

The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

# WALKING THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD



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This resource is made possible by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Visit [www.studyingcongregations.org](http://www.studyingcongregations.org) for further research and resources.



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### ***About Studying Congregations***

StudyingCongregations.org is the premier resource for understanding religious congregations in the United States. A collaborative project of leading scholars in the fields of sociology of religion, history, and practical theology, the strategies, resources and tools you will discover at StudyingCongregations.org have been designed specifically for theological educators, future religious leaders, and anyone else who wants to go beyond the received wisdom to discover what is happening in religious gatherings today.

This resource is offered to you as a gift of the Congregational Studies Team, an informal research group that has led the way in researching US congregations. Their work is generously funded by The Lilly Endowment.

*What we see on foot (or in a wheelchair) is often very revealing. Groups come together in specific places, and those places shape who they are and give expression to their identity. There are several ways to approach an exploration of the spaces a religious group occupies, but they are all aimed at opening your eyes to the social realities and meanings you might miss without exploring the nooks and crannies at ground level.*

# EXPLORING THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

This exercise assumes that you have a regular meeting place (even if it is rented or temporary). Organize a few folks to take this walk together, and start from your meeting place. Walk as far as is comfortable and cover the side streets, as well as the main thoroughfares. Take notes, chat along the way about what you notice, and consider taking pictures, as well ([link to visual methods](#)).

Are there new buildings or developments? If there is housing, what kind? Are some areas looking particularly good or bad? What about new businesses? Are there a lot of people walking around and enjoying the area, or does it seem deserted? What kinds of people do you see? Is there a police presence? Are there posters about community events? Signs about a neighborhood watch area? Or nothing but concrete and traffic? What does it feel like walking around? Or trying to get around in a wheelchair?

Once you've returned, think about ways your group is and isn't connected to that community. Think about how your property does and doesn't fit. Is or isn't inviting. Or could perhaps be used more effectively.



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# INSIDE YOUR OWN SPACE.

A space tour is a great way to understand how different participants and subgroups understand the spaces you use. Who uses what rooms, and for what? What do the paintings or artwork mean to individuals? What are the stories about purchasing carpet or tables or religious symbols? Is there a place reserved for youth or children? What about new people?

You can do this exercise with one person or with a group. Walk through the building and the grounds, asking questions about how space is used, what has happened there, and what it means. Or, ask people to take you to the places that are their favorites, and ask why. In each space, be sure to ask for stories about memorable events or pet peeves about how it is or isn't used. Pay attention to accessibility – both what is physically accessible and what is socially and culturally accessible. Are there places where “people like us” don't go? And don't forget the “stuff” you see along the way. You might even ask people to make a list of things they would most miss – or would most like to see go!

A variation on this exercise is to use photos to generate conversations about space. See our visual methods tool for more information on that.

No matter how you do these exercises to explore your space, don't forget your notes! As soon as possible after the event, set aside the time for recording your memories and impressions. Turn the quick notes you took during the tour into a full description of what you learned. If you included photos, attach them to the file and identify them. Remember that these notes will help you see the overall patterns in the work you are doing and identify other areas that need to be explored.

