work. When trying to sense the place for a new work to begin, it is important to notice if there are any geographic boundaries that may impede a new work in a particular area. Also, what does the landscape tell you about the place and people? From your research you might be able to determine how far people will travel to gather together, if one work will reach a large area or if you might need to go after each location separately and if there are any ministry projects that could connect a new work to the community.

Observation (what do I see (eyes)?):

- What are some of the public places provided?
 - Are they well kept?
 - Who are they provided for and are they being used?
- Are there paths of travel that are avoided by the residents? (Does a railroad track, or river divert people’s travel/separate communities?)

Are there duplicate businesses in a seemingly short distance?

- Where are the schools located?
- How far do people travel to get to the local health care?
- Are the recreation facilities for indoor equal to or outnumber outdoor?
- Where is the local Walmart/Lowes/Home Depot located?
- Is there a Dollar General store, or Family Dollar Store between the housing and Walmart?
- How close are the local grocery stores together?

Conversation (what do I hear (ears)?):

- Ride the public transportation if available and ask about the reasons people choose to use it.
- Ask a recreation facility how far members come to participate.
- Ask locals if they know of a place to eat at... (use a street across town that you know has restaurants) and see if they are familiar with the area.
- Ask if they know where there is... (a service provider) and take note of where they direct you.
- Another question may be, "Is there any place you would recommend I avoid while in your town?"
- Why is that?"
- What is the longest drive you would do weekly if it were something that you wanted to attend?
- Is there a direction that you don't want to drive to get somewhere? ○ Why is that?

Implementation (what should I do (hands)?):

- I believe that a way to build a bridge into the community could be through a service project... (what, where)
- It is most likely that the church will reach a radius of or geographic area of...
- I found that there are boundary lines of... (this could be geographic, transportation, or other) and cannot be crossed (or can be crossed by...)

SPIRITUAL: Fourth is the spiritual climate. While all exegesis is trying to determine the activity of God, this one targets that area of how the community is engaged with spiritual matters.

When speaking of spiritual, we are looking outside of the evangelical sense to include any form of a connection with a person's spiritual nature. Some communities have spiritual presences that are not divine in nature. What this can convey is often a greater sense of darkness, or a searching for God. Sometimes it means a greater worldview and acceptance of non-traditional religions. It could also mean a population that is more diverse. When you are able to speak to a church pastor or secretary, thank them for their presence in the community and desire to push back the darkness.

Observation (what do I see (eyes)?):

- From the churches you have discovered, are they growing, declining or maintaining?
- How many churches are evangelical in their purpose today (have programs/classes or events intentionally sharing the gospel)?
- Are there any “spiritual” places besides church? (palm readers, Christian science bookstores, new age shops)
- Is the community giving to support causes? (United Way, jars for individual donations)
- How many Christian schools are in the area?
- Are there any non-profit, para-church or social agencies in the area? (half-way houses, single parent homes, boys/girls clubs, support groups)
- Where are they located?

Conversation (what do I hear (ears)?):

When visiting a church ask...

- ... “what is their average age in attendance”?
- ... what types of outreach do they offer?
- ... what is the most important lesson you have learned in serving your community?”
- Visit a local tattoo shop and ask what them to tell you the most popular tattoo that they do?
- What custom work do they do most?
- Ask residents where are the places of life, hope and beauty in the community?
- Ask people, “if you were able to make one spiritual request, what would it be”?
- In what ways do you sense God’s presence where you live?
- Ask people “what do you believe about God and Jesus Christ”?

Implementation (what should I do (hands)?:

- From my exploration I believe that the spiritual climate for our church’s community is...
- I would recommend our church’s climate be fostered through...

Persons of peace that I discovered were...

AFTER EXPLORING THE OVERALL CLIMATE OF THIS COMMUNITY, WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS CAN I MAKE TO SEE A NEW CHURCH FOSTER SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN THIS COMMUNITY?"



Your Answer...

<div><div><u>SOCIAL CLIMATE:</u></div><div>Place:</div></div>	
TECHNIQUE	QUESTION
Observation	
Conversation	
Implementation	

Date:
DISCOVERY

<div><div><u>ECONOMIC CLIMATE:</u></div><div>Place:</div></div>	
TECHNIQUE	QUESTION
Observation	
Conversation	
Implementation	

Date:
DISCOVERY

PHYSICAL CLIMATE:

Place:

TECHNIQUE

QUESTION

Observation

Conversation

Implementation

Date:

DISCOVERY

<div><div><u>SPIRITUAL CLIMATE:</u></div><div>Place:</div></div>	
TECHNIQUE	QUESTION
Observation	
Conversation	
Implementation	

Date:
DISCOVERY

Engage Panorama

The Engage Panorama below is designed to help you explore the ministry context both inside and outside your church – like looking through a window. To complete this panorama, it will be necessary for you to complete four levels of research, including data collection and interviews.

- 1. **Church Inside:** This is a combination of your church’s data and demographics combined with a survey from your church members about how they feel about your church.
- 2. **Community Inside** – This is surveying your community to discover what they know and feel about your church.
- 3. **Church Outside** – This is a survey of your church to discover what they think and know about your surrounding community.
- 4. **Community Outside** – A combination of your church’s data and demographics combined with a survey of your church about how they feel about your church.

	Church	Community
Inside	?	?
Outside	?	?

NOTES



9999 Chemstrand Road
Pensacola FL 32514
(850) 471-3430

brian@pbbassociation.org
www.pbbassociation.org

“Helping the church **BE** the church”