

NOTE: This material has been supplied by Kevin McBride and the "City Reaching 101" Working Group of the City Impact Roundtable

Decoding your City

Special Thanks to the LA Campus Metro Team who developed "Decoding Your Campus" of which many of these principles have taken. Good work!

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Chapter 1 - Why decode?

"Decoding" is the process of gathering information and relationships that God can use to direct you as you seek to see God expand His Kingdom work in your city.

There are several goals of decoding:

- 1) Information: to gain a macro-description of your particular city which God can use to give you wisdom in understanding people and formulating strategies*
- 2) Relationships: to get to know people that God can use to open doors, help with the on-going learning process on campus, and eventually see "Transformational Communities" planted on campus.*
- 3) Direction: to gain as many ideas and strategies as possible that fit your city and the people that you have met. You may not try them all, but having a lot of ideas is a lot more motivating than not knowing where to start!*

Ultimately, God must lead you to people in your city who will catalyze a "transformational community" of followers of Christ. As you "pray and decode" seek to always keep in mind that you want to see people across your city leading communities of others in transformation.

But until the skill of observation is developed, utilized, and refined – things that are obvious are likely to remain hidden. It is entirely possible to look

but not see; to hear, but not understand. Every successful military, business, and athletic team depends on accurate understanding of the environment in which they operate. Ministry is no different.

Because each city has its own unique personality, how we go about reaching that city for Christ must be tailored to fit. One city may be open to the gospel while another is hostile. One may have many different ethnic groups, whereas another may have few. Examining and researching your city will help you discover its unique personality.

*This booklet, **Decoding your City**, has been developed as a tool to help you cultivate your observation skills, *broaden your relationships and help you determine direction*. Decoding is the science, art, and spirit of uncovering what is hidden to the untrained eye. With practice, you will become a skilled craftsman able to decode not only your city, but neighborhoods, corporations and sub-cultures wherever you go.*

How do you put your arms around a city?

Research can be done in one of two fashions: macro or micro. Macro research helps you understand the major components of a city that provides the context for every-day activities and relationships. Micro research focuses on understanding the unique characteristics of individuals or small segments of the city.

How is this tool organized?

Picture yourself opening up a puzzle box with some friends. You arrange all the pieces so that you

can see everything all at once. Where do you start? The four corners. Why? Because they frame the entire puzzle that you are putting together. They also happen to be the easiest to find. We will use this same analogy to frame our thinking about Decoding your City. By the time you finish working through the areas described in this tool, you should be able to accurately describe four elements that define will help the personality of your city: geography, mission, sociology and spiritual world. Although these four elements are not the only areas that impact a city, each will provide you with a significant understanding of what will ultimately shape what you do and how you will go about doing it.

The importance of prayer -

We believe prayer must flow through everything we do – including the decoding process. You must pray earnestly that God will lead you to key individuals in your city who will help bring the gospel to those outside the Kingdom of God, and that He helps you grasp the various strongholds of the kingdom of darkness. God must lead you in your observations, interactions, and relationships.

If possible, decode your city with others as the Body of Christ. You will see, hear and believe things differently as you reach into the various levels of your community with God's heart. God will lead your group as you pray survey, research and discuss what God has revealed. The best scouts are those who live in the city because they live and breathe as insiders, involved with the unique culture of the city.

Research as a Spiritual Discipline -

There is nothing unknown to God (Hebrews 4:13). However, we as God's people need to research and to understand the nature of people.

Moses, for example, was instructed by God to "send out....men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel..." (Numbers 13:2). Why didn't God forgo the research trip and send in Israel to take the land? It appears that the information they were to gather would somehow shape what they would do as well as how they would do it.

In Moses' case, twelve men were sent out to study the land. Each man reported back having seen the same people, the same cities, and the land. Yet only Joshua and Caleb came back and gave God's interpretation of the land (Numbers 13:25-33). Ten "decoded" the land through human eyes and drew false interpretations and conclusions. For Joshua and Caleb, their research was a spiritual discipline in which they saw God's leading every step of the way.

And don't forget that relationships need to be developed while doing research. Imagine what would have happened if the spies had not developed a relationship with Rahab in Jericho. She was honored to be included in the lineage of Christ. God will have a purpose for the people you meet.

The Apostle Paul gives us *another* example. Note his emphasis on research as he speaks, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription "To An Unknown God" (Acts 17:22-23). Paul approached ministry by "decoding" the cities in which he entered.

Like Paul, we must be astute observers of the cities on which God has called us to minister. Decoding and research must become a lifestyle where God gives us eyes to properly "describe" any situation in which we find ourselves -- ready and willing to understand what God would have us to do.

A word of caution -

Through the years, one of the things that we've noticed is that people have a tendency to make the decoding process an academic exercise that really doesn't capture the essence of a city. Interacting with people is the only way to get to heart issues and is the only way to find people who can help you learn and network for you as you go into new territory. Sometimes it is more comfortable to stay with the academic, but remember that every number, every location, is made up of people who Christ gave His life for. Create a complete picture which combines hard information fact gathering with soft information, leading you to people who God can use in the process.

Chapter 2 – How to Decode

Pulling your city apart –

Going back to the puzzle analogy, as we lay all the pieces out, we begin to pick up individual pieces and study them, looking for their unique curves and contours or seeing where there are pieces with the same color or design on it. As we look at a city, we use a similar process. We make general observations concerning the city's geography, sociology, mission and spiritual world. Whether you physically view the city or do research from the internet, collect information such as maps, newspaper articles, demographics, etc and record as much objective information as possible.

Then move to more focused observations; observations that people within the city make. Some of your time should be spent interviewing people to get the more subjective, human aspects of the city. In the back of this book, you will find different questionnaires that might be helpful in your research. Make sure that you interview people in different areas of your city and among different ethnic groups. Feel free to interview people in ministry as well. As you go along, there may be a few areas or people that you select for further interaction (e.g. a particular ethnic group or trend-setting organization). Make sure you keep accurate records for future reference.

Putting it back together -

As we study the individual pieces, we begin to understand how they relate to each other, finally fitting together. As we mentioned before, the four components for your city "puzzle" are geography,

mission, sociology, and spiritual. As we look at these components, we begin to see how the complex city fits and works together.

However, unlike a puzzle, a city is constantly changing. As a result, elements within the four components of your "puzzle" are also constantly changing. New roads are built opening new sub-developments. Political leaders come and go. Current events and crisis shape a city. Some things change slowly, other quickly. As you research, determine whether the culture of your city directly or indirectly undermines Christ and a Christian view of life. Determine not only where your city is, but what it is moving towards.

As you move along, you will be gathering huge amounts of information. At some point, you will need to begin to summarize that information. Be careful not to reject that which you don't understand or personally relate to, but make extra effort to understand it more fully. God will lead you in your understanding of the major subcultures of your city and their influence and direction, as its predominant spiritual climate.

Chapter 3 – Examining Geography

Winston Churchill once said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.” There are three basic relational spaces that affect us geographically: living space, work space and social space. Living space relates to homes, apartments and neighborhoods where people live. Work space relates to areas that people use to accomplish tasks. Lastly, social space relates to areas where people meet for casual conversation or play, such as coffee shops, parks, sport arenas.

In a ground breaking research project, urban planner Kevin Lynch explored how people related to surrounding landscape and architecture. His research revealed that people use five mental images which help people develop behavioral patterns that relate to existing buildings, streets, and structures. We have added some questions that relates to each area to help you with your research:

1. Pathways: a general route or track along which people traffic from point A to point B; direction
 - What are the areas where traffic, such as autos, bicycles, bus, plane, mass transit, are high? (mark these paths on a map)
 - Is there a hub where the traffic goes towards or flows from?
 - What hours of the day is traffic the heaviest?
2. Nodes: strategic points or intersections of two or more pathways; *“intersection” of the pathways*
 - Where are some key points where major pathways intersect?
 - What are people doing at these intersections?

3. Districts: two-dimensional areas that people connect over a particular theme
 - Living spaces (neighborhoods, communities, suburbs)
 - Work spaces (office complexes, factories/light industry, schools, retail space)
 - Social spaces (shopping, sports, arts and museums, entertainment, places of worship)
 - What are the themes of these districts? What binds them together? (If you do not identify with this theme, you will be an “outsider”)
4. Edges: boundaries or seams between districts or significant geographical changes; one dimensional
 - What are the edges defined by geographical barriers?
 - What are the boundaries, visible or invisible, that speak to separate groups?
5. Landmarks: a three-dimensional object that people attribute a significant characteristic; three-dimensional, objects people use to navigate
 - What are landmarks in the city that almost everyone knows about or can easily identify?

The architecture and geographical layout of a city may have more of an effect on your city than you may think. Aesthetics play an important role as well in fostering moods for relationships. Once one understand the social dimension of geography, you can begin to predict where use places for evangelism, meetings, publicity, and the like can occur. You can also identify problematic areas that will save you plenty of heartache. Collect your information and then summarize your most important observations.

Chapter 4 – Examining Culture/Mission

Each city, although made up of a variety of sub-cultures, develops its own culture based on what it perceives as its mission or values. A city will elect its administration, design developments and improvements, and determine laws and regulations all based upon fulfilling its mission, whether written or not. In order to understand the mission or culture of a city, the ideology, politics, economic and history must be researched. By identifying it, you will become aware of the current of ideas and values that shape and mold the lives of its people. Because many cities reinforce views that are opposed to the person and work of Christ, you cannot overestimate the importance of doing careful research in this area.

Most cities operate within a complex web of power structures. Politics is part of that web and the election of people reflects the values of their constituents. Power is held both positionally (the authority of the position) as well as through influence (the personality of key individuals).

Economics and history are other parts of the web. By tracing the economics of a city, you will gain important insight into how different agendas are being resourced or squeezed out as well as who influencers are in different parts of the city. Studying the history of a city will help you uncover the significant people and events that determined its personality. The following are questions to help in your research. Additional questionnaires are available in the last chapter of this book.

Culture – City Mission and Values

- Is there a stated mission or “slogan” for your city? What does it mean? What values does it imply?
- Is there a mayor’s annual message? What is its theme? What values does it imply?
- What are themes/issues reported by media?
- See additional questions in the Questionnaire.

Politics/Leaders – Develop a chart that includes the following positions and any pertinent descriptions of the individuals who hold these jobs. Look for biographies, articles they write, and/or organizations they support as ways to uncover their individual characteristics.

- Government: Elected officials
- Education: School board
- Social groups: Country clubs, leading families; big names in town; community leaders
- Athletics: Professional sports; recreational leagues; clubs
- Living space: neighborhood organizations; heads of programs in the community
- Communications: Media figures; radio/TV stations; talk show hosts; editors

Laws and regulations

- What are the regulations for public gatherings?
- What are policies regarding religious expressions?

City Calendar

- Holidays
- Special events (i.e. political, educational, social, athletics, media, entertainment)
- Ethnic Holidays (Jewish, Latino, Chinese, African-American, etc.)

- Emphasis Days (Black History Month, Gay/Lesbian events)
- Events that a major portion of the city will go to (i.e. major sports, concerts, speakers, presentations)

Economics

- Employment – What percentage is employed? Who are the major employers? What are the agencies that service the unemployed and where are they located?
- Income of various groups in various areas
- Technology – How many own computers/use internet?

History

- Read about the history of your city
- Interview people from different areas who have lived/worked in your city and ask about it's history and/or changes they have seen.
- Why was the city originally established? Has its purpose changed course? Why?
- What influences have occurred over time that has influenced it?
- What is the history of relationships within the city? Are there events in particular that have affected these relationships (racially, gender/sexuality issues, religious)?
- Refer to questions on the Questionnaire.

Uncovering these areas will be much like the process of peeling an onion, unwrapping it in layers. Do not answer the questions quickly and move on. Seek God for insight with regard to the importance of what you discover and then summarize your observations. Your goal, once again, is to uncover information and people that are significant to furthering an evangelistic ministry.

Chapter 5 – Examining Sociology

All people navigate relationships from a mental map that directs and guides the way they interact with others. People are not just map readers; they are map makers. From ethnic background to personal interests, people affiliate and organize themselves around personal and group values. Whereas examining the geography of a city helps you understand its physical map, sociology focuses on the social maps of the city.

- ✓ Who is in the city?
- ✓ How do they identify and organize themselves?
- ✓ What people of the world are represented?
- ✓ When and where do they meet?

With broad brushstrokes, you answer these four questions utilizing demographic information. The most helpful conclusions from your research will relate to identifying the predominant subcultures. Subcultures define the boundaries of social interaction. These boundaries may be weak or strong, but nevertheless, they are boundaries and must be considered. Most social interaction is based on common identity rather than geography. Do not assume that all people from an ethnic group or sub-culture are all alike.

In order for your conclusions to be useful in ministry, you will need to identify the unifying characteristics of each subculture. To help you in categorizing, use the acrostic GROUPS to prompt your memory of the six classifications for any group. Be mindful that some groups will fall under more than one classification:

- Gender/ethnicity
- Religious
- Occupations

- Unifying causes
- Play
- Social

Pray that the Lord will lead you to significant individuals within each particular subculture who will be instrumental in seeing the gospel spread throughout the entire city. Then begin by identifying:

1. General demographic information of your city
 - Metro area population
 - Suburban and/or divisions of population areas
 - Gender and age breakdowns
 - Ethnic breakdowns

2. Social groups under the 6 sub-group categories:
 - Gender/ethnicity
 - Religious (i.e. churches, synagogues, New age groups)
 - Occupational (i.e. unions, professional organizations)
 - Understanding Issues (i.e. political organizations, activist organizations, Alcoholics Anonymous)
 - Play (sports, dance, health clubs)
 - Social (i.e. country clubs, veterans organizations)

3. People groups of the world that are represented in your city:
 - Demographics – country and ethnicity specific
 - What are ways to serve or mingle with them? (i.e. programs, English classes, holidays, cultural events, outings)
 - Who are important people in a city with regard to international visas, international relations, etc.

4. Select the top 10 subcultures you feel lead to focus on. For each sub-culture, list the following:
 - Unifying characteristics
 - Officers or influential persons within the group
 - Meeting times, places (both officially and unofficially)
 - Ongoing activities and special events
 - When and where people gather for each social group? (i.e. What are the high traffic hours/events? Where do they go in the evening? How available are people on weekends? Are there areas of “turf” for specific groups?)

5. Other questions are listed in the last chapter.

Ministry involves people. Your ultimate purpose is to penetrate every “people group” or subculture with the gospel of Christ. We are defining the term “people group” as the largest group within which the gospel can spread through relationships without encountering barriers of understanding due to culture, language or geography. If God raises up a Christian community within every “people group” in a city, it becomes very feasible to see the entire city transformed by the gospel.

Chapter 6 – Examining Spiritual Attitudes

Each person over the course of time develops his or her own understanding of reality. From the seen to the unseen, people's perceptions of life shape how they think, act, and relate to people and events. Peoples' overall perceptions of reality and non-reality are called "worldviews."

A worldview is a conceptual framework of fundamental assumptions about reality. It enables a people to define and organize events and experiences into patterns that are consistent with their perception of the seen and unseen world. Simply stated, a worldviews frames a person's "view" of the "world."

When becoming a student of cities and their people, it is helpful to realize that there are only four major conceptual frameworks or what we will call worldviews "families". In any city of the globe, every worldview will fall into one (or a mixture of) these four families:

- Theism – the belief in one supreme God who is both transcendent and involved in all affairs of the universe. Creator and creation are separate and distinct. Includes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism.
- Monism – the belief that there is only basic reality despite the appearances and experience of diversity. This view believes god is everything and everything is god. Includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Baha'i, New Age, Gnosticism, Jainism.

- Naturalism – the belief that denies the existence of any god and claims that the natural world and its processes are all that exist. The supernatural world is myth and thus only believe the material world is real. Naturalism West includes Scientific, Humanistic, Hedonistic, Existential and Marxist Naturalism. Naturalism East includes Confucianism, Taoism, Asian Marxism.
- Animism – the belief that local spirits control the nature and relational world. Includes African and Native American religions, ancestor worship, Tibetan Bon, Shintoism, Voodoo, Dalia Lamaism and others.

Animism is probably the least understood and most overlooked worldview category. Anthropologists tell us that over eighty-percent of the world have animistic beliefs and practices to some degree. A key is to look for ritualistic and/or ceremonial practices.

Within each worldview family, there are a variety of directions a particular worldview can take. For example, there are three major religions that exist within theism: Judaism (God of the Old Testament), Christianity (God of the Old and New Testament), and Islam (a deviation of the Old Testament). All three have a similar understanding of reality, yet each differs drastically in the details of their beliefs. Moreover, one worldview can lead to a multitude of cultural expressions. Christians in Oklahoma worship Christ in entirely different ways than Christians in Bangkok.

Evangelism in some parts of the world has been a process of leading people to Christ who already

have a theistic or Christian worldview. For such people the gospel of Christ already fits within their view of reality. Most of the globe, though, has embraced worldviews that do not reflect biblical truth. Conceptual walls have been erected within their minds that prevent them from embracing Christ.

For most people to embrace Christ, not only must they deal with the sinfulness of their wills, but they must also undergo a paradigm shift in their thinking. Mental walls must be torn down and new ones built that align with a Christian worldview. We call this process "worldview change."

Understanding the predominant worldviews should open your eyes to the conceptual wall that keeps people from believing and walking with Christ. Your evangelism and teaching will need to be tailored to carefully remove their false views and reconstruct new ones based upon the Bible.

The purpose of this tool is to help you identify and describe the predominant worldviews and religious practices in your city. Refer to the Questionnaire in the last chapter for questions to help you determine what worldview a person has. Your findings should clarify areas for future study and research as you see your city transformed for Christ.

Chapter 7 - Using Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be very helpful in obtaining information about the people in your city. Several are suggested through this book and follow this chapter. They can be used individually to assess a certain area, or combined into larger surveys to assess several areas at once. Feel free to design what you feel you need to get the information so that you can decode your city.

It is very important to remember that any questions you ask need to be asked in an environment of trust. Without trust, people will doubt the motives behind your actions. Keep these guiding principles in mind:

1. Use a tool as a tool. Questionnaires are only tools, and tools are only as good as the craftsmen who use them. There is no one right way to use a questionnaire. You may want to do it more formally, reading the questions right off the page. At other times it might be more appropriate to rehearse the questions and ask them from memory in an informal interview. Remember to love people and use the tool. Don't love the tool and use people.
2. Be a trustworthy person. You will need to decide in advance what your ministry goal is. Are you looking for an opportunity to share Christ or are you also interested in serving people and the city at large? Whatever your direction, you must be motivated by love. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. And anticipate how you intend to answer the questions they are likely to ask: Why are you doing this? What will you do with the information? Why me? If you were not a

Christian, would you agree with the reasons behind your interview? This will help you answer thoughtfully and in a way that builds trust.

3. Decode as Christians, not as sociologists. Remember, that you are filled with the Holy Spirit who gives wisdom beyond human information.

Sociologists do their research to understand people from a variety of cultures as they study the interaction and characteristics of people. As Christians, our interest goes beyond to the spiritual world. Not only are you looking to understand what people are doing, but you must also find where God is at work. **Decoding your City** is a tool to help you accurately describe your city, as well as discover *where* and *among whom* God is working.

You will also find that wherever God is at work, so is the devil. Remember that there is a war in your city. As the Apostle Paul put it, "...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12)

Community Questionnaire

Neighborhood/Area _____

Age _____ Ethnicity _____

1. As you think about this city, what groups, organizations, etc. would you list as the most prominent? (list 5)
2. What criteria did you use to choose those top 5 – influence, size, visibility, quality of what they do, etc.?
3. Are you a member of any political groups, social groups, unions, non-profit organizations?
4. Where are most of your friends (at work, in your neighborhood, elsewhere)? Is there a place you and your friends generally meet?
5. What group do you personally feel like you belong?
6. Where would I find different groups in the city?

City History Questionnaire

1. How long have you lived in this city?
2. What 3 characteristics distinguish this city from other cities?
3. Have there been events that have significantly shaped this city? If so, please describe them?
4. What changes or trends have you observed over the last 10 years? 20 years?
5. Have racial or ethnic issues been an issue in your city? When? How?
6. What would be your greatest hope for this city as it moves into the future? What are barriers to achieving these hopes?

City Mission Questionnaire

1. Why did you decide to move to this city? To this area of the city?
2. How have you changed since moving to this city? How has this city influenced you?
3. What are your goals? How do you think this city can help you achieve them?
4. What are the major issues in this city? Social? Political? Religious?
5. Who/What are the groups addressing these issues? How are they going about it?
6. What is this city known for?
7. Does religion have any influence on this city?
8. Who is the person you respect the most in this city?

City Worldview Questionnaire

1. Who have been the most influential people in shaping who you are as a person? What you believe?
2. What three things do you want to do before the end of your life?
3. How do you make important decisions? How do you decide between right and wrong?
4. When you are having health or personal problems, where do you turn for help/guidance?
5. Do you believe people can contact or interact with past ancestors or spirits? How?
6. How do you overcome evil? What about evil spirits?
7. What happens to you when you die? Are you fearful of death? Why/why not?
8. What are the unique things you do to bring you and your family good luck or fortune?
9. What is your view of Christianity? What are some of its essential beliefs?

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