

**PEOPLES NEXT DOOR**

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# FOURFOLD PANORAMIC ASSESSMENT

How to carefully examine your local church in  
its mission context.



# INTRODUCTION

"The gospel never fits properly within a culture."

That is a quote by Ed Stetzer from a chapter in *The Mission of Today's Church*. In the chapter, Stetzer is detailing the plight of Southern Baptist churches in relation to the North American mission field. He goes on to say, "Two parallel problems keep many believers from truly engaging the unchurched culture. Christians tend to love or despise the culture too much," (Stetzer, 152).

Stetzer is onto something here, and it would do us well to take note. For as long as I can remember, churches have seemed to fall somewhere on a spectrum of trendiness. Some churches are total sticks in the mud. Changing the carpet color in the sanctuary is just shy of heresy, and they have split over less. Other churches seem to try so hard to be cool. They are the high school cafeteria equivalent of the guy doing the quarterback's homework so he can sit at the cool kid's table. These churches try to look trendy, dress trendy, sing trendy, and preach trendy, and they will do anything (read change anything) in order to appeal to the masses.

So, which one is right? Is there not a better option?

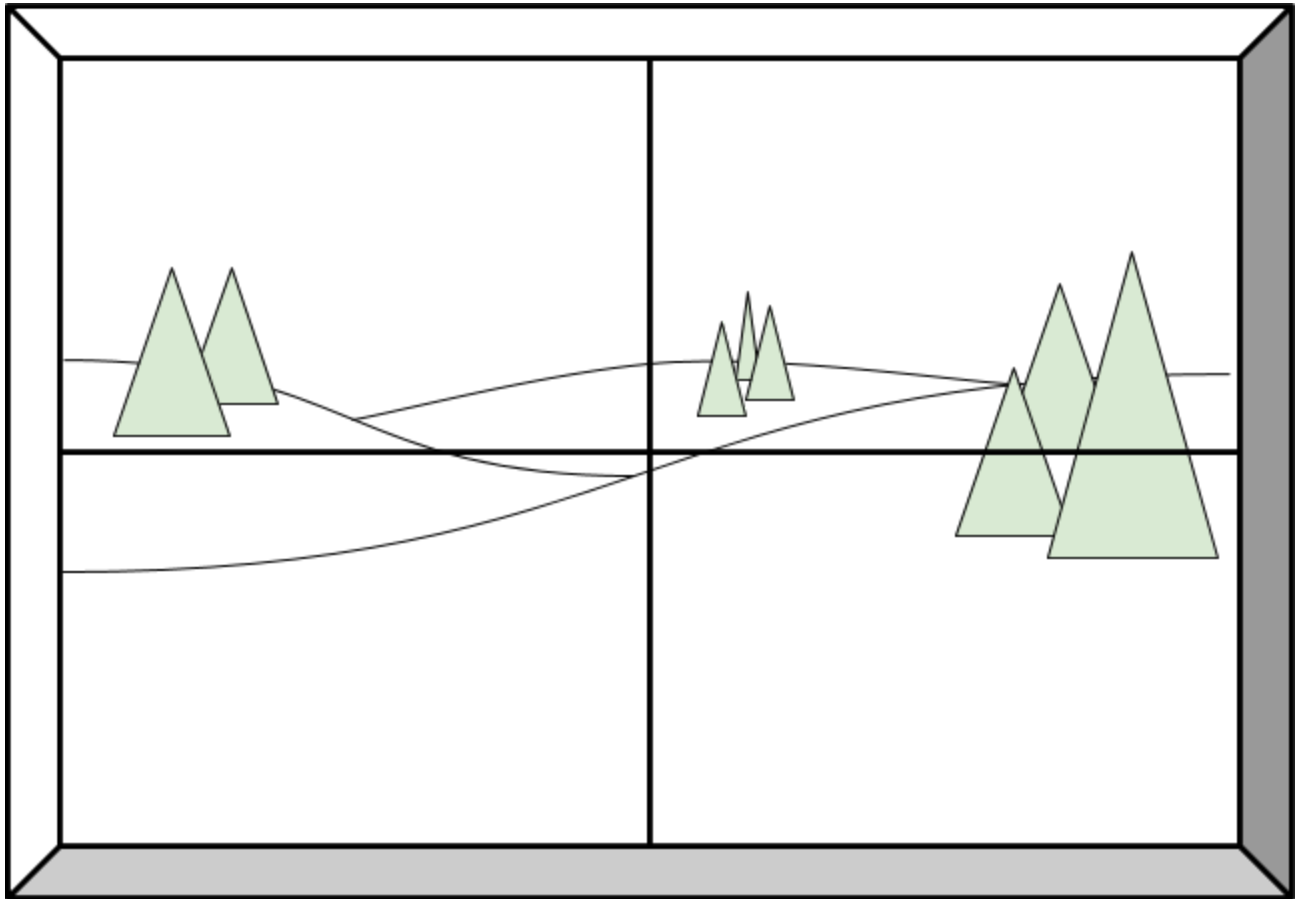
Churches can, in fact, strive to be both biblically faithful and culturally relevant, and a great deal of church health requires maintaining both priorities. Without a focus on biblical and spiritual fidelity, a church ultimately ceases to be a church. However, without an eye toward the culture and a heartbeat for expressing the Christian gospel in manner that makes sense to their community, churches will lose the voice necessary to execute their mission.

Biblical faithfulness and cultural relevance require constant examination. Over time, churches lose sight of their vision or the context around them shifts, and familiarity allows blind spots to develop. The results of this misalignment are often easier to see than the root causes. Enlisting the help and counsel of trusted outsiders, such as denominational leaders and fellow pastors, is an important step in accurate examination. Then, with the help of others, a church can examine and assess the relevant information to understand both the state of their church and their local context of mission.

## **The Panorama**

In order to thoroughly examine a church, it helps to consider the purpose of the church in the first place. Why do churches exist? In short, churches exist to bear witness to the glory of Christ through the making of new disciples from all nations. In order to do that, two big categories must be considered: the local church itself, and the context they are attempting to reach. Too often, people attempting to revitalize, plant, or replant a church do so with an eye on only one of these categories. That is always a recipe for disaster. It may, in fact, be why the church is in its current shape. It is possible to polish up a church real nice, and due to a lack of contextual understanding, create the fanciest obstacle to the gospel in a particular neighborhood. Church and community are both objects of examination done well.

However, even that is not enough. In order to view both of these categories accurately, it must be done from more than one angle. Multiple perspectives exist for the local church and for the community: an insider perspective and an outsider perspective. Insiders have information only those who are a part of the church (or community) would know. Outsiders, on the other hand, provide a unique vantage point, and if the goal is making new disciples, then their perspective is crucial.



Considering all of these perspectives in examination results in a fourfold approach that provides a panoramic view of the church in its community. Like a panoramic portrait of a stunning landscape, considering all of these perspectives provides the complete picture for the church. This picture then becomes the basis for decisions in strategy and planning moving forward. It is important to consider each of these viewpoints in turn. The following pages provide a snapshot of the examination process for each perspective in the panorama.

# PANORAMIC ASSESSMENT

The panoramic assessment provides a framework to view your church and context from four different angles. Each perspective is essential for a complete picture of the church's situation.

	<b>Church</b>	<b>Context</b>
<b>Insider</b>		
<b>Outsider</b>		



Additional resources at [www.peoplesnextdoor.com](http://www.peoplesnextdoor.com).

# CHURCH INSIDER

## What are you looking for?

With the church insider perspective, the goal is to search for signs of life. Does the church still exhibit vitality from the inside.

- Spiritual vitality - Does the congregation exhibit a vibrant faith, spiritual maturity, a commitment to prayer, and a love for God's word?
- Relational vitality - Does the congregation love one another? Is there a spirit of unity, or does the congregation exhibit signs of deep division?
- Financial vitality - How are the church's finances? Does the congregation still give and steward its money well?
- Missional vitality - Does the congregation demonstrate a genuine concern for the lost? Are they attempting to make new disciples, especially in the church's immediate community?

## Sources of Info:

- Annual Church Profile
- Church confession, constitution, and by-laws
- Budget
- Membership map
- Membership data
- Church members and leaders

## Who do you ask?

- Current leadership
- Older members
- Recent members (if any)
- Pillar members and fringe members.
- People who have left the church.

## Questions to answer:

*The questions for this section are an abbreviated list compiled from Mark Hallock's internal assessment questions found in Replant Roadmap (Hallock, 124-134). For the full list, consult Hallock's work.*

- In your opinion, what are the three best things about this church?
- What is your dream for how the church might look ten years from now?
- Who is the favorite pastor in the history of the church and why?
- If a big decision needs to be made, to whom do the members look for blessing and approval?
- What are the expectations laid upon church members?
- What items in the current worship service are non-negotiable? What items are acceptable and have been featured in the past?
- What is the present financial situation of the church?
- What are the expectations for the pastor's wife and children (spoken and unspoken)?

# CHURCH OUTSIDER

## What are you looking for?

If the church insider perspective reveals the vitality of the congregation, the church outsider perspective reveals the reputation and witness of this gospel community. In other words, how does the outside world see the church?

- How do people in the community describe the church?
- Do visitors think the facilities are substandard? Do they think the church is closed?
- Does the church have a reputation for being divisive or friendly?
- What, if anything, do outsiders know about the church's message?
- Do people think it is a Bible-believing church that loves people?

## Sources of Info:

- Other area pastors
- Denomination leaders
- First time guest interviews
- "Secret shoppers"
- Community survey

## Who do you ask?

- Trusted area pastors
- Director of Missions/ Associational leader
- A good sample of community members
- First time visitors
- People who have left the church

## Questions to answer:

- How do you (as an outsider) view the facilities of this church?
- Is this church welcoming?
- What is the message of this church? Do they seem to have one?
- How would you describe the reputation of this church in the community?
- Are you aware of any issues (as another pastor in the area) within this congregation?
- What do you think are the greatest strengths and weaknesses of this church?

# CONTEXT OUTSIDER

## What are you looking for?

When turning away from the church to examine the community, the first place to start is the context outsider perspective. Often, members of the congregation possess a context outsider perspective. The church may meet in the community; however, many of the members are not actually residents. Additionally, the outsider context will consider objective data, such as census and demographic information. Finally, the context outsider perspective also includes the way the leaders of the community attempt to present it to outsiders.

- How do members of the congregation view the immediate community where the church facilities are located?
- What are the populations and demographic trends?
- How do community leaders attempt to present to community to outsiders?

## Sources of Info:

- Census data
- Neighborhood newspapers
- Chamber of commerce materials
- Local websites
- Church member interviews

## Who do you ask?

- Community leaders (civic clubs, city council members, chamber of commerce representatives)
- Church members

## Questions to answer:

- What does the census say about this community?
- What is the story of this community? (This is especially interesting when the congregation is asked.)
- How has this community changed in the last 20 years?
- What are two or three things that residents of this community seem to value?
- How long have most of the residents lived here?

# CONTEXT INSIDER

## What are you looking for?

The context insider perspective is often the most challenging to obtain. However, this perspective is crucial to an accurate assessment of the church in its context and provides the examiner with the “real story” of the community. This perspective attempts to understand how the actual community residents view themselves, their community, and the world around them. Knowing this is imperative for mission.

- How do the residents view the community where they live?
- How do the residents describes themselves and their worldview?
- Are there competing narratives in this community? For instance, has gentrification created two opposing communities in the same location?
- What is the spiritual and emotional climate of the community?

## Sources of Info:

- Community survey
- Personal interviews
- Face to face time in the neighborhood

## Who do you ask?

- Residents of the immediate area surrounding the church facilities
- Local shop owners
- Community members who do not attend church anywhere
- Attempt as diverse a sampling as possible

## Potential questions to ask:

- Do you like living here?
- What is your favorite part of living here?
- What are two or three things that you (as a resident of this community) value?
- What are things you would change?
- How long have most of the residents lived here?
- How have things changed since you moved here?
- Are new residents similar to older ones?



# PUTTING IT TOGETHER

After carefully examining all four perspectives, a synthesis can be developed that provides the examiner with a full view of the church in its mission context. In order to create the panoramic, a brief report can be written summarizing the findings from each perspective examined. After the reports are compiled, the findings can be compared to create a composite picture of both the church and the community. At this point, assessments can be made about the overall health of the church and how well the church fits into its community. In addition, valuable information has been gathered that provides keys to cultural relevance and making new disciples in the immediate context of the church. This information can be used to cast a fresh vision for next steps by the congregation.

## **Cited Sources**

Hallock, Mark. *Replant Roadmap: How Your Church Can Help Revitalize Dying Churches*. Littleton, CO.: Acoma Press, 2017.

Norman, R. Stanton. *The Mission of Today's Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007.