

EDOT Diocesan Council 2017
Plenary – Missional Strategies
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One fall morning in 2001, I was up earlier than usual packing my bag, getting ready to leave for the airport, heading out of town on a business trip. The phone rang. It was just before 6am. Who could be calling? My wife's aunt was on the other end. "Turn on the news. Right now," she said. We turned on the TV and stared at the screen stunned at the images. Together, we sat down on the sofa together. My arm wrapped around my wife. I could feel her belly stretched tight, nearly nine months pregnant with our first child. And then we watched as Flight 175 crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center.

The world changed in a moment that day. The divisions that rippled through our culture following the attacks on 9/11 were not so different than those felt by many in recent days, weeks, and months. A sense of security, values, identity... these were rattled and many found themselves in disagreement with those they loved about how the world worked.

Amid this, a small group of Christian leaders began to gather and pray about how we might create community for those searching for answers within what felt like a world shifting beneath our feet. We had no idea of where to start but to open our homes, invite people to share a meal and pray. One week, the neighbors who had never entered a church joined us. Then their extended family came. Young adults in the neighborhood who had sworn off church began to show up.

One evening, one of these young women brought a co-worker. She announced herself saying, "I know you are her religious friends but I just want you to know, I'm not into that. I'm an atheist." This was, of course, fine with us. We shared a meal together and shared the ups and downs of the last week. Towards the end of the evening, a young man offered, "We've all heard several concerns tonight. If everyone is okay, it seems like we should pray together." Everyone agreed, even the reluctant co-worker. Subdued evening prayer was followed by a brief pause when a solitary voice came from somewhere in the room. "God, before tonight I didn't think you existed. But whatever these people have, I want it. Please give that to me. Thanks."

One thing was clear that evening: we had no idea what we were doing, but God did. God was out ahead of our stumbling through the dark, shaping a space for people to experience the Divine, people that had not considered entering the doors of a church building. But as Francene Young explained in our first workshop, this is what God does! Whether we are looking to Scripture or to the world around us, God is on a mission of reconciliation which we are invited to participate in. Episcopal author, Verna Dozier [wrote](#) that the Bible is a "book of wrestlings, not a book of answers. In each age," she wrote, "the people have to struggle to hear the word of the Lord for their time, and sometimes their hearing is keener than at other times."

As Beth Magill shared in our second workshop, when we hear the world of the Lord—and respond to God's invitation, it can be as simple as breaking bread and listening to the stories of those around us. I wish I could tell you that the lives transformed in that community were due to intricate plans but they weren't. We created a space for people to share life and the Spirit showed us what more was possible.

In the Diocese of Texas, we've come to define missional communities in this way:

Missional communities exist when we participate in God's mission of reconciliation beyond the walls of the church through relationship and worship.

That may sound like missional communities suddenly appear if we show up and participate with what God is doing in the neighborhood in just the right way! On the contrary, we *know* that missional communities take time to develop. They are relational and therefore require that we build trust with those in outside the walls of our church buildings. This takes time. While they are relational, they are not simply groups of like-minded Christians gathered for Bible study or to serve the needy in the neighborhood. These are worshiping and praying communities situated in a particular place for those that will not darken the doors of a church building, for whatever reason. Due to this, they require patience and a willingness to experiment and fail and try again, as we seek to find ways of recognizing the sacred that is true to our tradition yet honest to the context. “The liturgy or work of the people,” as Letty Russell [writes](#), “includes their culture and their way of expressing faith and struggle.” There is something natural, organic about these communities but this does not mean they do not require a thoughtful, intentional approach.

That is what I would like to talk with you about during this time.

How would we organize around this concept on a congregational level? How would we move from practices that individuals might undertake to a coordinated effort across a congregation? How might you get others involved in your parish? How would you select who to be involved and where?

What I would like to do is share with you some tools that might help you answer some of these questions.

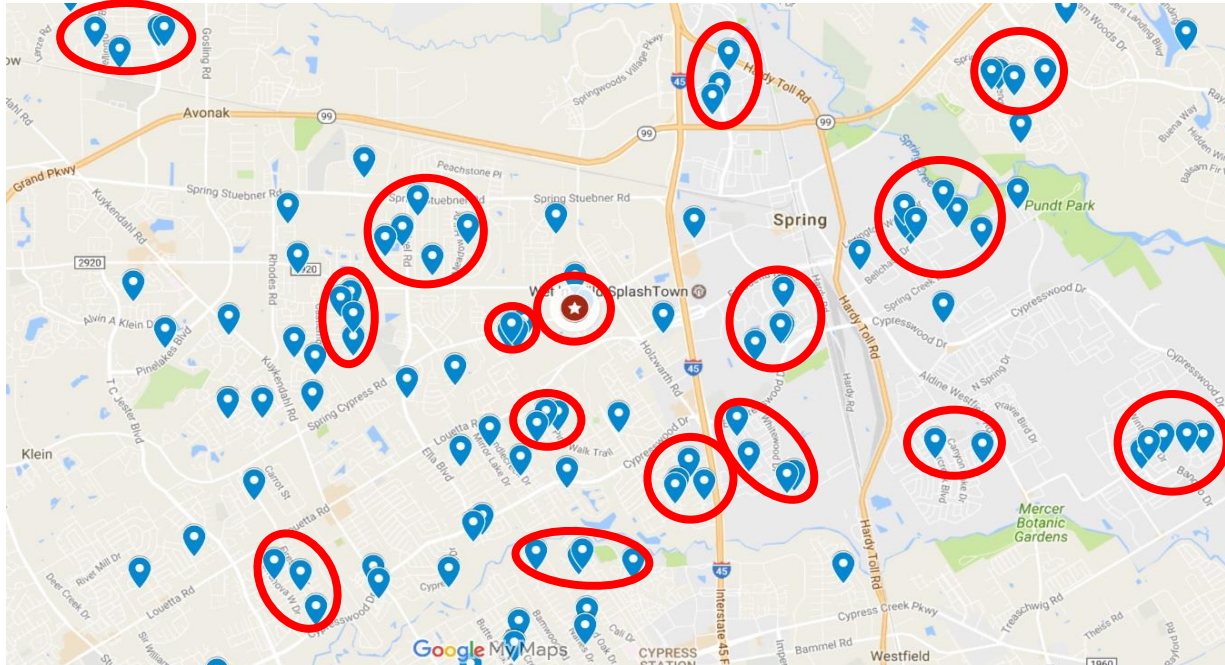
It would be reasonable to expect some to believe this unfitting to the vision and strategic plans of a given congregation. Last summer, the mission amplification team at the diocese did a survey to assess missional engagement across the diocese. Several congregations noted then—and later in conversation with me, that “missional,” as they understood it, was not a priority. This is fair, considering that there has been some confusion as to what we mean when we are talking about missional communities. But let me be clear, a congregation that is not concerned with mission is a dying congregation. Mission is as much about maintenance as good bookkeeping and mowing the front lawn. Without a strategic plan for engaging those in our neighborhoods the natural forces of attrition will slowly wear down our communities.

I am not discouraging the efforts we do in making our campuses attractive and our worship experiences welcoming. The energy we put into how we gather is critical. What I am arguing is that we need to put an increased amount of energy in to how we scatter as well. In a bygone era we could anticipate neighbors seeking us out; church membership was expected. Even as the Church left the central place it once held in western culture and consumerism took its place, as long as you did good marketing you could assume growth. Yet, even this has passed. Inundated with countless messages and appeals, an increasing number of your neighbors are waiting for you to meet them where they are and share God’s good news with them. As Bishop Doyle pointed out in an [article](#) recently, studies have shown that churches who send congregants as missionaries into their communities are congregations that grow.

If missional communities are sacramental and relational outposts for those that cannot, or will not, participate in a traditional congregation then the journey towards developing a missional community ought to begin by asking yourself what the impediment is. Why are there people uninterested in participating in a church service on Sunday morning? Is it religious baggage? Are there physical or cultural boundaries? In other words, *who* is it that God is calling you to create Christian community for?

The most strategic way to address this is by capitalizing on the congregation itself. There are countless interactions between your congregants and their coworkers and neighbors on any given week. To begin discovering who God is calling you to create community for, why not begin by looking at where your people already spend a significant amount of their time: at home.

An easy and no-cost way to do this is with [Google maps](#). I've asked [Holy Comforter in Spring, TX](#) if I could use their membership as a sample. What you will see on the screen here is the active membership home addresses of Holy Comforter plotted out on a map. As you can see, there are logical, geographic clusters of addresses across the map.



I recognize that what I am going to recommend will look different depending on your context. These exercises will have unique qualities in urban, suburban and rural communities. A congregation consisting mostly of commuters will add other distinctions. For these reasons, among others, I would recommend that you begin by conducting these in the immediate neighborhood around the parish. Congregational leaders, this allows you the opportunity to model for your members what you hope they might do in neighborhood clusters.

Most people move into a neighborhood for similar reasons. It may be for ease of access to services they depend on or desire. It may be because of the performance of schools in that area. In any case, it's safe to assume that these clusters represent some shared values, an inherent logical connection between parishioners in these clusters and their neighbors. Wouldn't it be interesting to know what those shared values are?

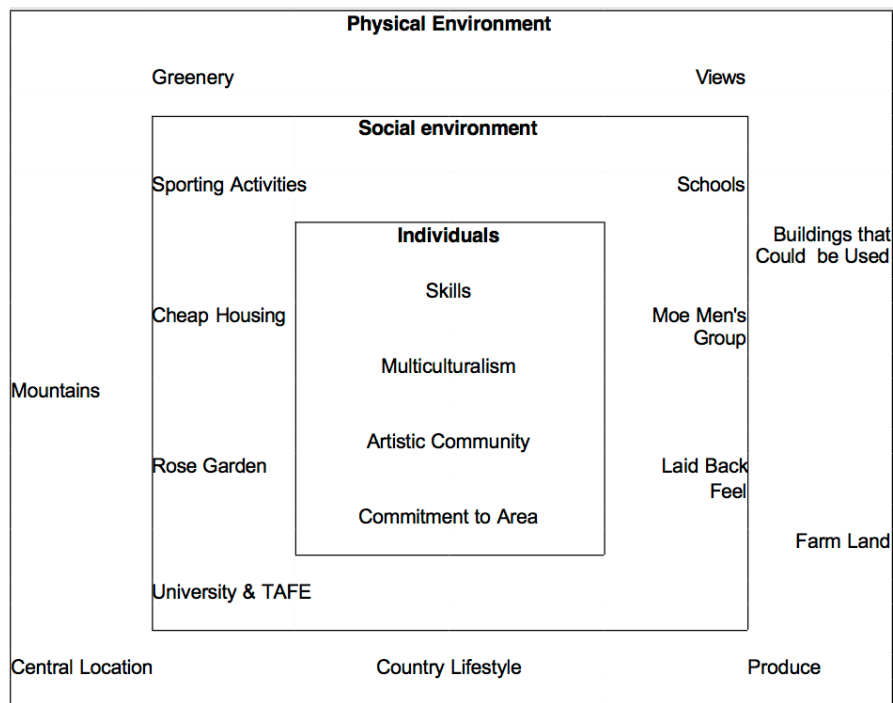
To explore this requires that we act a little like scientists, seeking out and testing ideas. A scientist is bound to the scientific method; you ask a question, collect information, establish a hypothesis, and then conduct experiments to determine whether your hypothesis was right. If it doesn't work, you go back and collect more information and try again. If it does work, you move forward. Similarly, missional communities do not develop without experimentation. We would begin developing a "missional hypothesis" answering this question about the shared values of a neighborhood. What do our neighbors care about? What are their hopes and hurts? What brings them together?

The Diocese of Texas provides a helpful tool for you to test whatever assumptions you may have at this point about your neighborhood: [Mission Insite](#).

Mission Insite can provide you all sorts of information about the area a missional community might take shape. Age, family, income, education. This is a robust tool that I would encourage all congregations to utilize. This data will assist you in assessing whether your missional hypothesis was correct, but this will only give a bird's eye view of local realities. To truly discover what our neighbors celebrate or what keeps them up at night, requires a more human touch.

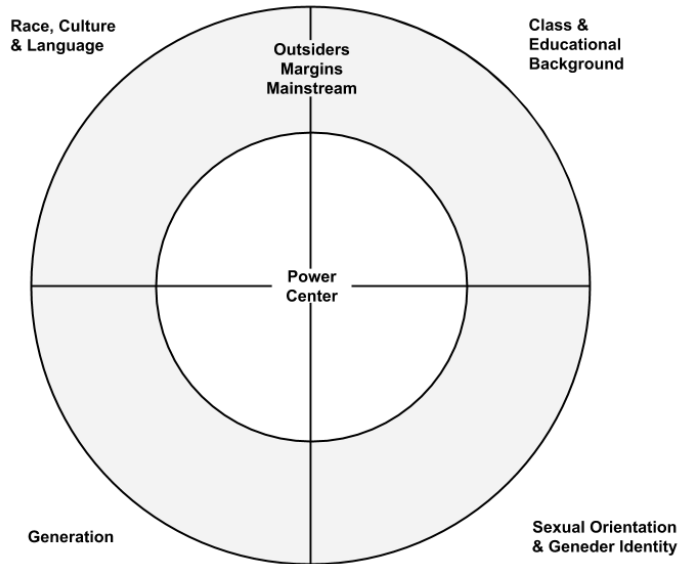
To really begin organizing around the hopes and hurts of those in your neighborhood, I recommend a timeless, ancient spiritual practice: Walking.

As I said before, begin with organizing walks around the parish first. Then encourage these clusters to walk their neighborhoods. You can assure those worried about being asked to conduct street corner evangelism that this exercise is merely an effort to pay attention the features of the surrounding community—the physical and social environment and individuals that make up this place. John Kretzmann and John McKnight, authors of *Building Communities from the Inside Out*, recommend the diagram on the screen as a template for tracking what you discover.



(Find this and other tools at [Asset-Based Community Ddevelopment Institute](#))

Ask members to pay attention to the physical environment—the terrain, whether it's urban, suburban, or rural, whatever stands out about the physical location of this context. Ask them to pay attention to the social environment—how do people gather? Through schools? Sports activities? The local coffee shop or McDonald's? Lastly, ask members to pay attention to the individuals. In her book, *Radical Welcome*, Stephanie Spellers explores this using the diagram you see on the screen to map power dynamics of individuals in a community. No matter how you document what you notice, list individuals by name or by their role in the community.



You've started with a missional hypothesis, you've tested it through study of the demographics, and now you've tested it by walking the neighborhood.

We are beginning to clarify who God is calling you to create community with but remember, missional communities exist for those that not inclined to participate in a traditional church environment. We are convinced that no matter the context, the primary way you will answer this question is through building relationships. If this is true, then the question really is, *How* will you get to know these neighbors, these people within the community you are called to?

What would happen if you began to gather these clusters around a simple invitation: Let's love our neighbors? Jesus said that the law and prophets hinge on two things: Loving God and loving our neighbors. Loving our neighbors assumes that we *know* our neighbors. And chances are that many of your fellow congregants don't know their neighbors.

Ask one of the members in this cluster to host a party for members nearby. Ask attendees what they know about the neighborhood, why do they live there? The temptation, though, is to remain general. I would recommend handing out a sheet such as the template on the screen which comes from the book [The Neighboring Church](#).

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	YOU	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Invite those present to list the names of 8 neighbors that do not attend your church and whatever stories, gifts, hopes and/or hurts that they know of. If those gathered are willing to continue meeting, they can start with the smallest of steps: get to know the names of 8 neighbors. Starting missional communities may begin with something as simple as an army of parishioners getting to know the names of their neighbors, people that can start their day with a, “Hi Raul!” “Hi Nancy!”

For years, I held weekly meetings at a local coffee house. On Saturday mornings, I would frequently take my kids in to get hot chocolate so that their mom could sleep in. I would always greet my barista and ask how things were going. I never thought much of it until one day my barista plopped down in a chair next to me. “You’re a spiritual guy, right? My girlfriend just had a baby. I’m a dad now. I don’t know what to do.” For seven years, I had simply said, “Hi.” I had no idea this simple gesture would make me the safe confidant to share fear at such a momentous occasion.

We live in a cultural of isolation. We get in our cars, open the garage door, pull out, pull up to our parking spot at work. At the end of the day, we drive home, pull into the garage, close the garage door and do the same thing all over again. Whether they recognize it or not, chances are your neighbors long for connection.

As small as this may seem, getting to know the names of neighbors is a big first step for many people. But for those that come back excitedly sharing, “I did it! I know the names of 8 of my neighbors!” You can encourage them to start practicing the habits that Beth Magill shared in the last workshop.

Getting to know our neighbors, utilizing the practices Beth shared, cultivate a holy curiosity of what God is up to. This is not simply a curiosity on the side of our members. Their neighbors will increasingly be curious as well. Inviting your neighbors to join a community that celebrates what God is doing in a neighborhood, that strives for what God’s dream for that place is, this is not as scary as it may sound.

In my experience, missional communities begin to take shape around one of three shared values between you and your neighbors. It might be around a sense of service; neighbors may not share your faith tradition but long to see the surrounding neighborhood thrive just as you do. Or it may be around shared convictions; for whatever reason, your neighbors may not ever return to a traditional church yet remain compelled by the gospel. Or it may be around a longing for community; your neighbors may simply be waiting for someone to invite them into meaningful fellowship.

Whatever the case may be, the development of a missional community is like a journey; the time and length are determined by the terrain, the context and each one is unique. As Carol Howard Merritt writes in [*Tribal Church*](#), “That strange meandering path on which God meets us looks different for each person, and finding it takes time.”

She goes on to write, “[S]ince Jesus’s time, we have built the body of Christ out of our own imperfect parts. [...] As we learn to live as members of the body of Jesus Christ, we begin to understand the richness of friendships, the holiness of community, and the hallowedness of our ground.”

Sisters and brothers, go and make friends of your neighbors. Declare holy the mundane and ordinary. Announce the good news that God has shown up in these places and then watch and participate in what the Lord of the Harvest is doing.