



Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs

The Community Resident Interview

The demographic information provided in the *Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs* process can provide some interesting and helpful “clues” in understanding the human care needs of your community:

- population growth or decline
- age distribution
- median, average and per capita income of the residents
- education levels
- type of employment
- housing patterns
- ethnic composition, etc.

A careful study of the information may suggest concrete needs to be addressed. **But demographic information is not a substitute for talking to people who work in the community.** For example, the staff of the nearest public school or social service agency can share valuable information about the community they are serving.

Yet **the most telling information comes from the people who live in the community** – the residents – people that congregation and community agencies seek to serve. Actually talking one-on-one to the people down the block and around the corner from the church reaps rich benefits:

- accurate, first-hand information
- long-term relationship building

The community residential interviews or “cold calls” of the *Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs* process is low-key and non-threatening because the caller is seeking, not imparting information! Some refer to this activity as *pre-evangelism*, or the *cultivation* stage of the practice of evangelism.

While seeking opportunities to “Plant Gospel Seeds” is the spiritual component of serving both *body and soul* needs, care is taken by the caller to **first develop a relationship** with the resident by demonstrating care for the human, *bodily* needs of their community. Indeed, such care for people as human beings, as well as spiritual beings, is very much like the early Christians, who continued in the Apostles’ teachings, but also cared for the *bodily* needs of their fellow believers (Acts 2:42-45; Acts 4:34-35).

The callers can, indeed “Plant Gospel Seeds” as opportunities are opened and as the callers are asked (and they often are in these residential interviews), **“So tell me about your church? What do you believe?”**

Why reach out to residents?

New people are reached for Christ and His church in many ways. New members come from the invitation of parishioners. Others are drawn to the body of Christ in a local congregation through small group ministry. These are fine methods to be commended and used. *The Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs* process, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, also results in new disciples for Christ and His church.

The process has been field-tested in congregations throughout the United States over the last 10-years. We have discovered that at least 1-in-10 “cold calls” will yield a “prospect,” a family in the congregation’s neighborhood that desires a follow-up call from the church.

It appears that congregations can grow when care contacts are made with their neighbors! Recent research reveals that congregations can grow by engaging their immediate neighbors and by becoming immersed into the fabric of the community.

The long-term goals of community resident interviews are:

- to **initiate a dialogue and potential relationship** with the congregation's neighbors, which enable the pastor and people to share the Gospel within the context of ministry to body and soul.
- to continue **making contact with residents around an initial geographical parish** that will serve to **train disciples of Jesus Christ, who will emulate Jesus' model of missionary expansion**: "After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go" (Luke 10:1).

The immediate goals are:

- to secure residents' assistance in **identifying the most critical, unmet, and under-served needs in the neighborhood**
- to **introduce residents to the congregation.**

How to conduct a community resident interview

How do we reach and converse with our congregation's neighbors? Simply by knocking on their doors and **asking permission to talk briefly about the needs in their neighborhood and community, and how the church might respond.**

How can these interviews be conducted? We insist on the "Jesus' method" of going in pairs: "After this the Lord appointed 72 others and **sent them two by two** ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go" (Luke 10:1). Jesus trained his disciples where real people lived! **Local communities were their training ground, learning laboratory, or discipleship "incubator!"**

As you prepare for our on-site assessment, recruit folks to conduct these community resident interviews with us. Pair up a "talker," (energetic, type-A personality) with someone who is willing to go along to listen and lend "moral support."

Groups participating in the *Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs* process ordinarily meet at 9:00 a.m. for a workshop (and for a continental breakfast). We conduct interviews on Saturday from 11:00 a.m. to noon. A light lunch is prepared back at headquarters, which also provides a casual time to de-brief. Sometimes we will go out into the community again at 2:00 p.m. and end at 4:00 p.m.

One caller does the interviewing; the other listens and takes notes. The interviewer may also take notes. With even four members willing to conduct the interviews, it is easier to recruit four others who will just go along to listen and take notes. That's four teams. In just an hour, quite a bit of ground can be covered by four teams!

We have found that those who went along to listen and take notes want to conduct interviews the next time we go out. The four teams become eight teams, since it is easier to recruit those who will simply listen and take notes.

As with the agency interviews, you begin to hear the same needs stated repeatedly. Each family interviewed reflects views of at least one or two other households as people share their feelings and views of where they live with each other on a day-to-day basis.

Sample interview

Our conversation at the door can go something like this:

Interviewer: "Good morning! I am _____ from _____ Lutheran Church down the block." (Share a card or brochure.)

Resident: "Thanks, but we already have a church."

Interviewer: "Good! What a blessing! But actually, we are doing a survey of the community to learn about:

1. the most critical, unmet, or under-served needs
2. issues that are surfacing in the community
3. challenges and struggles that families are facing

We'd like to refocus and redesign our congregation's work to reflect the needs of the community. We would sure like to hear your view of what is most needed in this neighborhood. Have a few minutes?"

Resident: "Oh, uh, sure. Why not? We sure do have lots of needs. . ."

Interview Questions

So, what types of questions should teams ask? Here's a sample interview. If time is a factor, focus on questions #4 and #5. Or, feel free to develop questions that you feel are most applicable to your community.

1. How long have you lived in this community?
2. Overall, how are the services in the community (police, garbage collection, etc.)?
3. What changes have you seen in the community during the time you have lived here?
4. Of all the needs in the community, which of these are the most critical – the things you feel should be addressed first?
5. Which of these needs are not being met or are underserved?
6. Which agencies are best serving these needs?
7. Are there any churches that you know of that are trying to meet some of these critical and pressing community needs?
8. Would like to be involved in serving any of these needs?
9. If we schedule a community forum to share the results of our survey, look for more suggestions, and possibly form action teams to study the prioritized needs, would you like to be invited to such a meeting? (If yes, ask for their name and telephone number.)

Interviews with existing community contacts

Another way of engaging people from the congregation's immediate neighborhood is to interview families from the neighborhood that are enrolled in one of the congregation's existing human care ministries. Such ministries might be a childcare center or an after school tutoring program. Some of these families can even be interviewed at the church. An appointment can be set up. The community resident interview can be an orderly and yet very informative step in the relationship building process. Oftentimes, there is little contact with these families outside the services they receive from the congregation's program in which they are enrolled.

A combination of these two methods will yield the best results. Begin by interviewing the neighbors surrounding the four corners of the church. Thirty to forty interviews will result in a lot of information.

This method is really the "Jesus' method." Jesus was out among the people asking what He could do for them. For this reason, we encourage our congregations to go out in teams at least one Saturday a month (or another agreed upon time) and continue this practice until Jesus comes!

Creating and expanding geographical parish boundaries

After the congregation's "geographical parish" is covered, begin again! Follow up on those who showed special interest. Stay in contact with the congregation's immediate neighborhood, expand the boundaries or start a satellite congregation in another area.

A non-threatening method: why it works

Unfortunately, many congregations believe that talking to their neighbors is a frightening and futile exercise. They imagine doors slammed in their face and many have concluded that door-to-door outreach will bear little fruit or new prospects for the church.

We have found that this needs/assets assessment method of going out two by two, near the church, **is not as frightening as some might think**. Most interviewers have returned saying, "That wasn't so bad! In fact, it was fun!" or "Interesting responses! I'd do it again." And there is good reason for this; the community residential interview does not seek to "proselyte," that is to impart religious information, but rather to seek residents' opinions about the critical needs of the community. The callers seek to express concern for people as human beings and find ways to serve. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit.

This kind of interview that seeks information and does not impart religious information (unless asked) is non-threatening to people. We have found an amazing receptiveness. In one community with considerable needs, many residents even gave us their names and telephone numbers, asking us to contact them if they could assist the church. This offer to help the congregation in developing "contemplated programs," based on the data gathered from the residential interviews supports the argument that, even in the most distressed communities, there are **NEEDS** to be addressed, but also **ASSETS** to be tapped.

A student of the Kennedy "Evangelism Explosion" method of evangelism accompanied me on one of these interviews. He described our community resident interviews as **controlled by the interviewee** and therefore less threatening and more relaxed. The door-to-door community resident interview is easier than imagined!

Conclusion

If your congregation is like one we recently contacted, you may want to start doing interviews right away, even before we arrive on-site for the, normally, four-day consultation and training. Great! Keep good notes, especially noting where no one was home so we can return at a later date.

May the Lord richly bless your preparation for these very fruitful and interesting community residential interviews.

Questions? Concerns?

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