

Community Leader Conversations

This approach to exploring the context is especially fruitful because it builds face-to-face relationships with people who are deeply concerned about your local community— such as school superintendent, police chief, director of social services, and town planner. In larger urban areas, you may be approaching neighborhood leaders, agencies that use your building, and your local school principal. It is a mistake to start off by asking them what your church should be doing— they may have an opinion, but this is not the thing you need from them most. Get them talking about what they see as they look at your local community— realities, trends, initiatives, problems, cultural changes.

- Make a list of four to seven community leaders from different sectors of life. Possible candidates might be: school superintendent, police chief, head of social services, town planner, a denominational official familiar with your area, and a few neighboring religious leaders.
- Assign one or two team members to handle each interview.
- Schedule a 30-minute appointment with each community leader. Tell the leader right at the beginning that you have three basic questions to cover during this short interview:

- 1. What impressions, if any, do you have of our congregation?**
- 2. What trends and challenges are you seeing in our community today?**
- 3. What unmet needs do you see in our community?**

- I strongly suggest that you do not ask, “What should our church be doing?” I have known many community leaders to balk at a request to tell the church what its business should be. That’s your job. Ask them to talk about what they know best: the conditions and needs they confront every day in their own work.
- Be prepared for some awkward moments when you ask for impressions of your congregation. These leaders may not know who you are, where you are located, or what you have ever done as a church. Asking this question gives you a reality check on whether your congregation has much of a profile in the wider community— and whether the information others have about you is correct. Thank them for whatever they offer.
- From the notes you have taken during the interview, write up a brief summary of the responses you received to your three questions, using as many of the person’s own words and phrases as you can.
- Bring these reports back to the planning team for discussion.

Adapted from chapter 4 of *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral to Program Size Transition* by Alice Mann (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001),
and Resource S of *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning
as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).