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Sustainable Community Evangelism

Introductory Concerns

1. Connecting with a community that you have lost connections with appears to be very difficult: churches and pastors don't seem to be able to do this.
2. Are a lot of strategies out there that seem to primarily produce a "blame game"---- if only I had a different congregation, if only we had a different pastor.
3. Some strategies are cloaking devices for a theological move that gets baptized as evangelism or community outreach. Bible study is a good thing, but many churches are rightly suspicious of programs that seem to have ulterior objectives!
4. This emerged initially out of my Ph.D. research in which I studied one church that did all the fancy strategies and another church rejected all of them: the "stuck-in-the-mud" church doubled in size over five years while the avant-garde church struggled for existence. Why? How you contextualize what you do is the absolute crucial issue, and that is what most churches seem to have the most difficulty with.

Six Questions:

1. **Why are you doing this?** An important question because it helps us select the appropriate strategy for what we want to accomplish.
 - Get new people to do our work and pay our bills
 - Find people like us to invite to church (not entirely bad!)
 - Organize our neighborhood for community action?
 - Identify social needs that we can meet
 - Evangelize and transform people in the community?
2. **Which communities are you a part of?**
 - a. Geographic communities (e.g., a "parish", loved by city planners, Roman Catholics and community organizers)
 - b. Identity communities (e.g. ethnic group, GLBT.). Doesn't matter if there are Samoans on your block, open a church and they will come!
 - c. Ideological communities (progressive Christian witness, radical Christians, etc.). If you are an ideological community, your geographic

neighborhood may be a mission field but not an evangelism field----if you want more members, find a way to reach your ideological group!

- d. Status groups (social workers, teachers, etc.)
Protestant congregations are fellowships of believers much more than they are parishes. While neighborhood leafleting can be important for a variety of reasons (keep us honest, keep us open to others, evangelism, etc.), it seems to have fairly minimal returns.

3. Who are your neighbors?

- a. Once you identify who your neighbors are, you can then think about who they are and what you need to do in order to minister to them.
- b. If you are in a geographic bounded area, in a year there will be great demographic information. Some data (from schools) is more recent, most is 10 years old. **But be careful: knowing the demographics does not help your neighbors get to know you!**
- c. **Meeting Strategy:**
 - i. **Identify where the community meeting places are, and show up!**
 - ii. **Ask what meetings people go to, and you go too!**
 - iii. **Ask yourself how you can meet and befriend people in your communities. And do it!**

If your church wants to attract the growing number of Palestinians in your community, find a way to make friends with Palestinians! Don't wait for them to join in order to talk to them!

4. What are their spiritual needs? What makes their soul's ache? I'll give you three methods for discerning this:

- a. **First: Guess.** Form a lectionary study group with other clergy and focus on the text.
- b. **Second: Needs analysis**
 - i. Identify their needs, issues
 - ii. Ask yourself: what are the spiritual issues here?
 1. A person whose material need of food might have a spiritual need of recovering their sense of humanity
 2. A person who is recently divorced might have a spiritual need of affirmation, acceptance
 3. A bored teenager might need a sense of what will give their life meaning
 4. A recent immigrant might have a spiritual need of knowing that God is with them on this journey, that when they are surrounded by signs that they are "wrong", in God's eyes they are loved and "right"
- c. **Third method: there are deep functional needs in American culture. Deal with them!**

- i. Why have **faith**? (an increasingly secular society observes that you don't need church to have fun, friends)
- ii. How cope with **failure** (from marriage, children, economy, addictions, etc.)?
- iii. How do I keep my **family** together? How do I form a sense of family for myself, my kids, when I am single?
- iv. Where do I **find people with similar values** and culture that I want for my life and family? (How do you cope with the demand of many congregations that you be "culturally old" in order to fit in?)

5. What beliefs and practices of your congregation address those needs?

- a. Form a chart with five columns:
 - i. Need
 - ii. Belief (be concrete: doctrine of incarnation does relate to the issue, but how?)
 - iii. Practice. Beliefs without practices are empty promises. What do you do about what you believe?
 - iv. Opposition ("But's"): What do you believe, practice that is in opposition to your neighbor's needs? E.g. we really believe that mother's shouldn't work, so we will have no child care for choir, meetings, etc. that might permit them to leave the house)
 - v. New. What new themes or practices do you need to adopt? What do you need to change.

b. Knowing your Practices and Oppositions are what is most important!

6. What actions do you need to take? Now you are ready for action:

- a. **What do you need to change? How are you shooting yourself in the foot?**
- b. **What do you enhance, build off of?**
- c. **If reaching out to a community that is different from your existing congregation, build off of the common needs, practices and beliefs. If finding a sense of home is crucial to your elderly Germans and the young Hispanics, there is your theme: Building a Home with God**
 - i. **This meets needs of both existing group and the desired new group, rather than pitting one against the other**
 - ii.
- d. **Now you can write a brochure or a leaflet or design an advertisement that addresses what the deep needs of your intended community.**