Building Community in Suburbia
Albert Hsu

How to Use This Tool
This Conference Classics process tool is designed to accompany an audio recording of a Willow Creek Association conference session. You can refer to the tool while listening to the session and use it afterward to dig deeper into the content, or you can use the tool to get the highlights without even listening to the session.

This tool consists of three parts:
- The PREVIEW section lists the problem that the session addresses and the recommendation that the speaker makes.
- The KEY CONCEPTS section breaks the session down into the core ideas most important for you to understand.
- The REFLECT section includes questions to help you practice, apply, and implement what you’ve learned. Although the questions are geared primarily to individuals, groups can use them as a discussion guide.
Problem: Suburban culture is fragmented, busy, and anonymous, making it difficult to build authentic community.

Recommendation: By understanding the dynamics of suburban culture and recovering the practice of Christian hospitality, you can build true community in any suburban context.

Key Concepts

Understanding the Suburban Context
- Like every other environment, suburbia has its challenges, and they are common nationwide.
- Suburbia may be one of the most strategic mission fields of the twenty-first century.
- Suburbs are as strategically important as cities in reaching the world.
- Nationwide, more suburbs house commerce, arts, and racial diversity than cities.
- The suburban life is a spiritual quest of hope for the future.
  - Suburbia is the context for people’s dreams.
  - Suburbia was created to provide affordable housing in healthier living conditions away from cities.
- Modern suburbia has departed from these original ideals.
  - Financial anxiety and worry has replaced peace and rest.
  - There are now more people living in poverty in suburbs than in cities.

Cultural Barriers to Building Community in Suburbia
- The development of a commuter culture has caused suburbs to be designed for car travel.
  - The commuter culture causes fragmentation as home, work, and church occur in different communities that don’t overlap.
  - Health suffers because we drive more and walk less.
  - The lack of mass transit means that people who can’t drive or can’t afford a car have limited mobility.
  - This highlights the importance of transportation ministries in local churches (e.g. the CARS Ministry at Willow Creek Community Church).
  - The commuter culture has also created commuter churches — fragmenting a church’s sense of community and creating a significant need for parking.
  - Social capital and civic networks (e.g. bowling leagues, Rotary clubs) have declined in recent years.
    - Every 10 minutes of commuting reduces a person’s community involvement by 10 percent.
  - Today community refers to affinity or interest groups, but years ago, community referred to your physical location — your local neighborhood or parish.
    - One way to counter commuter culture is for Protestants to recover the parish concept.
    - Consider what it would look like if you tried to consolidate your life into a smaller region (e.g. a five-mile radius).
    - The multi-site church model distributes the church to where the congregation lives.
- A consumer culture has also developed.
  - If we need something, our default setting is to go out and buy it, rather than ask
3. Albert listed several ways that individuals, groups, and churches can build community in suburbia.

   a. Review the list below. If there’s one idea that you are interested in pursuing, place a checkmark next to it. (You can also write in your own.)

   □ Start a transportation ministry in your local church.
   □ Begin consolidating your life (work, home, church, shopping, etc.) in a smaller region (e.g. a five-mile radius).
   □ Share resources in Christian community, rather than always buying what you want or need.
   □ Open up your local church as a public gathering place.
   □ Intentionally practice hospitality and building community in and around your home (e.g. inviting people over, spending time in your front yard).

   □ __________________________________________________________________________

   b. Write down the next step you would like to take to implement the idea you checked.