

## **Exegeting Your Community's Culture**

(Notes from talk by Shaun Garman, Lead Pastor at Seed Communities)

Pastors are trained to exegete the Scriptures as they preach, teach, admonish and console

This training and skill set utilized the grammatical, literal, historical, synthesis and practical principles.

In order to be in mission in our communities, it is helpful to learn how to exegete our culture in order speak the Gospel into it.

### **Lead your church to exegete your local culture - 20 questions**

1. Where do you need to go to listen to your culture?
2. What are the housing and people demographics in your GAOR?
3. How is life affected by the geography and weather patterns?
4. Who are the cultural heroes in your local and regional culture?
5. What is sexuality like in your culture?
6. What does masculinity look like?
7. What does femininity look like?
8. What are the physical signs of wealth?
9. What does security look like?
10. How is authority viewed in your culture?
11. What are the social conflicts currents which are currently being dealt with?
12. Who is moving into your community
13. What are the acceptable terms to describe the various "sub-cultures" which are acceptable and provide dignity?
14. What/Who are the "gods" in your culture?

15. What is considered "art" in your culture?
16. What are the accepted rhythms of life in your culture?
17. How does the history of your culture affect life today?
18. How did your city come to be the way it is?
19. What political, cultural and economic issues have shaped the ethos and beliefs of your city?
20. Who do you need to listen to?

### **For Reflection**

Are you willing to be indigenous to your culture?

How do you adopt a Gospel lens view of your culture?

Is this a "one time" exercise?

More talking or more listening?

When we live with a missionary mindset, like Paul, we will meaningfully walk around and live in our neighborhood, taking the time to observe what people consider most important (what they worship), what they fear, what they believe, and what they idolize.

We exegete the neighborhood and city to which we have been sent, because we need to find the best way to take the whole gospel into the real context in which people are living.

### Deeper Questions for Local Cultural Exegesis

To simplify things even further, there are four basic questions you can ask to gain a fairly good understanding of a particular neighborhood and/or city, based on the key elements of a culture.

1. (Narrative) What story is the city calling us to embody?
2. (Rituals) What are the core practices that people engage in which shape their identity and sense of mission in life?

3. (Institutions) What are the primary institutions that are shaping the city, and how are they shaping people's identity and destiny?
4. (Ethics) How would your neighborhood and/or city define success?

As a way to help you answer these four primary questions, we will dive a bit deeper into each element of culture and consider a number of other questions, with the goal of being able to answer these four primary questions with greater depth.

### **1. Narrative: What story is the neighborhood within the city calling us to embody?**

When seeking to understand the narrative of a people, you need to consider what they believe about God, or if they believe in God (theology), what they believe with a sense of confidence (doctrines), and the (stories) that they tell each other, the stories that they live into based on the music they listen to, and the various kinds of media that to which the continually expose themselves.

Here are some questions that help us get to the heart of the overarching story that our city is calling us to embody.

- What are the key slogans of the city or neighborhood?
- What are the prime landmarks, and how do they shape the narrative of the neighborhood?
- What kind of music do people tend to listen to?
- What lyrics do they have committed to memory, and what story is that calling them into?
- What are people's favorite films and what lines can they quote by heart?
- What are people's dreams and hopes?
- What are their fears and stresses?
- What do people think about God, about Jesus, or about the church?
- What places of worship are in the neighborhood and what do they tell us about the neighborhood?
- How do people think about money and power?
- What are the idols of the neighborhood?
- Who has "played God" in the city and how has that shaped the city's story?
- What are important moments in the history of the city, or *kairos moments* in the life of the city or neighborhood?

### **2. Rituals: What is the core practices that people engage in which shape their identity and sense of mission in life?**

To understand the life shaping rituals of the neighborhood within city, you need to observe the formal ceremonies that are fused with meaning that people engage in (rites), the common (practices) in which people routinely engage, and the everyday (liturgies) that people partake in that shape their ultimate desires, identity and sense of the good life.

Here are some questions that help us to understand the thick practices that people routinely engage.

- What activities do people engage in which give them a sense of worth?
- What holidays are celebrated with the most vigor?
- How are these holidays celebrated and in how do they shape people's ultimate desires?
- How do people approach their work, as a career or a calling?
- What do people do in their "free" time and how much "free" time do they have?
- Other than work, what do people devote the most time toward?
- What third spaces do people engage with the most?
- How do people spend their time, their money and their talents?
- In what ways do people seek to meet their need for beauty?
- Do people tend to work for the common good of the neighborhood or for their own good?

**3. Institutions: What are the primary institutions that are shaping the city, and how are they shaping people's identity and destiny?**

Institutions have certain (structures) that speak to the distribution of power and decision making, (systems) that either encourage the flourishing of the city or demise of the city, and (symbols) of success and failure that shape people's sense of worth.

- Which companies are the primary employers of the city?
- Do the primary employers look out for the common good of the city or their own good?
- Is the government centralized or decentralized giving power to the local neighborhoods?
- Does the police force look out for the underprivileged or add to the divisiveness of the city?
- Do the lawmakers and judges treat the people with fairness or with favoritism?
- How do the various institutions deal with immigrants as people made in the image of God or a problem?
- If there is gentrification happening in the neighborhood, are the displaced treated as full human beings?
- Who founded the hospitals, how do they operate and do people have equal access to health care as people made in God's image?
- Is it easy or difficult for small businesses to flourish in the city?
- Which institutions are caring for the homeless in a God honoring way?
- Are churches seeking to bring a greater sense of the kingdom to their neighborhood or looking out for themselves?
- What is the reputation of the religious leaders churches in the neighborhood?
- Who are the most powerful people in the city and do they promote justice or their own welfare?

- What are the most influential media institutions and how does their reporting influence people?
- What are the primary educational institutions and how are they shaping the life of the children and the city?
- Does everybody have equal opportunity when it comes to education?
- What are the significant universities in the city or neighborhood and in what ways are they influencing the people in the neighborhood?
- What is the built environment of the city (the cities approach to architecture, parks and sustainability), and does it add to the flourishing of the city or not?

#### **4. Ethics: How would your city and/or neighborhood define success?**

Ethics are the moral convictions that shape the life of community and speak to people's sense of (being), which in turn shape people's (doing). Ethics require space and time for people to engage in (reflecting) on their lives and their neighborhood, in order to examine if they are promoting the common good.

- Does the pace of life in the city aid or hinder people's ability to engage in solitude, silence and reflection?
- Does the built environment (design of the city, neighborhood) help people be fully human or add to agitation people feel?
- Does the art scene help people in the neighborhood and city to consider the important questions the community ought to address or add to the duress of the people?
- How do the primary modes of transportation shape people's sense of being?
- Who promotes and hinders justice in the neighborhood?
- How does the city shape people's conception of the good life?
- Does the city promote the "American dream" or God's vision for the future, and how does this shape people's imagination?
- Do the laws and enforcement of the laws help each person of the city, no matter what class or ethnicity they may be, feel like a person made in the image of God?
- Does the cities description of the "good life" cause people to consider others more important than themselves or to look out for number one?
- What behaviors are rewarded and what behaviors are punished?
- How does the city government budget reflect her understanding of success?

