

DATA, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND DRIVING DISTANCE

An Incomplete Picture

In church planting, starting something new, we like to do our homework.

We study the community. We gather data. We examine demographics. We look at population growth, age, income, education, family composition, religious affiliation, housing patterns, and driving distance. We want to understand the people we hope to reach.



There is nothing wrong with any of that. Good information can keep us from making foolish assumptions. But there is a danger hiding inside all that research.

We can know an extraordinary amount about people without actually knowing them.

Data can tell us how old people are. It cannot tell us what they are afraid of.

Demographics can tell us how many children live in their homes. They cannot tell us what those parents worry about when they lie awake at night.

Driving distance can tell us how far someone might travel to attend something. It cannot tell us why they would never consider coming in the first place.

We can know where people live, what they earn, where they work, how they vote, what they buy, how much education they have, and what religious box they check on a survey. And after collecting all of it, we can still know remarkably little about how they actually experience their lives.

People are more complicated than data.

They are emotional. Relational. Contradictory. Hopeful. Afraid. Wounded. Resilient. They make decisions that don't always make sense from the outside because we don't know the stories that make those decisions perfectly understandable from the inside.

This is one of the things years of conversations in the harvest have taught me.

Someone says, *"I don't believe in God."* A survey records no religious belief. *Holy Curiosity* asks, *"Tell me about the God you don't believe in."*

Someone avoids church. We could categorize them as religiously disengaged. *Holy Curiosity* seeks to uncover what happened.

Someone becomes defensive when Christianity enters the conversation. We could label that resistance. *Holy Curiosity* asks what might be happening beneath the surface.

JESUS SAW MORE

Matthew tells us that Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He turned to His disciples and said, “*The harvest is plentiful.*”

Jesus saw something.

And what He saw moved Him.

That matters because Jesus didn’t describe the crowds as a target audience. He didn’t reduce them to their observable characteristics. He saw beneath the surface deeply enough that compassion was His response.

Then He called them a plentiful harvest.

What did Jesus see that His disciples didn’t?

We aren’t told everything He perceived in every person standing in that crowd. But Matthew makes one thing unmistakable: Jesus’ way of seeing people was profoundly personal. He saw more than what was visible on the surface.

That kind of seeing requires *proximity*.

You cannot learn someone’s story from a spreadsheet. You have to sit across the table.

You cannot discover what a person means by the words they use from demographic research. You have to ask.

You cannot understand the pain underneath someone’s anger by observing their behavior from a distance. You have to become curious enough to listen.

And you cannot manufacture compassion from information. Compassion begins when the people we are trying to understand stop being categories and become names and faces.

THE HARVEST IS ALWAYS SPEAKING

The harvest tells us far more than data ever could, but we have to learn its languages.

Over hundreds of conversations, I have increasingly learned to listen for four of them: *Words, Behavior, Expectations, and Pain*. I've written about this in another Field Note titled, "*The Four Languages of the Harvest*."

Words reveal how people understand their world.

Behavior can give us clues about what is happening beneath the surface.

Expectations reveal what people believe should be true, even when they cannot articulate why.

Pain often exposes the places where their deepest questions are hiding.

None of these are shortcuts for figuring people out. They are invitations to become curious.

What does that word mean to you?

Tell me more.

What happened?

Why was that important to you?

What were you hoping would happen?

What hurt?

Those questions will rarely fit neatly into a spreadsheet. But they can open a window into another person's world.

This is Holy Curiosity.

We don't listen so we can collect better information about people. We listen because people matter. We believe the Kingdom is near, the harvest is plentiful, and the Lord of the harvest is already present in His fields.

So we pay attention.

FROM INFORMATION TO RELATIONSHIP

Data has its place. Demographics have their place. Even driving distance can tell us something useful.

But none of them can replace relationship.

There is a significant difference between asking, "*What do we know about these people?*" and asking, "*Do we know these people?*"

The first question can be answered from a desk.

The second requires us to enter their world.

It requires coffee and meals and conversations. It requires listening long enough for our assumptions to be challenged. It requires becoming comfortable with stories that don't fit our categories. It requires enough humility to discover that some of what we thought we knew about people wasn't true at all.

Kingdom Reconnaissance isn't studying people from a distance. It is getting close enough to see them with compassion. To become their trusted friends.

Because the harvest isn't a collection of data points.

The harvest has names. Faces. Stories. Hopes. Heartaches. Fears. Failures. Dreams. Desires.

So gather the data. Study the demographics. Calculate the driving distance if it helps.

Then get out from behind the spreadsheet. Because the harvest isn't a demographic to study.

It is people to love.