



WHERE IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Churches with a missional mindset are eager to reach out to those in their communities. In the process, they are likely to grapple with the question asked of Jesus, which prompted the parable of the Good Samaritan: “Who is my neighbor?” Church folk often think demographically at this point, and seek to describe how the neighbors look. (The Research Office heartily endorses this and provides resources to assist with this worthy task.) In jumping to this place, however, they often overlook a related question that can greatly impact the determination of who composes their neighbors: “How do I define my community?” Put another way: “What boundaries constitute the community we are called to primarily serve?” Or, in terms similar to the question posed to Jesus: “Where is my neighbor?”

John Wesley noted that the world was his parish. This is true in some sense of all churches living out the tradition he started. Even so, it is important that churches come to grips with their primary local ministry area. Amazingly few churches seem to have given this much thought. The Research Office fields requests for demographics by asking about defining the geography of interest to the church, and finds most callers need to reflect about it. Some quickly assume a zip code or two, or throw out a distance from the church to draw a concentric circle around it. These approaches might be valid in some cases, but should involve serious thought rather than an impulsive guess.

Several factors need to be considered when identifying what geography covers the community served by a church. The overriding issue is God’s calling on the church. This is something which is spiritually discerned and comes to churches in a variety of ways. This newsletter will not attempt to

suggest how this may come about other than encouraging concerted prayer toward that end. This discernment can often be made in conjunction with practical considerations. For example, a church should identify the important factors that have historically informed the sense of community, and whether or not they are still valid. Have times changed? Has the neighborhood changed? Has the congregation changed? Was there once a clearly defined sense of who they served? Is it still valid?

A key component in community assessment relates to the usually obvious level of urbanity. Community for an isolated rural church is very different than that for a densely populated urban neighborhood. The rural church may define community as the handful of people who all look alike and live within 10 miles. The urban church may have more folks within two blocks than the rural church has for miles, and that cluster may be highly diverse. And if not, then one does not have to go far to find diversity of all kinds in a typical highly urbanized area. Between these two ends of the spectrum we find suburbia, exurbia, and small-to-mid-size towns and cities, each with their own distinctions about what community means.

The size of the church also impacts who it serves. A megachurch is a regional church, by definition, with thousands of congregants driving past many other churches to get there. A small-to-midsize church tends to be much more of a neighborhood church, though our mobile society is much less concerned about nearness than our ancestors were. In some parts of the US, there are United Methodist churches every six or seven miles or so, harking back to the horse and buggy days when they were established. Proximity to other churches can be an issue in determining community.

Certainly there are often many churches of other religious affiliations within the boundaries of most church communities. Sometimes they are other United Methodist churches. Each church will need to consider whether nearby churches impact its definition of community or not. Obviously, if neighboring churches are being totally ineffective in reaching those around them, there should be less concern about nearby ministry impact.

A common tendency of church folk, when asked to define the boundaries of their community, is to look at where their current people live. This can be helpful and then again, not so helpful. It is certainly a good place to start. One common instance where this is not helpful is the case of an aging urban church, whose members have moved out of the neighborhood as they or the community changed, and now drive back from various outlying areas. The church has no ministry in those areas and is not likely to. Even in cases where some people drive much farther than others for the right reasons, it may be unrealistic for church outreach to extend there, given the limitations of smaller churches. It is really about where the church can realistically minister to the whole community, not just to a few outlying members. Ministry means doing something that truly impacts the lives of folk beyond the flock in a focused way.

Churches will often overstate their ministry boundaries when they have not given the issue genuine consideration. They have never really gotten out a map and drawn out boundaries. When this is done, it turns out that miles are really bigger than imagined. Also, natural boundaries are often factors. These include rivers, railroad tracks, freeways, and the like. In urban areas, a few blocks can mark a huge transition in income, race, ethnicity, school districts, and other urban realities, which can serve to form boundaries every bit as real as a river.

Churches thinking in terms of a concentric circle of some distance around the church should consider

what that circle intersects. Portions of the circle may be outside natural boundaries and therefore include people who are not realistically part of the ministry area. Some churches with a particular mission focus are regional by nature, however, even if they are not large. These include churches targeted to reach a particular population group and not a particular geography. These could include racial/ethnic churches, for example.

Curiously, paragraph 341:4 of *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* refers to the bounds of a pastoral charge, though in a context different from the discussion here. It would be interesting to learn what the writers of this paragraph considered obvious enough not to define. It was likely written a century ago when assumptions were very different than now and a parish concept prevailed. In today's world, being missional demands that we know where we are going when we move ministry outside the four walls of the church.

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