

GET TO KNOW THE COMMUNITY THROUGH MAPPING

When Pastor Alexis was hired to do community outreach in a racially diverse, economically struggling neighborhood, church members told him, “This is a high crime neighborhood.” Yet he was skeptical. What if news reports placed undue importance on crimes and how much did church members’ personal experience with the community or crime generally color their perceptions? Checking city government maps of crime rates, he discovered crime to be no worse than in the surrounding areas.¹

Mapping Clarifies the Picture

Mapping can clarify the picture of a church’s neighborhood by filling out incomplete information or overturning misconceptions. It provides information visually on a geographic background and can be high tech or low. High-tech mapping combines the use of the global positioning system (GPS) with digital mapping software, which has replaced physical maps for many uses. Low-tech maps can be drawn with pencil and paper based on information provided by good, old-fashioned conversation.

Basic Mapping

Draw a basic map of the neighborhood before deciding how and where to reach out. Start by defining your community’s physical boundaries, including major streets, highways, railroad tracks, hills, and rivers. Next, look for anchor institutions—such as schools, hospitals, prisons, and military or recreational facilities—that are sources of power and decision making in the community and provide stability in moments of crisis. Finally, include gathering places, such as churches, parks, schools, service clubs, restaurants, taverns, and street corners.

The community’s people constitute a significant part of this analysis. To help you in this process, identify and gather a group to tell stories about the community. Include visual observations of the community by taking a quick drive or walk through the neighborhood, deliberately looking for the “invisible” people who are

marginalized and powerless. Finally, consider intangible forces, such as laws, cultural values, employment patterns, and job security.²

Conversational Mapping

Low-tech mapping can be informal and conversational. Paul Lichterman observed how a group of church volunteers used an informal mapping process to get to know the low-income neighborhood they served. The Park Cluster commuted monthly from their tree-lined suburban neighborhoods to the Park neighborhood, a multi-ethnic, low-income community. As they became more curious about neighborhood institutions, they began an informal process that the researcher labelled “social mapping.” Interviewees shared their stories: Ned talked about all the different thrift shops and Mary knew all about the local schools and could tell the group which ones had congregations and synagogues nearby that might be approached in the future to sponsor tutoring programs. Through their conversations, they carried around in their heads a shared mental map of the neighborhood, its resources, and its problems.³



“DOUG’S PAINSTAKING EFFORTS TO MAP ESSENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD ASSETS WILL ENABLE US TO CONFRONT THE NEXT CRISIS WITHOUT SQUANDERING VALUABLE TIME SEARCHING FOR A DONUT SHOP!”

Digital Mapping

The recent emergence of wiki-platforms such as OpenStreetMap (OSM; OpenStreetMap.org) offers a place where interested persons can contribute to a single map, from assets such as grocery stores, banks, and thrift shops to hazards such as unshoveled sidewalks, reported crime incidents, and potholes. For church leaders willing to engage the newer forms of technology, wiki platforms offer churches a powerful community planning tool.⁴

Computer maps such as Google Maps are called geographic information systems⁵ and wiki-platforms such as OSM represent an open source version of Google Maps and are free for anyone to use or modify. Users can create overlays to the basemap provided by OSM, plugging in information they find useful for themselves. OSM applies the concept of crowdsourcing to mapmaking, operating in a manner comparable to Wikipedia, an encyclopedia whose contributors write and edit articles, subject to the review of other contributors who are part of the community. Church leaders could use online maps in at least two ways: for crisis response and for the mapping of communities too poorly resourced to have their own self-designed maps.

- **Crisis Response.** Mapping proved invaluable to aid workers in crisis response after the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti. Given Haiti's poverty, humanitarian aid workers found themselves hampered by only knowing where the major roads were. Here "citizen geographers" from around the world proved invaluable, developing a base map for humanitarian aid workers in the field.
- **Community Assistance.** Churches could work with low-income neighborhoods to develop collaborative maps to benefit residents. For example, commercial map makers have shown little interest in mapping the Kibera community of Nairobi, Kenya, a massive and impoverished section of the city, despite the fact that it is home to hundreds of thousands of people. Users of OSM created Map Kibera, which now serves as a comprehensive guide to data that matters for residents, such as water points, toilets, clinics, schools, pharmacies, places of worship, and non-governmental organization offices.⁶

Collaborative Mapping

If collaborative mapping could work for Kibera, it could make a difference for the resource-starved communities that many US churches serve. Such communities often lack features that middle- and upper-middle-

class neighborhoods take for granted, including high-quality schools; jobs that pay a living wage; banks that offer reasonably priced, non-predatory loans; and supermarkets with adequate selections of fresh foods. In order to improve the situation, churches could collaborate with local resident groups to create a map with features such as food banks, thrift shops, transportation points, and grocery stores offering fresh produce. Such data could not only help service providers but also public policy advocates seeking to bring change.

Sponsor a Mapping Party

Church leaders hoping to raise awareness of collaborative work might consider sponsoring a mapping party. Use the event to train volunteers in developing digital maps. Volunteers could learn how to download aerial photos and alter them using web browser-based editing software. Volunteers who prefer to explore the neighborhood themselves could go out for a walk, a bike ride, or drive around the community using GPS units to mark their location and notepads to write down the information, coming back later to record the data on a computer.

Collaborative mapping requires teamwork but not high-end technology. However, those with a technical bent can use wiki-platforms such as OSM to create a specialized, self-generated community map. Whether high-tech or not, mapping provides a way for community members to develop a sense of place through visually representing different aspects of the community in relation to its geography. When undertaken with others, mapping provides one more basis for building community.

1. "The Several Forms of Community Mapping," *Best Practice Briefs* No. 3 1998-1999, Michigan State University, <http://outreach.msu.edu/capablecommunities/documents/CommunityMapping1.pdf>.

2. Carl S. Dudley, *Community Ministry: New Challenges, Proven Steps to Faith-Based Initiatives* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 22-50.

3. Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 179.

4. Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st-Century Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2015), 272-73.

5. "GIS: Geographic Information System," National Geographic, June 21, 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/geographic-information-system-gis/>.

6. Sterling Quinn, "OpenStreetMap and Its Use as Open Data," <https://web.archive.org/web/20180609162822/https://www.e-education.psu.edu/geog585/node/738>.