



Stats
have
Faces

Best efforts will
not substitute for
knowledge.

W. Edwards Deming

Handout 1

Introductory reading

Discerning what God is up to in our neighbourhoods is not so much about skills or knowledge as about learning to hear God together and discerning how we might join with what the Spirit is already doing in our community.

Welcome to the *Stats have Faces* program which has been produced to help your congregation build a better understanding of your community.

Sometimes we don't know as much about our own communities as we think we do. Sometimes what we once knew is no longer the case.

All agencies and service and care providers are encouraged to carry out research in relation to their local community. Churches should be no different. While communities might share similarities such as schools, shops and sporting facilities, each one is unique with its own character and potential.

The *Basis of Union* says that the Uniting Church “stands in relation to contemporary societies in ways which will help it to understand its own nature and mission”. The more we understand our communities, those that live in them and their needs, the better we can serve God in being effective in mission.

The Queensland Synod's Vision 2020 calls for the church to be a “sustainable mission oriented organisation”. The *Stats have Faces* process provides tools and activities to help your congregation to engage more effectively in mission in your neighbourhood.

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Statistics are valuable tools in this process but it is important to remember that behind every number there is a story about real people living with frustrations, hopes and dreams. Statistical information is never a substitute for going out and meeting the people who actually live and work in your community. Nor can statistics substitute for prayer and reflection on God's calling for your congregation.

Society has changed a great deal. People are more mobile than ever before and we live in an age of incredible opportunities for communication and connection. This is a time when it should be possible to feel increasingly that we belong to a community. This is far from the truth for the many people in our neighbourhood who struggle with isolation and despair.

The issues are different in remote, regional or urban areas, but society everywhere is striving to retain or develop a sense of community. As churches and individuals we are in a unique position to help build stronger communities.

In our traditional church communities we sometimes make the assumption that God's call is an elite and mysterious experience, reserved for activities which occur within the four walls of the church building, or for times of private and deliberate withdrawal, prayer and reflection.

The role of church is not to rescue people from the world, but to be the church embedded in the world, helping to transform it. Historically, the church was local, taking place in neighbourhoods and in people's homes.

It has been said that "It is not the church of God that has a mission, but the God of mission who has a church". Mission is an attribute of God; the church is just one instrument of God's mission. God is at work in places that the church is not, and it is the Spirit working within us that enables us to see where and how God is working in the world beyond the walls of the church.

Jesus was present, ministering to his neighbourhood. He acted inclusively, treating every encounter differently and with its own dignity. For him every conversation was unique and every relationship was life-giving and life-demanding.

Much of Jesus' own mission was carried out in his local community, in people's homes, in marketplaces and on the street. He met people in the midst of the most ordinary tasks: drawing water from the well, in their workplaces, over meals and at a family wedding.

How well do we actually know our neighbourhoods and our neighbours? Many people do not know the names or anything about the people who live across the road or around the corner from them. Do we linger long enough to see the small details where we perceive the hand of God—the intricate patterns formed within the spider web on the ugly broken fence, the way the raindrops drip from the ends of the leaves and form puddles on the ground?

We need to constantly attune ourselves to recognise God's presence in the ordinariness of our neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood is holy ground and it is sacred. Encounter it with reverence and view it as holy.



The Uniting Church in Australia
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