

Exegeting Your Neighbourhood¹

What is Exegesis?

The word exegesis literally means a critical interpretation and is most often used to study the Bible with a hope to discern its truth for our lives. This can be applied to your neighbourhood as the primary text where God is at work today. Through careful, sensitive and critical (discerning) observation, your task is to discover the truth of God's presence and activity where you live. Instead of looking to a community to find its problems, this helps one see its strengths and places where God is at work. What is God saying in and through your neighbourhood?

Some Primary Assumptions

1. To exegete one's neighbourhood assumes a broken and shattered world in which the Trinitarian God revealed in Scripture is actively bringing about both the spiritual transformation of persons and the social transformation of neighbourhoods and communities.
2. This means that you hope to find benefit from what reformers like Luther and Calvin called "common grace institutions," i.e. good schools, health systems, economies and employment, freedoms and security.
3. This also assumes that churches, which receive local property tax exemptions and income tax deductions, are seen as institutions that offer social benefit to the communities where they stand.
4. This idea assumes that the Church and its mission is to be a blessing to their community and not merely a "club house" model of church.

Exegeting your Neighbourhood Might include some of the following²

Take a Walk. Draw yourself a map, including your church (or home), the basic street patterns, and any landmarks, shops, commercial or community buildings, schools or parks. Once you've got a rough idea in mind of what area to include, grab a notebook and pen and head off – make sure you stop for a coffee along the way. The following will help you "listen" to your neighbourhood:

1. Develop a brief history of your neighbourhood (region, area), noting key persons, and major turning points in the life of the city.
2. Describe the major gate-keepers or power-brokers (individuals, institutions or coalitions) in each of the following:
 - a. Business / Manufacturing
 - b. Schools, Colleges, Universities
 - c. Financial Community

¹ Inspired by material taken from course work done by Ray Bakke on Urban Mission

² An exercise adapted from Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*. Brunswick: Acorn Press, 2007, 103-104.

- d. Governments: city, regional, county
 - e. Health Care Providers
 - f. Civic Organizations (Kiwanis, Rotary, etc.)
3. Who are the major people groups and sub-groups in your neighbourhood? Who are the gatekeepers of each? Where are they located? What are their major institutions?
 4. What evidence of struggle, despair, neglect and alienation do you see? Is your neighbourhood stable, declining or dying?
 5. Is there a word, several words, or a phrase that would help to describe your neighbourhood?
 6. Visit every church in the community, first to learn of their histories, calling and ministry, but also to thank them for serving in the community and helping people you will never reach. Ask the priests or pastors, "What is the most important lesson you have learned in serving your community?" You will be amazed at what you did not know and what you will learn.
 7. Which groups would you identify as the most influential community organizations in your city? Who are the gatekeepers in them? Are they advocates and/or community developers?
 8. What public spaces are provided for children, teenagers or seniors? Are they being used? If so, in what ways?
 9. Is there a local park, what do you notice about it? Does it feel like an inviting place? Who is there? How is it used?
 10. Who sets the public agenda for your city and region?
 11. Who are the significant non-profit organizations, 'para-church' agencies and social agencies in your neighbourhood / city? Who are the influential leaders in them?
 12. Who is living in your neighbourhood? New Canadians? Identifiable sub-groups? Where do they live? Who are their influential leaders? What significant cultures, institutions, emphases are part of their lives? What significant lifestyle and mind-set features do you find in them? How are they self-described, religiously?
 13. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the following city systems? - public schools, criminal justice, health care, housing, recreation .
 14. Imagine yourself as an old, infirm person with no car, or as a young child living in the middle of this neighbourhood. How disadvantaged or advantaged would you be with respect to shops, churches, parks or schools?
 15. Are there places in your neighbourhood that you wouldn't go? Why?
 16. Where are the places of life, hope, beauty or community in this neighbourhood?
 17. In what ways do you sense God's presence where you live?
 18. Visit any other social organization in the community, such as schools, police, hospitals, fire departments and businesses, such as realtors and others who have community data and up-to-date information. Even pubs can teach you a lot.
 19. Ride along with local police to get their sense of what's happening in your neighbourhood.
 20. Gather census data (from government sources, or through religious mission groups like Outreach Canada)

The bottom line is this: Learn to listen to your cultural context, ESPECIALLY if you want to transform the context and not just to draw people out of it to some theoretical safe zone.