Getting to Know Your Church

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We often talk about reading the Bible carefully, deeply, and critically, which is called *exegesis*. But it's just as important to read and understand our church communities in the same careful way.

This idea comes from William P. Brown's book *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*.[1] Brown says that when we study the Bible, we are also learning about ourselves—our experiences, beliefs, and how we see the world. He even made a list of questions to help readers explore their own thoughts and feelings while reading scripture.

In his book, Brown is mostly talking to seminary students—people studying the Bible in school. But for pastors and church leaders, there's another layer. They aren't just thinking about their own views—they must also think about the whole church.

When a pastor stands in the pulpit, they bring their own story, but they also speak to a room full of people with different lives and perspectives. To help pastors think about this, I've adapted Brown's questions from *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis* into a new set. These questions are meant to help pastors understand their congregation better—especially as churches start thinking about how to respond to phenomena like rising temperatures and extreme heat.

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1 William P. Brown. 2017. *A Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

This Cooling Communities project resource was developed by Logan Pollock in Spring 2025 while fulfilling degree requirements as a student Agent of Thriving at Duke Divinity School.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR CHURCH COMMUNITY

1. Who makes up your congregation?

What are the backgrounds of the people—ethnically, socially, and economically? Are most people alike, or is there a lot of variety? Do people tend to gather in smaller groups? If so, how do those groups differ?

2. How much do people know?

What is the congregation's knowledge of the Bible? What do they know about heat waves, rising temperatures, or climate-related issues?

3. Has your church experienced a significant event?

Has something happened that shapes how your church sees extreme weather or rising heat? For example: a local flood, wildfire, heat-related illness, or crop failure.

4. How does culture affect the church?

How do the culture and background of your congregation influence how they read the Bible and think about the church's role in the community?

5. What role does gender play?

Do men and women have equal voices in your church? Who usually makes decisions, and how does gender influence that?

6. How does politics show up?

Do people in your church mostly share the same political views or are there many different ones? Do people want political topics talked about in sermons, or would they rather keep church and politics separate?

7. What issues matter most to your church?

Are there certain topics or problems that people care about deeply? How do these concerns shape how they listen to sermons or read scripture?

8. What values guide your church?

Does your congregation focus on certain themes—like justice, salvation, service, or sharing faith? How do those values affect how they read the Bible and connect with the community?

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The Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability at Duke University accelerates solutions to critical energy and environmental challenges, advancing a more resilient and sustainable world. The Nicholas Institute conducts and supports actionable research and undertakes sustained engagement with policymakers, businesses, and communities—in addition to delivering transformative educational experiences to empower future leaders. The Nicholas Institute's work is aligned with the Duke Climate Commitment, which unites the university's education, research, operations, and external engagement missions to address climate challenges.

The Heat Policy Innovation Hub

The Nicholas Institute's Heat Policy Innovation Hub is the first program in the United States dedicated to cross-disciplinary innovation on extreme heat policy and practice. Located in a region profoundly affected by extreme heat, Duke University is particularly well-situated to influence—and potentially transform—our nation's approach to this critical issue. The Heat Policy Innovation Hub brings together Duke's globally recognized expertise in medicine, health, policy, engineering, the environment, and ministry.

Cooling Communities

The Cooling Communities initiative brings together community leadership, trusted faith-based institutions, and financial innovation to explore scalable, locally rooted strategies for heat resilience. The first phase of the project has been led by the Heat Policy Innovation Hub in partnership with Duke Divinity School and Interfaith Power & Light.

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