

IMMERSE

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Do You Know My Name?

By: Brad Griffin

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Learning names can be hard for me. I have to practice names in my head while I'm with those people then associate the names with their faces later in my mind, and sometimes I still come up empty. Throw me in with 30 middle schoolers and I'm doing mental acrobatics trying to pull up names on the fly.

Why do I bother?

Because names matter. They matter a lot, actually. Names bear our mark to the world, often preceding us somewhere and remaining after we've moved on in records, signatures and memories. Think about the names in your high school senior yearbook. Or the names of the students in your first youth group.

Names matter to God too, of course. Numerous stories within Scripture highlight God's willingness to step into someone's life and give that person a new name. Think Abraham, Jacob and Paul, who all experienced mid-life (or later) name changes. Or John the Baptist and Jesus, both divinely named in-utero.

We can't possibly remember everyone's name, of course. As a result, usually we only catch the names of people we think will matter to us at some point down the road. In light of this, it's interesting to note that nearly one in three Americans doesn't know a single neighbor.¹ You know, the people-who-actually-live-near-you kind of neighbors.

Not one.

Another third know “some,” and 24% know “most” of the people who live close to them. So less than a quarter of us know most of our neighbors by name. Yet, in the same study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a significant correlation was found between knowing neighbors and having face-to-face talks around community issues.

What stands out to me from this study is that *justice* in our communities is directly related to *awareness*. And when we aren’t having conversations about the issues, we’re not likely to be aware of the issues or collaborating toward possible solutions. When we don’t know our neighbors in the first place, it’s so easy to ignore community concerns altogether.

Living in a neighborhood with a moderate crime rate, I see this play out all the time. There are folks who slide in and out and don’t get involved and others who know everyone on the block and tend to be really aware of the latest news and drama. The latter are more likely to start conversations about how we can make a difference.

You may or may not live in a neighborhood where justice issues seem close to the surface. But as we allow God to reorder our reality in light of God’s heart for justice, we’re invited to reimagine the location of our “neighborhood.” In *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, Mark Labberton suggests that when we truly seek to love God and neighbor, we may encounter the God who suggests our neighborhood is different than what we expected:

...We will realize that our neighbor is not just those who happen to live in the comfortable enclave of our own choosing, but also includes the needy, the suffering and the marginalized. For they are in God’s heart, right where we now dwell. It’s dangerous to let God shape our lives, for he always changes the neighborhood.²

In other words, we may continue to live in the same physical location, but as we wake up to God’s reality, God changes our address. With this new address, we have new opportunities to impact our neighbors. As Eric Michael Bryant notes in his new book, *Not Like Me*, “proximity equals opportunity.” Bryant explains:

Getting involved in someone’s life allows us to share our lives honestly with them in a way that gives hope when they feel hopeless. When a friend sees us going through trials while relying on God and our friendships, they are more likely to seek us out when they are struggling. Proximity allows us opportunity for significant conversations.³

The first step in having conversations about neighborhood injustice, though—whether that’s our immediate neighborhood or one God redirects

our hearts toward—is taking the time to learn names. That’s inconvenient and takes effort. To one in three of us, it’s not worth it. Which one are you? Which one will the students in your ministry be?

Here are a few ideas for improving our name recall:

- On your next mission trip or visit to the local homeless shelter, help your team set a goal for learning the names of the people you serve. If possible, get names and photos ahead of time of folks you’ll be most interacting with and use those to practice. Afterwards, encourage students to pray for folks by name, and do so together as a group in the following weeks and months.
- Give a justice issue a face and name. Child sponsorship through organizations like World Vision and Compassion International is so effective because of the power of names, faces and stories. Rather than tell kids they should care about AIDS in Africa, how about committing as a group to sponsor a child in an AIDS-impacted community?
- Model getting to know your actual neighbors, including your church’s neighbors. Depending on your circumstances, this could be a real eye-opener for you and your students.

¹ “Neighbors Online,” Pew Internet & American Life Project, June 2010. Accessed at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Neighbors-Online.aspx>.

² Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 68.

³ Eric Michael Bryant, *Not Like Me: A Field Guide for Influencing a Diverse World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 215.