

# LOCAL CHURCH OUTREACH IN RACIALLY-CHANGING NEIGHBORHOODS



**Dolton, Lansing and Park Forest** are south suburban Chicago communities in transition ethnically and economically. They would be characterized as collar suburbs and all have something of an urban look, feel, and life experience. Like many other churches around the world, our Chicago southland churches are challenged to be reconcilers across both racial and socio-economic barriers.

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Therefore, we've needed to continually come together as a family to talk about our need to buck the tendency to move away. We've been challenged to hear and heed God's calling to stay as the light of Christ, and be intentional about developing firsthand relationships in our communities. Through Doc Fuder's teaching and teaming up with his Moody Graduate School Community Analysis class, we've been equipped to truly exegete our respective communities much the same way we would seek for treasure in the Scriptures.

In the case of First Baptist Church of Lansing, we were interested to discover the common felt need of sports activities for youth and differing perceptions of the safety of our community (whites generally perceived the community as less safe than Blacks and Hispanics viewed it). We were glad to hear that those who knew us viewed us positively, especially through our children's programming. We also found it quite impactful to meet several first generation Hispanics (whom we were not prepared to survey).

As helpful as these discoveries were, we were most profoundly affected by the reality that our surveyed facts and figures came from real people directed to us by the Holy Spirit. This was no longer a project. Our hearts were greatly expanded for our community because now, this was personal.

Likewise, in the case of New Community Church in both Dolton and Park Forest, the greatest benefit of the teams' work for us has been the listening opportunity that it has given to us. We have been able to hear personally from people living in our community but not necessarily attending our church.

While the demographic data collected through various sources has been very helpful and has suggested directions or ministries for us to design and develop, actually hearing from community members about their perception of the community and their perspective on community needs has been helpful to confirm or adjust ideas that we have had for ministry development. For example, in the first community assessment done we knew from the census data that there were a high percentage of single parent (mostly women) homes in Dolton. This was consistent with the felt needs expressed for day care, after school programming, academic help, and tutoring.



When the survey results came back for Park Forest, there were a couple of things that we had not anticipated. Along with the 'felt need' for youth programming, which was expected, were two areas that we did not expect: financial counseling and job training. But both speak to the reality in the community of a declining economic base and transition in the socio-economic stability for which Park Forest has been previously known. As a smaller congregation, there is probably little we can offer with regard to job training, though we could cull information about places that are hiring and make that information known. We could also offer financial management training through programs such as Financial Peace University, Crown Financial, or some similar biblically based training program that would both meet a need and give us contact with people in the community who would benefit from supportive relationships.

Youth programs, after school programming, and child care were also high felt needs in Park Forest; but because of the location of our church facility, those are not programs that we could as readily offer. These services would be much more feasible at our campus in Dolton, which is right across the street from a grade school, in the middle of a residential area, and on a main street through the village.

The report submitted to the church by the team gave us a helpful 'snapshot' of the village and, based on the information gathered, offered suggestions as to some means of effective outreach and ideas for need appropriate programming that we may not have otherwise considered.