

Getting to Know Your Neighbors Starter's Guide

This guide is intended to provide a starting point for people and parishes who are interested in getting to know their neighbors, but who aren't sure where or how to begin. Keep in mind that while the activities suggested in this Starter's Guide will provide you a helpful, surface-level understanding of who your neighbors are, you'll need to go deeper in order to engage in effective, meaningful mission.

Linger there.

Many of us commute to church from other communities and aren't really attuned to the day-in, day-out rhythms of the neighborhood in which we worship and serve. Such a scenario makes it easy to fall out of touch with the needs and concerns of the people who live, work, and play near our parish. So, instead of rushing in and out on Sunday mornings, linger there!

- If the community, or a section of it, is walkable, then walk it. You'll notice more this way than just driving through.
- If walking through a business district, stop and look at signs posted in storefronts. Likewise, stop in the library and check out the community bulletin board. Look for clues as to the cares and concerns of the community. Also look for opportunities to engage in upcoming community events.
- Hang out at the local diner or coffee shop. Listen to the conversations taking place around you, and be open to engaging in conversation. You never know where it will lead!
- Linger in the community on different days of the week, and during different times of the day. You'll likely notice a difference in the people you encounter and the tempo and vibe of the community between weekdays and weekends, mornings and evenings, etc.

Perform online research.

- ***Check out free data sites.*** Depending on your location, there may be a wealth of free data out there about your community, including demographics, income and education levels, housing types, etc. For the most part, you can simply enter your community's name and/or zip code ... and be amazed! Here are a few good sites:
 - [The Episcopal Church Community Demographic Profiles](#)
 - Select *Pittsburgh* from the Diocese drop-down, and your parish from the Church drop-down. Then click View Community Profile.
 - Report shows demographics and trends for a 3-mile radius around your church building.
 - Not all parish communities are available.
 - [City-data.com](#)
 - [Areavibes.com](#)

- [Niche.com](#)
- [The Association of Religion Data Archives \(ARDA\) Community Profile Builder](#)
 - Search on the name of your town, village, or neighborhood, or enter your address or zip code. Then, using an interactive map, customize the area that is included in your data.

You may want to check more than one of these sites to be sure you're getting a clear and complete picture of your community. (One word of caution, though: Pay attention to the age of the data and how it was collected.)

- **Google your community.** Simply type the name of your community in the search box, and see what pops up. What should you be looking for? ...
 - News articles referencing community trends, concerns, etc.
 - Social service organizations. This will give you an idea of the needs that are already being address in your community. *How can you join in, or fill in the gaps?*
 - Community organizations (e.g., block watch, chamber of commerce, community council, historical society, etc.). Many such organizations hold monthly meetings that are open to the public. Attending these is a great way to connect with neighbors!

- **Follow on Facebook.** You may come across some community-focused Facebook pages (and other social media sites) while Googling, but you should also do a search from within Facebook. Some communities have a closed Facebook group that won't show up in Google search results, a forum for neighbors to communicate with one another, often about rather mundane topics (like, "Does anyone know a good plumber nearby?"). Occasionally, though, you might come across something more meaningful, or notice trends that help you understand the cares and concerns of your neighbors. Typically, closed Facebook groups are fairly non-restrictive; if you click the "Join Group" button, they'll let you in, no questions asked.

Consider investing in a detailed, customizable demographic/ethnographic report.

While *demographic* data will tell you *who* lives in your community (age, race, gender), *ethnographic* data will reveal *how* they live. For example ... Do your neighbors belong to a faith community? How do they generally like to get their news? How do they commute to work? Organizations like [Percept](#) will generate a detailed report, containing extensive demographic and ethnographic data (and colorful charts and graphs!), based on an area that you identify. Prices vary. Percept, for instance, offers the following:

- FirstView report: A six-page color graphic summary report, costing \$85.
- Ministry Area Profile: A 27-page detailed report with six thematic infomaps, costing \$219.

Get to know the religious community.

Identify other worshipping congregations in the area, and visit them, online and/or in person, to learn about their message and ministries.

- What are their key beliefs?
- What are their worship times?
- What segment(s) of the population do they attract and serve?
- What type of worship do they offer (i.e., traditional, contemporary, family friendly, etc.)?
- Is there an active ministerium? (How often/well do churches work together to address the community's needs?)

Meet with gatekeepers.

Who are the community's gatekeepers – leaders in the community and people "in the know"?

These may be:

- Local business owners and service providers (especially those who are also residents)
- Priests and pastors at other churches in the community
- Officers of community organizations
- School principals
- Local government representatives.

Be honest about your intentions. Most people will be happy to meet with you, if you express a sincere interest in the well-being of the community.

Prepare questions in advance, based on who you are meeting with and what you have learned about the community up to this point. Some general questions include:

- What changes have you noticed occurring in the community over the last few years?
- How have these changes impacted your life and work here?
- What do you think distinguishes this community from the communities surrounding it?
- What do people in this community care about?
- What are they concerned about?

So, what's next? Good question! ... Consider this your first round of new, or renewed, engagement with your community and your neighbors. Next, gather all that you've learned and, with prayer and conversation, discern where God might be nudging you to go from here. Have you discovered areas that require further research, or community groups into which members can plug in? Have you already uncovered needs that your parish is particularly gifted, and feels called, to meet? It may be time for your parish to shift its focus, from getting to know its neighbors, to *being* a neighbor. What would it look like for your parish to *be* a neighbor – a *good* neighbor – to the people in your community?