

GET TO KNOW THE NEIGHBORHOOD WITH A COMMUNITY TOUR

Walking the neighborhood offers an unparalleled chance for church leaders to learn what's going on outside its own church walls. We walk in order to get a better sense of the neighborhood. This may come from observing housing conditions; infrastructure needs, such as roads and bridges; the presence or absence of businesses; the types of available public space, such as parks and libraries; the number of people seen at a given time of day, and where they are going; traffic conditions; and the noise level in general. All of these things can be observed by walking the neighborhood.

Kevin Frank, Director of the Brady Faith Center, speaks of the importance of getting to know the community, in this case the financially struggling Southwest side of Syracuse: "We go out every day and walk the neighborhood. We are with people in our community, listening. The poorest folks will never come to you. They are just too busy trying to live and survive. So unless you go to them, it's not going to happen."¹

A community tour offers such an opportunity. Calling it a tour implies something more systematic than simply wandering around the neighborhood to see what can be discovered. For this reason, a checklist will be necessary, detailing sights to be seen and questions to be answered. Additionally, these tours bring about a shared understanding of the situation faced by the community. Conflict mediators stress the importance of "joint fact finding" to break an impasse and to achieve common understanding. In the same way, when neighbors confront the same set of facts, such as broken sidewalks and stop signs bent out of shape, it makes it easier to do something together about the problems.

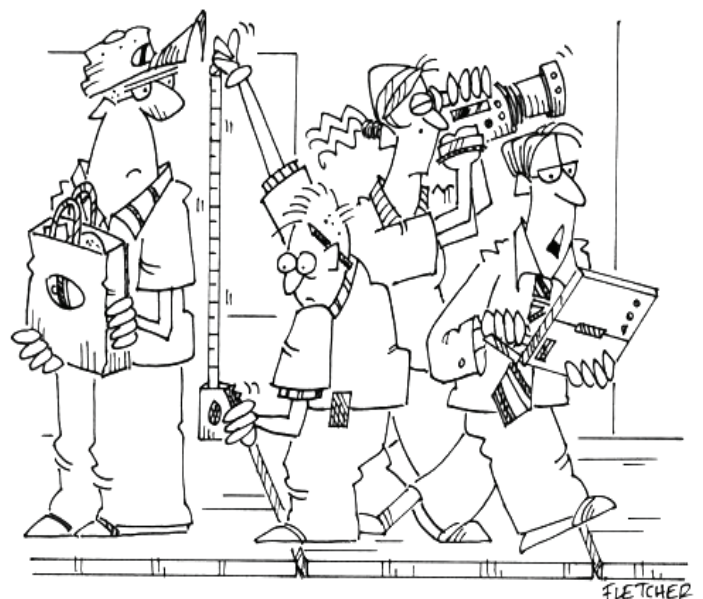
Planning the Tour

There are two types of tours that you can plan: a walking tour and a driving tour. They both have benefits

and limitations, so it's best to consider what is most appropriate for your neighborhood. In some cases, you may want to combine walking and driving, particularly when you need to cover a city or a large neighborhood or when safety is a consideration. Some communities were not built for pedestrian traffic and may not be safely walkable.

For a walking tour, a few guidelines might help. First of all, try to be unobtrusive. When working with a team, this would mean splitting the group up into groups of two or three. A group of five or six constitutes a crowd and could draw attention. Second, try taking part in everyday activities such as taking public transportation, buying something at a store, or eating in a restaurant. Third, take notes as you go along and discuss your observations.

In the case of a "windshield tour" by car or bus, it works best to have a team of two in charge: one to drive and the other to guide participants as they observe and record their observations.



"REMEMBER...THE GOAL OF TODAY'S COMMUNITY TOUR IS TO GET A BETTER SENSE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD WITHOUT ATTRACTING ATTENTION."

In either case, take time to analyze what you observed. The following questions might be helpful in doing a debriefing or analysis after the tour: What are the community's outstanding assets? What seems to be the community's biggest challenges? What is the most striking thing about the community? What is the most unexpected? What about the aesthetic quality of the community, was it positive or negative?

Case Studies

Looking for Vital Signs in Kansas City. Latino Health for All Coalition took a windshield tour of a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas, to assess the condition of seven different sites for physical activities, such as gyms, pools, and playing fields, in a neighborhood that was approximately one by one-and-a-half miles. In preparation, the leaders did an internet search of facilities, then used free online mapping tools to create a map with the sites on them and to establish the boundaries of the community. They printed maps and drove through the community, stopping and getting out to assess the facilities at each location and using a digital voice recorder and camera to document what they discovered. This tour took about fifteen hours to complete. Afterward, the leaders developed a list of physical activity resources for the community. They asked key stakeholders, such as parents, about their experiences at the sites and how often they used them, which went into the final report.²

Building Self-Esteem in Philadelphia. In north Philadelphia, a nonprofit organization called Centro Nueva Creación (New Creation Center) used tours to build self-esteem in the neighborhood's children. Fairhill, a predominantly Latino neighborhood, has for years experienced violence related to drug trafficking and has been nicknamed "The Badlands" by the media for that reason. To counter negative stereotypes, the center calls itself "The Goodlands Project" and uses the arts—yoga, painting, gardening, poetry, and photography—to help children explore the many good things in both the surrounding neighborhood and their own cultural heritage. Once a week, when photography is taught, the children go on a tour of the neighborhood, taking pictures of signs of hope they see in their neighborhood. In that way the children can learn to see their neighborhood in a more positive light than the media portrays.³

Catholic Mothers Walk the War Zone. In Los Angeles, the mothers of Dolores Mission Roman Catholic

Church undertook a tour to save their community from gang violence. Living in the middle of east Los Angeles, the heart of the gang zone, the mothers felt paralyzed by the presence of thirteen active gangs, each vying for dominance. Killings and injuries happened almost daily. During a particularly violent period, the women began to discuss the crisis in their study group, searching the Scriptures and praying for guidance. One night a woman announced that Jesus had called their study group to do something drastic: they must put aside fear and walk into the heart of the gang's war zone. The group was dumbstruck, but after long discussion, they decided it was time to intervene. Seventy women and a few men began a *peregrinación*, or pilgrimage, from one gang turf to the next throughout the barrio. Whenever they encountered the young men, they talked with them, offered prayer, and fed them with chips, salsa, and soda. Each night that week, the mothers walked, eventually covering all thirteen war zones. Within a week, gang-related violence plummeted. The mothers formed Comité pro Paz en el Barrio, the Committee for Peace in the Barrio.⁴ The intervention, in the form of a community tour, had worked.

Getting Out Is the Point

Community tours can be undertaken with the broad goal of getting an overview of the neighborhood, or it can be more narrowly focused on one aspect of the community, such as the environment, housing, or street conditions. Whether the scope is broad or narrow, and whether the purpose is observation or intervention, there is no substitute for just doing it. The point is to get out into the community.

This article has been adapted from Dana Horrell's book, *Engage! Tools for Ministry in the Community* (Fortress Press, 2019).

1. Dana Horrell, "Why Engage the Marginalized?" YouTube video, September 24, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-3_6TvdI-c&t=1s&ab_channel=DanaHorrell. See also, <https://bradyfaithcenter.org/>

2. Daniel T. Schober, "Example: A Windshield Tour to Assess Physical Activity Resources in Kansas City," Community Tool Box, <https://tinyurl.com/yaqjbabk>.

3. <https://www.goodlands.org/>.

4. Ken Butigan, "The Love Walks," *100 Days of Nonviolence*, <https://tinyurl.com/y84wymnh>.