

Our Church, Our Neighbors, Our Community: Creating a peaceful, Loving and Justice-Seeking Congregation

Excerpted from an article by Rev. Dr. Sandra E. Graham

Our churches and the neighborhoods surrounding them, share a joint history. While that history has perhaps faded with the changes in our culture -- family structure, work-life issues, technological advances, economic, class and racial differences, and political divides -- there is still something to be said about the relationships between our churches and their neighborhoods. Where it used to be that churches could just keep their doors open and people would flock in, we now find ourselves isolated from the neighbors around us and seen as only a place where invited people (and often older people) go to worship. This causes the once strong reciprocal relationship between church and neighborhood to break down. So how do we find better ways to enter into relationship with the neighbors around us? And what might we do as church members and church leaders to bridge the gaps that have been many years in the making?

A Neighborhood Inventory

One way to begin is to look beyond our church doors and the ways we've always done things, and to conduct a *neighborhood inventory*. This can be done as a group, or individuals can take parts of the inventory and then come together as a group to "map out" what is in the neighborhood, what some of the key issues might be, and what resources exist in the surrounding area. Some questions to address may include:

- Who lives in the neighborhood? Are there updated census records that we could look at? Who do we see when we are walking down the street or driving through the area?
- What is the housing in the neighborhood like? Is it well maintained? Are there places that could use a little help or updating? Are there new housing units? Are there houses or apartments or condos? Do people tend to rent or own their housing?
- What are some of the key resources in the neighborhood? Are there community gardens? Are there food pantries? Homeless shelters? Clothing banks? Refuge for survivors of domestic violence? Head Start or other preschool options?
- What are the schools like? Have schools closed? Which ones? Have schools merged? Are there separate elementary, middle and high schools? Is there a school board? Who is on it? How many families are home schooling their children? What are the higher education opportunities in the area? Tech schools? Colleges?
- What is the average income of the people living in the area?
- How are people employed? What employment opportunities are around?
- What is the condition of roads and streets?
- What other churches are in the area? Can you see any potential for engaging in work with any of those churches?
- Who are the elected representatives or officials in the area?

Once an inventory has been completed, a next step might be to establish neighborhood priorities as part of church life. The neighborhood is just one of the places where church members can observe the greater community around them. Extending mission to create a peaceful, loving and justice-seeking congregation will serve to give light and life to its members for a long time. This, combined with reflection on how this work enlivens the heart and soul of ministry can address both long-standing church and community needs.

Questions to Consider:

1. As you consider your own church -- its history, its present state, its sense of mission -- what do you see as the biggest opportunities for engagement?
2. How would you describe the area surrounding your church? Rural? City? Suburban? What challenges do you think your area faces?
3. What are the obstacles that you see in engaging in a neighborhood inventory? How might you overcome them?

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