

“There is so much to learn. I’m always afraid I will make a mistake.”

“I’m not sure I can do this. I don’t think I know enough.”

“How do I keep trying when I don’t receive a response?”

Meeting our neighbors again in a new way is not an easy journey. There is always more to learn, and we will always make mistakes. If we wait until we think we know enough, we will never get started. Jesus sent his disciples out in twos with an openness to receive from those to whom they were sent. They went with expectation, and sometimes they were rejected. Jesus never promised an easy road, he simply said, **“Go. Go and tell. Go and do likewise.”**

And so we go – with an openness in our hearts and minds to hear and receive. With knowledge and confidence in our own gifts, we go out to meet our neighbors to receive their gifts. It is important to look at our neighbors in order to see their gifts, not to see their deficits or failures. As we listen to people in order to form new friendships, we listen for what we have in common and we work to build on that. Listen for the similarities as you meet your neighbors. What are their cares and concerns in life? What worries do they have about their children and grandchildren? What are their hopes? Listen always with an openness to receive what is offered and be open to wonderful new surprises.

As you welcome new people into the life of your congregation, you will be transformed. Remember to regularly celebrate together as you continue on the journey. Your celebrations will probably become more festive and joy-filled as the community of your congregation expands.

Use these tools as needed to help you in your walk of meeting your neighbors and assessing your next steps for growth.

Continue to Leader Tips and Action Steps – Neighborhood Walk



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Once you have listened to community members and/or neighborhood leaders, become familiar with the neighborhood's history, celebrated your congregation's story, examined your congregation's culture, and reflected on your challenges, you need to take specific action

The next step is to prepare to go out into the community to learn as much as you can about it. You will need to know who and what is in the neighborhood and how best you can fit it. Rather than going out to get people to join the congregation, take a look at what needs to happen so the congregation can join the neighborhood.

A program in process

Know that when you go out, you will not only enter another world, but also a program already in process. The script for this program has already been written without you. Your jumping in will require improvisation on all parts and eventually rewriting of the script. You cannot just jump in with your little script in hand, convince everybody that your script is better than theirs, and get them all to go along with you. No, you are joining their program. They couldn't wait. They had to start without you, while you were busy inside your comfort zone. Keeping this in mind will enable others to trust you as you go beyond your walls.

Ask yourselves, "Do they even want us here?" If your congregation has not been a contributing, integral part of the community, perhaps the answer is no. If all you have done is keep a tax exempt piece of realty from becoming blighted, perhaps not. If your building and grounds have been exclusively your domain and look like a country club next to the rest of the neighborhood, perhaps not. If you have been quickly driving in and out of the neighborhood for years, perhaps not.

On the other hand, perhaps they would welcome you with open arms. Some will say, "It's about time. Welcome to the community." Others may be angry and resent your late entry. And there will be everything in between. I bet you can't wait to find out

Reprinted from Miguel de Jesús, *Beyond Our Comfort Zone: Developing Social Ministry Programs in Multiethnic Settings*, Augsburg Fortress, 2002, page 15.

In taking those steps out of the building and into the neighborhood, Miguel suggests a number of important points to keep in mind. These are significant whether you are entering a neighborhood around you whose background has changed from that of the congregation or whether you are entering a community of people who have recently settled within the larger community.

Preparation

Walking humbly – If the congregation has not been actively involved in the community, walk gently and humbly. Despite the needs you may see, people in the community have been living their daily lives in ways that have also made use of their internal strengths and resources. What you may see on the surface through your eyes may look quite different from someone else's perspective. Keep in mind the realities of culture. Be careful – over and over again – to check your judgments. You are stepping

out to see, hear, and experience the community through the eyes, ears, and realities of those who live within the community.

Listen – “You are going from merely being there in the neighborhood in a semi-invisible state, to going out and engaging others in conversation and eventually a long-term relationship. It cannot be said enough that no one of us, no group of us, has all the answers” (de Jesús, p. 25). As you walk, listen carefully with ears, but also your eyes and heart. This requires being fully present in the moment and being aware of and listening beyond your filters. Some people will live up to your worst expectations and stereotypes, but most will not. Be open to discovery.

Be yourself – If you have not regularly walked in the community, people will likely notice that you are different and your body language may convey your discomfort. Be genuine and be yourself. Walk as you would in entering the home of a friend and receiving hospitality. Begin your walk with prayer and be open to receive.

The team – Prepare together as a team, being aware of your fears and challenges and be prepared for surprises. Be comfortable with the two or three you walk with. You may want to plan a time when members of your team can go out in twos or threes, walking in different directions within a two to three block radius. Don't make your group or groups so big that it looks like a tour.

Information gathering – Before you go, identify information or resources that you will be looking for. Notice signs of investment and disinvestment in the community. Notice the types and condition of housing, schools, businesses, organizations, banking, transportation, community and professional services. Be alert to the gifts and resources of the community.

Find a neighborhood guide – From the information gathered in the assessment of congregation and community, identify persons who could serve as guides for your walk. A guide who knows the community can help interpret and advise you as you walk and is also a person who brings street smarts, recognition, and hopefully, respect as you walk together.

The Walk

Walk the neighborhood to experience what is there. Walk during daylight hours and be aware of what you need to know regarding safety. Your neighborhood guide can help you more fully engage with the community.

See this as home – “Walk in the shoes of the people who live in the neighborhood. See with new eyes. See this as a place where people are born, fall in love, raise their children, play outside, do their shopping and their laundry, feel safe walking the streets, are afraid to walk the streets, attend worship, visit with neighbors, live out a history, die, and do everything that you do in your life. Visualize yourself as a resident of this neighborhood.

“Be aware of the way you look at people in the neighborhood. What are your inner thoughts about them? What do you believe about them? What do you think you know about them? What if these things are not true? What if they are misinformation and stereotypes? Examine your attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors. Be honest and pray” (de Jesús, p. 29).

Listen with all your senses – Be alert to notice the information or resources that you had noted earlier. If you can't find a resource you had listed, ask someone. Enter into conversations with people as opportunities present themselves. Notice the sights, sounds, smells.

Go into public places – Make a mental shopping list of things you regularly buy. What can you buy in the community and at what price? What are the choices and variety? What things are not available? What kinds of foods are available in the local grocery store? Look for real estate or rental offices and ask about available housing. Note the lowest and highest rent available in the community. Notice the financial institutions and transportation available to people in the neighborhood.

Be alert to the important people and institutions in the neighborhood. What is the role of schools, churches, neighborhood organizations, youth agencies? Is there a park, corner, or spot where people gather? Ask your guide about the significance of these gathering spots. Notice what is going on before you talk with people in these gathering areas so you don't walk into a drug deal or other situation in which you would not be welcome.

After the Walk

Debrief and share information – “Once you have gathered enough information on your walk, go back to the church building and share your observations. Talk about and record what you have seen, how it makes you feel, and what you think about it. Compile and share anything you have learned or insights you might have. What did you discover about your attitudes, assumptions, and behavior toward the people in the neighborhood? Be honest. Make a list of the resources you found. Pray together” (de Jesús, p. 31).

Celebrate and prepare for the next steps – Celebrate all you have done and all you have learned. Communicate your learning and your excitement with the congregation. The process of deepening your self-understanding as a congregation will be ongoing, but it is now time to walk with both feet – with one planted in the congregation and its gifts, history, and culture, and one planted in the community and its gifts, history, and culture.

Continue to Interviews & Discussion: Does the neighborhood know your church?



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- Are you as a local church integral to your community?
- Would you be missed if you were not there?
- How are you doing on meeting needs?
- What are your challenges for growth as a congregation to fully be one body with many members?

The answers to these questions will tell you how you are perceived in your neighborhood. The responses will also point out where communication needs to be improved. And with better communication, your congregation can become a brighter light to the world!

Here's a simple tool. Survey the neighborhood by conversing with shopkeepers and others with whom you are normally in contact. Ask them:

- How long have you been in _____?
- Do you know of the church on _____?
- What kind of programs do they have that you are aware of?
- If there was one thing that this church could provide for you and your family or organization, what would it be?

After you have completed interviews, share your information in light of the opening questions.

As you develop relationships with persons in the community and after you have attended events at other places in the community, invite people to your congregation. Offer community based Bible studies. Discern needs for spiritual growth. Invite participation in shaping ministries that you and members of the community can offer together.

Adapted from Pastor Albert Triolo, Ascension Lutheran Church, Deer Park, NY.

Action Steps Completed - Continue to Self Reflection

