



COMMUNITY *Portrait*



Why a community portrait?

The BUV community portrait has been designed to be used by churches or church leaders to better understand the needs and make up of a local community. It is envisaged that it will set the stage for deeper theological reflection and missional engagement. It therefore may be useful for evaluating how an existing church can engage (or re-engage) with its local community. However, it can also be extremely useful for a church leader or someone thinking about commencing a new initiative within a community – this could be in the form of a new community engagement initiative, missional community (simple church) or church plant.

What is involved in a community portrait?

The community portrait is a tool designed to be utilised by churches or church leaders to be able to more easily understand the needs of a local community in order to engage thoughtfully and effectively. It utilises several diagnostic tools to paint a portrait and give a more detailed picture. A portrait gives us some insights that are foundational to the real work of ethnography¹, interviews, and prayerful discernment. It utilises research and information accessed from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Victorian Government and National Church Life Survey (NCLS) data as well as information obtained, or observations gleaned, from prayer walking and/or from community consultation activities.

Where does the information and statistics come from?

As already mentioned, there are several information sources that are utilised to make up a community portrait. While some data is sourced from local knowledge and local church leaders, other data comes from a variety of resources. As the community portrait is about the local community it is imperative that any portrait is made up of real-world observations that are then fully documented. However, it is vitally important to include quantitative data which is available online and can be sourced from the following organisations:

<https://www.abs.gov.au>,

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/2016+Census+Victoria>

<https://www.vic.gov.au/discover-victorias-diverse-population>

¹ Ethnography is a qualitative research method that comes from the discipline of anthropology but is applicable to other disciplines. It is the in-depth (i thick) study and description of a culture including customs, habits, beliefs, and environments.

<http://services.land.vic.gov.au/landchannel/jsp/reports/ReportsIntro.jsp>
<https://www.ncls.org.au>

This last link through the NCLS website is particularly helpful to churches as the data has been collated by credible researches within a Christian framework emphasising church needs.

Who conducts the portrait?

A community portrait is usually conducted by a local church or church leader in conjunction with a member of the BUV Mission Catalyst Team. The Mission Catalyst Team have several people who are gifted and experienced in collating a well-researched, comprehensive report for local churches which then becomes a tool to engage more effectively with and in their community.

How do we gather the main components of a community portrait?

Demographics: Details such as population, gender, age, marital status, education, country of birth, religious affiliation, etc. are essential to understanding the makeup of your locality and who your neighbours are. These can easily be accessed for your community at: <https://www.abs.gov.au>

Property: If you are looking at a specific building in your community (such as your residence, a church building, or a manse) it can be helpful to get a detailed property report issued by the state government. This is easily done by following the link here:

<http://services.land.vic.gov.au/landchannel/jsp/reports/ReportsIntro.jsp>

Field Trip: In order to understand how to engage with the local community it is essential that leaders place themselves in a position where they can listen and not just assume they already know what is taking place. Our Mission Catalyst Team will participate with church leaders in this essential aspect of the community portrait so that a guided approach utilizing all senses, including physical and spiritual with experienced partners can aid the process. This will provide a template for further discernment with the leadership group of your church. The result is that we want to know “what is God up to in the neighbourhood?”

To continue the process, it is important to take time to walk around the community and see it through fresh eyes. As you walk, ask, “Does what you see match up with your perception?” Notice who your neighbours are, when and

where do they gather, and what are they doing at different times of the day? This will require you to take walks at different times of the day to see the rhythms of your place. Next, use these five P's to make notes and identify God's already-work in that place.² (Appendix 1)

- **Prayer** – Steep your community in prayer. Use this guide to frame your walking and your praying.
- **Pay Attention** – Sit and watch carefully. Grab a coffee and observe interactions. Make notes. Imagine you need to describe what you see to someone else. For example, your notes could include remarks like, “for every person walking, ten cars go by.... there are no trees....people stop and talk with one another outside the newsagency....”.
- **People** – Ask people what they love about their community? Who do they see doing good work and making the community liveable? Ask what they think is missing or could be improved? You are simply a fellow community member wondering how to make that place even more lovable. You could go door to door (this can be intimidating but worthwhile) or simply start a conversation with the barista at your favourite coffee shop. It's also valuable to try and find elders in your community. Who holds the memory and the stories of the place? Who has authority to speak up when the community experiences hardship or wants to hold a celebration?
- **Partners** – Do some digging online about the organisations you identified earlier. Is there something already going on that you can join? (Often a suburb will have a Facebook site and it is worthwhile checking that out so you can get an understanding of who is in the suburb, who are the gatekeepers and what are the collective needs. For example, an inner suburb's Facebook may concentrate more on advocacy, or issues around development, whilst another's might emphasize a “swap shop”. All this gives greater insight into your neighbourhood).
- **Projects** – After all this (and only after all this!) you can work on any projects. The best projects are where your *love for God*, your *love for neighbours*, your *love for that place*, and *your gifting* all intersect? It doesn't have to be grand. Side projects are a great way to test the waters without much investment of resources.³

² <https://missionalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/DiscoveryPractice2.pdf>

³ <https://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/2018/02/on-innovation-4-get-yourself-a-side-project.html>

Pictures: While on field trips photographs are encouraged to record what is seen, heard and even smelt. Nothing beats a real photographic portrait of a community to add colour and context to the words and numbers. Therefore take a camera with you for a walk around the community and try to capture images that show how people gather, what the buildings are like, what kind of trees and plants grow, the source of smells, sounds and the ways people get around (cars, bikes, footpaths, etc.) You don't need special skills or equipment...just use your phone camera and create a folder of images you can add to over time.



Potential Partners: It is important to ask who might be in the community already doing good? It's worth taking time to identify other church groups and community hubs that bring people together to address needs and bless the community in different ways – such as men's sheds⁴, Rotary clubs⁵, art groups, neighbourhood houses⁶, neighbourhood or traders associations, etc. One of the best places to visit initially is the nearest library. Often gatherings are hosted or at least advertised there.

The Past and the Present: This is important but a little more difficult to access from simply walking around the neighbourhood. A true portrait will detail a bit of history as well as current activities in that place. When did people first start living in that place (always be sensitive to indigenous communities if they have a history there)? What industries and agricultural practices were part of community life? Have there been major employers over the years for that place (eg. a factory or hospital)? How does the local government operate? How do people organise their lives politically? Who are the council representatives? What services does the council provide? It's worth finding an elder in the community, someone who has been there over many years and has first-person experience. Another excellent source for these details is your City Council website. For example, if you were creating a portrait for the town of

⁴ <https://www.vmsa.org.au>

⁵ <http://rotaryaustralia.org.au>

⁶ <https://www.nhvic.org.au>

Williamstown you would go to the Hobsons Bay City Council site:
<https://www.hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au/Home>

What's next?

Once you have decided to engage with the community contact the Mission Catalyst Team missioncatalyst@buu.com.au who can walk with you and guide you through the process.

What's in the box?

First collect and source the data, complete the field trip, collate the information and then you are ready to present it to the wider church. However, even before this, it is envisaged that a member of the Mission Catalyst Team would meet with the church leadership to help present the findings and provide an outline of a strategic approach for possible ways forward. This would give opportunities for the church leadership to ask questions and discuss the findings further before a general release.

Please engage your BUU Mission Catalyst Team in the process of community engagement. Of course if you have any questions, suggestions or simply want to chat about mission and innovation we are here to help:
missioncatalyst@buu.com.au

Appendix 1

Community Observation: A Guide

Even if you have been in a community for a long time, you can learn to see the familiar with new eyes, alert to indicators of God's presence within your community - its assets and strengths along with its points of brokenness and need.

This Community Observation Guide is a place to start as you plan to take "field trips" into your wider community to observe what God is up to there. Use the General Guidelines below or let them stimulate creating your own guidelines and questions. You may also take a look at alternative approaches such as "Prayer-walking" (praying over what you see as you walk) or an "Exegetical Walk" (a closer look at individuals' neighbourhood right outside their door).

General Guidelines:

1. Walk through as much of the community as you are able; if the area is far-flung, or if the weather is bad, a driving ("windshield") survey is another option. If the area is more unfamiliar to you, ask a resident to give you a guided tour of the neighbourhood.
2. It is helpful to open your observation time with prayer that God would allow you to see with His eyes of love and discernment. You can combine observation with more in-depth prayer for the community. You may find it useful to complete this exercise more than once, with a different focus for your observations and prayers each time.
3. Respect the dignity of community members by recording your notes as unobtrusively as possible. Be present as servant-learners, not tourists!
4. Conclude with meeting together to compare notes and reflect on your observations.

Making observations during your field trip:

You may find it helpful to use these categories (or others that are stimulated for you) to organize your observations. Look for evidence of the following:

People groups: Who is standing at bus stops, hanging out on street corners, going into businesses, playing in the park, waiting in line at the store? Note ages, ethnicities, languages and apparent economic status. How much do you see people interacting with one another?

Places of activity: A pizza shop crowded with youth, a shopping plaza, a heavily trafficked intersection, playgrounds, school zones

Structures: What are the types and conditions of the structures (homes, businesses, roads, parks)? How much "free space" is there in the community? What is the mix of private and public space?

Services: Where can people go to shop, eat out, get an education, worship, receive assistance? What appears to be the quantity and quality of available services? Who is providing services, and who is receiving them?

Signs of change: Businesses opening or closing, housing construction, sales or demolition, languages added to shop signs, buildings used in ways different from their original purpose. Overall, do conditions appear to be getting better or worse?

Signs of hope: Evidence of God's grace and God's people at work: churches and non-profits, playing children, uplifting artwork, Christian symbols, social gatherings, gardens. Look especially for local assets that could be connected with neighbourhood needs.

Signs of need: Evidence of hardship, hurt or injustice, specific to particular areas or affecting the neighbourhood as a whole. Be aware that marginalised people and social problems are often hidden, especially in communities that appear well off.

After the Field Trip:

Take time as a group to compare notes and reflect on your observations. You may find it helpful to use these or other questions for your discussion. The goal is to discover what God wants us to learn about our wider community:

What positive qualities, opportunities and benefits does the community have to offer? What are signs that God is already at work in the neighbourhood? Identify potential partners (people, churches, organizations) that the church could come alongside in serving the community.

What needs and concerns are in evidence? What do you see that might detract from people's quality of life or hinder people from developing their potential? What challenges are people likely to face as they go about their daily life?

How might community residents view your congregation? Would you be perceived as allies, foreigners, friends, helpers, annoyances, or simply irrelevant?

Take note of your own response to what you see. What kinds of "vibes" do you get from your encounters in the community? What feels familiar / strange, safe / dangerous, friendly / hostile, happy / sad, pleasant / uncomfortable?

Do you sense any barriers to "fitting in" between yourself and the community - language, culture, class, ethnicity, age? What stereotypes about people and places might you have to address in order to build healthy relationships with people here?

How is the Good News of salvation through Christ relevant here? What might it look like if God's kingdom were realised "on earth as it is in heaven" here in this community? Imagine how your congregation alongside members of the community might participate in helping the neighbourhood experience God's design for a good life.

Close with a time of prayer for the community and for your congregation's witness and service there.

Developed by Evangelicals for Social Action and adapted from the work of Rev. Jill Sanders, Field Outreach Minister, East Central District of the Iowa Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Jill.Sanders@iaumc.org.

Appendix 2

Prayer-Walking Guide

What is prayer-walking? One simple definition is: "Praying on-site with insight." The purpose of prayer-walking is to seek God's blessing, mercy, and transforming power -- both for the community and for ourselves as God's servants in the community. (Read more about prayer- walking and download detailed guides at www.waymakers.org/prayerwalking.html)

Become more aware of what you see while you walk and pray by connecting prayer-walking with structured observation. The discussion questions in the observation guide can help participants "debrief" after a prayer-walking experience.

General guidelines for prayer walking:

1. Meet at an assigned time and start with group prayer.
2. Walk in groups of two or three. Plan routes ahead of time to cover as much of the area as possible.
3. Pray aloud in a quiet, conversational voice, if you feel comfortable doing so. Or pray silently, letting your prayer partner(s) know what you are praying about. Don't call attention to yourselves. As the Waymakers website puts it, "You can be on the scene without making one."
4. If anyone asks what you are doing be prepared to respond: "We're praying God's blessing on this neighbourhood. Is there any special way we can pray for you?"
5. Although it is not the primary purpose of prayer-walking, be open to opportunities to interact with and bless people that may grow out of your experience. Waymakers highlights the connection between prayer and action: As you pray God's promises with specific homes or work sites in view, you'll find that hope for those people begins to grow. You'll begin to see people as God might view them. You'll likely find yourself becoming more interested in the welfare of the people you are praying for. ... Watch for the ways God impresses you to display his love in practical acts of kindness.
6. Plan to walk for about half an hour. If anyone in your group is not comfortable with walking, they can prayer-drive around the neighbourhood instead.
7. Afterwards, gather to share your prayers, observations and experiences. What did you learn about the neighbourhood? How was God manifest in this experience?

8. Encourage people to continue praying for the community during the week.

How do you pray?

Pray for discernment - seek the gift of seeing the community through God's eyes, and to discern what God is already doing among the people; ask God to reveal what you need to know to inform your prayers for the people, events, and places in the community.

Pray for blessing - over every person, home and business you encounter; for God's intervention in each life, so that each one can be fruitful in God's kingdom; for God's will to be done in this community "as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Pray with empathy - see and feel what residents live with every day; offer intercession for those things that express brokenness and grieve God's Spirit and give thanks to God for the blessings and gifts that exist in the community.

Pray from Scripture - prayers based directly on God's word can be especially powerful. You may want to bring a Bible with key passages highlighted or copy verses onto note cards.

Pray in God's power - allow times of silence for God's spirit to speak to you, or for you (Romans 8:26). Ask with confidence in the power of Jesus' name (John 14:12-14).

Additional Resource

Exploring Your Neighbourhood: An Exegetical Walk

An exercise from Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood*. Brunswick: Acorn Press, 2007, 103-104.

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're 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, think about how you define your neighbourhood and how it's physically laid out. Draw yourself a map, including your own home, the basic street patterns, and any landmarks, shops, commercial or community buildings, schools or parks. Be sure to include those boundary markers or natural borders that give your neighbourhood definition. For some, the neighbourhood will be larger than for others. It's a very personal thing; no one else can define it for you. The only criteria are that it includes where you live and is walkable. Once you've got a rough idea in mind of what area to include, grab a notebook and pen and head off.

Be sure to include time along the way to stop, buy a drink somewhere, sit in a park or at a bus stop, linger outside public buildings or places of interest. There's no hurry.

Here's a list of questions to help you as you go:

1. As you stand just outside your house or apartment—by the front gate or on the footpath—what do you see as you look in each direction? What do you hear or sense? What activity do you notice?
2. As you walk the neighbourhood, what do you notice about the architecture of the houses or apartment complexes? On average, how old do you think the houses or apartments are in this area? How much renovation or rebuilding is going on?
3. What do you notice about the front gardens or entrance ways to each of the houses or apartments? Does your neighbourhood feel like a cared-for place?
4. How many houses or apartments for sale do you see? What indicators of transience do you observe? Does the neighbourhood have a feeling of permanence or change?
5. Is there a freeway or major highway close by? If so, try and imagine this area before it existed. Who has gained and lost by its introduction?

6. Stop—sit if you can—in a tree-lined street or quieter spot and also at a busy intersection. What are the smells and sounds of the neighbourhood? How quiet or noisy is it?
7. How many community or civic buildings do you see? What are their purposes? Do they look inviting? Well used? Deserted?
8. What public spaces are provided for children, teenagers or adults? Are they being used? If so, in what ways?
9. If there a local park, what do you notice about it? Does it feel like an inviting place? Who is there? How is it used?
10. Do you pass any churches or religious buildings? What does their design or appearance communicate to you?
11. What kinds of commercial buildings are there? Walk around a supermarket or local store and identify who makes up the clientele.
12. If your neighbourhood includes a shopping area, is there provision made for people to sit, relax, or relate?
13. Excluding the areas of business, how many people did you pass walking? What age, race, and gender are they? How pedestrian-friendly is the neighbourhood?
14. Imagine yourself as an old, infirm person with no car, or as a young child living in the middle of this neighbourhood. How disadvantaged or advantaged would you be with respect to shops, churches, parks or schools?
15. What evidence is there of public transport? Who uses it?
16. Are there places in your neighbourhood that you wouldn't go? Why?
17. Where are the places of life, hope, beauty or community in this neighbourhood?
18. What evidence of struggle, despair, neglect and alienation do you see?
19. What sense of connection do you feel to your neighbourhood as you walk through it?
20. In what ways do you sense God's presence where you live?