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Faces

Handout 5

Exploring your neighbourhood: an exegetical walk

All the statistics
in the world can't
measure the
warmth of a smile.

Chris Hart

The word exegesis literally means a critical interpretation and is commonly applied to the study of literature. As readers of the Bible, we exegete the text with a view to discerning its truth for our lives. In this exercise you are invited to undertake an exegesis—a critical interpretation—of your neighbourhood.

Through careful, sensitive and critical observation, your task is to discern the truth of God's presence where you live. Quite simply, it's about reading your neighbourhood as one of the primary texts of daily life—one through which God speaks.

To do this properly, you need to set aside two hours of uninterrupted time. Before you head out, consider your destination. What constitutes your neighbourhood? You may choose to walk around the area where you live, through your town centre or near the church.

Once you have a rough idea of what area to include, grab a notebook and pen and head out.

Be sure to include time to stop and have a drink, to sit in a park or at a bus stop, and to linger outside public buildings or places of interest. Don't just look at your surroundings, but take note of your feelings and reactions.

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Here's a list of questions to consider:

1. Think about the built facilities. How old are the houses or apartments in this area? How much renovation or rebuilding is going on? What do you notice about the front gardens? Does your neighbourhood feel like a cared-for place? Do you see any community or civic buildings? What are their purposes? Do they look welcoming and busy, or are they deserted? Do you see any churches or religious buildings? What does their design or appearance communicate? What kinds of commercial buildings are there? If your neighbourhood includes a shopping area, is there provision for people to sit and interact?
2. Think about the people. Excluding the business areas, how many people did you pass on foot? What age, race, and gender are they? Do people look, dress and act the same way as you? Walk around a supermarket or local store and identify who makes up the clientele. How pedestrian-friendly is the neighbourhood? How would you encounter your neighbourhood if you were elderly, disabled, a young child or parent with children, or if you didn't have a motor vehicle?
3. Think about the social assets. What public spaces are provided for children, teenagers or adults? Are they being used, and how? If there a local park, what do you notice about it? Does it feel like an inviting place? Who is there and how is it used? Is there public transport, and who uses it? Stop—sit if you can—in a tree-lined street or quiet spot and also at a busy intersection. What are the smells and sounds of the neighbourhood? Are there things that you sense are missing?
4. Think about the strengths and weaknesses. Is there a freeway, major highway or railway close by? If so, try and imagine the area before it existed. Who has gained and lost by its presence? Are there any geographical or constructed features that divide your neighbourhood? Are there places that you wouldn't go or where you don't want to stop?
5. Ponder the ways in which you sense God's presence. What sense of connection do you feel to your neighbourhood as you walk through it? Where are the places of life, hope, beauty or community? What evidence of struggle, despair, neglect and alienation do you see? How do you feel about your neighbourhood?

Review

You may wish to return to the maps you drew in an earlier section and consider how you might have drawn these differently.

Adapted from an exercise in *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood* by Simon Carey Holt. Permission given.



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