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# HOW CAN WE SERVE?

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## An In-depth guide to discovering needs and opportunities in your community

In 2013, Ashley Austin and his family relocated to Victoria, British Columbia to begin the process of planting a church there. In order to plant a church that met the community's needs they spent time learning the community's context. By discovering the context first, and then building relationships in the community to discover specific needs, the church has grown from the original group of nine adults and six children to 350 attenders at the original site and has planted a second church in another area of the city.

“We’ve created a sense of belonging, a sense of family and a sense of community for a city longing for relationships,” says Ashley. “And that sense of belonging has led to countless opportunities to communicate the gospel. If restoration is taking something that’s disconnected and making it whole, when we join God in what He’s doing, He transforms even the most unlikely of situations.”



## Finding Your Place

It is important to identify the needs and opportunities of your community, identify your available resources within the church and identify your understanding of what God has called you to do. Often, churches that want to impact their communities try to do too much and quickly find out they are not particularly effective with their efforts. Many times, their lack of life-changing success can be because they didn't take the time to identify the true needs and concerns within their communities.

Each of these areas is necessary for finding success in meeting the needs in your community. But at the intersection of these three—where God's calling, the church's gifts and resources and the needs of the community—is where your church can not only meet needs but change lives as well. The process of discovering the identity and the needs of your community is the first step in bringing community restoration. As you begin this process, pray that God will give you the eyes to see and the compassion to help meet needs and restore the broken.



# Identify the Context of Your Community

As you begin to learn about your community, it's best to understand the community's context. Context includes important historical events, current cultural traditions and future desires and goals. Create task forces or teams to dig into each of these areas, and then compile the teams' findings into one report that accurately portrays the community's context.

## Research the Past

Use the local library, archives and older members of the community to help you learn the things in the past that have made your community what it is today.

- What major crises or conflicts has the community faced? (fires, damage from natural disasters, racial tensions, etc.)
- Did these events unite or divide the community? How has the community moved past these?
- What are some wins, success stories and initiatives that have worked or been successful in the past?

## Understand the Present

Look at current city council agendas, news items, statistics and even social media trends in your area.

- Who are the people of influence in your specific community and why?
- Identify areas experiencing growth and areas experiencing decline. What economic and social issues have impacted both areas?
- Identify the demographics of the community. Which demographic groups are growing faster than others? What reason is behind this surge in growth?
- What city/county services are meeting the needs of the community? What infrastructure needs are not being met?
- What programs are being offered for senior adults, teenagers and children through the city?
- What issues does the city council see as most pressing in the community?

## Picture the Future

This information can be found through the library and the city council.

- What developments (shopping, parks, multi-family housing, subdivisions) have been planned for the future?
- What future new programs or expansions are being planned through the city?

# Identify the Needs of Your Community

The next step is to learn the ministry needs and opportunities within the community. Explore the physical community, listen to and learn from people living and working in the area and seek God's guidance by prayer-driving and prayer-walking the neighborhood.

## Pray over your community

- Pray for every inch of your neighborhood. Take note of the condition of homes, schools and playgrounds. Pray for the children and families who live, work and play there.
- Pray for the local churches. Take note of each church's location and programs. Pray that God will bless each church's work in the community. Ask God to lead you to those churches that could become partners with yours.
- Pray for the children and families in the neighborhood. Pray that God will help you learn their stories and identify their needs.
- Pray for the homeless, abused, addicted, lonely, neglected and afraid in your community. Ask God to give you the sensitivity to identify who they are and what they feel and need.
- Conclude every time of prayer by asking God to show you the community's needs and bring you clear next steps.
- Take time to engage people while you pray in the community. This will intentionally connect the praying exercise with the people in the community. God can use these conversations for you to see and hear the answer to your questions.
- Identify people in your church who are gifted and passionate about intercessory prayer, and create ongoing, regular times of prayer for the community and specific individuals and families therein.

## Spend time in your community

- Visit local stores and businesses. Note to whom they market their products and who is shopping in the establishments.
- Note who is out and about in the community and where they are found.
- Note what demographic/ethnic/racial/age breakdowns are observable.
- Note where people gather in groups (coffee shops, restaurants, ballfields).
- Note how people move about the community (car, bus, taxi, ride-share services, walking).
- Participate in an already-existing community service or gathering and listen for evidence from people of further need.
- Ask what ministries are already in place to meet a particular need. If there is already a successful ministry meeting certain community needs, ask how your church can come alongside them in support, so as to promote collaboration instead of competition.



## ► COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

### **Listen to and learn from people in the community. Use the [attached surveys](#) for guidance.**

- Talk to several people as you explore the community about what they perceive as the community's best assets and greatest needs. Talk to individuals, business leaders, community leaders and church members.
- Talk to local government officials about the needs they want to address in the community.
- Ride with local police officers to explore their observations and understandings about the community.
- Talk with other area church leaders about how they understand the needs of the community.
- Talk with school officials and teachers about the needs of the community they see through the children in their classrooms.
- Talk to people in the community with evident needs (e.g. shut-ins, disabled, homeless, etc.). Ask what would be most helpful to them while also seeking every chance to pray for them.
- Choose three people in your neighborhood to take to lunch at separate times. Respect appropriate behavior in your community for lunch (e.g. keep the "rule of three" or men with men and women with women). Listen to their concerns.

# Strategically Considering Ministry Opportunities

Take the next step by enlisting a small group of people within the congregation according to God's calling and their passions and gifts to lead the process outlined above.

- Divide assignments outlined above in the "Identifying the Context of Your Community" section between the members of this group. Set a date when information will be due from each member and then compile that information into one report.
- Lead group members in evaluating the report on the context of your community.
- Lead members to spend several weeks praying through the first section provided in the, "Identifying the Needs of Your Community" section, both individually and within small groups.
- After two or three weeks of prayer, make assignments for the second and third sections, and set a deadline for findings. Provide copies of the questionnaires to be used whenever possible as group members work.
- Gather again after the deadline to compile and review information collected.
- Based on the group's findings, lead group members to discuss:

**How do you see God leading in this process?** What needs or opportunities do you feel God has shown you?

**What partnerships in our community have you discovered that could connect with you to meet the needs you have identified?** These could include government officials, school officials and teachers, other community churches and leaders, local shelters or other preestablished programs addressing the needs you've discovered.

**Who in our church is passionate and equipped to lead or participate in ministry to meet these identified needs?** Consider children's workers, parents and/or families, teenagers or youth groups, Sunday school classes, senior adults — anyone with a desire to help provide resources to help meet these needs.


**What resources and relationships has God given your church to support ministry to meet these needs?** Consider missions offerings, other financial resources, church members who are connected to local schools, those with the gift of couponing and Sunday School classes as places to start.

**What space within the church or within the community could be used to meet these needs?**



## These questions can help you determine whether or not:

- There is a desire within the congregation to meet this need.
- There are resources of people, space and money to meet this need.
- This ministry is sustainable over time.
- You feel God leading you as a congregation in this direction.



Remember that it is at the *intersection* of God's calling, the identified needs of the community, and the passions and gifts of your church that you can meet these identified needs while changing lives with the gospel.

## 3 Tips for Success

**1. Serve, don't lead.** Gain credibility and trust by serving those in need and those who minister. Learn by taking an active role in the ministry instead of leading from outside. Listen to the community's dreams and goals and respond to those. Remember that your ministry is all about glorifying God through serving your community and sharing and living the gospel.

**2. Don't forget to bring your church along.** Tell the church what you are learning and keep them informed about the needs and the work of the ministry. Ask church members to prayerfully consider using their passion for the needs of the community. Encourage them to engage with humility, a servant's heart and a spirit of fellowship.

**3. Evaluate and consolidate themes across the different surveys.** Pay close attention to the feedback your community provides you, listening for what they aren't saying just as closely as what they are saying. Look for places where commonalities in answers exist and where different people are saying similar things.

**4. Identify resources to help your church get started.** Explore Send Relief's series of Ministry Guides which provide directions for starting a multitude of ministry programs at [sendrelief.org/ministry-guides](https://sendrelief.org/ministry-guides).





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