

Entering the Community: Take Your Time¹

TelChar Associates

On entering an urban community the first thing for the urban youth minister to do is slow down. Pause; take a step back and discover the signs of God's hand in public life. Various authors have emphasized the fact that God has gone before us in our communities. Oftentimes Christians enter urban communities at top speed, full of arrogance and zeal. We develop strategies for ministry and launch projects, before we've adequately discerned God's Spirit at work, before we've found signs of the presence of God in unexpected places. We lack the humility of Christ, so impatient to develop our own vision that we fail to see God quietly at work. Remember, we are working with God, not on our own. Learning to exegete the community takes a certain level of discipline at first but can easily be cultivated into a natural process employed whenever one is in a new environment. The following are some tips to use to read and assess an urban community:

1. *Look at the structures.* Determine what kind of structures predominate or are being built: are they residential or commercial? They will help determine whether it is a residential, business or some other district. The level of maintenance needed and currently employed can suggest the ability of the residents to maintain or how invested the landowners are in maintaining the community. Also, determine how long the buildings have been around. Usually the style and materials used can suggest the period when the community or neighborhood was built. Are there changes in the uses of the structures: is the theatre now being used as a marketplace or church? What other changes are occurring? Who is leaving and who is replacing them? Why is this happening?
2. *Look for "scraps of life."* Do not overlook the artifacts people leave about their property: do they reflect certain age groups or types of households? Are they ethnically or culturally specific? Are certain values articulated by them? Also, make note of the kinds of items or services offered by the local businesses: Again, are they ethnically or culturally specific? Are they for the immediate residential community, or for others from "outside?" What do the costs say about the clientele?
3. *Look at the signage.* Competitive marketing companies have done the demographic research and will promote products and services in a manner appropriate to the target populations who live in or frequent the area. Therefore, read the billboards: what is being sold? Is the language used the dominant language of the area? Who is the target audience? Likewise read the window ads or signs placed by business or landowners: what is being sold and for how much? Do not overlook bumper or printed stickers as they reveal much about the people buying them: what religion or political perspective is being espoused? Where did they go to school? What is their ethnic ancestry?
4. *Look at space.* No, not outer space, but how space is used. Looking at the kinds of structures in a community is one way to assess how the local population or political powers interact with the space, i.e., how they define it or use the land. Most urban land is defined by topology: a river or mountain range, or by human construction, the

¹ TelChar Associates (2014). *Transforming the City*. (n.p.): TelChar Associates.

placement of a rail system or freeway. These elements of the natural and built environment can become demarcation lines for certain communities. On a more personal level, living space reveals certain values or priorities that residents may hold, for example, vehicles parked on what would be considered the front lawn or raising crops or livestock on the land immediately surrounding the residence. In some cultures, the front yard is an extension of the living room and everyone is welcome to participate in festive occasions. But in other cultures, the backyard or garden area is host to private celebrations.

5. *Sounds and smells.* Exegeting a neighborhood can be a sensory experience. Keep your ears attuned to the kinds of music played by the residents or heard on the street: Does the music cater to a specific age or cultural group? Also, you do not need a linguist to appreciate different languages, as intonations and speech patterns will differ from one group to another. If you hear many different patterns, it may be a sign of a rich multicultural setting. Aromas can reveal preferences in certain foods, which in turn point out the ethnicity of the resident or restaurant clientele. The smells of an elegant boutique will certainly differ from the smells of an alleyway in skid row.
6. *Look for signs of hope.* Keep an eye out for evidences of God’s people at work – they could be future partners and certainly key resource people. On an immediate level, look for the presence of churches and parachurch organizations. Read the leaflets handed out in the neighborhood or notices in the local paper about religious activities or programs. It will take time to get to know and be accepted by the community and to learn to work together as a team. Make this time quality time. A thoughtful initial introductory period sets the right tone for a collaborative spirit and the building of a good team foundation. As urban ministers move more slowly in developing a ministry or project we open ourselves to learn from those who came before us. As we discover signs of God’s presence, a vision for ministry will evolve.

Reflecting on your own community, what methods from the article could you apply to analyzing your own neighborhood? Do you feel you would have a different understanding of your community from utilizing these methods? If so, how?

Enter your response here: