

3 where?

The story of our local area

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1. Mapping your area

The aim of this exercise is to give members a visual representation of their area by producing a basic map of the geography of their community and the potentially significant areas for mission.

- Spread a large sheet of paper on a table.
- Begin by marking the boundaries of the parish area near the edges of the page.
- Mark the Church building.
- Add any major roads, rivers or other geographical features.
- Mark the homes of members living within the parish.
- Number the members living outside the parish on the edges from which they travel in.



- Mark significant community facilities i.e. shops, community halls/centres, schools, surgeries etc.
- Mark other significant gathering points i.e. parks, sports pitches, where young people hang out.
- Mark significant areas of housing e.g. new developments, estates, high rise flats.
- Add areas of involvement in mission beyond the parish and overseas to the edge of the map.
- Talk about how the mapping exercise has caused you to think again about your parish area, potential locations for connecting with the community, physical/geographical/social barriers, as well as giving you a picture of mission as a global enterprise.

2. Exegeting your area

The aim of this exercise is to begin to read your neighbourhood as a primary text for mission by either walking or driving around it.

- Individually, or in a group, set aside time to travel around you area.
- Bring a notebook to record your impressions.
- Walk or drive around the area reflecting on what you see.
- Stop and spend time in a cafe, park, at a bus stop.
- Try to repeat the exercise at various times of the day.
- Reflect on the following questions:
 1. What activity is going on at various times of the day?
 2. What do you notice about the housing? Is it old/new, single person apartments/family?
 3. Does your neighbourhood feel like a cared-for place?
 4. How many houses are up for sale or to let? What does this tell you about the transience of the population?
 5. Have new roads been built? Who has gained or lost by them?
 6. Which community buildings or premises offering community services can you identify?
 7. What public spaces are provided for children and teens? Are they being used?
 8. As you pass church buildings, including your own, what does their appearance communicate to you?
 9. Who make up the clientele in the various shopping outlets?
 10. Did your area seem quiet or busy? Who did you pass on the streets? What were their ages, gender, race?
 11. Is your neighbourhood well served by public transport?
 12. Are there places in your neighbourhood where you didn't feel safe?
 13. Are there places of life, beauty and hope?
 14. What evidence of despair, neglect and alienation did you see?

3. Googling your area

The aim of this exercise is to tap into the potential of electronic media to gain a wider understanding of the issues in your area, other groups who may be working there and the unseen perspectives that may be provided by bloggers.

- Do a Google search of the name of your parish area and record the links that result.

4. Picturing your area

The aim of this exercise is to obtain snapshots of various aspects of the life of your community to heighten awareness of local issues and potential settings and locations for mission.

- Go out and take a series of photographs of your area.
- Or, ask a variety of members to take photographs representing the 'worst' and 'best' of what they see locally. Depict these as examples of the effects of sin and glimpses of redemption.
- Or, engage the community in a local art competition.
- Display the photographs on a notice board or through Powerpoint.

5. Conversing your area

The aim of this exercise is to engage local people in conversations to gain an understanding of how those who live in the area feel about it. Individuals should be approached in a natural way, allowing the conversation to flow without structured note taking. Jot down the things that stood out later.

- Use the following questions conversationally with either local individuals or groups with whom your congregation may have contact.

1. Where are some of the local places you meet with others throughout the week e.g. coffee shop, pub, bus stop, market, gym?

2. When did you move into the area and what brought you here?

3. What are your best memories of this area? 4. What do you like and dislike about the area?

5. What have you seen change over the years? 6. Do you have family or friends living nearby?

7. What would you like to see happen in this community?

6. Reading your area

The aim of this exercise is to uncover the major issues affecting those who are living in your community through the content of your local newspaper.

- Trawl back through the front pages of your local newspaper for the past year to uncover the local issues highlighted by the press.
- Trawl back through the letters page of your local newspaper for the past year. What are people either concerned or excited about?

7. Interviewing others about your area

Every area has its local service providers and representatives. Often in the Church we view communities from a perspective that is like looking out through the stained glass windows of our buildings. Gaining the insights of others who work in our district can offer other angles of understanding and help us discover new possibilities for mission.

- Draw up a list of local service providers e.g. local shopkeepers, GP's, school principals, statutory and voluntary agencies working in the area etc.
- Draw up a list of local representatives at local and national government levels.
- Arrange visits to each of the above with a simple agenda of gaining their perspectives on local issues.
- Draw up a list of questions to cover at each interview based on the suggestions below.

• Ask to take a photograph of the interviewee. If they are willing, you can use the photograph to put a face to the name in presenting interview outcomes to the congregation.

GENERAL

1. What particular service do you provide to the area?
2. How would you describe the area?
3. Do you feel there is a sense of 'community' in the area? Why/why not?
4. What changes have you seen over the past 5/10 years?
5. What changes do you envisage in the next 5/10 years?
6. What role do you think the Church plays in the community?
7. What role do you think the Church might play in the community?
8. How might the Church partner with you/your organisation to serve the community?

PARTICULAR

- Shopkeepers – How are you seeing trading patterns change?
- GP's – What are the common health issues facing patients from our area?
- Schools – What issues relating to children and families in the area are you facing?
- Agencies – What issues do you spend most time dealing with in our area?
- Public representatives – What issues are local constituents approaching you concerning? Are you aware of any plans for redevelopment of the area?
- All – Who else would you suggest speaking to who might give us important perspectives on our area?

8. Drawing your area

A lot of the information gathering techniques above are very word based and relate better to adults. To engage children in a creative way in giving their perspective on the community, ask them to draw something about the place where they live. Take note of recurring themes arising from either positive or negative images.

9. Analyzing your findings

The object of uncovering the story of our local area is to better understand where God has placed the congregation for local mission. The following ten questions seek to provide a mechanism for pulling together a picture of your local context from the range of means of gathering information you have used.

1. What is life like in our area?
2. What is life like for children and families?
3. What is life like for working people?
4. What is life like for the elderly?
5. Who feels most at home in this area?
6. Who feels least at home in this area?
7. What are the big issues that stand out from the information you have gathered?
8. What might we celebrate about our community? 9. What areas of concern are not being addressed?

10. Who are the key people we would need to engage with before starting any new community project?

10. Ideas for presenting the information

GENERAL COMMENTS

1. Most people will not have been involved in gathering the information and will not share the enthusiasm of those who have. Be prepared to work hard and take time to communicate your discoveries.
2. Most people are not excited by huge amounts of statistics presented on either paper or Powerpoint. They will go with what you tell them so long as you can provide evidence for your conclusions if asked.
3. Some of what you have uncovered about your district will have surprised you and should be presented in order to surprise others.
4. Creative use of visual representations will capture the imagination best. Use maps, photographs, etc.

IDEAS FOR PRESENTING YOUR FINDINGS

1. Display, and speak to the mapping exercise.
2. Interview those who did the exegeting the area exercise.
3. Print and display, or show on powerpoint, some of the results of the googling exercise.
4. Stage a display of local photographic images. Ask members and/or the community what overall impression of the area emerges.
5. Relate key points of the conversations process through a display of 'speech bubbles' entitled 'They say'.
6. Display a montage of newspaper cuttings relating to local issues.
7. Create a colourful montage of the views of local service providers and representatives, explaining that these are the views of the community emerging from 'beyond the stained glass windows'.
8. Display the results of the children's art work in the church building or local school and take the opportunity to talk to parents and children about their views of the local area.
9. Collate all the information into a 'Day in the life of...' article that humanises your findings along the lines of the example below. Use the questions 'For Prayerful Reflection' to get people thinking about the congregation's response in mission to the local situation.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF BARTONVILLE

Based on the findings of the working group exploring 'The Story of our Local Area' which presented a picture of:-

- A population of new young professionals alongside a more established base of families and elderly people.
- An area with a lot of houses for let.
- An area with a small migrant population.
- An area of low educational achievement, loneliness among the elderly and a high proportion of single parents.
- An area of Loyalist paramilitary influence.
- An area with a high number of residents on anti-depressants.
- An area of high teenage pregnancy.

- An area in which fathers separated from their partners have nowhere to take their children during hours of access.
- An area which experiences some youth crime, drug and alcohol abuse.

The day begins slowly as those driving to work weave their way along Bartonville Avenue. Recently moved into the area on the back of their first job after university, they are on the road again. Tonight it'll be the same old routine – home late, off to the gym, a bite to eat, then bed. It's busy, but it can be a lonely enough existence. As they drive into the city centre again today, the area in which they live is just a blur to them - it might as well be the moon!

By 8:45am the Avenue is filling up with mums and grannies taking the children to school. One mum warns her children to avoid the dog's dirt - it's everywhere. 'Can nothing be done about this', she thinks, 'I wish there was some sort of community group that could get something done around here'. Many of the children don't really want to go to school. They are tired, having been up late playing on their X box last night. The teachers are great, but school is hard when you don't get much support from home and there's someone in the class with behavioural problems – even worse if you are that person and you can't understand why you are getting told off all the time.

By 10am activity switches to the Post Office. First in a long queue is a widow collecting her pension. It's her one outing of the week. Since her husband died she's been lost for company and feels her life is wasting away in the house as she watches an endless diet of television. Next there are two single mums with their restless toddlers. One is really distressed as they share how they struggle to cope. They never realised it was going to be this hard or that so much of their lives would be dominated by just raising their children. Behind them a man in his late fifties shifts agitatedly from foot to foot. Out of work for the last five years, the days are very long. As he waits to collect his benefit payment he is already waiting for the pub to open to go and have his first drink. He knows he is drinking far too much these days, but what else is there for him to do? Conversation is out of the question to the person who comes next. She has recently arrived from Poland, feels far away from home and the latest racist graffiti on the wall across the road doesn't make her think she is welcome here. She'll not have anyone to speak to until her husband comes home from work that night.

Over in the shops, as lunchtime approaches, the man buying his paper is known to many of the locals. He is a former paramilitary leader about to read about the latest demand for Loyalists to decommission their weapons. He's not against that idea at all but wishes someone out there would actually do something to provide a concrete alternative. He needs help to move those under his charge out of their illegal and anti-social activities into finding a new identity that would help them play a constructive role in their community. The other shops are quiet – too quiet, their very future threatened by the fleet of taxis constantly taking the local people up to the brand new Tesco superstore to stock up for the week. Doesn't anybody realise that the demise of their shops will rip what little heart is left out of the community? Only the chemist sees steady trade, the result of so many local people on medication for long term illness and depression.

By mid afternoon the Avenue sees the pupils of the local secondary schools return home. In the shadow of the towering cranes of the old shipyards things have certainly changed in Bartonville. No longer can your dad guarantee a job in the local shipyard when you leave school, now it's all about qualifications. Some pupils rise to it, but most still don't see the point. Already accepting that they are destined for failure, for them the future holds very little hope. Headphones in ears, one girl's thoughts turn to last night when she slept with her boyfriend again. She wonders how many times she can do that without getting pregnant? Still, she reckons, that might not be the worst thing that's ever happened – at least it would get her out of home, where things are pretty grim at the moment, into her own place.

By 5:30pm the buses begin to spill their load of work weary passengers out on to the footpath. As they trek back home they wonder what it's all about. Previously priced out of the property market, now the banks' refusal to lend means they can't afford to buy their own home and their landlords are greedily putting the rent up all the time. In no hurry, last off the bus, is a young father. Separated from his partner it's his turn to have his son again tonight but what is he going to do –

just take him to walk around the shopping centre and then for supper in McDonald's again? He so wants their relationship to be better than that but he is at a loss to know what he's meant to do.

Early evening sees the teenagers out on the streets again. There's nothing to do around here, so it's into the off license for a carry out and down to the park to hang out with their mates. Sometimes there are drugs for sale too. They don't mean to cause any trouble but the PSNI are always on their case wanting to move them on. 'Move them on' - where too exactly?

All of this happens within a stone's throw of a big, aging, red brick building, surrounded by locked gates most of the time. The church has been there for a hundred years and still does some really good things, but what they are doing seems to connect less and less with local people. Very few even know what goes on there and most of the work takes place round the back, hidden away behind a high hedge. In fact the only time there is any semblance of life at the front is on Sunday morning – when everybody else is still in bed!

This cycle repeats itself, again and again, without apparent hope of change or improvement for all the government reports and church Bible studies about how 'Jesus is the answer'. This is home for many of our neighbours. This is life on the streets in Bartonville. Welcome to our mission field!

FOR PRAYERFUL REFLECTION

- What have you learned about life in our community as it is today that you had not thought about before?
- Being honest, how does what you have read make you feel – sad, angry, compassionate, disparaging of others, glad you don't have to live like that or just coldly disinterested?
- Much of what you have read may be a world away from a day in your life, so what would make you care about the lives of those described?
- Pray for people in this district who grapple with the issues described.
- Prayerfully reflect on the following verses from James chapter 2, verses 14-17:-

“What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food? If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed’, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

- What sorts of things do you think we might do as a church to serve this community in Jesus' name?
- In what sort of things might you be able to be involved to enable our congregation to help some of these people?