



Center for United States Missions

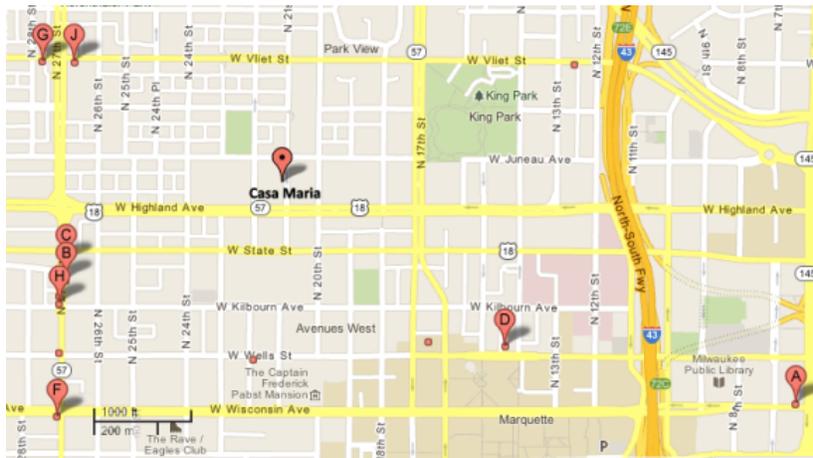
Mission Moments



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Neighboring: How to Establish an Effective Listening Area – Part 3

By Gary L Roberts



People care less about what you know and more about how you apply what you know.

It is one thing to know the reasons for establishing an effective ministry area (see my previous post on Mission Moments) but quite another to actually do it. That is what this blog post is about, the how-to.

Effective *Ministry Area* = Effective *Listening Area*

Ministry and Listening go hand in hand. We can refer to our Effective *Ministry Area* (EMA) as our Effective *Listening Area* (ELA). If we minister in an area without listening, it would be like trying to hit a target we cannot see. Blindly shooting at a target is both ineffective as well as dangerous. If we want to effectively minister to people in our neighborhood, it is important that we employ a listening strategy that is realistic and facilitates relationships with our neighbors.

If relationship is the track on which love runs, the same is true of ministry. No listening, no relationship. No relationship, no love. No love, no ministry. So let us consider actionable steps for listening to people in our neighborhoods.

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Steps to Establish An Effective Listening Area

Get a Map

First, obtain a map that covers your neighborhood and a small amount of the area on all its borders. It can be a paper or digital map, both have pros and cons. Whichever you choose, make sure it is durable. Laminating a paper map adds to its usefulness over the long term and proper file management will do the same for digital maps.

- **Paper Maps:** The *advantages* of a paper map are that they are large and can easily be seen by many people at the same time. Paper maps can be displayed in a prominent place like your office or church to help people in your congregation or ministry team envision their personal relationship to the neighborhood place. The *disadvantage* of paper maps is that they are cumbersome to work with when overlaying information like census data, crime statistics, member locations, and notes on people, associations, and institutions.
- **Digital Maps:** Digital maps afford portability, not just in the sense that you can share the map with people you are with physically, but digital maps can also be shared virtually with other members of your team without having to be in the same physical location. It is easy to add information to digital maps using a simple app like Google Maps or more complex community mapping programs. Storing your digital map using an Internet cloud service allows your team members to have access and add updates 24/7. It is also possible to layer important information like census data, crime statistics, etc. over your map for analysis and presentation purposes. What might be the disadvantage of digital maps? Not everyone is adept at digital file management. Make sure you have a team member who is technically competent to manage your digital services and files.

Define the Boundaries of Your Effective Listening Area

Now that you have your map, add the following information:

- *Natural and human-made boundaries* create barriers that separate people and their natural formation of relationships based upon shared community experience. These include rivers, lakes, parks, green areas, freeways, busy boulevards, etc. In Minneapolis, for example, the Mississippi River is formidable barrier that separates very different neighborhoods on each side.
- *Boundaries of Class, Race, and Ethnicity.* Sometimes it makes sense to trump physical boundaries in order to maintain continuity between social groups. If, for example, a freeway splits an immigrant group, consider not including the group in your ELA or traversing the freeway to include the entire group. The group may share leadership and family members living on both

sides of the freeway. If you live in an urban area you have likely experienced something similar to this. Of course, never use boundaries of any kind to exclude groups of people from your listening area for convenience sake or because of prejudice.

- *Identify neighborhood gathering places* like coffee shops, restaurants, and parks. These are your best opportunity for having conversations with people based upon shared community experience. I call these gathering places ‘listening posts.’

For instance, in my neighborhood I have established three primary listening posts that are strategically placed. All three are great coffee shops. One is on the southwest end of the business district, another is near a college and has a largely student customer base, and the third is along the edge of a park where neighbors have a healthy generational mix. If you connect these three locations on a map it appears as a triangle and each point of the triangle identifies a unique aspect of our neighborhood.

If your neighborhood is under-resourced gathering places may not be apparent. If this is your situation, contact me and I will help you develop a listening strategy.

- *Make your Effective Listening Area walkable.* Enter the above information onto your map and examine it, attempting to scale your ELA into an area that can be easily walked. You will see more, hear more, and smell more. In other words, you will experience more of your neighborhood. If you have determined your neighborhood to be large having followed the above guidelines, you will need to divide and listen. Which brings me to my next point...
- *Plot on the map where your church members, friends, and other believers you may know live.* An important principle of missional neighborhood ministry is to replicate in others the skills you learn. After you identify where they live in the neighborhood, teach them to take responsibility for the blocks surrounding their homes. In this way you can divide your neighborhood among missional believers and increase the relationship potential of your ministry. There are other reasons for plotting your membership on this map, but that will have to wait for another post.
- *Record observations on the map religiously.* The more you learn about your neighborhood the better you can define it and increase the effectiveness of your listening. Do not let your map grow out of date. Continuously add to it and relationships between places and people, people and people, and statistics and people will grow in clarity.

Where to Go From Here

If you follow the above steps you will define your Effective Listening Area. “Great!” you say, “now what? I have all these people to talk with and have never developed a relationship with a stranger in my life! How do I do that?”

Stay tuned! The next post in this series will teach you how to have *learning conversations* with people you do not know. I will share with you *five key questions* that will help you build relationships with your neighbors around shared community experience.



Gary Roberts is an educator, trainer and coach in community listening. His primary mission is to help churches listen to their communities using missional principles and practices. Gary has served the Church as pastor, nonprofit executive director, seminary professor, and consultant. He is certified by the Christian Community Development Association as a practitioner and trainer of trainers in Christian Community Development. He is also a Community Advancement Coach and board member of Communities First Association, working ecumenically toward neighborhood transformation using the principles of Asset-Based Community Development. Gary facilitates neighborhood listening workshops for churches and other neighborhood groups, and provides coaching to pastors and lay leaders.

Moment Extras

Questions and Comments for Reflection

1. Is it realistic for you to do this without help? Brainstorm a team of three to five people who live in your neighborhood and share the same passion for it. If you do not know three to five people who meet these criteria, how will you find and develop them to join you in this work.
2. What do you think of the concept of walkable communities? Is this a realistic expectation or am I out of my mind? List five advantages and five disadvantages of a walkable listening area. How do your ministry priorities affect your willingness and ability to define your neighborhood in this way?
3. Speaking of priorities – How would you need to adjust your workflow to begin listening to your neighborhood in the manner I suggest in this blog?

Useful Links

Update from Gary Roberts on missionalmind.org:

Since the first of the year I have been in a rebranding process, transitioning from missionalmind.org to globerts.com. My contact info below reflects this change.

Though the web address and look of the site have changed, my mission remains the same: *To educate, train, and coach churches and their lay and professional leadership in community listening skills, equipping them to live in relationship with their communities.* In other words, I help churches listen. The new site simply provides a more functional platform to accomplish my mission.

By the time this blog is published in Mission Moments, globerts.com should be live! If not, please go to the site and provide your email address and I will send you a notification as soon as it opens. Thanks to all of you who have already visited and requested notification. I know you will find information that will add value to your neighborhood ministry. Don't worry – I hate spam as much as you! Your email address will never be shared.



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News From The Center

C4USM Connections - C4USM Connections is our e-newsletter sent out periodically. It is designed to keep you informed about the training, research, and resources offered by the Center for U.S. Missions. [Click here to subscribe.](#)

Please pray for these training events in the upcoming months.

March 17

Church Planters Leadership Forum – Missouri District

March 20-21

Churches Planting Churches – Christ Victorious Lutheran Church, Chaska, Minnesota – Minnesota South District

April 11-12

Church Planting Introduction – Regional Mission Convocations, Kansas District

April 17-18

Churches Planting Churches – Iowa District West

April 27-30

Exponential Church Planters Conference – Tampa, Florida

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