

Tool #31: Community Observation Guide

Even if you have been in a community for a long time, you can learn to see the familiar with new eyes, 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. If possible, ask a resident to give you a guided tour of the neighborhood.

It is helpful to open your observation time with prayer, that God would allow you to see with His eyes of love and discernment. You can combine observation with more in-depth prayer for the community (see the "Prayer-Walking Guide," tool #30), and/or with a neighborhood survey (see tool #32). You may find it useful to complete this exercise more than once, with a different focus for your observations and prayers each time.

Use the categories on the next page to organize your observations. Respect the dignity of community members by recording your notes as unobtrusively as possible. Be present as servant-students, not tourists!

After the visit, take time as a group to compare notes and reflect on your observations. You can use this time also to generate a map of the community (see tool #29). Discuss the following:

- What positive qualities, opportunities and benefits does the community have to offer? What are signs that God is already at work in the neighborhood? Identify potential partners (people, churches, organizations) that the church could come alongside in serving the community.
- What needs and concerns are in evidence? What do you see that might detract from people's quality of life or hinder people from developing their potential? What challenges are people likely to face as they go about their daily life?
- How might community residents view your congregation? Would you be perceived as allies, foreigners, friends, helpers, annoyances, or simply irrelevant?
- Take note of your own response to what you see. What kinds of "vibes" do you get from your encounters in the community? What feels familiar / strange, safe / dangerous, friendly / hostile, happy / sad, pleasant / uncomfortable?
- Do you sense any barriers to "fitting in" between yourself and the community -- language, culture, class, ethnicity, age? What stereotypes about people and places might you have to address in order to build healthy relationships with people here?
- How is the Good News of salvation through Christ relevant here? What might it look like if God's kingdom were realized "on earth as it is in heaven" here in this community? Imagine how your congregation alongside members of the community might participate in helping the neighborhood experience God's design for a good life.

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, and the Prayer-Walking Guide, tool #30).

(Tool #31, continued) Community Observation Guide

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 at the store? Note ages, ethnicities, languages, apparent economic status. How much do you see people interacting with one another?
- *Places of activity:* A pizza joint crowded with youth, a shopping plaza, a heavily trafficked intersection, playgrounds, school zones
- *Structures:* What are the types and conditions of the structures (homes, businesses, roads, parks)? How much "free space" is there in the community? What is the mix of private and public space?
- *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? Who is providing services, and who is receiving them?
- *Signs of change:* Businesses opening or closing, housing construction, sales or demolition, languages added to shop signs, buildings used in ways different from their original purpose. Overall, do conditions appear to be getting better or worse?
- *Signs of hope:* Evidence of God's grace and God's people at work: churches and nonprofits, playing children, uplifting artwork, Christian symbols, social gatherings, gardens. Look especially for local assets that could be connected with neighborhood needs.
- *Signs of need:* Evidence of hardship, hurt or injustice, specific to particular areas or affecting the neighborhood as a whole. Be aware that marginalized people and social problems are often hidden, especially in communities that appear well-off.

People groups	Places of activity	Structures	Services	Signs of change	Signs of hope	Signs of need