



Exegeting Your Neighborhood¹

We feel small and weak, but we are gathered together to signify the power of God who transforms death into life. That is our hope, that God is doing the impossible: changing death to life inside of each of us, and that perhaps, through our community, each one of us can be agents in the world of this transformation of brokenness into wholeness, and of death to life.

—Jean Vanier², in *From Brokenness to Community*

Introduction

Exegesis is something we normally think about doing with a passage of the Bible. The dictionary defines exegesis as critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially of Scripture. We examine Scripture to properly interpret it. We take the passage and we look at it in the context of the whole Bible. We look at the language used, explore the cultural context and content, examine the historical perspective, we look for meaning, and then try to put it all together to discern what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us.

In a like manner, we can exegete a city or a neighborhood. Primarily through the process of observation, we can take a critical look at our neighborhood or city, explore the cultural context and content, look to see what we might learn of its history, discover its meaning or purpose, and then seek to discern what the Spirit of God might be saying to us about the very place He has called us to. Simon Carey Holt says that our “task is to discern the truth of God’s presence where you live. Quite simply, it’s about reading your neighborhood as one of the primary texts of daily life—one through which God speaks.”³ In and through this exercise we want to use all of our senses to exegete our ministry areas, for we believe God is present.

Exercise

Set aside at least one hour to complete this community listening exercise. Take the following questions and blank paper with you in order to record your findings.

Exegesis of a neighborhood can only be done on foot, slowly and carefully. Don’t rush this exercise. You will want to designate the boundaries of your city, community or neighborhood. As you walk, listen to the sounds you hear. What smells do you smell? The following questions will possibly help you look deeper than you have before. As you begin, pause to pray and ask God to be present to you as you exegete your neighborhood.

1. As you stand outside your home, church or office, what do you see? What do you hear or sense? What activity do you notice?

¹ By Nancy Donat, One Collective Senior Area Director for the United States and Catalyst in Fresno

² Jean Vanier is in some ways a modern-day Jonah, deeply flawed, and yet used mightily by God.

³ Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighborhood*, (Acorn Press, 2007).



2. What does the architecture of the area tell you? Its history? Is the area cared for? Busy or quiet? Crowded or deserted? Is there graffiti? Are there sidewalks? Is the area sensitive to various people with disabilities? How easily could they get around?

3. Are the buildings/homes/apartments occupied or empty? How many empty or boarded buildings do you see? Is there much renovation or rebuilding going on?

4. Are there places where people gather? Common areas people share? A park? Do these places feel safe and inviting? Who is there? If you feel safe to do so, sit in one of these public places and just observe all that is going on. Allow your eyes to drift towards one person and without approaching them, pray for them and whatever needs you sense they may have or hopes you may have for them. Allow God to guide your prayers for them.

5. What kind of commercial buildings are there? Are there billboards? What do they advertise? Who is their main target? What languages are present? What types of restaurants?

6. Are there churches present or religious buildings? What does their design or appearance communicate?

7. How many people are out? What are their ethnicities? Ages? Genders? What do you notice in the people around you?

8. Where are the places of life and hope? Where do you see beauty? Joy?

9. Where do you see signs that the Kingdom of God is present?