

How to Exegete Your Community

Often when I ask another pastor who his church is trying to reach, he gives me a very spiritual answer—lost people. It sounds good, but it usually means the pastor has a very fuzzy view of his own community.

When I was in seminary, I was taught I had to understand the culture of the New Testament before I could understand the message of the New Testament. If I understood the culture that the New Testament was set against, I could extract the timeless truth from the text. Every biblical preacher does that when he preaches a sermon.

But I was never taught to exegete the community where I serve. That's what targeting is. I should know the geography, customs, culture and religious background of my community as much as I do about the biblical times.

You can't faithfully communicate God's Word until you exegete your text and your community.

So what about your community should you know? I'd start with these four areas.

- **Its geography.** Simply define where the people you want to reach live. Get a map of your city or area and mark where your church is located on that map. Estimate a 15 to 20 minute drive (reasonable driving distance may be a bit different in your community) in each direction from your church and mark those as borders of your primary ministry area. This is your "evangelistic fishing pond." You may have people drive a couple of hours to get to your church. But most of the people who'll attend your church will live nearby. By the way, your "fishing pond" will likely expand as your church grows.
- **Its demography.** You need to know who lives in the area you're targeting. Not all demographics will be helpful. I'd focus on a breakdown of these stats: age, marital status, income and occupation. Other stats are interesting but won't make a difference in what you do in your church. Don't overdue demographic research.
- **Its culture.** No missionary in foreign lands would try to evangelize without understanding the culture. You shouldn't either. You can't learn it from studying census data either. Looking for the values, interests, hurts and fears of people means you have to talk to people in your community!
- **Its spirituality.** Try to determine what the people in your community understand about the Gospel. Other pastors are often the best source for this. When I started Saddleback, I wrote a letter to all of the evangelical pastors in the Saddleback Valley and asked them some basic information about the spiritual background of the community. I got some great insights from that!

Read more from Rick [here](#).

Want to know how to discover information about your community? [Contact an Auxano Navigator for details.](#)