



Lessons Learned

A Guide to Ministry With our Neighbors in North Texas

The Zip Code Connection has gleaned very important lessons since it began in 2013 as an initiative of the North Texas Annual Conference. The two orienting goals for the ZCC were to 1) experiment in ministry alongside the poor and marginalized through longer-term relationships with two impoverished communities in North Texas (one rural and one urban) to explore how community development approaches to address poverty, and 2) to extrovert the lessons learned in this process to assist leaders and congregations across North Texas in their own connecting with impoverished neighbors. These are a few of the lessons learned through this process, often through trial and error.

Concentrate Where Invited: The two zip codes were initially selected because research through MissionInsite demographic mapping showed they had the highest poverty rates in the Annual Conference. On the one hand, this was a noble way of pushing the organization to focus on the most impacted communities within its geographical borders. Yet, as the years have passed, the wisdom of Jesus' command to his disciples to focus on where one is welcomed by "people of peace" has been born-out.¹ We relied upon the a computer generated map to focus our work, instead of relationships with neighbors who could tell us if we were needed, desired, or welcome. Neighbors and partners grimaced when we referenced our reason for being there as their communities being the

the “poorest.” No one invited us to these communities. We simply showed-up and offered help. And however noble this effort was intended to be, residents perceived that we thought they were “broken” and that we were there to “fix them.” In hindsight, it is clear that community development efforts have to begin with building relationships and base their approach on invitations by neighbors who are our hosts. Operating as guests in a mission-field is not only more effective at honoring neighbors and building trust, it is also the way of Jesus who often was the guest of others and who became the host when needed.

Discussion Questions:

- With whom from your surrounding community have you intentionally built relationships?
- Who is inviting you to work alongside them in the community?
- In what way might your ministry be trying to “fix” people? And, how do you build mutual relationships and look for what Christ would have you do?

Strengths-Based Approach: In our selection of zip codes to work in, the Zip Code Connection unintentionally fell into the trap of focusing its efforts where we had the fewest strengths and greatest challenges. The previous paragraph spells out the ways which the way we entered communities, in part, created the challenges of generating long-term community buy-in and trust that faced by our efforts in both communities. But, when we selected areas based on their deficits of wealth and development, we lost sight of a number of important factors to consider. Firstly, the UMC has one local church in the SDFP community and that church was inwardly-focused and had few connections with actual residents. Secondly, the other UMC-related churches and non-profits locate within or with affinity for the community (Dallas Bethlehem Center, St. Luke “Community” UMC, St. Paul UMC, Zan Wesley Holmes Center) were in times of deep transition and had little capacity to engage the South Dallas community in new efforts. In fact, the Dallas Bethlehem Center was emerging from near closure at the time the ZCC started. In Clarksville, St. Paul UMC and McKenzie Memorial UMC were weak in their ability to engage their community due to aging congregational makeup and the limitations of part-time pastoral leadership (one of whom who lives hours away, and the other who has the reputation for racist remarks). In addition, South Dallas – Fair Park has suffered from roiling political battles over redevelopment, as well as a glut of churches and non-profits who have been historically unable to find common ground and work together for broader community organizing efforts. Clarksville is challenged by having a having one of the most racially charged atmospheres in the Conference. Clarksville leadership (both municipal and UMC) is often fractured by racial divisions, volatile, and untrusting of those born outside the city limits. After the setbacks faced in both communities, it is clearer now that future efforts should focus where there is greater strength in local partners to face challenges.

Discussion Questions:

- What relationships do you already have with people, organizations, businesses, governments in your community?
- What are your strengths (individual/congregational/team)?
- Where do you already have strengths that you can leverage to do impactful work alongside neighbors?

Asset-Based Community Development: The values of asset-based community development (ABCD) are important guides for future efforts. The Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) and its Texas chapter offer written resources and yearly workshops and training for church, non-profit, and denominational leaders. While CCDA operates under eight official commitments, ABCD can be broadly described as a methodology for community development that places primary importance on working in partnership with residents (and other organizations within area) of marginalized communities to uncover often undervalued gifts, talents, dreams, desires, and connections to build relationship-based change efforts from the inside of communities. Often, non-profits and churches attempt to project grand plans and fixes unto communities, without listening to actual neighbors. ZCC staff attended CCDA and trainings at the Church for All People in Columbus, Ohio. Some of the language of ABCD is found throughout ZCC documentation. And though its results were not well documented, the partnership with groups to deploy SDFP residents to survey the community house-by-house was one way to listen to neighbors. The lack of buy-in from local residents and other partners after five years of work indicates that we did not begin with building relationships with actual neighbors.

Discussion Questions:

- How could you begin to help yourselves and others see the assets or gifts that may go unseen?
- In what way does the ministry you do or are planning to do connect and leverage the assets of the people you intend to serve?
- Where are the low-hanging fruit in terms of ways to reveal and embrace the gifts, talents, dreams, and connections of neighbors and congregants to make a difference together?

The Iron Rule: Asset-based community development and community organizers operate out of what is known as the “Iron Rule:” never do for others what they can do for themselves. Since holistic community development occurs by cultivating and leveraging the gifts within a community, the Iron Rule is helpful in guarding against efforts to short-circuit that process. In our efforts to connect with both communities, the ZCC parachuted out beyond the local churches and existing organizations to accomplish the work in ways that were perceived to be quicker and more effective. Churches and non-profits often operate out of the do-gooder

mentality that assumes that outsiders know best how to fix issues. And it often feels good to help, to serve and volunteer. On-the-ground organizations and individuals presented some ministry opportunities to the Zip Code Connection that we could have very well accomplished. But in accomplishing these tasks we would have been supplying a short-term fix, instead of supporting local institutions and efforts to engage in justice-seeking, long-term change. This is the trap many well-meaning church groups and local requesting organizations fall into that allow unhealthy savior mentalities to persist.

Discussion Questions:

- How might the work you are doing or plan to do disempower the people you are trying to help?
- Are you investing in local leaders and institutions?
- How might you integrate meeting short-term needs with longer-term justice seeking?

Dismantling White Fragility and Supremacy: In both Zip Code focus areas, it became clear that white fragility must be addressed for North Texas Conference missional efforts to foster any lasting change in local churches or communities. Robin DiAngelo defines “white fragility” in this way,

“White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress. Although white racial insulation is somewhat mediated by social class (with poor and working class urban whites being generally less racially insulated than suburban or rural whites), the larger social environment insulates and protects whites as a group through institutions, cultural representations, media, school textbooks, movies, advertising, and dominant discourses. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. In turn, whites are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways., as we have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides. leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. **White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.”**¹

In Red River County, the realities of racism and white supremacy are carefully avoided by the white power structure of the city. Anti-black sentiments are often simmering just below the surface of conversations.

Leaders are almost universally too afraid to speak of racism. Within Clarksville, the root of the area’s poverty and dysfunction is systemic racism. Texas Legislative action allowed white families within Clarksville to send their students to neighboring districts to escape the

¹ Robin DiAngelo, web introduction to [White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism](https://robindiangelo.com/publications/) (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018). <https://robindiangelo.com/publications/>

presence of black students. Red River County was during the Civil War a protected holding area for slaveholders to move those they held in captivity as the war drew nearer to their plantations. After the war, it is said that many formerly enslaved persons settled in the county. A local cemetery features the “hanging tree” from which black people were lynched. Yet, a local historian removed the marker for the tree to prevent CNN and other media from finding out about it. The geographic center of the County is the Clarksville town square which itself centers on the statue of Confederate Colonel John C. Burks. According to local lore, the statue faces Northwest so that the Colonel can guard the historically black Northwest segment of the city. One of the ZCC’s most progressive local stakeholders confessed privately that he though the black and white communities needed to come together, but that he was afraid that the black people would want the Confederate statue removed. “And then,” said the stakeholder, “they’ll want more and more.” In previous years, the City of Clarksville was the subject of what local leaders call “unfair” national attention for segregating public housing. A series of Federal court cases have centered on racially-charged practices within the Clarksville Police force and the city’s housing office. In midst of such a volatile racial situation in Clarksville, the United Methodist congregations there only in 2016 decided that it is safe to hold shared worship services and step into one another’s buildings. Methodism arrived in Red River County in 1836, nearly two-hundred year ago.

Racism undergirds much of the predicament in which South Dallas – Fair Park finds itself. Residents suffer from generational poverty, the criminalization of black bodies, inadequate housing, social isolation, and the absence of a unifying vision and organizing capacity. The history of real-estate red-lining, white flight from Dallas Independent School District, and neglect from local politicians has made South Dallas-Fair Park a difficult place to live, work, and raise families. From the 1970’s up to the present, those that can make it up and out of South Dallas – Fair Park do so and enter the black middle class. However, many of the remaining residents are not able to escape the trap that systemic racism has created for them. Many United Methodists from white churches in North Dallas and surrounding suburbs have volunteered and supported ministries in South Dallas – Fair Park. Residents are leery of these well-meaning white efforts, because they almost always lack staying-power.

We have learned from these two ministry contexts that the most impactful efforts take the time to build relationships, but also doing the homework needed to process the effects of race. It was easy to see how racism historically affected these two communities. And it was understandable that racial injustice continues to play a role in lower education and health outcomes, as well as the high levels of chronic disease in the neighborhood. However, we know now that it would have helpful to have understood that we as a mostly white church

organization would need to do our own homework to process how racism affects the ways we move through the world. It is essential for future efforts that we embrace a deep dive into exploring how race has effects on white people and organizations that are invisible to them. White church groups like ours that don't recognize these invisible but ever-present racial dynamics will find themselves frustrated and leaving the mission field when they are challenged by persons of color. As those call to make disciples for the transformation of the world, we have an opportunity to equip communities and their leaders with the language and understanding to transform historic racial injustice.

Discussion Questions:

- What racial dynamics are you already aware of in your context or community?
- How might you strengthen your understanding of racism and white supremacy, so that you can dismantle their prevalent effects?
- How can you prepare yourself and other leaders to have difficult conversations about racism, white fragility, and building racial equity?

Communities Determine Geographical Limits and Organizational Focus: When the Zip Code Connection first began, it defined the scope of its work by two specific area codes: 75215 and 75246. Once staff began to convene conversations with residents and stakeholders, it became clear that the communities did not identify themselves by their zip code. Instead, the 75215 focus broadened to include a subset of South Dallas known as South Dallas – Fair Park. And South Dallas – Fair Park is made-up of smaller neighborhoods like Queen City, Mill City, and Dolphin Heights with their own associations. 75215 covers the City of Clarksville, but because the community is so small and related to neighboring townships, stakeholders suggested we focus on Clarksville/Red River County. Residents and other local stakeholders can help churches and leaders better define and focus their ministry efforts. And this applies with efforts in areas where groups have not had a presence, but also for those who are reconnecting with their immediate mission field that has undergone transitions.

Discussion Questions:

- How do you understand your neighborhood or primary service area?
- How do residents distinguish their community/neighborhood from others?

Fight Poverty Hand in Hand with Neighbors: The Church is necessarily given to grand ideas. After all, scriptures of the Old and New Testaments speak of God's creative and redemptive acts in terms of the cosmos, the world, Zion, the ends of the earth, the reign of God's righteousness. The Christian Church has since its baptism of Constantine and his Roman Empire been co-opted by the idea that political and military domination can and should be used to achieve the purposes of God. The Church immersed itself in the grand ideas and

visions of empire, of dominating geographic areas and trading routes, as well as subjecting other cultures and tribes to its particular interpretation of the faithful way of living. In so doing, the church become predisposed to acting like the colonizers on whose coat-tails it spread throughout the globe. Normative ideas and ways of doing political, economic, and family life are foisted by white colonizers onto others. In our post-colonial era, we as local churches and communities should take to heart the work of post-colonial theorists and ethicists who help is disentangle the Gospel from the cultural captivity of Euro-centric versions of Christianity.

Many of the efforts of the Zip Code Connection, and even the very idea of the Zip Code Connection, is tangled-up with the imperial predilections of coming-up with grand ideas for those who are other without first listening to them in a posture of humility and guesting. Initially, the mission of the Zip Code Connection was to “Eradicate Asset Poverty” in the two zip codes within ten years. While this was an ostensibly noble vision, it was not one that stemmed from the building relationships with neighbors. Organizationally, we saw the demographic reports and drove around the community and imagined ourselves being the initiators of a grand plan to save these communities. We did not put in the initial time and invest in the long-term relationship-building that must precede defining a vision for the work and creation of a plan. We desired a grand missional effort. However, it is more effective and sustainable to begin where one already has relationships and build-out relationships within a community from there. In such a listening posture, one acts as a guest within the community and builds relational capital so that one can hear a request to help where needed by neighbors instead of foisting upon neighbors what one believes will really fix things. Often, when we use the language of the Kingdom of God, we forget the relational nature of its reality. As some scholars have suggested, we might be better served in using the term “Kindom of God” noting our equality and diversity before God who makes kin of us all. The Kingdom of God is always already working in our mission field. It is the recognition of the ways in which God is at work in our neighbors that is where the hard work of listening, of watching and waiting with Christ becomes necessary. It is ultimately more faithful to the way of Jesus to get to know our neighbors, so that we can understand how to love them. This might mean beginning with one-on-one meetings, sharing a meal together with a neighbor, moving to a community intentionally, looking for transformative work people are already doing and seeing how one can encourage it. By 2017, it became clear that our grand plans and projects had been largely driven by our own imaginings and projections because few local stakeholders were driving or invested in the work we were doing.

Discussion Questions:

- Who from your neighborhood can you talk with about how you can be impactful in positive ways?
- Who from the neighborhood or community can help you analyze your plans and grand ideas, to make sure they fit the community's expressed desires and needs?

