

LISTENING TO PLACE

A resource from
the center for
Transforming
Engagement



Listening to Place: a 1-hour exercise to help you better understand your changing context

At the [Center for Transforming Engagement](#), we believe that congregations are at their best when they embrace and develop their context: their specific neighborhood, geography, and community. Faith communities who do so follow the Word who becomes flesh. They strengthen authenticity and live out their mission with meaningful action.

“The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.”
John 1:14 (The Message)

Our [Transforming Communities](#) program is an in-depth process of understanding the local context and matching the congregation's strengths to the needs and opportunities of the community. Part of that process is to set aside assumptions and listen deeply to the community around you. This brief exercise will give you a taste of the new possibilities that come from listening to a place.

Prepare

Start by choosing a place or a community that you are curious about. *Examples: the park down the block, the local cafe, a sports group, employees of a business headquarters.*

Consider what assumptions, stereotypes, or preconceived notions you might have about this group. Frame 2 or 3 as questions to help you test your assumptions. *Example: “Soccer parents push their kids too hard” could become “How do soccer parents interact with their children from the sidelines?” Or: “That business only hires young men” could become “What are the age and sex of people who enter and exit their building?”*

When you arrive, find an unobtrusive spot from which to observe. Plan on being there about 30-45 minutes. *Examples: a public bench, seating in the foyer of a building, a window seat at a nearby cafe, the bus stop across the street.*

Center

Take a few minutes to center yourself on the task of listening. Step out of the stance of an expert and into that of a curious learner; perhaps pray for such re-orientation. Ask God to open your senses to the dynamics of this place you are observing and to direct your attention to those aspects of the context that have something to speak to you.

We'd love to hear your experience of this resource. Email transforming@theseattleschool.edu, subject: Resources.



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Deep Listening

Below are questions you can use to guide your observations.

- What do you perceive with your five **senses**? (Sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste.)
- What are some of the dynamics of **power** in this place?
- What is the **ecology** of this place? What are the tensions between human-created elements and nature?
- What are some of the dynamics of **socioeconomics** in this place?
- What are some of the **spiritual dynamics** of this place?
- How might **God already be at work** here?

Optional: Have a conversation with 1 or 2 people in the group you are observing. Ask about what brings them there, their experience of the place or activity, how they first got connected to it – anything that might help you test your assumptions or learn more about the themes in the questions above.

Interpretation

Take some time to make meaning of what you experienced by journaling or having a conversation with a friend about these questions.

- What details seemed important? Name or draw them, even if you are uncertain about their potential meaning.
- How were your assumptions challenged by your listening and observations? What did you learn that goes against your assumptions?
- How did you encounter what God is already doing in that place?
- In what ways does deep listening change your understanding of the place and people, and what does that suggest for your life?

Transforming Communities helps you understand your local context and match your organization’s strengths to the needs and opportunities of the community.

Visit [*Transforming Communities*](#) to learn more.

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