

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 is 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?