

Community Engagement

Research Strategies for Local Congregations

Bible Study/Conversation Guide for Clergy & Lay Leaders

- How does your congregation understand what it means to be Church in society today?
- What are one or two words that best describe your local congregation and its relationship to your community? (Example: “We are a _____ congregation.”)
- How do the neighbors near your ministry setting view and describe your congregation?

Context Matters

As the Earth tilts on its axis while orbiting the Sun, many communities experience weather-related seasons (Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter) and changes. Some of these changes include variations in daylight and darkness, temperature, and the amount of sunlight, prompting the use of appropriate clothing. Some differences are visible in the colors of the trees, flowers, and grass, as well as in the leafless branches lining the streets of the community. In some areas, these changes involve salt-covered streets, the use of large snowplow trucks, and images of children shoveling snow for seniors or sledding on hills for fun and recreation. Throughout the year, there are times when changes indicate that a new season has begun and different actions are needed.

Just as there are changes associated with the tilting of hemispheres, there are also changes within congregations and their local community. Sometimes, those changes and the realities associated with them are apparent, hidden, or so frequent that it is difficult to discern and understand their impact on human flourishing and ministry. What we do know is that when the church or its local community enters a new season, change is inevitable. If we are honest, these realities make it challenging for congregations to identify relevant ways to be good neighbors and collaborators in social change. Like Jesus, the Church today is called to engage salvific and transformative work so that individuals and communities at large can experience wholeness, justice, and the all-encompassing steadfast love of God. How we engage the salvific work today is what matters.



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*Who Are We? What Should We Do?
When Can We Act?*

After all, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) identity statement declares, “We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.” What does it take for our Church to live into its identity fully? Among many possibilities, it begins with believers, congregations, regions, general ministries, and partners recognizing where and how various forms of evil threaten justice and human flourishing within their local contexts. This recognition is not merely for insight, but for motivation to access every available resource to confront the evil one sees head-on. This requires congregations to reflect on their shared vision and mission consistently and to identify their gifts, talents, passions, resources, and capacity to act justly and faithfully. It requires community engagement, including recognizing and embracing new ministry opportunities within one’s local community.

Friends, to pursue timely opportunities, the congregation must develop trusting relationships within the congregation and with neighbors, stakeholders, local organizations, educational institutions, business owners, other faith groups, and more. These collaborations are necessary to leverage all available resources to transform one’s local community and improve lives. Amy Butler and Dawn Darwin Weaks, authors of *Holy Disruption: A Manifesto for the Future of Faith Communities*, suggest, “We must radicalize our resources.” They further state, “Maybe we can use institutional resources in ways that we’ve never considered before. And sometimes maybe we can let go of what we’ve worked so hard to maintain but instead use the assets we’ve inherited to pivot with the wind of God’s Spirit.” Church, the state of our world demands that we engage now. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, “The time is always ripe to do right.”

What social issues are prevalent in your local community? Who or what is impacted by these social ills? Who benefits from the social ills you see? What best practices, research methods, tools, or resources did your congregation use to identify these issues and understand the impact on families?

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Choose the Approach

To foster a shared understanding of community engagement and research approaches and strategies, the following definitions are provided below:

Research Approaches to Doing Research

1. Quantitative Research: Typically involves statistical analysis of numerical data gathered and used for the purpose of proving, planning, possibilities, and predicting output and outcomes. (Ex. Number of families with children who live in your targeted area, number of people served by the church's food pantry this year, number of after-school programs in your local community, number of shelter beds available in our entire county, etc.) The data are usually collected through surveys, tests, experiments, and datasets to demonstrate the scope and scale of possibilities.

2. Qualitative Research: Typically involves seeking to understand perspectives, lived experiences, communities, behavioral patterns, complexities, and culture through observation, history, and related methods. (Ex. Understanding your church's practical ecclesiology and its impact on your members, the effects of poverty on families in your local community, the relevance of your church's outreach program, the top three concerns your neighbors have about their community, etc.) Data are usually collected through interviews, stories, photographs, experiences, case studies, community forums/town halls, focus groups, and observations. This research helps congregations engage with their neighbors, understand their communities, plan, and clarify mission possibilities.

3. Mixed Method Research: Mixed method is simply research that involves gathering a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to strengthen understanding. Congregations use this method to assess outputs and outcomes. Mixed methods address the what, how, and why of most situations.

There are more research methods available. However, these approaches are simple and practical enough to assist congregations in understanding and engaging their local contexts.

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Choose Your Strategies

Research Strategies To Engage Your Local Community:

- 1. Demographic Analysis:** According to the US Census, demographic analysis is a technique used to develop an understanding of population estimates, key factors, and quality of life.
- 2. Community Asset Mapping:** According to the Institute of Education Science & The US Department of Education publication titled, *An Overview of Creating an Asset Map*, describes *community asset mapping* as a process in which individuals or organizations identify and describe community assets or strengths. These assets or strengths are often mapped, helping community members see and understand available resources.
- 3. Congregational Asset Mapping:** This process is similar to community asset mapping, but done primarily inside the congregation. When a congregation prepares to engage the community and analyze its findings, it will understand its capacity and the resources available to do its work well.
- 4. Culture Analysis:** According to the University of Kansas and its *Community Toolbox* and *Cultural Competence and Spirituality in Community Building* publication, "Culture" refers to a group or community that shares common experiences that shape the way its members understand the world. These experiences influence one's views, values, history, present realities, humor, hopes, loyalties, worries, and fears. A cultural analysis is a process that helps one understand the impact of culture on one's lived experiences, including how power is used and how it shapes societal structures. The benefits of this process enable congregations to develop ministry activities that partner with their local contexts to foster unity, equity, and understanding among subgroups and enhance the community.
- 5. Ethnography:** The art of immersing oneself in a place or community long enough to see, hear, feel, and understand its unique rhythms. It is the way of paying close attention to hope where it emerges. According to Jessamyn Rubio, Senior Analyst and Art Director at Faith and Leadership at Duke Divinity School and author of the publication *Hope & Ethnography*, this method is a specific way of listening deeply to communities from a perspective of care and empathy, rather than pretending to be unbiased, detached observers.



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Community Engagement Possibilities

- Engage in a community walk or drive-through as a team.
- Do a ride-along with a firefighter, police officer, social worker, or key stakeholder.
- Visit a local gathering place (restaurant, school, city government meeting, neighborhood association meetings, community forums, etc.) to meet folks and/or hear community concerns.
- Facilitate one-on-one conversations with neighbors and key stakeholders.
- Organize and host a local community outreach event to meet neighbors.
- Develop surveys and questionnaires to learn about community needs and how the community perceives your church, etc.
- Organize an open house to tell your congregational story and build relationships.
- Meet a new family in your local community.



Things to Look for in Your Community

- **Population:** Changes in city/county size, ethnicity, age, gender, family units, educational status, employment, income, poverty rates, etc.
- **Housing:** Single and multi units, apartments, mobile homes, senior housing, shelters, unhoused data, housing values, etc.
- **Geography of your context:** Rivers, lakes, parks, air quality, water, public transportation, bridges, roads, sidewalks, handicap accessibility, etc.
- **Religion & Faith:** Congregations, denominational affiliations, faith-based organizations, clergy groups, interfaith coalitions, etc.
- **City Services:** Trash, lighting, streets, parks & recreation, public safety, community centers, etc.

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- **Businesses:** Restaurants, grocery stores, financial institutions, entertainment venues, home improvement stores, malls, etc.
- **Food & Nutrition Possibilities:** Restaurants, healthy food options, full-service grocery stores, a number of fast-food restaurants within the community, community gardens, etc.
- **Education:** Early childhood, K-12, trade schools, colleges, universities, seminaries, adult education programs, accreditation, standardized test scores, graduation rates, free & reduced lunch data, etc.
- **Community Programming:** After-school programs, cultural enrichment activities, summer camps, juvenile justice programs, senior programming, STEM camps, mentoring programs, philanthropic organizations, foundations, etc.)
- **Health:** Medical Institutions, Federally qualified health centers, private doctors, urgent cares centers, hospitals, pharmacies, research institutions, rehabilitation centers, dialysis centers, health disparities, public health, etc.
- **Social ills:** disparities, injustices, inequities, etc.
- **Possible Partnerships:** faith groups, neighborhood associations, businesses, organizations, universities, sports teams, etc.



Next Steps

What do you already know about your local community? What do you need to learn today? What are the strengths of your local community? What realities are breaking your heart about your community right now? What should your congregational response be to what you know, what you are learning, and what is breaking your heart? What's your congregation's capacity to act? What new ministry opportunities are emerging? What partnerships are needed for your congregation to act faithfully?



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**Before the Congregation Acts,
Press Pause to Study and Inquire of
the Lord! 1 Chronicles 13-14**

Before your congregation considers new community engagement opportunities and decides on the research methods and strategies it will use, it is essential to pray for direction, inspiration, and clarity. Clergy, lay leaders, members, church staff, and a few community partners should come together in fellowship, study, and ask God what God is calling the church and community to be today, and how they might make the necessary changes, secure the resources, and establish the partnerships to do so.

Let Us Pray

Dear God, thank you for being our Creator. You imagined, breathed, spoke, and created a world out of chaos. Your vision for humanity was made with good intentions. Your world was good. However, when humanity began to exercise its free will, abuse its power, and allow pride to guide and lead, your communities began to miss the mark, creating a culture of sin, scarcity, and injustice. Forgive us when we create or support evil that separates us from you and one another. Help your people and our communities find peace amid this polluted society. Help us cast new visions of hope and engage a love that builds bridges instead of walls. Help us be the church the community needs today in Jesus' name, Amen!

Scriptural Lesson: Luke 13:10-17, NRSV

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11 And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day."



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16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" 17 When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

Bible Study Lesson

Group Discussion Questions

- What words or images stand out in the text?
- What's happening in the historical context of this scripture?
- What problems can you identify in this text?
- Who is sick or crippled by a spirit (the unnamed woman, the synagogue leader, the gathered people in the synagogue, the opponents, etc.) in this text?
- What is the impact of the spirit on those in the text?
- What is the good news in the text?
- What role does Jesus play in this text? How did his actions bring about change and highlight the importance of communal awareness?
- What does this text suggest about humanity, power, communal chaos, God, and the role of the Church today?
- How might this text teach you and your congregation about the importance of community engagement, understanding our local context, and what it means to be a partner in social change?
- What are the personal and congregational benefits of engaging emancipatory hope in your local context?

Additional Scriptures for Exploration:

Jeremiah 29:7, (Unity & Impact)

Exekiel 37: 1-14 (Partnership, Mission, Possibilities, Life),

Luke 4:18-19 (Purpose, Impact, Service),

Acts 8:26-40 (Opportunity, Resource, Timely, Support, Relevance)

For more information or to request innovation and vitality support for your congregation, please don't hesitate to contact my office.

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