

ENGAGING A SUBURBAN CHURCH WITH A LOCAL NEED

I live in Iowa where the church often adopts the well-known saying from Field of Dreams, “If you build it, they will come.” As a large church, our modus operandi is attractional – come and see and get involved in our programming. For many in our city that approach provides access for discipleship to take place, but not for all.

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That’s where Community Analysis comes in for us. This analysis has been a rousing call to look out for the left out in our city. It all started with a seemingly simple conversation with our deacons, “Is our way of coming alongside the poor helpful or harmful? Is it enabling or developing?” Our discipleship of those outside our walls had become more and more about a transaction, and less and less about transformation. Something had to change.

We began to change the questions we were asking, studying the people who were coming, offering more counseling instead of compassion funding. Our leaders became students of our city, driving around with God’s eyes to see the massive demographic shifts taking place. For example, nearly two hundred refugee families flood our city each year and inhabit ethnic pockets throughout our cityscape. Something clicked. We needed to go to them.

We realized that over ten countries are represented in a housing complex only fifteen minutes from our doorstep. Historically the darkest parts of our city are experiencing renewal as the nations are coming. Our approach, thanks to the help of Community Analysis tools, has been to create platforms where community can take place. Neighborhood BBQs for over four hundred people (it is Iowa), Backyard Bible Clubs, Soccer Camps for refugee kids, Tailgate parties – are all legitimate expressions of the Gospel as we seek to engage our city, get to know our neighbors, and take seriously God’s command to love our neighbors.

All is well and good in theory, until something radical has to take place. Like Jesus in the Incarnation, someone has to move in. I told the LORD in my seminary years that I NEVER would do ministry in a city – I was too afraid, needed the respite the suburbs offer, and was more equipped to do ministry amongst people like me. Trust me when I say I had every excuse.

Community Analysis, in the kindest sense of the term, has wrecked my world. While many are fleeing, God is calling my wife, kids, and I to the city - to aid our church in connecting with people who are disconnected from God. Apparently our Elders heard the same thing, affirming that it is time for us to take the Church into the City instead of waiting for the City to come into the Church.

As our church has studied our city, we have had to face a lot in ourselves. We have had to let the Gospel touch our innermost being as it roots out fear, prejudice, racism, and apathy. As we study the city, we recognize the massive implications of the Gospel and that God is calling us to far more than what we typically see the Church doing. The time is now. Being a church in the city is simply a matter of your location. Being a church FOR the city is about your vocation. Be a learner and become an insider – for the sake of our cities and God’s glory.