

Grounding Discernment in Data: Strategic Missional Planning Using GIS Technology and Market Segmentation Data

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***Abstract:** Taking Jesus' call to love our neighbors seriously requires engaging them in the neighborhoods where they live. However, neighborhoods are transforming demographically faster than ever before. If we can help congregations more quickly understand their neighborhoods, there is a much greater likelihood that they will grow to love them as they love themselves. The question before us is, how do we help faith communities and their leaders engage missional opportunities that are emerging from rapid population change? The goal of the FaithX Project is to make it possible for faith communities, their leaders, and the judicatories that support them to employ location intelligence and predictive analytics in order for them to discern emerging missional opportunities. FaithX then helps them to create effective missional strategies for engaging those opportunities by asking four essential questions: What is our neighborhood? Who are our neighbors? What are our neighborhood's issues and opportunities? What are our neighborhood's resources?*

***Keywords:** Strategic Missional Planning, GIS Technology, Market Segmentation Data, Neighborhoods, Neighborhood Missional Intelligence, Predictive Analytics*

Introduction

JESUS CALLS UPON THOSE of us who would follow him to love our neighbors as ourselves. By extension, this would mean that Jesus calls us collectively to love our neighborhoods and the people living in them as much as we love ourselves as faith communities.¹ The problem arises when we as faith communities fall out of love with our neighborhoods. This could be, in part, because we have grown fond of the little community we share within our own church buildings, but that strength of our fondness for each other becomes a source of exclusion to those who visit us from the communities outside our

¹ See for example, Matt. 5:43, 19:19, 22:39; Mark 12:31, 12:33; Luke 10:27; cf. Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; Lev. 19:18.

walls.² It is equally likely that our neighborhoods are changing so rapidly that simply knowing our neighborhoods on a personal level, let alone understanding them, becomes an increasingly insurmountable challenge.³

Indeed, our neighborhoods are changing faster than ever before. Neighborhoods that once experienced population shifts over several generations are now transforming demographically in less than a decade—virtually overnight in ecclesiastical terms.⁴ However, we can apply our understanding of this dynamic in reverse. If we can help congregations become familiar with their neighborhoods, there is a much greater likelihood that they will grow to love them as much as they love themselves. The question before us is, how do we help faith communities and their leaders engage the missional opportunities emerging from rapid population change?

We know from research and experience that data alone cannot change minds. Rather than review data objectively, and bring their beliefs about reality in line with observable fact, people tend to look for data that confirms what they already believe, a phenomenon known as the *confirmation bias*.⁵ In this day of increasing tribal division, this tendency is strengthened by our need to believe the same of the people we consider to be our friends and allies, a more intense form of confirmation bias that some call “my-side bias.” For some people and situations, their beliefs about “how the world works” quite literally prevents them from taking notice of discrepant data that contradicts

² See Darren M. Slade, “Religious Homophily and Biculturalism: A Theory of Conservative Church Fragmentation,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 9, no. 1 (2019): 16–17, 22–23 <http://dx.doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/cgp/v09i01/13-28>; Stephen M. Merino, “Religious Involvement and Bridging Social Ties: The Role of Congregational Participation,” *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 291–308, <https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.10>.

³ Cf. Barna Group, *2015 Sees Sharp Rise in Post-Christian Population* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015), <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-sees-sharp-rise-in-post-christian-population/> and Gregory Smith, *America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015), accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁴ Joseph Cortright and Dillon Mahmoudi, *Neighborhood Change, 1970 to 2010: Transition and Growth in Urban High Poverty Neighborhoods* (Portland, OR: Impresa Consulting, 2014); Miriam Zuk et al., “Gentrification, Displacement, and the Role of Public Investment,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 33, no. 1 (2018): 31–44, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0885412217716439>.

⁵ Hugo Mercier, “Confirmation Bias – Myside Bias,” in *Cognitive Illusions: Intriguing Phenomena in Judgement, Thinking and Memory*, 2nd ed., ed. Rüdiger Pohl (London: Psychology Press, 2016), 99–114, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315696935>.

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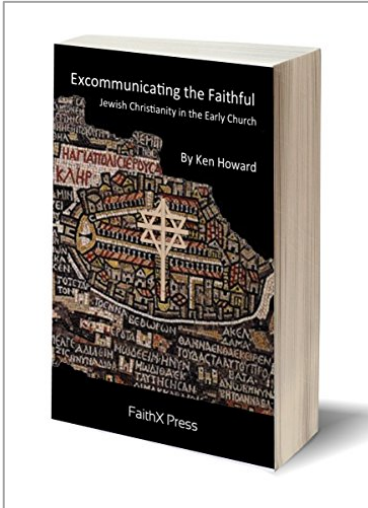
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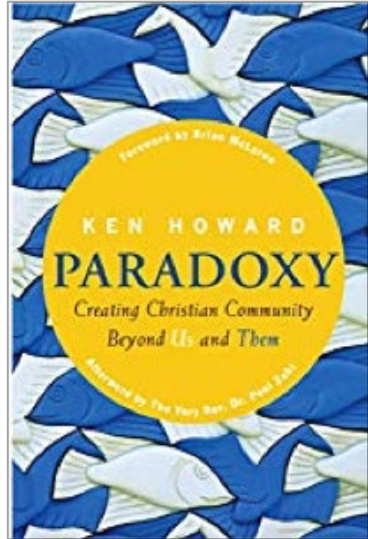
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