

## Why Community Needs Assessment?

If you are a church planter, or someone considering starting a new church, an emerging practice in church planting is the use of community needs assessment as an integrated part of the “pre-launch” phase up through the first couple years of the new church. As we explore this idea we must first, answer the question:

“What is a needs assessment?”

A needs assessment is the process of systematically listening to community members and leaders through surveys, interviews and other methods. This is a period of intentional “listening,” that when approached in the right way, can have dramatic benefits for the growth of the launch team, new church and its community impact. To work for churches, the process has to be modified from the traditional social work approach and should engage volunteers as the primary workers, include questions about strengths and needs in the community and help the new church focus its ministry both inside the new church and in its community. It will result a public report that can be issued to coincide with the launch date, and help to establish a clear community focused identity for the new church.

Now that we know “what it is”, we need to answer the *why* question:

“Why Should I Include Community Needs Assessment in My Church Plant Process?”

It’s the natural prerequisite to the New Testament model of Demonstration and Proclamation. For us to effectively demonstrate through service, we have to first “investigate.” To use the words of Rick Rusaw, who believes in “show and tell,” as a key ministry approach, needs assessment creates a process of “LISTEN, SHOW AND TELL” to increase the impact and effectiveness of the service and sharing.

Maximize your servant “outreach” activity. Many new churches include a series of outreach events that range from free car washes to block parties. The impact of these activities can be improved when they are linked to a needs assessment. The team simply does intentional survey work during the events to help them focus on listening, make better connections with those who attend and to listen to the heart of the community.

Develop missional disciples in your core team. While we often work to “win” team members to the new church effort, we cannot afford to only “disciple” them to church practices. This reality is made clear in the new study by Willow Creek, REVEAL. To many, a real disciple is missional—that is, their life includes an external life focus in which they see themselves as sent people, present in the community not just to set up chairs, or lead singing, but to personally win and disciple others. Needs assessment helps put the entire team on this track, and gives their leaders an effective way to work at “action discipleship” in which they work together in the community, talking and listening to community members intentionally. Without intentionally focused personal

discipleship around mission, we may find ourselves have to “re-disciple” people who we truly only won to the work of church, not the work of the mission of God—to be sent in the world.

Make hundreds of new connections, relationships. We know that people come and stay in new churches when they connect with people. An effective church launch requires hundreds of new relationships in a short amount of time. If we are targeting more than just transfer growth, or those who are shopping for a new church, the needs assessment will put us personally in front of as many hundreds as we want.

Let the community know we are serious about serving. Since community needs assessment is the official method that new organizations in the community prepare to serve, our use of the needs assessment lets the community know that serving is more than lip service—we are serious, intentional and sophisticated about understanding the needs in our community. The needs assessment changes the conversation with community leaders from the very beginning. It is critical to establish a service identity for the new church from the beginning.

Develop community partnerships. Long term partnerships with community organizations result from the needs assessment process. It allows us to begin by asking “how can we help?”, rather than “what can you give us?” You will discover that your requests for meetings with community organizations are much more readily accepted for the purpose of needs assessment than they are for the introduction of a new church. One church reported a 100% “yes” response to appointment requests with more than 200 community leaders during their needs assessment.

Survey the landscape. We can only learn so much about a community from secondary sources like demographic or lifestyle research. There are hidden treasures of relationships, personal readiness for a new life, community partners, and significant assets and needs in the community just waiting to be discovered. Since community is a complex mixture of culture, spiritual attitudes, institutions, families, social groups, commerce and identity, the only real way to understand this landscape is “learn by walking around.” The needs assessment allows this thorough kind of survey to put you in contact with all of these important elements.

Raise up new leaders that could lead community service efforts. If your new church will include a long term focus on service, you will need to grow a new kind of leader. The earlier this starts in your plant process the stronger your community ministry effort will become. We can measure the value placed on community service by the church calendar, budget and leadership assigned to it. The needs assessment provides a great opportunity to attract people who can grow into this kind of leadership and give them the right foundation.

Build a missional DNA in the church from its very beginning. It’s the early history of the church that sets its DNA. If your new church will be truly missional (organized around

the Kingdom mission), then what you do at the beginning will be critical to establish this “DNA.” Needs assessment provides an early process that will engage everyone in community focus and help set this priority.

Use an incarnational process to expand brand awareness. Rather than rely solely on marketing tools like postcards to allow people to know that you are present, the needs assessment can provide brand awareness at a much deeper and create relational connections, beyond just the “fleeting image” or “unique impression” created by traditional marketing methods. Needs assessment is not primarily marketing, but it helps to achieve brand identity anyway.

Crack the cultural code in your community early and accurately. One well know pastor told me that it took him nearly 10 years to really understand the culture of his community after he started a new church. Needs assessment advances this time clock dramatically, but giving insight to not only the leaders of a new church, but to its entire plant team. The entire team becomes more culturally aware within a short amount of time. This will sharpen everything about the new church from style to teaching, small groups and worship by aligning them with community values.

Help every member of your plant team to become a community net worker. Current research places the number of network contacts over 1200 for an effective church launch, and the planter cannot be the only net worker. Needs assessment points the entire team at specific community targets and gives them the initial opening to initiate a relationship.

Prepare to focus and sustain long term community engagement. The real question for new churches that want to have a community ministry or service focus is how will they sustain it? The current default for many churches is occasional and random community efforts that don’t result in sustained relationships that lead to transformation. The needs assessment brings clear focus to the community ministry by aligning the community ministry focus with the church calling, gifts and resources. This focus is a primary ingredient to community ministry that can be sustained.

To find out “how” to complete a community needs assessment, check out the needs assessment process and tools created by Compassion by Design for both new churches and churches seeking to turn the missional corner. <http://www.compassionbydesign.org>