

Community Audits

In the Diocese of London we have an expectation of our parishes that they will develop and periodically revise a Mission Action Plan. This document should outline strategies for mission and ministry so that parishes grow into vibrant, healthy communities of witness and service to their local communities. To develop a realistic, achievable MAP, parishes must have a good in depth knowledge of their locality. So this approach to a community audit seeks to encourage parishes to do it themselves; to engage members of the congregation as they reflect on their shared life and witness, and as they look at the wider community, to discover the profile of their church in the local neighbourhood.

Amongst other resources we recommend the 'Seven Marks of a Healthy Church' found in the Healthy Churches Handbook by Robert Warren (1); that is to say we seek to develop churches that are energised by faith with an outward-looking focus, so that they are deeply rooted in their local community, responding to local need by loving service and innovative, flexible use of their buildings. Having faithfully discerned what God requires, these churches will be able to face the cost of change and growth, will be willing to partner other agencies to build flourishing, generous communities that make room for all, and grow congregations that function in a focussed rather than a frenetic 'must meet every need' way.

Some church members will claim to know all that there is to know about the area in which they have lived most of their lives. They need to be aware that London is a vibrant, constantly changing capital city impacted by globalisation and major regeneration schemes, where local business and industry can be dramatically altered by decisions made in other countries, and where life-long job security is a thing of the past. London is also a divided city, a checker-board of wealthy and poor areas living side by side, often with little sense of shared community or how to achieve it. London from earliest days has seen successive waves of immigration both enriching its culture and straining its resources, and the recent economic migrants from Eastern Europe are just the latest in a long line of ethnic groups to change the make up of London's population. Clearly parishes must monitor these changes and address these issues as they seek to share the good news of the gospel, with a prior commitment to the poor and marginalised.

Threefold Audit Process

This begins with the **audit of the local congregation** – a questionnaire for church members. Carried out over 2 or 3 consecutive Sundays over coffee after the main act of worship, it seeks to encourage a positive reflection from members of the congregation to the challenge of ministry and mission in that parish church:-

What's the most exciting thing that's happened here in the last five years?
Looking ahead five years, what would you most like to happen here? How

could you help to achieve that dream? How has the community changed? Where are the areas of need? Who are the marginalised/most at risk? Are the church buildings welcoming and easily accessible? Are the facilities (meeting spaces, toilets, kitchen) of a sufficiently good standard?

Ideally the audit/questionnaire will be tied into some teaching/sermon. If there is a particular opportunity to improve the physical facilities through reordering or redevelopment, then appropriate questions relating to this can be added.

The second stage is the wider **community audit**. The original questionnaire will need to be amended by a small working group so that the parish gets a clearer picture of its profile in the local community:- Do the 90% of people living in that community who have never entered the church or used its related buildings have any idea what goes on? What do they perceive to be pressing local needs? How has the area changed? Who are the marginalised/most at risk? If the church/hall became a more flexible space, which groups might use it through the week....?

The timing and scale of the exercise will need careful consideration. The depth of winter is not the best time of the year to be embarking on this exercise.... Are you going to cover every street in the parish, knocking on every door. If you hand out questionnaires it's hard work getting them back, so do you just have a table outside the church for one week, or are there other key sites such as the church school, health centre, shopping centre, library etc. Is there a church or neighbourhood festival where church members could have a stall to publicise parish activities and get people to fill in the questionnaires. There will be parishioners who hate the thought of face to face encounters such as this process entails, but who may be brilliant at researching facts and figures about the locality. By contacting the local authority, the local council of voluntary service, the office of national statistics.....they can build an important picture of how the community has developed and changed over the last twenty or so years, and where the areas of real need are today, and the contact details of the agencies attempting to meet those needs.

It will also be important to contact the local planning authority, and, depending on the time available and the level of detail required, this can be extremely helpful as the parish looks ahead :- What is the area profile based on the census information? What is the I.a's Community Strategy? Look at the Unitary Development Plan (now being replaced by the Local Development Framework. Is there any Area Action Plan, Master Plan, Planning Brief affecting the area. Is the church situated in a conservation area? Is there an Estate Renewal Programme? All of these may reveal potential for local funding partnerships.

The diocese can also provide parishes with some census material, including their

'deprivation score' from the Index of Multiple Deprivation – measuring issues such as unemployment, access to health care, education etc. across quite small, local 'super output areas'.

Agency Audit/Lunch

Thirdly, as part of the community audit process, it will be important to liaise with local agencies and charities already operating in the local community, or with a borough-wide responsibility such as Age Concern or Mind or the statutory Youth Services.

One of the best ways to do this is to invite them to a working lunch, at which you outline your ongoing commitment to the local community - the contribution 'faithful capital'(2) already being made, and share plans for the future. It will be important to listen to their expertise regarding local need and gaps in the current provision. It may be that this exercise leads into new working partnerships and potential income for the parish. At the very least it will have heightened the profile of the local church as a confident and serious potential partner for other agencies sharing similar concerns.

Key Points

- Essential element in the development and updating of a MAP (fits well with 'Healthy Church' review).
- Must be undertaken by church members so that they own the findings (this is what we have discovered)
- Should be coupled to teaching linking our Incarnational faith to Jesus' concern for the whole person, and the opportunity to share more deeply in his healing ministry. In this way our parishes are actively involved in creating generous, welcoming communities, where people achieve their God-given potential, and the most marginalised/at risk are a priority concern (London Challenge)
- Will win respect and a better profile for the parish church in the wider community.
- May enable new partnerships which bring new opportunities for mission, ministry and income generation.

Outcomes

- The information gathered from this three-fold process will be key to the updating of your MAP, and should help to ensure that the challenges which this document contains, are both appropriate and attainable.
- You may wish to share your findings with the wider community, through the local newspaper or through contacts with the local authority, but please remember that this approach to community audits is seeking to help congregations to engage and minister to their local neighbourhoods, rather than producing in-depth statistics.
- However, when fundraising, you will also need to list your expected community outcomes (e.g. developing a youth project or a mental health drop-in) in a way that potential funders can support on the evidence of local need revealed by this exercise.

Further Advice

Please contact Jack Maple, the Community Ministry Adviser, if you need further advice or help with beginning the audit process or designing the questionnaires.

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(1) The Healthy Churches Handbook. Robert Warren. Church House Publishing 2004

(2) The Church Urban Fund has produced a useful 'Churches Community Value Toolkit' to help parishes assess their contribution to the wider community: www.cuf.org.uk