

## PARISH HISTORY AUDIT

### INTRODUCTION

To assist in producing an effective Mission Action Plan it is recommended that parishes undertake background research to embed the process in the local context. This research will include a **Parish Audit** (focused particularly on the church and congregation) and a **Community Audit** (which explores the reality of the geographical parish and local demography). A further tool in producing an effective and fruitful MAP would be a **History Audit**.

### HISTORY AUDIT

A History Audit is a process of exploring and naming the historical themes of church, congregation and neighbourhood. It is not same as a parish history (although there are clear links between the two).

### THE VALUE OF A HISTORY AUDIT

Evidence suggests that history tends to repeat itself and that high dividends can be paid in naming and understanding the themes that have repeated themselves in any given situation.

### PROCESS

The process for carrying out a History Audit would closely resemble the **Look ~ Listen ~ Read ~ Research** pattern given in *Writing a Parish History* (full details can be found at <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/building-on-history-project/>), but the audit will be much more of an overview, identifying specific themes, rather than a detailed history.

### THEMES

Possible History Audit themes may include:

- Church attendance (Electoral Roll and Average Sunday Attendance figures)
- Children and Youth Ministry (including numbers, focus, etc)
- Style of Worship and Changes in Worship
- Use of the Church and Buildings; architectural developments and changes in use
- Length of stay and profiles of incumbents
- Recurring themes in PCC minutes, Parish Magazines, etc
- Patterns of Lay Leadership
- Issues and Initiatives in Outreach, Mission and Evangelism
- Church Music
- Social, Funding Raising and other Church Events
- Finance
- Church and Congregation Planting
- Socio demographic changes in parish population and church congregation

### POINTS TO CONSIDER

Whilst undertaking a History Audit it is worth considering these questions:

- Can we identify and name cultural themes?
- Is there evidence of significant, ground-breaking change taking place? If so, what events or actions enabled these to take place?
- Are there clear sticking points that nobody has ever managed to address?

## NAMING THE THEMES

There is enormous power in the naming of particular issues and themes for two specific reasons:

1. The accepted wisdom of what it was like 'in the good old days' (or 'bad old days'!) may not actually be true when researched in detail (the myth of the full church is one good example of this).
2. There will almost certainly be issues and themes which recur throughout the history of a church which no one has ever really explored and identified (for example, the cry that 'we can't get people to attend the Harvest Festival service' might be researched to discover that for 150 years the Harvest Festival service has been poorly attended; does this say something?).

## WHERE MIGHT EVIDENCE BE FOUND

As discussed above, the **Look ~ Listen ~ Read ~ Research** pattern is a good one to use. Specific documents which may be worth surveying will include:

- PCC Minutes
- Parish Magazines
- Annual Reports
- Annual Accounts
- Service Attendance Registers
- Church Electoral Roles
- Mission Action Plans and equivalent

## REFERENCES

Walter Wink *Naming the Powers* (1984)

Rick Warren *Purpose driven Church* (1995)

Bob Jackson *Hope for the Church* (2002)

## CASE STUDIES

- Church 'A' has difficulty in developing lay leadership for mission and ministry. A history audit reveals that not only has this always been the case, but that there has been a history of powerful individuals within the congregation accruing significant leadership roles to themselves, leaving it difficult for others to develop their potential in the parish. The power has, effectively (if not in reality) been handed on from one powerful person (or group or family) to another. The history audit will help to reveal this tendency within the church community and ways of involving greater numbers of people in leadership might then be more easily explored. The naming of the issue will offer the potential to challenge positively the inappropriate accrual of power.
- Church 'B' is seriously considering a major development project, to include an internet café and place to meet in a socially deprived area. Although various pieces of research undertaken both by the church and by the local authority have indicated that the local community is crying out for both these facilities, further, more specific, research by the church indicates that no-one would actually use such a facility at the church. All the talk at PCC is of people being 'scared off' by the church until its pointed out that social initiatives by both the local Methodist and Roman Catholic churches are well used. A history audit

then reveals that Church 'B' has always had a problem with new initiatives in the local community simply because of its location. Although close to the main road it feels hidden. The audit shows that the plot on which the church was built was purchased for a song because nobody else wanted it. History shows that the issue the church needs to address is that of visibility and profile.

- Church 'C' has difficulty in paying its common fund, even though the church is well attended and in a comfortable part of London. A history audit reveals that there has been a history of members of the PCC feeling that the common fund contributions are disproportionately high and so appealing or questioning them. The result is that there is a general, unquantifiable, feeling that 'the diocese doesn't understand us'. This feeling is communicated to the congregation in fairly intangible, but none-the-less real, ways. However, rather than this ever being resolved it rather is just allowed to exist as an uncomfortable feeling. Revealing this in a history audit can lead to clear exploration and resolution, rather than being left as a festering feeling.
- Church 'D' despairs of the fact that just as good, able people are found to work with the mission and ministry of the church they seem to leave. A history audit shows that this area has always been transient in terms of its demography. Rather than despairing, the naming of this theme will help to put in place strategies for mission which encompass this reality, rather than trying to work against it.
- Church 'E' seems to get through incumbents like hot cakes; no one survives more than a few years with a whole heap of apparently different reasons for each leaving. A history audit reveals that the 'sanctified' first incumbent founded the church in his own image. He was a very charismatic person and the mythology suggests huge congregations in the early days. The audit enables some of the mythology to be de-bunked and the rest to be named in terms of the first incumbent's strengths **and** weaknesses, thus demonstrating that no successive incumbent is able to succeed because he or she is being (consciously, sub-consciously or unconsciously) compared to the first incumbent and found wanting. In this case the history audit names the issue and invites the leadership and congregation to address it head on, and give the next incumbent space to be themselves.