

Equipping for Rural Mission

Researching and Surveying your Community



1 Introduction

Obtaining views from outside the church and / or some hard data is an important part of developing a mission action plan.

It can be used before session 3 to ask open questions to understand what people in the community think are needs, opportunities and priorities in the area. You can check if your viewpoint ('there are no teenagers in the village') is actually true. Strong opinion that differs to yours may offer you a new starting point or resolve long held misunderstandings or preconceptions.

Research can also be used after session 3 to gauge opinion and support for an emerging idea. It can also help you to make local contacts and identify potential partners. Research with and about others can also reduce competition between churches and other groups through duplication. This is important, especially when fundraising.

2 Using data that is already available

Local data and community plans

The easiest way to get useful information is to see if research is already available. A local, community, parish or village plan may exist for your area, which may include research or a consultation. Ask a Parish Councillor if there is anything available if you don't know, or consult a residents association.

You could also conduct internet research and look for national, regional and local data. Your local authority will have lots of information which has influenced their priorities and expenditure. This is usually called the Community Plan, and the underlying data Community Profiles. This will give you an idea of how your locality features in particular concerns relative to surrounding areas such as the county. Be aware that these plans have been written at a certain point in time, and the priorities drawn up may not be politically neutral.

To obtain the community profile for your area go to your local authority website and type 'community profile' or 'area profile' into the search box. Community Profiles may be named differently by different authorities. You can contact the research department of your local authority and ask about this over the telephone. Community profiles are based on Wards and are drawn from national statistics.

Listening to the world

This is learning and listening in a broader way and can go beyond your local community. It could include information from various sources - a Christian conference seminar, or a course, or the insights that come from the particular interests of



church members. You could also include something you are aware of from the support your church gives to world mission partners or social justice campaigns, initiatives from denominational leaders, or specific national research publications.

Perhaps a personal story or a good practice example of mission has inspired you in some way. Bring this to the table and enable it to broaden what you later discuss and reflect on together.

Using this type of information can seem overwhelming at first. It is easy to look at headlines and say 'it's not like that here', but the same issues may well exist in your community too. There is potential during research stages for groups of churches to plan to reflect on these findings together.

Looking at the broader picture is an opportunity to offer what you can to existing initiatives – to 'piggy back' - without the pressure of setting something up yourselves or being the key player.

3 Asking community leaders and others

Rather than or in addition to a formal survey, consider visiting or calling a few key community leaders to ask for their views.

'A church shaped for mission will be one shaped for the sake of those to whom it is sent, not one shaped to meet the needs of its own members' Does your church reflect this quote?

The following questions might be helpful.

- In what ways do you think people in the local community who are not church members use or benefit from church?
- Are there any church activities that you don't think help the community? What do you think the church could do better or differently?
- What things would you like to see the church doing more of?

Try to include people from different age groups and occupations and someone from the margins of church or new to it.

When you gather your responses together, show what you do well and less well and indicate what you may want to improve or change.

Tips for those collating the results

- Some of the answers might be tough to display and discuss. Don't ignore answers which reflect that you don't do something at all, as this will also be valuable to think about and discuss.
- Don't ignore anything that brings out an emotional response in you or in others.
- Smaller churches can focus on 'doing fewer things but doing them well'; but this might mean losing one particular focus in favour of another.

- The interviewers need to listen carefully to other people and record their views. This takes skill, especially when you hear opinions that differ from your own.
- The questions and your collated answers/results could be circulated or displayed with space to comment before you get to Session 3 of the process. In Session 3 you can discuss them in more detail, with time to reflect and pray beforehand.

4 Surveying

Surveying requires some people with persistence and good listening skills and others with the ability to collect, analyse and present data simply.

Surveys can be done directly by questionnaire, interview or focus group. These methods are complicated to varying degrees. Without a well-designed survey you will not get good response rates or a data set which you can use easily in comparison. Without well-prepared volunteers or staff who can conduct your survey or a series of good questions, you may obtain a set of partial and ambiguous results for your effort. In many cases these methods may not be fruitful or quick. It may be beyond the capacity of a small church to do a detailed survey.

Firstly, ask yourself: **“What do we want to find out?”** The answer to this question is your **research goal** and will inform how you go about the whole task: what form of research you will choose, who you will approach, what questions you will ask and how you will feed back results.

There are many methods to survey a community, including *questionnaires* and *interviews*.

Who are you going to approach?

Before conducting the survey, you must choose a relevant survey population (your sample). Findings from that carefully selected sample are used to make estimates regarding the entire population’s attitudes or beliefs on a particular topic.

If you are aiming to get a **general view** e.g. across an entire age range or a complete parish, then continue the survey until you get enough participants. Aim for at least 10% of the overall population and a minimum of 30 people. You could collect responses until they are representative of the area, e.g.

- 30% of local people live in the social housing estate, so 30% of responses need to be from people living there.
- 11% of local people are ages 16-24 years so likewise get 11% of responses from this age group.

To conduct the surveys, go where there is significant footfall i.e. people coming by. You could use social gatherings such as a village fete or farmers market, or ask permission to survey in the local shopping area or pay for a car boot pitch. ***Avoid asking your church members to take part in a survey like this as they are already part of your ongoing discussions.***

Alternatively, you may want to just sample **specific groups or individuals**, e.g. church hall users.

Designing Surveys

Initial planning of the survey design and questions is extremely important. Once the survey has

begun it is difficult or impossible to make changes. Four key issues should be considered when designing a survey.

- 1. Respondent attitude:** Put yourself in the respondent's shoes. Ask yourself what kind of survey you, as a respondent, would be most likely to answer.
- 2. Nature of questions:** Match the type of questions which you use to the method you are using. For instance some questions might be easier to ask on paper, rather than on the telephone.
- 3. Cost:** The method of survey, sample size, time taken may all affect cost.
- 4. Ability to meet needs of research goal:** There needs to be a link between the survey method and the goal of the research. So, if you want a large number of responses from a broad sample of the population you would choose a postal survey. If you are interested in getting more interaction between researcher and respondent you might choose face-to-face interviews with a smaller sample size.

Designing Questions

Developing a good survey or questionnaire is more difficult than it might seem. You need to consider:

- Type of question used.
- Content of questions.
- Wording of questions.
- Order of questions.

You can use a combination of closed and open questions.

Closed questions limit respondents' answers. They are allowed to choose from a pre-existing set of answers, such as yes/no, true/false, or multiple choice with an option for 'other' to be filled in, or ranking scale response options. Example: 'The most important issue facing our community today is litter'. In response to a statement the respondent is asked to tick on a scale from: I strongly agree, I somewhat agree, I have no opinion, I somewhat disagree, I strongly disagree.

The advantages are:

- They are more easily analysed, interpreted statistically, and better suited for computer analysis.
- In large scale surveys they take less time from the interviewer, the participant and the analyst so it is a less expensive method.
- The response rate is better in surveys which used closed questions.

Open questions do not give respondents answers to choose from, but are phrased so that respondents are encouraged to explain their answers and reactions to a question with a sentence or more. Example: 'What do you think is the most important issue facing our community today?' The advantages are:

- They allow respondents to include more information, feelings, attitudes, and understanding of the subject. Closed questions may not offer respondents choices that reflect their real feelings or opportunity to say that they do not understand the question.
- Respondents are not likely to forget the answers they give, it is harder for them to disregard questions, and it prevents them simply selecting that same tick box each time.

Top Tips for Surveying

- Ensure that any respondent knows exactly who you are and represent (e.g. the local church, and why you are conducting the survey).
- Pre-test your survey - using volunteers who have not helped to put it together - before using it.
- Questions should be written in straightforward, direct language that does not contain jargon.
- Questions should be kept short and simple.
- The Data Protection Act applies to all personal data however it is kept. No contact details should be used for any purpose other than that for which explicit permission was given. Do not pass on contact details to anyone else.
- Does your choice of open or closed questions lead to the types of answers you would like to get from your respondents?
- Is every question in your survey necessary?
- Does one topic need more than one question?
- Do you give enough information for each set of questions?
- Is each question as succinct as it can be without leaving out essential information?
- Write a survey which you would be willing to answer yourself.
- Be polite, courteous and sensitive. Thank the responder for participating both at the beginning and the end of the survey.
- Remember to share and feedback your results. Let the community know that their contribution has been appreciated. If you have indicated that there will be feedback to your survey participants then you need to decide what form this will take. You may have already decided this before you started the survey. It could be in the form of a letter, a display in a public place, a follow up meeting or at a community event.

5 Questionnaires - written surveys

There are different ways of conducting a written survey.

Postal Surveys

These can be used to survey large numbers of people at the same time on a broad range of subjects.

- *Strengths*: Lower cost, convenience – participants can reply at their own leisure, reduced bias – as there is no personal contact between researcher and respondent, reliability of sample – it is possible to reach a greater population which can make findings more reliable.
- *Weaknesses*: Low returns rate compared with a telephone or face to face survey, relies on the ability of respondents e.g. literacy level and language ability.

Group Surveys

The questionnaire is presented to individuals in a small group setting.

- *Strengths*: High rate of response, more versatile – can serve a variety of specific purposes and can use both open and closed questions.
- *Weaknesses*: uses a small sample, time/timing; it requires a slot of time which is convenient for the whole group.

On-line Surveys

Internet based survey systems are easy to set up, for example using www.surveymonkey.com (which in its basic form is free). Create a survey, get the 'URL', TEST IT, then email it to those you want to survey or include it in your church web site or social media.

- *Strengths:* it is free or inexpensive, it is easy analyse data, it delivers responses quickly and responses may be more honest.
- *Weaknesses:* Not everyone has uses the Internet especially in some rural areas, it may be difficult to guarantee anonymity, it can be more difficult to construct an on-line questionnaire, there is potential for technical 'glitches', and response rates may be poor after the first few days.

6 Interviews - oral surveys

These are more personal and are used to get thorough opinions and impressions from respondents. Interviews can be done in several different ways.

Group interviews

The difference between this and the group survey is that individuals are not given a questionnaire but they work in a group to answer the researcher's questions together. You can approach local community groups to ask for a few minutes of time at one of their meetings.

Individual interviews

Choose appropriate people within your community and ask if you could meet together for a short time. These may be people who work in the community or provide services to the community. They may be local residents. Try to get a good cross section of people from the community regarding age, gender, term of residence, area of residence within the community, locally employed, travels out to work etc. Another way to conduct short informal interviews is for church members to take a few questions and ask people they meet in other venues in the community if they would answer them.

Phone surveys

This is potentially quicker than other forms of interview but many people do not like this sort of phone call.

- *Strengths of Interviews:* personal contact – interviews allow the respondent to ask questions or seek clarification of a question, response rate – although it takes more time to interview there is more control over the rate of response as the researcher conducts interviews until the required number has been achieved.
- *Weaknesses of interviews:* cost – it takes much more time and this may translate into cost, bias may be introduced from either the interviewer or interviewee, certain types of question are not easy to use in a phone survey e.g. multiple choice questions, attitude e.g. phone calls may not be received at a convenient time and annoy people.

A simple face-to-face survey

The simple survey below could be used to obtain information from local people.

Age:	0-9	10-15	16-19	20-29	30-44	45-59	60-74	75+	Male/Female
Area where I live – Postcode as a minimum									
One thing I like about this place/living here									
One thing I dislike about this place/living here									
How do you think it could be changed for the better?									
Do you think that the church could help to support the change you suggest?									
If the church wasn't here anymore what would you miss?									
When was the last time you visited the church and what was the reason for your visit?									

Responses can be anonymous but you will need to ask people who participate for some personal information to show it is representative.

Face-to-face surveys require good listening and recording skills. Data collected needs to be grouped to show what respondents said in a way that is simple to understand. ***Creating graphs and charts can help make the information given more meaningful and create visual impact.***

7 Community engagement in your survey

Surveying at local public events – piggy-backing - can be a great opportunity to:

- Gather information.
- Raise the profile of the church or signal to the community that you're planning or developing ideas.

These public events could be organised by the church like church summer fairs or family fun days but you don't need to organise an event yourself to do this – you could piggy-back on existing local public events like:

- School fetes.
- Community Festivals.
- Sporting events.

You will need to seek the permission of the event organisers first. The questionnaire can be filled in by the researcher there and then and you can use displays to attract attention. As part of this, you could have a stall that has an interactive display which aims to get the views of local people using one of the following ideas:

- **Sticker chart:** People can participate by putting stickers against different themes (or you could have large labelled bottles/buckets and a pile of stones – and give people stones to put in the themes they think are important) this gives a consensus of strength of feeling from participants about the themes. Each person gets the same allocation of stickers, stones etc.
- **Graffiti wall:** this is a space to write up what is important maybe against a heading or in response to a verbal question (suggestions below)
- **Draw your community:** Good for engaging children – while the children are drawing their picture, you can talk to the parents/carers and ask them for their views!
- **Local history display:** photos past and present. Getting hold of older photos and then taking photos of the same location in the present day will have a striking impact showing how things have changed. You can then ask people to write their favourite memories of the area and also what their hopes are for the area in the future.
- **A display of current church community involvement:** then pose a question on “What else can we do to help?” Other possible questions you could ask include:
 - What is the biggest issue facing your community?
 - What is the best thing in your area?
 - What would you love to see in your community?
 - What can the church do to help the community?

Drawing attention to your stall

With any public event, you need to attract footfall to your stall and draw a crowd. Here are some low cost ideas:

- Bubble machine - great for attracting children who will bring their parents. Borrow it or buy them for around £10-£20 at a toy shop
- Give away sweets/lollipops: but try not to compete at a school fair with a tuck shop
- Run a drawing competition with a prize given out at the event. Display entries.
- Helium balloons - more expensive than sweets but a crowd pleaser.
- Don't wait for people to come to you – go out and talk to people as they walk by – ask them if they'd like to give their opinion

8 Analysing, Presenting your Results and Feeding Back

A well designed survey will enable you to collate the answers to your questions and give you the answers to your research goal(s). Analysing your results is an important part of the process and how you do this will depend on the scope of your study, your own capabilities and the audience to whom you are going to report. Just giving out data in the forms of numbers on a page or the original surveys may make it hard to understand and interpret. This will also make it hard to look at the relative strength of a finding, to notice anything surprising or shocking etc. - and therefore make it harder to grasp the significance.

Say the following are your answers to the question ‘What do you like about this village?’

- *Peace and quiet*
- *There is less graffiti than in Chesterfield*
- *The crime levels are low*
- *It is a safe place to live]*
- *Close to town*
- *Security*
- *Drunks are seldom seen*
- *There is no through traffic coming in the village*
- *Good bus route*

You might want to reorder the comments and regroup into categories noting the number of similar comments with a heading to summarise:

- *There is less graffiti than in Chesterfield*
- *Drunks are seldom seen*
- *The crime levels are low*
- *It is a safe place to live*
- *Security*

A safe place to live and low crime x5

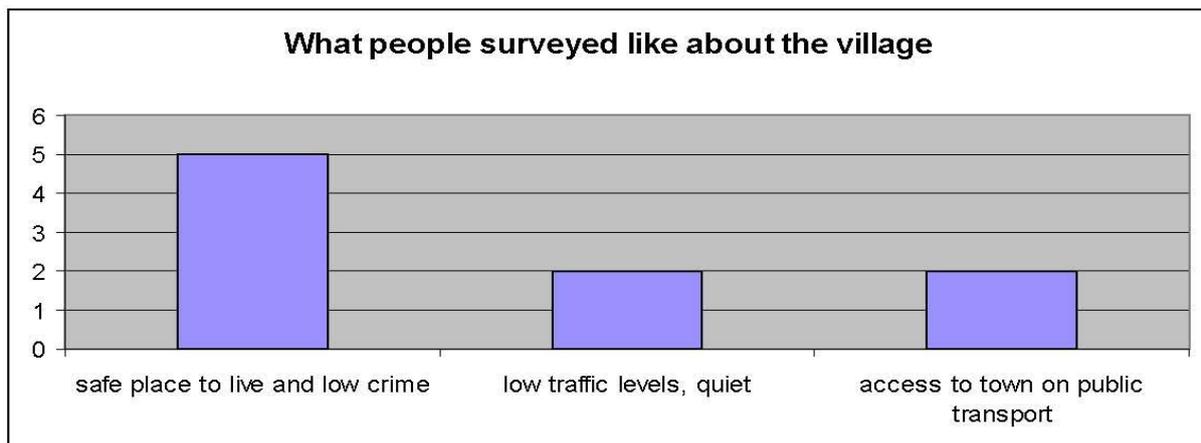
- *There is no through traffic coming in the village*
- *Peace and quiet*

Quiet and low level traffic x2

- *Close to town*
- *Good bus route*

Access to town on public transport x2

All of which could be shown as a simple chart:



This is not without potential problems, e.g. in the sample above the response ‘security’ has been grouped with ‘crime levels are low’ but it may relate to the idea that the place hasn’t changed much – which is comfortable for that particular respondent. You will have to make decisions like this. When you present findings you will need to be able to answer questions on this process, and clarify. You could also illustrate grouped findings with quotes from the range of responses, particular any you find significant in meaning.

Information may be recorded in a number of ways. If you convert findings to data in the form of a table you can then create a Chart or Graph. Charts and Graphs are clear, visual ways of presenting findings and may assist you to find meaning in the raw data, or make comparisons. Microsoft Excel gives easy to use software for data to be converted to Graphs and Charts.

Perhaps when you prepare the summary of survey findings you might reflect on:

- What finding was surprising?
- What finding was shocking?
- What finding needs more investigation?
- What has this revealed about the culture of your church or the wider community?

Feeding back survey findings should highlight what is of interest or significance *not* simply what is average or predictable. Some analysis is not exact - you make your best suggestion with the information given. Make it clear what is a *finding* and what is *your suggestion* so people can see the difference.

9 Conclusion

Remember you are not commercial researchers: show an interest in and empathy with your respondents and you may find the exercise helps break down any barriers and build relationships with the community.

Enjoy!

The material in this handout is produced with permission from materials created for '*Listening Church*' by **Dan Chapman** (Church Urban Fund), **Joy Bates**, **Phil Morris**, and **Stella Collishaw** (Derby Diocese) - **June 2011**. Updated by Jerry Marshall, March 2017.