

## The Importance of Context

On my recent mission trip, I read a wonderful book called *The Age of the Unthinkable* by Joshua Cooper Ramos. In it, he describes an experimental psychologist named Richard Nisbett, who studied how our cultural backgrounds condition the way we think. He discovered that there are fundamental differences in the way that Westerners and Chinese think. While the Chinese believe in constant change, Westerners believe that we go through periods of change and equilibrium. Westerners believe in a more deterministic world, thinking that we can control events because we know the rules that govern the behavior of objects.

These observations came out of a series of experiments that Nisbett ran with Western and Chinese college students, where they looked at pictures that changed every thirty seconds. What he discovered was that Westerners focused on the main object in the foreground of the picture, and often missed what was in the background. The Chinese, by contrast, usually looked at the environment around the main object first, and then moved to the object in the foreground. He discovered an expression of one aspect of Chinese philosophy and art that says our environment is far more powerful than any individual. In other words, context is everything.

This view contains the idea that constant change is a given. The environment contains clues about what is about to happen next. The more we pay attention to our communities and our neighborhoods, the more we will understand the changes that are coming our way. The more we follow the traditional Western thought patterns of ignoring our context, the more we will be surprised by the next wave of change that is coming.

In Numbers 13-14, we see Moses sending out 12 spies to scout out the Promised Land before they made their decisions about what to do. They understood the importance of the environment. As Oriental people, the Hebrews knew they needed an understanding of the land and the culture. They needed a sense of the context in which the people were living in, before they knew what their next steps would need to be.

The same is true for us today. In our church world, we often hear of good ideas that some church is doing, and if they are successful, we automatically want to copy them. This doesn't work because context is everything. What works in one place does not work in another place. Sometimes we can pick up some good ideas that may stimulate our thinking, but we always have to change them some how to fit our specific community, our specific people, and our specific place. Otherwise, the idea will fail.

One of the most crucial tasks for us as a group of congregations is to understand our context. That may sound easy, but often it's not. Unconsciously, over the years, many North American churches have become isolated from their own neighborhoods. The level of interaction between church and community is very minimal beyond letting some local group rent out the church facility. If we want to reverse the membership decline that most of our congregations are experiencing, then we have to discover once again how to move back into the neighborhood.

So, we are inviting every one of you to join us for a two day consultation on August 21 and 22, that we are calling Moving Back into the Neighborhood. For only \$75 (and every fifth person from the same congregation comes for free), we will give you some concrete steps that your church can begin to take to engage your local community in fresh ways. Alan Roxburgh and Mark Lau Branson will be our main presenters. They will give us a much food for thought. But rather than being passive spectators who listen to a series of lectures, we will be active participants who discuss and interact with ideas that will fit our specific congregations and our specific communities. Each church will walk away with some concrete next steps of missional experiments that you can begin to try, that will help you connect with your community. You can register now to attend at [www.pgconference.com](http://www.pgconference.com) or [www.presbytersd.org](http://www.presbytersd.org).

Why? Because context is everything. If you don't understand your neighborhood, your ideas will fail. If you don't understand your community, your vision statements and mission statements and strategic plans will be meaningless. We need to become more Hebrew (Oriental) in our thinking. We need to get in touch at a deeper level with our own surroundings. Without this, our congregations will continue to struggle. This is one of the key first steps to a more vibrant future for our churches. I hope you will register now to join us in August. Please be in prayer for this event, and look around your community with fresh eyes. We usually begin our planning with the church, and this one of our major mistakes. We don't get anywhere when we begin with the church. We must always begin with our neighborhood. We must understand it. We must listen to it. We must see how God's Holy Spirit is already at work in it.

Once we have developed some awareness and understanding of our community, then we can take some worthwhile steps. Then, we can know what direction to take. Then, we can know how to follow the Lord. Because God is already at work in our world, Christ is already on the move. And context is everything.