

COMMUNITY RESEARCH GUIDE

for church leaders



COMMUNITY RESEARCH GUIDE

for church leaders



Outreach Canada Ministries
www.outreach.ca



The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada
Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism
www.evangelicalfellowship.ca

Shared copyright 2008 between:

Faith Today Publishing
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada
MIP Box 3745, Markham, ON, L3R 0Y4
www.evangelicalfellowship.ca

and

Outreach Canada Ministries
2-7201 72nd St., Delta, BC, V4G 1M5
www.outreach.ca

All rights reserved. The Community Research Guide may be reproduced for yourself or your church, but we request that you do not make copies for others.

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Watson, James W., 1972-
Community research guide for church leaders / James W. Watson

Includes bibliographical references.
Also available in print and CD-ROM formats.

ISBN 987-0-9730621-6-8 (Online Resource)

1. Communities – Religious aspects -- Christianity. 2. Church work. I. Title.

BV625.W38 2008b 253 C2008-905787-2

: Acknowledgements

: Project manager	Rick Hiemstra
: Project advisors	Dr. Joyce Bellous Dr. Glenn Smith
: Writer	James W. Watson
: Copy editor	Alan Yoshioka
: Graphic design	Fiveight Design Inc.
: Reviewers	Laura Gerber Liz Hunt Lorne Hunter Pastor Kerry Kronberg Pastor Randy McCooeye Dr. Robert Shaughnessy Luis Teixeira

: Also

Many Bible teachers, social theorists, social scientists, activists, church planters, and church leaders have influenced the development of this guide. This is a creative construction from many ideas, and since it is designed for “lay” researchers it does not provide academic citations. Any direct quotations or concepts that can be traced to a single source have been referenced in order to provide credit and avoid plagiarism. An online resource web page provides a more extensive reference list of resources that might be helpful for further reading (www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch).



The bride and groom were near fainting with excitement and surging emotions as the pastor started in on his sermon on love. Looking right at the couple, the pastor boldly told them that they didn't know what love is yet. He went on to say that after they had worked through bills they couldn't pay, spent sleepless nights with sick children, dealt with major illness, negotiated the division of household chores, experienced job loss, looked after ailing parents, and survived the teen years, then they would know each other. Only then could they truly know what they meant when they professed their love for each other.

We cannot deeply love people we do not know. This is true in marriage, and it is true in our communities. Jesus told us to love our neighbour. For many of us life is so busy that at the end of our commute, and shuttling our kids to soccer practice and music lessons, there is precious little time left for our neighbours. We can literally live within 20 metres of our neighbours for years and know next to nothing about them. Love can be deepened by knowledge. Community research can provide a kind of preliminary knowledge of your neighbours; it can be the first steps on the road to loving them as Jesus called us to. We hope that your research will be a catalyst for forming relationships between your church and your community so that your presence there is like Jesus' (John 20:21).

This *Community Research Guide* is designed to help your church make some of those first steps to know your neighbours. In it you will find practical suggestions for how to learn about people next door who may seem so far away. It will help you put together a research team, plan your research, conduct it, and present your findings to your congregation.

James Watson of Outreach Canada, who has many years experience helping church planters and pastors understand their communities, has produced an excellent guide that can be tailored to the giftings of your people and uniqueness of your community.

This project has benefited from the thoughtful advice of many people. We would like to thank Dr. Glenn Smith of Christian Direction and Dr. Joyce Bellous of McMaster Divinity College for their advice on this project, which enriched the end result. We would also like to thank the many reviewers who gave their time and suggestions on how this project could become more practical and accessible.

It has been my pleasure to work with James and others on this project. We trust that you will find joy in the people you discover.

Rick Hiemstra,
Centre for Research on Canadian Evangelicalism,
The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.
May 23, 2008

iii	Acknowledgements
iv	Preface
v	Index
1	What is a community research guide?
2	Why do community research?
3	How can community research be done by the church?
4	Community research guide at a glance
5	What does photography have to do with research?
6	Imagining (Section 3)
11	Processing (Section 2)
20	Techniques (Section 1)
28	Putting it all together
29	Appendix
31	Endnotes

What is a Community Research Guide?

This is a guide to community research options – it provides various activities you can do so as to better understand your community. It also provides a framework for constructing your own research plan. There are so many different rural areas, neighbourhoods and “people groups” (networks of people with a distinct cultural identity) within Canada that we need different options available to us for understanding different communities.

What is “community”?

This guide defines community as the “neighbours” that the church can be relating to on a regular basis. The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) provides a helpful definition of neighbour as the person with whom we can come into contact and relate to in a meaningful way, regardless of differences in culture, appearance or social status. Different churches will find it helpful to define their community in different ways. Some churches may be able to identify a geographic region on a map as being their urban neighbourhood, town or rural region. Other churches may have to identify their community as networks of relationships or “people groups,” perhaps with certain languages or cultural identities as the primary features of these relational networks. In general, this community research guide focuses on the community outside the church; however, comparisons and connections with the community that is the church should also be recognized.

What is “research”?

There are many different forms of research. This guide defines community research as specific information gathering, interpretation and communication activities that can lead to more meaningful ministry in the community. This guide provides activities that can be accomplished by people who do not have professional research training, even though much “social science” research is done by professional researchers who have devoted their lives to refining their research abilities. Some of the ideas, while inspired by technical journal articles or textbooks, have been combined and redeveloped into forms that are easier to adapt for research teams of people who aren’t social scientists. Churches that engage in research can better understand their community and can renew or reevaluate their ministry in the community.

Biblical reflections on research

Here are a few Bible stories that can stir reflection on the roles research can serve in making ministry more meaningful:

- Nehemiah’s examination of the broken walls before planning action (Nehemiah 2:12-16).
- Jesus observed what people were doing (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7) and noted symbols in the culture (Matthew 22:15-22) and used these observations in his teaching.
- Is it possible that while Paul was first in Philippi, he was getting to know the city (Acts 16:12) so that he would know where to find the place of prayer (16:13)?
- Note that Paul assessed the religious nature of Athens after observing the idols (Acts 17:16, 22-23).

Why do community research?

Churches should seek to better understand their community for one primary reason, namely, because of Jesus' command: Love your neighbour.¹ We seek to understand the community that surrounds us so we can:

- know how to relate to our neighbours more effectively,
- recognize where God is already at work around us, and
- partner with the Holy Spirit in ministering within our community.

Community research should be a process of spiritual discernment as well as an opportunity to learn how to minister in the community. There are four primary ways in which community research can benefit the ministry of your church: information, motivation, activation and transformation.

Information

Gathering information can be a helpful way to clearly identify what you actually know about your community. By carefully considering how you will get new information, and from whom you will get it, you can learn new things about your community.

Motivation

The information that is gathered can be used to encourage people to get involved in ministry. The community research will help people to see real needs or opportunities for ministry.

Activation

Motivated people need opportunities to take action. The community research should result in the identification of potential ministry activities that are meaningful and constructive.

Transformation

Communities can be transformed through the ministry of churches that understand their community and are guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. People within the church can be transformed personally if they are provided with new opportunities to recognize how their God-given gifts and abilities can make a difference among their neighbours. Often churches that conduct some form of community research find that the people directly involved in learning more about their neighbours become more compassionate towards others and more passionate about the mission of the church.

How can community research be done by the church?

Community research leading to significant new ministry opportunities is a process. The process should include having people of the church learn about their community so that they can be transformed by their learning. The process should also be carefully developed so it is appropriate to the church and the community. Prayer and reflection on the Bible should shape the motivations of the people involved and encourage attention to God's direction during the process. The process should be guided by spiritual discernment. Different Christian traditions have different forms of prayer and spiritual discernment, so this guide will only point to certain passages in the Bible and forms of prayer that have been generally helpful to people who have been involved in community research.

Thinking backward in order to move forward

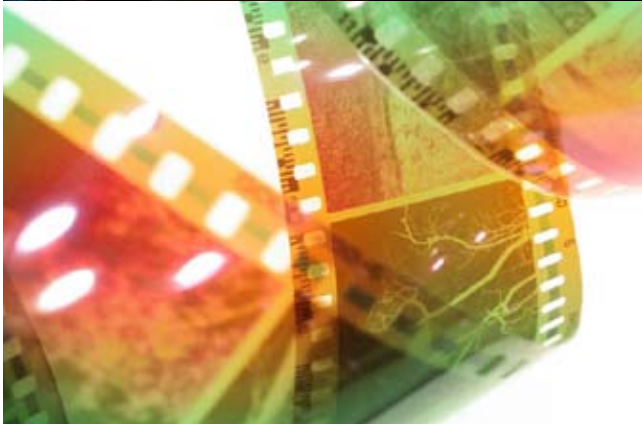
This guide is intentionally organized backwards (from Section 3 to Section 1) in order to encourage you to begin organizing your community research process by first thinking about the “big picture” of who should be the focus of the research and who will do the research (Section 3). That will help you determine what kinds of information you will want to have available to reflect on and interpret (Section 2). After you decide which kinds of information you need, you can select specific information-gathering techniques (research methods) that are most appropriate for your community (Section 1). Then you can organize your process, gather a team and begin to pray and learn together.

Why do it this way?

There are a number of community research manuals available; some can be found in church planting or church development books, some are small published booklets or textbooks, and some are self-published manuals (often in denominational offices). Generally they provide a specific process for a specific purpose. This guide has been organized in a “build your own” format because while many good tools are available for doing community research, Canada is a very diverse country with rural and urban differences, many different cultural groups and languages. This approach allows the church to decide what elements in the process will be most helpful with respect to its particular community. You can make the process fit your community by constructing it yourself.

Do NOT try to do everything!

Instead choose forms of analysis (Section 2) and research techniques (Section 1) that will work best for your community and research team. Create a reasonable plan that will best use the resources and time that you have available.



Imagining the End Result and the Process

Who? What? Where? How?

Section 3

Processing

Select analysis process(es) for your project

Section 2

Techniques

Select research technique(s) for your project

Section 1

Putting It All Together

Organize the project

Appendix

What does Photography have to do with Research?

Photography compares well with research because:

- both can be carefully preplanned but usually have spontaneous moments;
- both can be fun and provide opportunities for creativity and learning;
- both are artistic but involve some technical expertise;
- both are enjoyed by amateurs but can benefit from experts; and
- both can lead to a display or exhibition that can change someone's perspective on the world around them.

Images from photography provide some of the ideas in visual form so as to make them easier to remember and inspire creative thinking in the research process.

What do the icons represent?



Keywords

these are words that appear in the literature and might be useful to find additional information in glossaries of textbooks or through Internet searches.



Technical information

+ provides additional details.



Good ideas

provides creative or common sense suggestions.



Love that neighbour

ideas for showing respect and value to others while doing research.



For more information

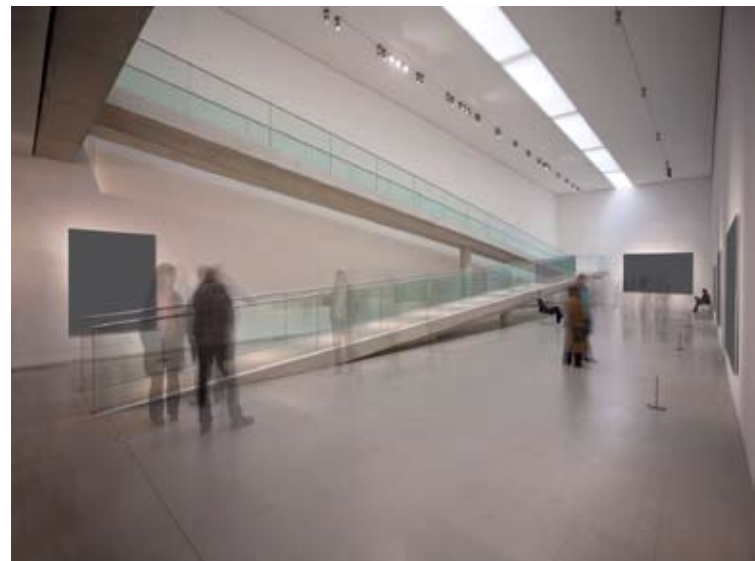
link to online resource page.

A photo exhibition is a well-planned event. People travel to experience the art and expect to gain new insight or have their perspective on the world changed. Months or years can be spent preparing for a major art exhibition, with careful thought going into what will be presented, how best to present the pieces and even what art will be commissioned to be made for the exhibition. Advance planning considers what will have the most impact on the viewers.

Likewise with community research, all of the effort will be worth it in the end if it makes a difference. If people gain insight into new ministry opportunities, are motivated to become more involved in the lives of their neighbours and, ultimately, the gospel is communicated in a more relevant way in word and deed ... then all the effort will have been well spent. Thinking through some of the “big questions” at the very beginning can help shape the overall process and maximize the impact.

One important reason why churches engage in community research is because they don't feel as if they know everything there is to know about their community. Research is a process of discovery – you do not have to know very much to start. Some insight can lead to asking good questions, which leads to more insight. Expect the learning experience to continue as the research develops. Start with what you do know, what you suspect and what you think might be helpful to know. Build from there. Ideally this will fit into a broader pattern of action and reflection for your church so that you can use what you learn from your research to try different ministry activities, which will lead to more relationships and opportunities for learning (and so on...).

“Who?” is the first guiding question for Section 3 and should be considered before moving on. The decision whether to plan the research as one individual or as a team is significant. Sometimes ownership for a process is strongest if people have been able to be part of it from the very beginning. If the intent is to develop a research team, then consider how others can be involved in the planning as soon as possible.



Who are the “subjects” and who are the “photographers”?

Who will be studied?

In community research, people are the primary focus of the research. Who you want to learn more about will define all of your other choices. While picking a geographic area as the focus will probably be helpful in most cases (a neighbourhood, town or region), in some situations a focus on a people group (who may be spread out over a larger area) or migrant people who come into an area for a season might be more appropriate (for example: seasonal workers, cottagers, homeless people, skiers/snowboarders). It is usually beneficial to include a number of different groups of people in an area in your research so you can reflect on differences and how they relate to each other, but be careful not to take on too large of a project.

Should the church itself be studied in some of the same ways that the broader community is studied? If some of your analysis (Section 2) and research techniques (Section 1) could also be reasonably applied to the church, it can provide you with a comparison between the two. It allows you to explore the extent to which people are similar and different.



Who will benefit from the study?

For whom are you doing this research? Will it be for a leadership team within the church, the whole church, the church and leaders in the community or the whole community? Is it important to prepare for more than one group? The answer to those questions will influence the final presentation(s) as well as what information is gathered and how it is interpreted.

Who will do the study?

The question of how many people will be needed to be part of the research team will be answered when the research plan is being created. The two main questions for this stage are:

- Who should be part of the research team? They may be people who would benefit from the experience or who have particular knowledge or skills to offer; and
- Who is available to be part of the research team? Knowing whether or not there are people available to help should influence the selection of research techniques (Section 1).

Partnership with people outside of the church can also be considered. Three very simple, but helpful guidelines for partnership are:

- agreeing on the shared values and purpose of the research;
- being clear on roles; and
- ensuring that the research will benefit each of the partners.

Other churches or community groups could be considered as partners. The extent of the partnership could just be sharing information, or it could involve working closely together.

What will be the end presentation?

Based on the audience for the research, there are a variety of ways the research can be presented. Here are a few ideas – select the one(s) that seem most helpful:

+ **Interactive forum:** An interactive learning environment for people on your research team and the congregation will allow them to raise their questions and voice their opinions. This allows a richer exchange of information, which allows the congregation to highlight areas that might have been missed in the research. Ideally, everyone should receive some of the information in advance to prepare them for the interactive experience.

+ **Written summary:** A short (one page) summary of what has been learned from the research (with appropriate graphs or images) will be helpful to a number of people.

+ **Written report:** A detailed report may be of great service to anyone who needs to know as much information as possible in order to feel comfortable participating. It can also be a way of organizing all the information you have collected.

+ **Audiovisual presentation:** An audiovisual presentation may be as simple as a poster or computer presentation, or as complicated as a short video clip.

+ **Drama:** A live interview, or a dramatic role play, can help make information come alive and engage an audience in the experience of discovery.

+ **Action:** Some form of ministry activity may both illustrate and respond to what was learned through the research.



Where will the photo shoot take place?**What will be the backdrop?****Where will the study be done?**

Community research is often done within a particular geographic area. Some churches choose concentric circles around the location of their meeting place or church building as the key areas of interest. Others choose specific neighbourhoods, or rural areas, based on residential boundaries or traffic flow patterns. For some regional churches, first mapping the residences and work areas of people in the church provides a good start. That information can be used to determine which areas should be considered part of the community that is in regular contact with people of the church.

If the community research focuses only on a particular people group then the location of the research might not be as important, or a number of locations might have to be considered. If this is the case, consider first speaking to some of the people from that group to better understand the significance of the places where they spend their time.

**How will the location influence the choice of research technique (Section 1)?**

- Observation and conversation can happen almost anywhere (Section 1.1).
- Surveys can be administered via hand delivery/mail/telephone/website anywhere there is someone who can respond (Section 1.3).
- Interviews can be done in most locations (door-to-door, at a park or other meeting place), at events or through referrals (Section 1.4).
- Focus groups are probably most productive if the meeting space is set up in advance so there are no distractions (Section 1.5).

Details of the photo shoot.**What qualities will be necessary?**

It is important to agree from the beginning on the quality of research that you expect from this process. The research process will need to be balanced between good reflection on the right kinds of information and the amount of resources and time that can be committed to the process. It could be risky for a church to find a few statistics related to their community and make significant decisions without either checking further into the source of information or testing their interpretations by asking someone in the community who might understand the issues more deeply. Determine in advance how much “quality control” you will need and how best to provide it. Often the quality of information can be greatly improved by ensuring that more than just two approaches to gathering information are selected. The information in Section 2 and Section 1 will help you think about options for interpreting and gathering information.

What will be the timeline?

When you decide what you will do, you can estimate how long it will take. In the concluding section there are forms that can help you organize your planning.

What resources will you need?

When you know what you want to do, then you can begin to estimate what kind of human resources (available time and skills) you will likely need as well as any material resources (such as paper for surveys, money for special maps). The forms in the concluding section of the guide can assist you in listing possible expenses so they can be considered during the planning stage.

What role will prayer play in the process?

This guide assumes that community research is a process of spiritual discernment. Deciding how God will be included in the process should be a priority. How does your church listen to God? Consider the spiritual traditions of your church and what forms of prayer might be most important to guiding discernment. Prayers of blessing for the community and worship as a research team can be significant elements of the process as well.



Photographs can be processed in different ways to achieve different effects. With the advent of digital photography, a little computer knowledge can provide a wide range of options for clarifying and modifying photos. Digital photographs can often be separated into different “layers” so that the background can be made lighter or darker, or specific features such as eyes can be highlighted (or “red eye reduction” is always a useful correction). By examining and correcting different layers, the photo can have a much greater visual impact.

Similarly, the interpretation of information that has been collected is very important. Interpretation should involve looking for patterns and unusual features of the information that has been gathered. As you discuss the information with the research team, take notes so that you can later remember where there were “Aha!” moments. Try sorting the information into general categories to see if there are ways in which it can be grouped together naturally. Invite constructive critique from other people to ensure that your analysis makes sense.

Do not over generalize what you can state “for certain” from your research. Humility and truthfulness require that you carefully evaluate what kind of “fact” statements can be produced from the research. For things you have learned that do not necessarily reflect the whole community, do not be afraid to acknowledge that it is a starting point. Invite church members to test your findings for themselves. It is better to invite others into the process of understanding the community than to find out later that someone has proven that you missed an important piece of information that affects all of the research.

As you summarize the information you have found, consider whether any additional clarification or questions are needed. There may not be time to follow up on all of the questions that the research findings will raise, but the very significant questions might be worth some extra effort.

The rest of Section 2 focuses on different forms of analysis that may be important to your research process. Review the options and select what you think will be most useful. Knowing how you want to process the information will help you select the specific research techniques (in Section 1).



**Is the photo too dark?
What is the lighting like?**

The research process should be complemented by the spiritual practices of the church. What Biblical reflection, prayer and worship activities will be helpful? How will you integrate prayer with your learning process?

Some churches have asked the leaders of other churches for their perspective on the spiritual dynamics of the community. Some have conducted prayer walks through the community. Information about church participation (what percentage of the community actively participates in church), other religions and personal beliefs can also be helpful to consider.

Simply asking people what their perspectives are regarding Christianity, church and God can be valuable. Some church planters have done “person-on-the-street” interviews with a video camera to collect perspectives. Keep in mind that with the diversity of spiritual beliefs within Canada, you may need to ask for their definitions of basic spiritual terms, such as “God.”

Love that neighbour ♥

Who could join you in praying for your community?

Keywords

Church-to-population ratio; ChurchMapCanada.com; General Social Survey (from Statistics Canada); prayer walk.

Good ideas

Consider prayer walking (or driving) through the community. Simply pray with your eyes open in order to observe your surroundings. Ask the Lord to reveal things³ that you should consider for prayer or action.

Technical information 

+ The church-to-population ratio can be determined by dividing the population of a specific geographic area by the number of churches ministering within that area.²

For more information 

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



How are the different subjects positioned in relation to each other in the photo?

God loves people and inspires the church to love people. By thinking about relational networks within the community we can begin to discern the different patterns of relationships that have formed and can consider how to develop healthy relationships with people in the community.

Keywords

Network analysis; sociogram.

For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.

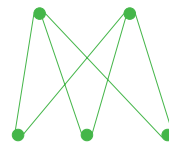


Patterns to discover:

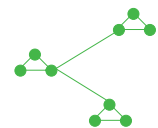
- What resources are exchanged through relational networks? Practical help, commerce, sharing of ideas or other forms of exchange could be considered;
- Who are the “hub” people in relational networks? People who relate well to others and can quickly find information or provide introductions from their network of relationships;
- Who are the “bridge” people? They participate in multiple different groups and might be able to make introductions and explain differences between groups;
- Where do relationships form in your community? Are there certain places or activities that help people meet each other and deepen relationships? Consider how the church might become involved or create these places;
- Where have relationships been damaged in your community? Consider whether the church might have opportunities to contribute to reconciliation; and
- Who are disconnected or lonely people with few supportive relationships? What opportunities for relationship building might be developed?

Good ideas

Sociograms are helpful diagrams similar to family tree flow charts – they simply indicate that there is a relationship between people. By beginning to chart the connections between people, we can see patterns emerge that may be obvious to some of us but unknown to others. With larger communities, it may be necessary to start by connecting groups of people and then consider how individuals relate within the groups (create a network of networks).



Relational Network



Network of networks

Technical information



+ Much can be learned about relationships through observation. Specific interview or survey questions could be developed to ask people who they might contact for specific information or help.

Love that neighbour

In smaller communities where “everyone knows everyone else,” charting relationships, particularly broken relationships, can begin to feel uncomfortable. Consider ways in which to reflect on relationships in the community that respect the people in those relationships. Providing respect and dignity is essential in loving others and will be a good witness to your ability to care for others.

What do significant objects in the photo communicate about the subjects?

Lifestyle refers to daily aspects of ordinary life that form patterns. Here are a few areas that might be of particular interest for ministry:

- **Time** – How do your neighbours use their time? How much time is consumed by work or travel related to work? How do they choose to use their leisure time? Understanding time schedules is very important for choosing the right time to provide ministry or simply to spend time with each other.
- **Money** – What is their relationship to money? Are they “savers” or “spenders”? If census data indicates that many of your neighbours have high incomes, does that indicate that they have significant disposable income, or that they have to earn high wages in order to manage a substantial debt load?
- **Place** – What places form significant “centres” for their lives? Their home, work, sports arenas, or other places? Understanding what places are significant can help the church understand where to be present in the community.
- **Personal style** – What music do they like to listen to? What television or web-based media entertain and inform them? What decorating styles are significant to them? What does their clothes say about who they are? While these things might seem superficial, attention to details such as music style can show a personal interest and could guide the church’s style of ministry.

Understanding these aspects of people’s lives can help a church understand how to relate in meaningful ways. This analysis can provide an overview of individuals or groups of people, while cultural analysis (Section 2.4) can provide a more in-depth approach.

Keywords

Demographics;
community profiles.

Good ideas

A time audit could be developed that tracks use of time over a “normal” day or week. Another option would be a place audit to map the daily or weekly routines of people in the community to understand what places are significant to the life of the community.

For more information

[www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/
communityresearch](http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch) or
[www.outreach.ca/
communityresearch](http://www.outreach.ca/communityresearch).

Technical information

+ Observation and conversation can reveal a lot about people, but sometimes specific questions need to be asked to get details. Be careful to protect personal information so that people who share do not feel exposed or violated in the research process. Limit access to the information and release it to the public only in a form that is generalized and could not identify any particular person.

Love that neighbour

Keep in mind that the primary objective of understanding your neighbour is to be able to love your neighbour better, not “profiling” your neighbours as “targets.” This should be not so much an exercise in market research as a reflection on what changes would be required in ministry to relate more authentically to the community.



What is the significance of any activity or communication in the photo?

We know different people have different ways of seeing things, or different tastes, or different decision making processes. To simplify the analysis, this section will focus on cultural practice and discourse.⁴



Practice/discourse

Consider practices and discourses in your community. Practices can mean anything we do and discourses can mean any form of communication (including symbols). How is it that “what we do” (practice) and “what we listen to or talk about” (discourse) both reflect who we are culturally and also shapes who we are culturally?

How did Jesus respond to cultural practice and discourse? With discernment:

- Sometimes he affirmed a practice. Jesus accepted the identity of rabbi, or teacher (Mark 9:5; 10:51; John 1:38-39; 3:2), with various practices that accompany that role.
- Sometimes he challenged popular discourse or practice. As part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus recited familiar teachings and then presented alternatives. “You have heard it said...” (Matthew 5:21-48).
- Sometimes he changed a practice to make a point. Foot washing was a familiar practice, but it was given a radically different significance when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:3-17).

If we can recognize and consider the meaning of the practices and discourse around us, then we can decide how to respond in ways that honour the gospel and meaningfully present it in the community.

For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.

Good ideas

Be careful not to stereotype the cultural identity of a person. Canada is a multicultural country (in many ways) and some of us feel most comfortable describing ourselves as being “hybrids” culturally (Hispanic-Canadian, teacher/parent/amateur race car driver, second-generation Korean-Canadian). Within this diversity, can you recognize groups (or subgroups) within your community? What are unifying practices? How diverse are these groups?

Technical information

+ Observation of practices can lead to asking questions about the meaning and significance of those practices.

Love that neighbour

As cultural differences can produce miscommunication and misunderstanding, it is important to be humble and respectful as you learn about the cultural differences around you.

Getting past the first appearances to understand why people do things differently can take time but is worth the effort.

What parts of the photographic image communicate strength or hope?

By exploring both the needs (see Section 2.6) and assets ⁵ (or strengths, resources) of a community, we can keep a realistic perspective. Sometimes resourceful people are overlooked or underused, and they can become very helpful with some encouragement, partnership or development.



Keywords

Community development; asset mapping.



Good ideas

An audit of assets can be developed by brainstorming all the possible resources available in the community (found in both individuals and organizations). This list can be organized, sorted and then used in conversations, meetings or interviews to identify which assets are underused and how they might be mobilized for the benefit of the community.

Assets to discover:

- gifts/talents/skills/interests of individuals in the community
- service providers
- information services that connect people with resources
- connections – knowing people that might be able to help or who know many people who might be willing and able to help

Churches can help promote services, provide missing resources or partner with others to mobilize assets within the community.

Not all of the assets have to come from within the community. Sometimes assets from outside of the community (financial grants, volunteers, donated materials) can make a significant contribution, particularly if they are directed and coordinated by someone who is part of the community.



Technical information

+ Interviews, surveys and focus groups can all be helpful ways to ask people to identify the assets of a community.

Love that neighbour

It is important to remember that, whatever the situation, developing assets within a community should take relationships very seriously. Respect for the different people involved and creating significant “wins” for everyone can help ensure that whatever new developments emerge, there will also be a strengthening of relationships and empowerment of people.



For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch or
www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



What is missing in the picture?

Needs assessment is a common research approach for churches and government agencies. Thorough analysis of needs should consider different kinds of needs that might be discerned from the information that community members have provided:

- Felt or perceived needs – These are the needs that people will most readily identify on a survey or in an interview. Comments such as “Our youth need after-school activities” or “People who lost their jobs at the factory need new job opportunities” or “Our area needs more doctors” might be examples of felt needs.
- Systemic needs – Sometimes we can recognize that the systems that support the life of our community may have problems. We might recognize a lack of support for a particular person or group in our health system or social service system or legal system. We might discover stories of racism within our community and the impact it is having on individuals and relationships. To begin to envision solutions to systemic needs, often many different perspectives (including biblical perspectives) need to be heard.
- Deep needs – These are the unidentified needs that might be at the root of other felt needs. For example, might fear, in opposition to trust in God and love of neighbour, be an underlying problem affecting concerns of safety within a community? As Christians we can identify ways in which the presence of Jesus has addressed some of our deep needs, either as individuals or families or as churches. Can we discern deep spiritual issues in our community and consider how they might be addressed? This requires listening very carefully to people in the community and spending time being attentive to God’s direction.

Keywords

**Needs assessment;
search for government or
social service reports on the community.**

Good ideas

Create a list of needs and a list of assets (Section 2.5) for the community. Draw lines between the two lists identifying where there might be assets that could meet needs. Write on the lines what might be done to help these solutions come into being.

Technical information

+ Needs assessment typically involves documenting and sorting how community members have responded to questions about problems or needs in the community. For example, “What do you feel are the five greatest challenges facing this community?”

Love that neighbour

Everyone has needs of some sort. Recognizing that we can all benefit from God’s provision, and that we can have different kinds of needs at different times in our lives, can be one way of avoiding unfair labeling of one person or group as “needy” and as somehow inferior to the rest of “us.”



Time lapse photography can be used to show change over time.

Acknowledging change over time can be very important to consider how the community has developed and to anticipate the future.

Statistics

Many trends are described by statistics. Use statistics wisely:

- Understand the context of the information. Why was the information gathered and how was it gathered? Understanding the context can assist in the discernment of the meaning and relevance of the information.
- Compare apples with apples, not apples with oranges. Make sure that the statistics were gathered under similar conditions and for similar purposes, or else your comparison may be very misleading.
- Beware of information hiding in averages. When statistics are presented, they may actually represent a diversity of responses within one range. Compare what the statistics are indicating with other accounts of the same phenomena to ensure that you understand what the statistics are reporting.

Future Trends

One helpful source of information on future trends can be the development policies that have been approved for geographic areas. Often a municipal government creates long term plans to guide the development of urban areas or to manage the resources of rural areas. Make contact with the level of government responsible for local development to determine if this information is available (multiple departments may be involved).

Keywords

Statistics Canada; community profiles; municipal websites may have projections as well.

Good ideas

Use a long roll of poster paper to create a timeline. Note some of the trends on the paper. Have people mark events on the timeline and provide information as to why those events might be significant with regard to the trends. This group activity can be done by a focus group or the research team in order to explore the significance of the trends.

Technical information

+ Future trends are usually best guesses as to how things will develop in the future if they continue to change in the same ways and at similar rates as in the past. Some researchers create multiple future scenarios in order to consider several different factors.

Love that neighbour ♥

With whom can you share this information? When you share the information you have gathered, remember to ask for their perspective on the information. They may see something you have missed.

For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



What is the setting in the photographic image?

Information from community research can be organized through various types of maps. All maps are designed to provide information, so by making creative use of the map-making process a community can be envisioned in new ways. Think about how different parts of the community's physical space can represent or illustrate issues identified in the previous parts of Section 2. This process can both organize some of the issues and also identify important places in the community.

Here are some examples:

- spiritual – Where are the places of worship and spiritual activity?
- relational – Where do people form relationships?
- lifestyle – Where do people spend their leisure time? Where do they work?
- cultural – Where do people develop their cultural identities?
- assets – Where do people go to get help?
- needs – Where do you find people in need?
- trends – Can past maps be contrasted with current ones?

Technical information

+ Asking questions about the current significance or history of particular places may become necessary as you observe people making reference to them.

Love that neighbour

Consider inviting people in the community to be part of the map-making experience. This means that they can show what they feel is significant about the community.

For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.

Keywords

Geographic Information Systems; thematic maps; demographic maps; satellite maps; street maps.

Good ideas

Create a conceptual map of the community. Simply assign meaning to some of the places in the community. This could be done in a number of creative ways:

- a simple sketch of the community with push pins and numbers that reference a legend of information about the community. You could also create this form of map on a computer with any program that allows you to combine images and text.
- an artistic impression such as a painting. If someone on your team has artistic talent, such a depiction of the community based on the community research can be very meaningful.
- a photo collage of the community with commentary.
- a video of the community with commentary and/or music.
- a slide show tour of the community (created with either slides or slide show software).



Photographers carefully line up the right angle, compose the photo and select the right settings for light intensity and action. They may ask their subject to smile, ask permission to take someone's photo or explain the project they are developing.

Collecting information

Record the information you need in a way that works for you and suits the situation. Keeping a journal of the different observations you make each day of the research project can be one way to avoid unclear memories and may help to provide documentation of the development of the research project. Careful note taking during the process of gathering information will be important both as a reference in the future and for group analysis if you are working with a team of researchers. Voice or video recording might help in some situations, but permission should be obtained from the people in the recording, and ground rules should be established regarding exactly how the recording will be stored, used and destroyed.

Ethics

- When you are gathering information from people, be clear about how you will use the information and then carefully follow those standards. Consider creating waivers for anyone being interviewed in person, in order to ensure that both the person participating in the research as well as the researcher are clear regarding how the information will be handled.
- If you promise anonymity to anyone, ensure that this promise is kept (with the exception of any legal requirements to disclose information).
- If your team gathers any personal information (name, contact information) then carefully consider any legal requirements regarding the protection of the privacy of the persons involved.

These procedures are very important in order to guard your integrity and preserve the trust and dignity of the people who are willing to participate in the research.



Keywords

Participant observation;
field notes; journaling.

Good Ideas

The time of day you are doing your observation can affect what you see. Varying the time of day that you note your observations can provide a more well-rounded perspective.

Good photographers can show us something insightful about the world around us, but the images are not usually selected at random. Likewise, we can walk around our community without ever noticing significant characteristics because “they have always been there” or we are simply not noticing what is going on around us. The first step towards good observation is to be alert and attentive.

Journaling observations can be a helpful way to capture the details and first impressions while they are still fresh. This then allows you, or others, to reflect on the observations and identify any interesting ideas or themes that might deserve more attention.

We can learn a great deal from people simply by talking to them. Whether this is at work, in a volunteer position or simply as we live our lives, we can always talk to our neighbours and ask for their advice or perspective on life.

Love that Neighbour ♥

Show respect for the people involved by guarding their privacy. Report observations without identifying individuals. You should ask permission to quote people from conversations and make sure the quote is accurate. You should offer to provide them with a copy of the research, so they can check that they have been quoted accurately.

Technical Information

+ Consider which analyses in Section 2 seemed most important. What would you need to observe in your community in order to be able to do that analysis?

For more information

[www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/
communityresearch](http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch) or
www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



↑ Keywords

Survey; sampling; representative sampling; random sampling.

💡 Good Ideas

If you have access to anyone who has experience in designing survey sampling strategies, ask them to review your plans.

🖥️ For more information

[www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/
communityresearch](http://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch) or
www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.

If you are conducting surveys or doing interviews, you may want to consider how representative your sample of survey respondents or interviewees is of the whole community (or smaller group from whom you would like input). It is acceptable to decide not to create a specific sampling strategy and simply survey or interview anyone who is available and willing; however, this means that you will need to acknowledge that there is very little certainty that the sample is representative of the whole community.

⚙️ Technical information

+ Careful thinking about how survey respondents or interviewees are selected will be important if you are interested in creating summary statistics for the survey and relating those directly to the community. One approach is simply to survey or interview everyone in the community. This may not be practical if it is a large group of people. If there is a large group, then one way to create a representative sample is through random selection of the survey respondents or interviewees.

Good selection processes can be complicated; however, you can come close to random selection by arbitrarily choosing every fifth (or tenth or twentieth, depending on the number of respondents you need) person (or household) for the survey or interview. For example, if you were conducting door-to-door surveys, this would mean that you would ask for a response only at every fifth house. Keep in mind that some people may not be willing or able to respond, so the number chosen will need to be large enough to ensure that you do get a minimum number of respondents.



Surveys provide a uniform way to collect data. Surveys are written questionnaires that can be used to encourage every respondent to answer every question in the same way. Surveys can be mailed out, set up on a web page or handed out in person.

Survey writing is both a science and an art. It requires careful attention to details to ensure as much as possible that different respondents are likely to understand the questions in the same ways. Surveys must be easy to understand and complete.

You can solicit different forms of response:

- Yes/no responses and one-word responses are easy to fill out in a survey.
- A range of responses (for example, 1–5) can be offered, but be very clear regarding the meaning of the range.
- Open-ended questions can take longer to fill out and may discourage people from contributing, although providing the option of adding comments can be helpful.



Keywords

Surveys; online surveys.



Good ideas

Test the questions in advance with someone who can give good feedback on how clear the questions are. The first draft of a question may not produce the kinds of answers that you expected. Testing also allows you to estimate the amount of time respondents will require to complete the survey.



Technical information

+ Response rate is a significant issue with surveys. Carefully think about how to make it as easy as possible for the person who receives the survey to respond. Consider the length of time it takes to complete the survey, and be clear with interviewees regarding the time required. Make it easy for participants to return the completed survey to the researchers.

You can motivate potential respondents by explaining the significance of the survey in terms that will be meaningful to them. Sometimes a promise of a small token of thanks, such as a coupon for a local coffee shop, can be appropriate.

Love that neighbour

Remember that while the primary objective is to gather information, it should be done with professionalism and respect so that the respondents are not left with a bad impression of the church.



For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



Keywords

Interviews;
structured interviews;
unstructured interviews.

Good ideas

Carefully consider how much time the interview should take. Be careful to stick to the amount of time you have told the interviewee would be required.

Interviews are essentially one person asking another person questions. They may take many forms, but two broad categories of interviews will be considered here.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews allow for direct comparison of answers among each of the people being interviewed. The interviewer asks a set of questions in a predetermined order. This approach can encourage consistency in responses and allows the interviewer to guide the direction of the interaction.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews allow the person being interviewed to provide some direction to the answers being given. Unstructured interviews can have a focus, but the intent is to ask just enough open-ended questions to allow the interviewee to identify what important issues they should be addressing. Asking questions that refocus the interviewee on the central question might be necessary during the interview.

For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.

Technical information

+ Provided that you receive written permission, you could record interviews via audio or video. If you offer the interviewees anonymity, you will have to take care to keep the recordings only as long as necessary to transcribe them to writing. Transcription can be a lengthy process, with one hour of recording taking as much as a day of writing to transcribe word-for-word. Transcripts are very useful for carefully reviewing the information that was provided. In order to respect what the person being interviewed has shared, all transcripts should be kept confidential within the research team and should be destroyed when they are no longer needed.

Love that neighbour

By explaining the significance of the research project, you can both help the interviewee find value in participating in the process and recognize their contribution.



A focus group is a form of group interview where a number of interviewees have opportunity to interact with each other as they discuss the interview questions. The advantage of a focus group is that, ideally, you can receive input from a variety of perspectives and the focus group participants will prompt each other to provide more information than could be gathered through individual interviews.



Keywords

Focus group.



Good ideas

- Some focus groups may benefit from being diverse (different professions or cultures) because of the differing viewpoints offered; however, generally focus groups will be able to relate to each other most quickly and effectively if they are made up of people who are similar to each other.
- Focus groups require someone skilled in group facilitation to provide the questions and moderate the discussion. Where some people may feel uncomfortable speaking in a group, a good facilitator can help draw them into the discussion. If a group gets stuck on one idea or topic, the facilitator may need to ask the right kind of question to move the discussion forward.
- The best questions are generally open-ended to allow the focus group members to begin to produce their own ideas. Craft the questions with care to ensure they are not confusing.



Technical information

- + The discussion in focus groups can be very difficult to record because different people are interacting with each other. Decide in advance what method of recording the focus group interaction will be most effective (recording device, note taker in the group) and obtain written permission to use it.

Love that neighbour ♥

Consider carefully how long it will take for people to begin to feel comfortable talking with each other. If you give the focus group too little time, members will enter into really productive conversation only at the very end of the allotted period. If the time commitment is too great, it may limit the number of people who accept the invitation to participate.



For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



Certain people have specialized knowledge of the community and might be able to refer you to others with more information:

- Church leaders (or ministerial groups) may know significant things about the community and the spiritual atmosphere. Knowing how many people attend local churches can be helpful in estimating how many do not participate in local churches.
- Police and social service providers have an in-depth perspective on certain aspects of a community. If you do not already know who these people are, it might be valuable for ministry to become acquainted with these contacts. Some social service leaders engage in community-specific research that might provide helpful information.
- Cultural coordinators (directors of art galleries, concert promoters) have insight into artistic values and often know many people.
- Business owners often watch their community carefully and know a lot of people related to their business.
- Real estate agents may understand why people purchase or sell houses.
- Members of government may have access to helpful information. Depending on how their office is managed and their travel schedules, you may need to book an appointment.



Keywords

The name of your community will probably produce a number of web pages in an Internet search engine.



Good ideas

Remember to ask them if they know of anyone else you should contact.



Technical information

+ Be well prepared with your questions so that you make good use of the time these people offer. Use language they will understand (beware of “church-ese”).

Love that neighbour ♥

Many of these people do view themselves as contributors to the community. Consider how you can provide them with encouragement and recognition for their contribution. Consider ways to share information or contacts, if it seems appropriate.



For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.



Specialized information sources may already have information that you could use in your research process:

- Municipal offices are often an excellent source of information because they are generally the level of government responsible for planning the future of a community.
- Local libraries can be a helpful information source, as librarians can direct you to resources and often know where to find access to local history.
- The local chamber of commerce often has economic projections.
- School boards need to carefully track family information in order to provide adequate services and prepare for the future. Principals often know a great deal about their students and the families in the area.
- Local university or college departments (geography, civil engineering, urban planning, sociology, psychology, anthropology, theological field education or medicine / health sciences departments) may be running local projects that could provide helpful information.
- Local media (radio, TV, newspapers, local web sites or blogs) often track ratings (such as local music preferences) and cover current issues.
- Social development agencies (food banks, subsidized housing, community centres, health offices) may do in-depth research on issues in order to manage programs and secure funding.
- Statistics Canada creates reports on many topics and communities. It can be a useful web site to search (www.statcan.ca) for Canadian information.
- Outreach Canada (www.outreach.ca) can provide customized community profiles or thematic maps.

 For more information

www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/communityresearch
or www.outreach.ca/communityresearch.

 Keywords

Demographics, community profiles, the name of your community.

 Good ideas

Remember to ask if they have any advice regarding who else you should contact for information.

Technical information 

+ Think carefully about the credibility of the source and whether or not the specific information they provide is relevant to your research.

Love that neighbour 

If you receive information from local organizations, it is fair to recognize them in some manner for their contribution. This may be as simple as including reference to them in a written report that uses some of the information from that organization.



Now that you have reviewed your options, it is time to plan and implement the research. While you may use different ways to encourage people to take part in your community research project, depending on your church's traditions and leadership styles, the basic process for organizing the research is straightforward.

The following two forms provide an example of how you can use the information in this guide to plan your community research. While these forms help to organize the focus and flow of the research, you will need to determine many details according to the selections that you make.

Planning Guide – The Big Picture (Form 1 of 2)
(See Section 3.)

A. What is the community that you will study? Are there multiple communities?

Will you study the church in similar ways to assess similarities and differences?

B. Who will receive the conclusions of the study?

C. Who will organize and lead the study?

Who will belong to the team that will do the research?

Who will help the research team?

Will there be any other partners in the research? Other churches, community organizations or individuals who are not part of the church? What basic commitments do you share regarding working together?

D. What do you expect to discover? This is an important question to consider before starting research so that you can contrast your initial assumptions with what you do discover.

What might be some ways that community research could benefit the church?

What might be some ways that community research could benefit the community?

Planning Guide – The Details (Form 2 of 2)

E. What research techniques (Section 1) will you use?

Technique	People Studied	Researchers Involved	Time Required	Completion Date	Financial Cost

F. Where will you conduct the research?

G. What ethical issues do you need to consider?

H. What training will the researchers receive? From whom?

I. How will you “field test” the research project?

J. What forms of interpretation (Section 2) will you use?

Interpretation	Information Analyzed	Researchers Involved	Time Required	Completion Date	Financial Cost

K. How will you organize the presentation(s) (Section 3.2)?

Presentation	Audience	Researchers Involved	Time Required	Completion Date	Financial Cost

L. Use all of the completion dates to create a timeline for the various people involved. Sometimes research, and life in general, require that we revise our schedules, but a shared timeline can help everyone understand how the research is progressing.

¹ Jesus' teaching on loving our neighbours can be found in Matthew, Mark and Luke (see Matthew 19:16-22; Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37). This teaching is highlighted in the letters to the early churches as being central to what God expects of us (for examples, see Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8).

² Moerman, Murray, ed. *Discipling Our Nation*. Delta, BC: Church Leadership Library, 2005, 31-33.

³ Some useful questions to consider could be:

- Where do you sense the presence of God?
- Does anything give you hope?
- What makes you feel uncomfortable?
- What are some needs?
- What evidence is there of values that are not consistent with Jesus' character and teaching?
- What might be some of the "idols" in this area?

⁴ Examining practice and discourse can lead to a more intense and organized analysis of culture. Special thanks to Dr. Ryan Bolger for teaching and conversation about practice and discourse.

⁵ Kretzmann, John P., and John McKnight. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Evanston, IL: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University: Chicago, IL, 1993.