



Neighborhood Exegesis: An Exercise for Discerning Relevant Community Ministries

Exegesis is a term that refers to the *reading out of* a given biblical text or narrative a reasonable meaning and/or interpretation. Exegesis is the process preachers implore as they prepare sermons or Bible studies, careful not to *read into* the story or passage what may not actually be there. That would be called *eisegesis*. The messy craft of exegesis is important. Actually, exegesis is critical.

In the twenty-first century, however, preachers and practitioners of the faith require far more than an ability to know what the Scripture once said and may still be saying. Ministry leaders must also be invested in *cultural and neighborhood exegesis*, i.e. drawing out of their local and relational contexts a sense of identity, meaning, and relevant possibilities for living into the gospel alongside their neighbors. We cannot afford to read into communities (false) assumptions about what good news can and should look like. *Neighborhood eisegeis* is neither life giving for those we are called to serve nor for those called to such service.

So we must engage new interpretative tools: maps, impromptu conversations with neighbors, partnerships with community leaders, interactions with local officials, investments in the history of the church and context surrounding a given congregation, and a willingness to risk implementing something altogether different and no longer limited to Sunday morning or traditional programs.

We also must spend time in the community and ask a lot of questions.

What is provided here is a proposed exercise essential to the beginning of discerning relevant and empathetic neighborhood ministry. First, identify a public gathering space, i.e. local business, community park, section of a community, etc., and carve out time to listen to local neighbors and observe. Then consider the following as you notice the people around you, your immediate surroundings, and how you might pray along the way.

It is recommended to pursue this sort of neighborhood exegesis in pairs or groups, potentially covering sections of a community and then coming back together to reflect on the collective experiences.

“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

Jesus of Nazareth

Matthew 13:16

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Beatitudes as Framework for Neighborhood Exegesis

In likely Jesus' most well known sermon, Matthew writes that Jesus "saw the crowds" and sat down to speak (5:1). Jesus had the eyes to see and the ears to hear. Then, with an empathetic spirit and compassion, he proclaimed with his life and lips the good news of their inclusion within the kingdom of God.

Using the beatitudes as a guide, and even filtered through the observational exercises below, consider where you see and hear those Jesus considered blessed ones in God's unfolding dreams for the world:

- Who may be those who mourn and grieve? What might be the cause of such loss?
- Who may be considered the meek, those on the margins and on the fringes of community? What might cause such marginalization and isolation?
- Who are those with a hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice? What are they hungry and thirsty for? What might be the cause of such hunger and thirst?
- Who are those who embody mercy and compassion? Are they individuals? Organizations? Religious?
- Who do you recognize in the community demonstrating purity of heart, leaning into the love of God without hidden agenda or ulterior motives?
- Who are the peacemakers? What conflicts and tensions are they working to reconcile and resolve?
- Who are those working towards wholeness in the community yet potentially face variations of resistance? Why might this be the case?

Observations about People

- Who do you see? Describe the people and perceived demographics.
- What are they doing?
- What conversations, if any, do you observe?
- Are people alone or in groups? Any distinctions between those in groups or alone?
- Do you see people walking on the streets? Driving? Sitting? Biking? Using public transportation?
- Who appear to be those most privileged in the community? Who might be those most marginalized?
- Are there any signs of hospitality and care of neighbor? If so, what do you notice and how did you come to this observation?
- Are there any signs of divisions within the community and local neighbors? If so, what do you notice and how did you come to this observation?

Observations about the Community and Local Businesses

- What do you see, hear, and/or smell?
- What do the physical structures tell you about the community?
- If relevant, describe the houses and adjacent spaces: single family, apartments, condos, yards, etc.?
- What are the conditions of physical structures and/or residential spaces?
- What kind of signage do you see? Advertising? Fliers on telephone poles?
- What kind of social services and/or not-for-profits exist? What does this tell you about the community?
- Is there anything that you might expect to see in a community that seems to be missing?
- Describe the commercial district. What stores are/are not present? What signs of commercial vibrancy do you see? Vendors?

¹ Adapted by the Presbytery of Philadelphia from a resource originally provided by the 1001 New Worshiping Communities movement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- What businesses do you observe? Can you get a sense of what people in this community do for a living? Is there evidence of a non-traditional, underground economy? Describe.
- Is there a school in the community? What kind, i.e. public, charter, private, religiously affiliated? How many? Are there any higher education institutions nearby?
- How close is the nearest grocery store, if any? How do prices compare to where you usually shop?

Observations about Recreational and Gathering Space

- Where do people appear to gather most? For what purpose?
- What signs of children or youth activities do you notice?
- Is there a gym, movie theater, sports facility, swimming pool, etc.? Describe location, conditions, and anything about these spaces that may tell you something about the community and residents?
- Are there any parks or green spaces? What is their condition and accessibility?
- Where, if at all, do you see public displays of the creative arts?

Observations about Religious Influence

- What churches or other faith-based community gathering places, if any, do you observe?
- What is their proximity to one another? Are there any signs of collaboration?
- If any, what kind of religious communities are represented? How are they present in community?
- Are there any religiously affiliated academic institutions nearby? What does this tell you?

Next Level Conversations

- Consider having a conversation with a passerby about the community and local residents? How do they feel about the community? What do they value? What are their concerns? If at all, how have they experienced change in the community? Other comments they would be willing to share?
- Consider talking with a local business owner, entrepreneur, and/or local leader about the community and their observations, ideas, hopes, dreams, concerns, questions, etc.? What led them to do what they do where and how they are doing it?

Post-Exercise Reflection Questions

- What did you notice in and about yourself through this experience? When were you most comfortable? Least comfortable? Why?
- What is your overall impression of the community? Would you be willing to live here? Why or why not?
- Where did you see evidence of the Kingdom of God? Where did you see evidence of brokenness?
- What assets does the community possess for embodying healthy and holistic community?
- Where are there obstacles to community formation? Evidence of lack that can strain a community?
- In any of your observations above, how might your assessments and/or perceptions be reading into (eisegesis) something that may or may not be there? In other words, what potential (false) assumptions are you making that could impact ministry in this community? How can you address these potential hazards to relevant and empathetic ministry?
- If God called you to start a new ministry or collaborative work in this neighborhood, what would you do next? What would you need to make this happen? Who would be potential partners?
- How would this work be framed not only in light of your observations, but also theologically and your understanding of the gospel?

“The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

Frederick Buechner

Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC