

Tool #29: Community Observation Guide

Even if you have been in a community for a long time, you need to learn to see the familiar with new eyes. The handbook *Studying Congregations* provides a useful guide for observing your community in a fresh way, alert to indicators of need as well as signs of God's reign.

Walk through as much of the community as you are able; if the area is far-flung, or if the weather is bad, a driving ("windshield") survey is another option. On a warm sunny day, a long walk is a pleasant break from the usual church committee meeting room! It is helpful to open a tour with prayer, that God would allow you to see with His eyes of love and discernment.

As you tour, look for evidence of the following:

- **People groups:** Who is standing at bus stops, hanging out on street corners, going into businesses, playing in the park, waiting in line outside the Salvation Army? Note ages, ethnicities, languages, apparent economic status. Are people interacting with one another a lot, or acting in isolation?

- **Places of activity:** a pizza joint crowded with youth, a busy shopping center, a heavily trafficked intersection, playgrounds, school zones

- **Signs of change:** businesses opening or closing, housing construction, sales or demolition, languages added to shop signs, congregations meeting in places that were not built originally for them

- **Services:** Where can people go to shop, eat out, get an education, worship, receive assistance? What appears to be the quantity and quality of available services?

- **Vibes:** What kinds of feelings do you get from your encounters in the community? What feels familiar / strange, safe / dangerous, friendly / hostile, sad / happy, inviting / repellant, pleasant / uncomfortable?

It can be helpful for each member of the group to take a sheet of paper with columns labeled with each of these headings to organize your observations as you walk or drive.

After the tour, take time as a group to compare notes and reflect on your observations.

- Try to put yourselves in the shoes of the people you see. Discuss what challenges they are likely to face as they go about their daily life. What are the likely sources of stress and dysfunction? What opportunities and benefits does the community have to offer?

- What evidence of changes do you see in the neighborhood, and how might these changes affect people?

- Try to imagine life in the community through the perspective of various groups of people: families with young children, teenagers, single parents, persons with handicaps, immigrants, seniors on a fixed income, etc.

- How might community residents view your congregation? Would you be perceived as allies, foreigners, friends, helpers, annoyances, or simply irrelevant?

- What might Jesus have to say to this community? How is the Good News of salvation through Christ that your congregation has to share relevant here?

- Close with a time of prayer for the community and for your congregation's witness and service there (see the Holistic Mission Prayer Guide, Tool #1).