

# Reading your Community: Towards an authentic encounter with the city

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In 1983, I left a ministry to university students to give direction to the ministry of Christian Direction with which I presently am involved in Montréal. It is interesting to reflect back on how a relevant missional theology of the city evolved through that change. One day, as I was looking out the window from the sixth floor of our office, I asked myself a question that initiated a reflection that continues to this very day. *I wonder what is being done in my city to incarnate the Good News with people who work in the downtown core, Monday at 8 am until Friday at 5 pm.* Much to my chagrin, I learned that very little was happening. So I began to read about ministry with people in the marketplace and saw the relationship to the needs of urban ministry.<sup>1</sup>

At that same time, I was also reading the Book of Jeremiah. Having been raised in the context of a family that placed a high priority on the Bible and the church, I am not sure how many times I had read that particular book. But in that cold winter of 1983, the opening words of chapter twenty-nine took on a new meaning:

*These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. . . . Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel . . . Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:1-7)*

As God Almighty had called those ten thousand Jewish exiles in Babylon to seek the peace—the *shalom*—of the foreign city, I began to see that the social and spiritual needs of Montréal could not go by me easily.<sup>2</sup> So began the reflection and the action that have informed my life over this period. The context was shaping how I listen to the Bible. I had to join with others to pursue a contextualized action and reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article, “*Reading Your Community: Toward an Authentic Encounter with a Canadian Context*” appeared in *Green Shoots in a Time of Drought: Alternate Futures for the Church in Canada*. Éd., John Bowen. Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013. This version has been substantially changed for a more global audience.

<sup>2</sup> For a more complete treatment of Shalom, consult my chapter, “*Shalom*”, in the book, *Quel shalom pour l’Afrique*, Abidjan, FATEAC, 2014

For a number of years now, I have been inviting students, audiences and readers to join me on the nineteen kilometre trip that I make every day from my home in the inner suburbs of Montréal to my office in the downtown core. It provides a context for the themes that inform my teaching and writing. Those themes include the social context in which we live our daily lives and the traditions Christians share, rooted in the Bible, Christian history, and theology. Contextual theology done in the framework of a biblical theological hermeneutic seeks to help the community of faith listen to the texts, listen to the context, and pursue mission in a integral, transformational manner.

I walk out the door of my home into an amazingly cosmopolitan neighbourhood, called Chomedey. In the homes on my street, I can hear several different languages being spoken, symbolizing a diverse array of cultures. What was once a former European immigration has now shifted to a truly global movement. When I first began thinking about my neighbourhood I was struck by the linguistic plurality. Today, the “Islamisation” of Chomedey is very real. As I stride toward the bus stop, I pass the only Protestant church, and then I cut through the parking lot of the Roman Catholic parish. Forty years ago, both churches were full for weekend services. The United Church had a Sunday school that taught over two hundred children. The exodus of Anglophones from Montréal has decimated that congregation. Today, forty gather on Sunday at 11 am for worship. The Roman Catholic parish once celebrated forty-five masses each week. In 2008, they sold the diminished building to an immigrant Armenian Orthodox congregation. The local mosque is a half a block down the street.

These remarkable religious changes remind me that my neighbours are much more concerned with their own pursuits and the development of a personal value system rather than anything offered by ecclesiastical structures. All things religious have been marginalized in Montréal.

A twelve-minute bus ride takes me to the Metro (the subway) where I enter yet another world, the metropolis of Montréal. It is one of the largest French-speaking cities in the world and the hub of a social transformation, better known as the Quiet Revolution, which altered the very face of Quebec.

The subway takes me into the heart of the city, but through several different “Montréalés.” I pass under *student Montréal*, which includes four major universities, thirty community colleges (or CÉGEPS), and forty professional and technical establishments. Montréal has the most students per capita of any city in North America. The population of student Montréal, in and of itself, would make it the thirteenth largest city in Canada.

Montréal is also a *hurting city*, with hundreds of people living with AIDS, a reported two hundred and thirty-eight thousand people on the welfare rolls, and some nine thousand adolescent prostitutes. Harvest Montréal, the organization that orchestrates food distribution among the poor, gives out thirty tons of food a day to one hundred and fifty thousand people a week. If one looks at the issue chronologically, one sees that the economic salary gap between Montréal and Toronto has been closing since 1960. Yet in 1995, this Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) had the highest rate of poverty in Canada at 27.3%, and was still a full 9% higher than

the rest of Québec by 2000. With the new so-called Market Basket Measure (2008), Montréal began to show an economic improvement for the poor. My Metro companions seem oblivious to this reality: workers with a secondary school leaving certificate have an average income of \$23,562 while a university graduate earns double that amount, \$41,277. In a city where more than 50% of kids drop out of high school, the future does not look bright.

As we swing through parts of *ethnic Montréal*, I am reminded that the two hundred thousand elementary and secondary students in the five school boards of Montréal represent 168 countries.

Then, at the McGill Metro stop, I am literally pushed out of the Metro car. Some seven hundred and fifty thousand people call this “home” throughout the working week. This is *business Montréal*. This CMA generates 76% of the entire Québec economy. I arrive at my office full of questions.

Several years ago, I began to do an interesting exercise with my students in a course I teach on urban ministry at l’Institute de Théologie pour la Francophonie (ITF). The class begins by visiting a rather large ethnic grocery store, Inter-Marché, about a kilometre from the faculty building. The store has a huge inventory of foods from several different countries, arranged in aisles that represent the continents. Haitian food covers a third of the Caribbean aisle. At one point, forty-five different flags hung from the ceiling, all contributed by the customers of the store. Inter-Marché is a success because the owner realized that Montréal is changing, and his store had better adapt to new realities. He does a booming business.

However, in the same neighbourhood, we also visit a church building with its English-only sign: “We worship God every Sunday at 11 am.” It does not take great teaching skill to lead the discussion that evening on the nature of pastoral leadership in a changing situation. They suddenly want to know how to “exegete the neighbourhood,” in much the same way that they have learned to study a biblical text.

How then can we help congregations develop the skills and the attitudes, so that together we can learn to think missionally about the church’s work in the city? Let us look at several principles and practices that can guide us in our learning.

### **Section 1: Orienting our actions**

Since “discovering” Jeremiah 29, I learned that this one text would never inform all that is the mission of God in a community. One of my dear friends and doctoral mentors, Harvey Conn taught me well. I remember him commenting:

Picking one biblical text to sum up my view of urban ministry is an assignment too awesome and dangerous for me. Too awesome, because wherever I turn in my Bible it shouts ‘urban’ to me. Too dangerous, because the text I select could leave out a piece of the picture too crucial in another text and distort the whole. We need a hermeneutic serious enough to link

Genesis to Revelation in the unending story of Jesus as an urban lover and the Church as God's copycat.

I realized that I needed to keep studying the biblical texts!

At the same time several authors, speakers and teachers began to shape my ministry practice. Many authors invited me to pursue a fresh encounter with our culture, taking the social category of "space" seriously. McGill philosopher, Charles Taylor, in particular, introduced me to the term "social imaginaries." This is not the same as the popular idea of worldview, which tends to have a more theoretical focus. "Social imaginaries" refers instead to the deep ideas that inform the life of a social context, and are for this reason critical to pursuing the mission of God.<sup>3</sup> I live in a "place," which is contextually specific. *Place is space with historical meanings, different identities, varied societal preoccupations.*<sup>4</sup> For example, I live in the city where the philosophical term "postmodernism" was first coined and studied as a social and philosophical expression. But I live in a different place than most people who talk about this theme. So the unending story in which we find ourselves always needs to be woven into the fabric of each place a little differently.

The basic purpose of theological and missiological reflection has never really changed. It is the people of God reflecting on God's story in human history, in light of their own circumstances. Missional theology is *God in dialogue with God's people in all their thousands of different situations*. Yet how does a journey through a Canadian community help us to both read our communities and read the narrative of Scriptures in our situation?

In the context of this chapter, what do I mean by missional theology? When we talk about Novel, we refer to it as "fictional literature". The noun, "fiction" becomes the adjective, "Fictional". It is same thing with the wonderful word "mission". When it is used as an adjective, We say "missional", like a church which is dedicated to mission.

But I call it an accordion word – the more air you pump into it, the more noise it makes! At the core, in spite of all the noise, there are four key ideas:

- First, we are affirming that God is *missionary* in His character – Being in action. Mission is first and foremost about God through Jesus is active in His creation by the work of His Spirit. Yes, God is love, God is just, God is holy...He is also missionary!

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<sup>3</sup> See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> On September 7 2011, the Chief Maestro of the Montréal Symphony Orchestra, Kent Nagano, opened the new *Maison Symphonique* with these words "A sense of *place* figures in the hall's success." In talking about the first symphony the orchestra would interpret he wrote, "We felt that the first sounds that were heard in the new concert hall should be Canadian and more than that, they should be Québec." I have been intrigued to watch how a world-class maestro has woven classical music into the fabric of the city. One of his first symphonies was a tribute to the Montréal Canadiens hockey team!

- When we use the word “missional”, we are reaffirming the Gospel – Jesus is LORD. A king has a kingdom; the Good news is about the LORDSHIP of Jesus over all His creation, in our lives, in His Church and over our cities!
- When we use the word “missional”, we are admitting that we live in a new period in our history. Some people call this, “Post-Christendom” – a period where Christianity and the Church are no longer at the center of our culture. We may grieve our loss, but we also need to think and act in fresh ways.
- When we use the word “missional”, we are affirming that the Church by its very nature as a people of living the implications of the Gospel is sent into our neighbourhoods and cities.

Although each of these four points is critical to reading a community, it is the fourth point that is critical to this chapter.

### **Two themes, one purpose**

Some people may take the trip downtown I described, and ask the question, “Where is the Church?” and then rush to critique the church’s lack of significant involvement in the complexities of the community. In the midst of the plurality and competing social imaginaries that a practitioner runs into on a weekly basis, I would rather ask the questions, “What will the Church look like?” and “How will the Church reflect biblically about the city, and pursue relevant mission in her context in the years ahead?” As I began to reflect about this, I soon realized that there are two issues that inform contextual ministry practice, and help us to understand what the Church will look like: social context and Christian traditions.

### **The first voice: social context**

First, the theme of social context with a twin foci Many people do cultural studies and wrestle with the sociology of place. On a different track, other practitioners try to get their heads around the demographics that make up their communities. I want to help the practitioner put these two foci together, so that in examining the community as a “place” we are also learning to look closely at the social imaginaries that are reflected in the urban context and in the statistics.

It is obvious that practitioners need to be able to comprehend the social imaginaries of a community in order to reflect about the spirituality of their particular context. These are much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged kind of way. They are the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, and the expectations which are normally met.

These are primarily lenses through which we imagine our social surroundings. Rather than being a theoretical concept held by the elite, a social imaginary is shared by a large group of persons. Generally speaking, social imaginaries are the series of presuppositions that groups of people hold, consciously and unconsciously, about the basic make-up of the community, relationship, practices and objects of daily life, whether they are of great significance or of little

importance. They are like the foundations of a house—vital but invisible. The make-up of social imaginaries is based on the interaction of ultimate beliefs and the global environment within which one lives. They deal with the perennial issues of life, such as religion and spirituality, and contain answers to even simple questions, such as whether we eat from plates, or how to launder our clothing.

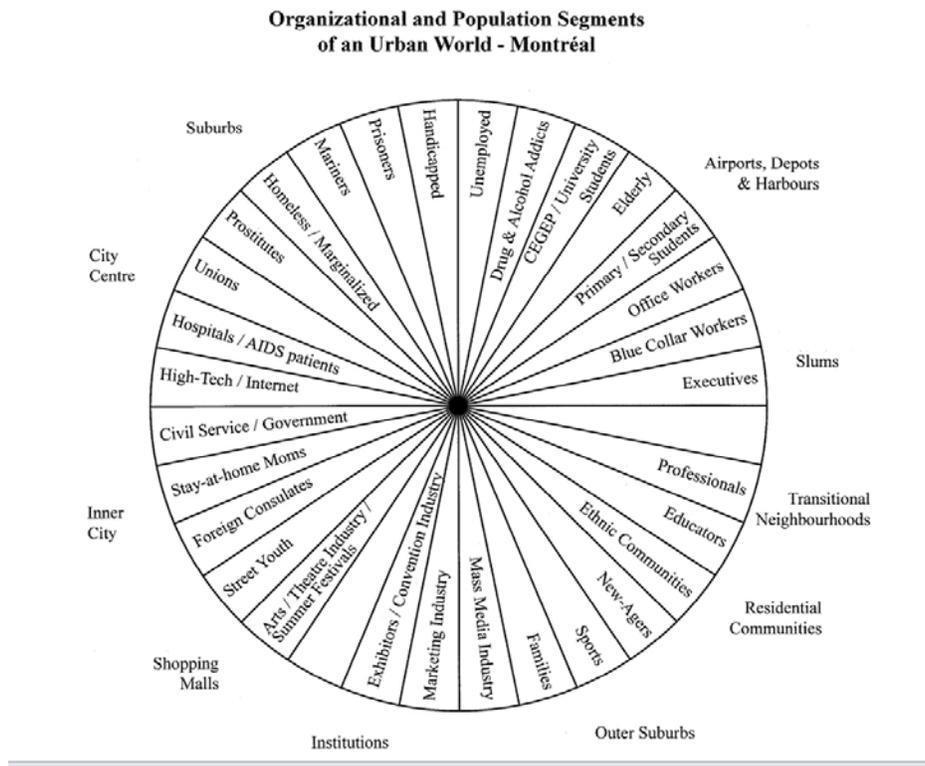
We should be careful not to confuse social imaginaries with culture, although they are in constant relationship with one another. Culture is foremost a network of meanings by which a particular social group is able to recognize itself as such, through a common history and a way of life. This network of meanings is rooted in ideas (including beliefs, values, attitudes, rules of behaviour), rituals and material objects including symbols that become a source for identity such as the language we speak, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the way we organize space. This network is not a formal and hierarchical structure. It is defined in modern society by constant change, mobility, reflection and ongoing new life experiences. This is opposed to traditional societies where culture was transmitted from one generation to another vertically within the community structures. Modernity still transmits some aspects of culture like language and basic knowledge vertically through the bias of the school system, but once this is done, the horizontal transmission of culture through friendship, peers and socio-professional status and social networking become more important.

Social imaginaries on the other hand may be studied in terms of four features: characteristic stories; fundamental symbols; habitual behaviour of the residents; and a set of questions and answers. These presuppositions interact with each other in a variety of complex and interesting ways. By studying the intersection of these big themes, the practitioner can unearth the perspectives of the context under study.

Communities often reveal their imaginaries by the cultural network they produce and constantly reproduce in social interactions, objects and symbols: from dollars to Metro tickets, from office towers to streetcars, from pottery to poetry, from places of worship to sacred texts, from emblems to funerary monuments, from stadiums to crosses. Symbols provide the hermeneutic grid to perceive how the world is and how we might live in it: these symbols provide a vision *of* reality and a vision *for* it. Symbols describe the typical behaviour of a society and vice versa: the celebration of important events, the usual means of dealing with dissonance, and the rituals associated with birth, puberty, marriage and death. And in many communities, their symbols and characteristic behaviour are also focused in stories. Furthermore, the answers to fundamental questions such as “Who are we?” “Where are we?” and “What are the problems we face and how will we solve them?” give us great insight into the perspectives of a community.

Max Stackhouse helps us understand this first theme—social context—by raising several foundational questions. “How do we know a context when we see one?” “How big is a context?” “How long does it last?” “Who is in it and is out of it, and how do we know?” In reality, the complexity of the city means we constantly ask these questions. The diagram below represents different urban contexts, and tries to take into account most of the factors that determine what makes a context.

Rather than studying a community with a typical map, that might locate neighbourhoods such as those found on the periphery of a wheel, try to see your community as spokes of a wheel. In other words, rather than doing a geographical analysis, think about the functional groupings in a context. This wheel represents many social networks, each with their own world and life perspective within my community. Which ones could you identify in your community?



To study a community, an attentive practitioner can use a three step process to analyse the context. I call this a transformational analysis of the social environment. It begins with the social-demographic study. It continues with a contextual biblical and theological reflection. It culminates in specific actions that the community of faith undertakes to pursue the transformation of the context.<sup>5</sup> This allows us to see how social structures and human behaviour interact and influence a community. This method is an excellent tool for the Christian practitioner who desires to study such things as: the knowledge and practices of people; the manner they use their freedom to dominate, transform, organize, arrange, and master space for their personal pursuits so as to live, protect themselves, survive, produce, and reproduce. To do this one must master dominant tendencies of the culture, so as to grasp where we have come from and where we are going as a society, and what the mission of God in this culture will look like.

The description for cultural analysis that I propose implies that a small group setting out to study their context needs to take seriously the fact that social activity is culturally and historically specific. Community hermeneutics allows us to understand or decode the polarity between social structure and human agency, which is constantly at work in a metropolitan area. Social institutions—the basic building blocks of a city because of their far-reaching spatial and temporal existence—are used by human agents to create urban systems and metropolitan structures. Human actions are constrained by these structures, but are also enabled by them. In attempting to understand a city, neither the subject (the human agent) nor the object (society and social institutions) has primacy.

By grasping this geography of spatial functions, we are looking at issues (the social dynamics, problems, needs and aspirations) that are culturally and historically specific. Like the city itself, these issues reflect the prevailing values, ideology, and structure of the prevailing social formation. A useful analytical, social, and theological purpose is served by the empirical recognition that community issues are manifest in geographical space. This implies that the resulting description will detail issues “in” the city as well as issues “of” the city. For example, an issue *in* urban space would include the consequences of population density in a census district in Ville St-Laurent that has 11,536 people per square kilometre versus the Census Metropolitan Area of Montréal norm of 847 per square kilometre. An issue *of* urban space includes attention to the socio-economic factors that go hand-in-hand with such population concentration.

To pursue this kind of analysis, the practitioner will need to bring:

- a high sensitivity to the local specifics and to micro details in the context.
- a concern for the social imaginaries in context.
- a synthesis beyond a simple homogenisation of the data.
- a true appreciation of the differences between cities, regions, and even neighbourhoods, so that one can appreciate the specifics of the area in the light of mission of the church in the situation.

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<sup>5</sup> To see the method explained and applied to Canadian urban issues, see my article, “*Community Development in Canada, What overarching system? What type of sustainability?*” (Montréal: Christian Direction, 2009)

Doing this transformational analysis can take many forms. As we are seeking the reasons for the spatial differences of human activity in our communities we will need tools of analysis. One innovative school of thought, The New Urbanism, suggests “transect studies”—intense first hand observational studies of a neighbourhood by the people studying the community.

My argument thus far has been that, in order to further the church’s mission in our communities, we have to learn first of all to read those communities. And we have seen that communities evolve within the social imaginaries of the societies within which they are located. Communities are manifestations of deeply rooted cultural processes that encompass economic, social and religious/worldview elements as well. Now we need to move on to bring our reading of the social context into conversation with a second voice.

### **The second voice: Christian traditions<sup>6</sup>**

The second theme that informs community research is our *Christian traditions*, meaning our study of the narratives of Scriptures, history and theology. Now the hermeneutical process becomes a true exchange between gospel and context. We come to the authoritative message with an exegetical method enabling us to understand a biblical theology of place. We ask, “What does God say through Scripture regarding this particular context?” This initial dialogue sets us off on a long process in which the more we understand the context, the more fresh readings of the Bible will arise. Scripture illuminates life, but life also illuminates Scripture. This dialogue must also include the practitioners’ own perspectives and that of the community in which they base their initiatives.

Biblical and social hermeneutics conceived in this fashion represent a holistic enterprise in which the Holy Spirit guides the interpreters to a more complete reading and understanding of Scripture and a more complete understanding of their context. There is an ongoing mutual engagement of the essential components of the process. As they interact, they are mutually adjusted. In this way, we come to Scripture with the relevant questions and perspectives. This results in a more attentive ear to the implications of the exegetical process, and a resulting theology that is more biblical and more pertinent to the culture. As we move from the cultural context through our own evolving worldview to the Bible and back to the context, we adopt increasingly relevant local reflection and initiatives. As we listen to Scripture and walk through our various situations in life, we are faced with a question: How can we hear and apply God's word in our cities and neighbourhoods? In reality, the complexity of our communities means we constantly ask these questions. Holding text and context together is vital as we continue in an era of rapid urban growth, urbanization and globalization.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more complete description of the second voice, see my article, *the mission of God and the changing task of the Church* in the urban reader, *The Gospel and the urban World*, Montréal, Direction Chrétienne, 2009, Section 1: article 8.

## Contextualisation and Transformation

The word contextualisation literally means a “weaving together.” For our purposes, it implies the interweaving of Scriptural teaching about “place” and the church within a particular human situation—the context. The very word focuses attention on the role of context in the theological enterprise. In a very real sense, all doctrinal reflection from the Scriptures is related in one way or another to the situation from which it was born, while addressing the aspirations, concerns, priorities and needs of the local group of Christians who are presently doing the reflection.

The task of contextualization is the essence of theological reflection. The challenge is to remain faithful to God’s revelation and the historic texts of Scripture while being mindful of today’s realities. An interpretative bridge is built between the Bible and its context to the circumstances of the local group of Christians who are doing the reflection. This is never a simple linear exercise. In this process, we approach the texts with humility and deep desire to keep on discovering their meaning. The first step of the hermeneutic exercise involves establishing what the text meant at the time it was written: what it meant “then.” The second step involves creating the bridge to understanding the text in meaningful terms for the interpreters today: what it means “now.” The final step is to determine the meaning and application for those who will receive the message in their particular circumstances as the present day interpreters become ambassadors of the Good News: what it means “here.” *Contextualization is not just for the one communicating, nor about the content that will be passed along. It is always concerned about what happens once we have communicated—about the ultimate impact of the message on the audience.*

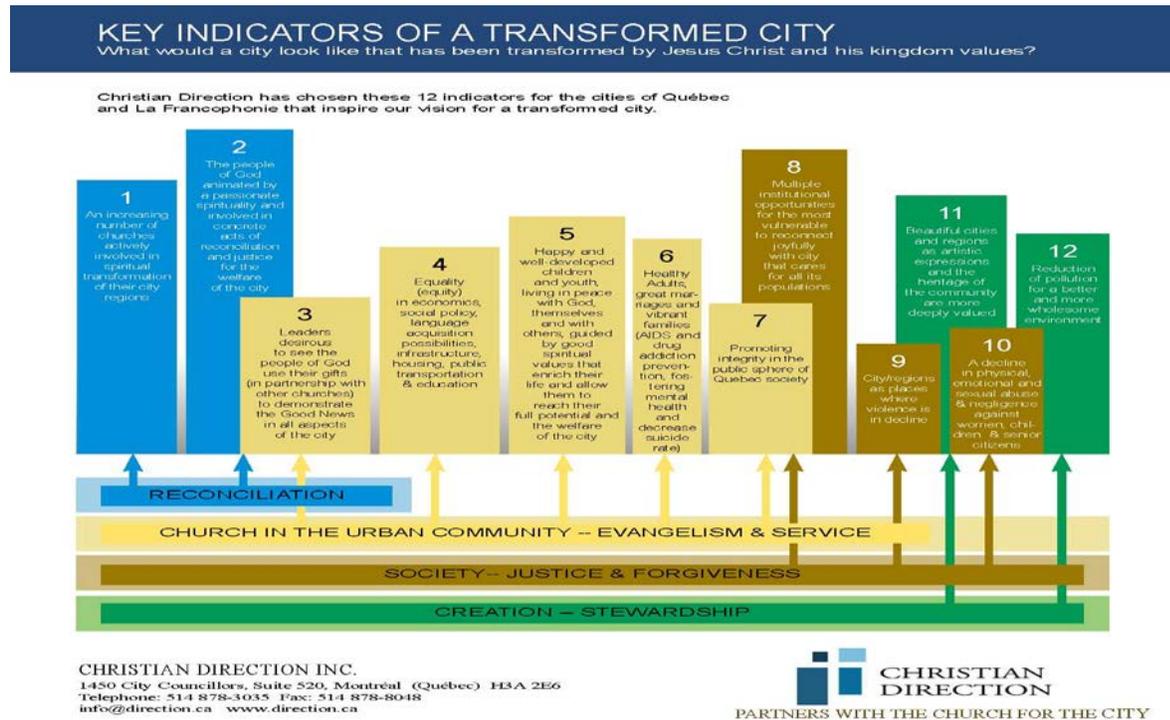
For what purpose does the practitioner pursue contextualization? Why listen to both the present context and Christian tradition, including our study of the Scriptures, Church history and theology? Increasingly, we hear the use of the word *transformation* as a term that encompasses all that the church does as followers of Jesus in God’s mission in the city. But what does this mean? What does it entail? Inspired by the South African missiologist, John de Gruchy’s reflections, I suggest that a transformed place is that kind of community that pursues fundamental changes, a stable future, and the sustaining and enhancing of all of life rooted in a vision bigger than mere urban politics. He adds that “it is an open-ended multi-layered process, *at once social and personal*, that is energized by hope, yet rooted in the struggles of the present.”<sup>7</sup>

Because our purpose is to look at how transformation might take root in a community, we will need some subjective indicators rooted in the social imaginary of people in that place. I

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<sup>7</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Social Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

would like to propose a model from community faith-based initiatives, rooted in the Biblical notions of peace and well-being. (See figure 2.)<sup>8</sup>



Transformation means that the community is moving with increasing awareness and intentionality towards the vision of peace and well-being represented in the diagram. These indicators are rooted in four tracks underneath the cityscape. They represent God’s concern for all of life, beginning with the congregation that embodies shalom and reconciliation. These communities then demonstrate the Good News in their neighbourhoods in word and deed. They are deeply concerned about justice and forgiveness in society. But as stewards they are also concerned for the whole created order. To measure the vision realistically, we have articulated twelve indicators of the type of transformation congregations are pursuing.<sup>9</sup> These address contextual concerns in our city. Accompanying these indicators are baselines rooted in research on the state of life in the city. Congregations work together to pursue the welfare of the city.

This vision seeks to help congregations participate in the transformation of the city, particularly in an era of broken relationships and the holistic understanding of poverty. Unfortunately, poverty is often viewed and portrayed in economic terms. Essentially, poverty is about relationships, not just about economics. Poverty is a broad concept including economic, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual realities. It is often intergenerational. It affects people’s

<sup>8</sup> The model comes from the work of Christian Direction, the urban ministry I lead in Montréal, Québec.

<sup>9</sup> These have been inspired by the eight United Nations Millennium Objectives, although this schema lacks the rigour of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) eighteen targets and thirty-two indicators.

identity (social exclusion, absence of harmony in life and well-being) and their vocation (deprivation at every level of life including the ability to participate in the welfare of the community). The causes of poverty can be traced to *inadequacies in the social imaginary*. These inadequacies are in fact a web of lies beyond the mere cognitive level of deception. This intricate web leads people to believe that their poverty or social status is somehow divinely sanctioned or a factor of fate. People sense that they have no choices. The social imaginary is a powerful instrument in perpetuating chronic poverty.

So as to measure these territorial social indicators, we employ objective measures from primary field surveys and from secondary census-based data sets. So, for example, Indicators 4, 5 and 6 in the diagram above can be measured by a blend of documentation from both sources. However, they also include subjective social indicators that describe the way people perceive and evaluate conditions around them. So, for example, Indicators 7, 8 and 12 are highly dependent on an individual's perceptions and aspirations of the context in relationship to the indicator. As the reader will see, social imaginary indicators rooted in the religious, spiritual and transcendent experiences of congregations are included in the presentation. Indicators 1, 2, 3, 5, 7 and 11 touch on these aspects of "the community in the mind"—the subjective views people have about their neighbourhood.

## **Section 2: Twenty steps towards understanding your context**

To begin the process of reading one's community, let me propose twenty steps. These are best undertaken by teams—usually ecumenical "task forces"—that try to understand their community context. After the "exegesis" or community assessment, it will be important to prioritize the initiatives that congregations will undertake.<sup>10</sup>

These steps can be divided into two sections. The first ten steps allow a congregation to understand its context. They are helpful for starting different types of ministries within the community. Steps eleven to twenty are more useful for those considering various kinds of church planting initiatives.

1. Compile a list of significant historical events that inform the community's identity. These could be specific, historic conflicts that took place, such as a war or dispute, specific unifying events such as the city coming together to fight a massive fire, specific decisions that leaders made such as the building of a community centre, or something that happened that gave people hope, such as a person doing something heroic or selfless. These will provide clues to the best way for the church to focus its energy. Begin this step by reading about the community. The local library or historical society is where we always begin.

Study the growth patterns of the city. One can find this information in libraries, city councils, museums, bookstores, local newspapers and on local websites.

- Why is the city growing (or why did it grow)?
- Who are (and were) the immigrants to the city?
- Where did they come from and where are they settled?

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<sup>10</sup> In Québec, Christian Direction has worked with congregations in ten different cities and boroughs to implement these steps. To obtain a copy of one of the studies, visit our web-site: [www.direction.ca](http://www.direction.ca).

- Where are they employed?
2. Understand clearly the sections or zones that make up the city. Examine census maps if they are available. Find out from city planners and real estate offices where city populations are expected to move, where commercial and industrial zones will develop, and which areas are slated to undergo major changes. Isolate the sectors of your larger community using the wheel diagram of the city on page seven. This represents the functions of a city.
  3. Study the neighbourhoods: their ethnic, social and economic composition, religious affiliations, occupational patterns, younger and older populations, concentrations of the elderly, young professionals, singles, and problem groups. To understand a neighbourhood you must walk the streets and talk to people, insiders and outsiders. Census data is important, but onsite observation is best. People groups criss-cross in the community. Probe to discover the dominant influence in a neighbourhood: is it ethnic identity? Social class? Undertake a participant-observer approach.
 

What is the extent of social contact between the different people groups? Is social contact increasing? Take time to chat with residents and pedestrians in the area. Ask them what the most significant changes are that they see or experience in the neighbourhood. When walking the streets, watch for the impact of these population shifts on the neighbourhood.

Many congregations use prayer walks as a way to learn more about their community.
  4. Determine and analyze the power centres in the community: the political figures, the police department, the business leaders and the Chamber of Commerce, the religious leaders. Who controls the media—TV, radio, the newspapers? Who controls commerce and finance? The schools and the arts? What are the religious and moral commitments of the people in positions of power?
  5. Analyze the dreams, aspirations, hopes and expectation of specific people groups within the community. You are looking for indications of receptivity and “keys” which may unlock doors to homes and hearts. Using focus groups detail the obstacles that various groups identify to attain these aspirations. In some communities, such things as personal illness, loneliness, physical hardships, insecurity in terms of housing, property rights, and the threat of losing one's dwelling are very real.

Once a church has demonstrated a commitment to partnering with the community a bridge of relational trust is established. There is often a greater openness to a discussion of deeper, spiritual needs, and to Christ who meets all needs.

6. Examine the traffic flow. Just as successful advertisers know where to place their signs, practitioners need to know where to begin their ministries, where they can readily be seen and reached.

Find out where each of the following is located:

- community service centres
- libraries
- police stations

- fire stations
  - city hall
  - shopping centres
  - sports facilities
7. Seek to discover how news and opinion spread in the community, and in particular groups. Mainly through conversation? By radio or TV? Who are the idea-people, the opinion-makers? Subscribe to the weekly publication in the area. Read it faithfully.
  8. Examine the relationship between city-dwellers and the rural, small-town communities outside the city. Do certain segments of the urban population maintain strong ties with their rural cousins? Is there a lot of travel and visiting between city and village? What are the present immigration patterns from the countryside? How might the urban-rural interaction be used for the spread of the gospel and multiplication of churches? Most of this information is available in census data.
  9. Ministries and churches in the community: locate them on a map; identify them by denomination, size and age. What transformational ministries and social services are already taking place through these ministries and churches? Reflect on what the church map shows.
  10. Analyze the various types of existing churches.
  11. Find out the growth patterns (if any) of the various churches: attendance, membership, and rate of growth. Try to determine the nature of the growth: is it by transfer, conversion, or by births? One can often locate this information by chatting with congregational leaders.
  12. Inquire about church planting efforts and church closures in the past several years. Which churches have closed? Why? Who has started new churches, and why and where did they succeed? Learn all you can from them.
  13. Who is planning to start new churches? Where, and among which people groups? Find out all you can from church and mission sources as to what is being planned for the community.
  14. Strategies: what has been tried in the past, what has failed, and what was effective in starting churches and stimulating growth? Analyze the information you receive. In the light of recent church growth studies, what has been “done right” in this community, and where ought things to have been done differently?
  15. Christians and non-Christians: where are the Christians located (of course, this may not be where they attend church)? Identify areas of the city where relatively few Christians live.
  16. Identify Christians in positions of influence in the city: in business, politics, the media, education, entertainment, and sports. Analyze their potential for wider spread of the gospel and assistance in planting churches.

17. List and analyze the parachurch ministries (if any) operating in and to the community. How might each contribute something to the overall strategy? Are there some you may want to avoid because they might have a negative influence on church multiplication?
18. Make an inventory of all possible personnel resources that might be tapped for the carrying out of your church planting strategy. For example, are there Bible College or seminary students available to help with door-to-door calling? Could interns be borrowed from existing churches to help younger congregations?
19. Evaluate all known methods for church planting in light of what you know about this community—its history, people, existing churches, and particular characteristics. What methods have proven effective elsewhere and appear appropriate for this community—and are within the capabilities of your resources.
20. List and evaluate the community agencies (private, religious and civic) that are designed to meet particular needs (literacy, overnight shelter, emergency food and clothing, and so on) and consider how their help can be incorporated into your overall strategy.

### **Where the rubber hits the road**

In 2006, Christian Direction, in conjunction with Roman Catholic parishes and Protestant congregations, published a forty-five page study of the east end of Montréal, using these twenty steps. This borough is the poorest continuous borough in Canada going back to the 1871 census!<sup>11</sup> Together we created the *Regroupement œcuménique de Hochelaga/Maisonneuve*. Numerous initiatives have been launched as a result of that study. For example, to address the 55% high school drop-out in the neighbourhood, in collaboration with another social service agency, we started a centre to work with adolescents, their families and the local schools to promote school success. Together with others in the borough, we advocate with local businesses so they do not employ kids during the school day. To address the relational poverty, there are four events each year to break the deep solitude people experience. To break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, three “financial capability” projects<sup>12</sup> have been started for young people and their families. In a short time, all three were generating income. At the heart of the vision are the key indicators of a transformed community in the diagram on page 11. This same experience is now being repeated in 18 other boroughs on the island of Montréal and four other cities in Québec. Research can *and must* inform transformational strategies.

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<sup>11</sup>David Ley, “The Inner City,” in *Canadian Cities in Transition: Local through Global Perspectives*, ed. Trudi Bunting and Pierre Fortin (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2006) 195.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.entreados.ca/>