

You Can't Love a City if You Don't Know a City, Part 5

I've been slowly working through this series about how to understand our cities so we can better reach them with the gospel.

In today's post, which I co-wrote with [Philip Nation](#), we want to focus in on how to get a study started and what might be the result from one in your own city.

The groups that meet together for the sake of the city face a formidable challenge. How does a group move from simply understanding the state of their city to acting on what they know? For the church, simply understanding the make-up of a city is helpful, but never enough. Our task is to turn the city upside down because we've proclaimed that there is a King whose name is Jesus (see Acts 17:1-7).

But, since beginning this series, many have asked how to start such a process and what they can expect from it. Let us give a few answers to those questions.

Where to start?

We find that in many cities the group is already there. It has normally taken on the form of the prayer gatherings of pastors and other believers. It is often a transdenominational group that is active in praying and occasionally mobilizing for certain evangelistic efforts such as a large crusade. Such groups can make the decision that combining their current efforts (of prayer and evangelistic efforts) with an in-depth knowledge of the city can mobilize churches in greater ways. So, if you are a part of such a group, the foundation is already being laid for a greater impact on your city.

But, if you're reading this and are unaware of any such group in the city, don't let that dissuade you. It is certainly possible that a few church leaders could simply decide that reaching deeper into their city is a necessary step and a greater understanding is needed.

What else is there to know?

Sometimes I encounter people who are certain that they have a full grasp on the nature of their city. From a demographic standpoint, that is possible. After all, there is a certain amount of information you can glean from a quick Google search. But, knowing the ethnic diversity (or lack thereof), spread of age ranges, and the like can only tell you so much.

In our City Studies, one of our major goals is to identify the affinity groups in each city. The affinity groups that you readily think about can be found through surface level demographic surveys (generational groups, ethnicities, education levels, etc.). But there are unofficial "tribes" that exist in a city that can only be discovered through a robust research process. In one city we studied, with approximately 2 million residents, we found 140 tribes that included everything from pockets of ethnic families to swimmers to woodworkers. By doing a survey of the residents of the city, we were able to not only identify these affinity groups but the percentage of believers

among them. In fact, in this particular city, swimmers were the tribe with the least percentage of believers among them. A demographic study could never show give you that kind of information. But what it means is... well, read on.

Actionable information

So what do you do when you discover that the tribe in your city with the greatest percentage of lost people is swimmers? The issue that gives me the greatest hope is that now the church will begin to see the bridges they have into the community where the lost reside.

If I'm a pastor in that town, I start asking who in my church swims regularly. As a group of churches seeking to reach the city, we inform our intercessors to begin praying regularly at the times when people are most likely coming and going from swimming for believers to have evangelistic conversations with their friends. A group of churches might even join together to begin sponsoring the swim meets and finding other ways to serve that tribe.

But that is just one example. Other insights can be gleaned from these studies as to the ethnic make-up of a region in the city, educational level of sections of the city, and even the societal needs that are present. Each affinity group that is discovered is a potential place where the gospel can be introduced and compassion can be shown. Whereas demographics are often just a smattering of factoids in a presentation, our hope is to give a group of churches actionable information that will lead to gospel engagement.

Mobilizing churches

The information gleaned about your city should lead to doing something about it. But too often, a bit of knowledge hits the church and rather than feeling ready, they can feel overwhelmed. Recently, the well-known actress and activist Ashley Judd [spoke about the tragedy of child sex trafficking in Atlanta, Georgia](#). It is a heart-wrenching presentation worth your time. And, for a typical church in America that averages 80-100 in attendance, it may seem like an overwhelming issue to tackle.

But imagine the work that ten or twenty or fifty churches could accomplish if they joined arms for the sake of the gospel; proclaiming the good news to every man, woman, and child; saving spiritual and physical lives; and caring for the hurting in their city. Congregations working together for the good of the city are a powerful force in the hands of Christ.

I can see believers emboldened by the joint work with brothers and sisters in Christ to assault the darkness in their city and shine the light of Christ in places where He has not been known. We're not just talking about pastors gathering once a month to pray for one another - though that is a very good work. Now believers across a city are getting to know one another, provoking one another to love and good deeds, presenting Christ to new tribes in the city, and caring for the hurting in His name.

The actionable knowledge that comes from researching a city can lead churches to leverage their resources into the areas where Christ has not been made known. It will help to understand

where new churches should be planted and established churches need to be revitalized. It is a work that will help you to know more and, I hope, act more.

Read other posts in this series here: [Part 1](#); [Part 2](#); [Part 3](#); [Part 4](#); [Part 6](#).

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