

RURAL MISSION SOLUTIONS

Centre for Rural Mission

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Resources for Rural Mission

Church and Community Appraisals

Rural Mission Solutions is an aspect of the ministry of Sunrise Ministries, an independent and ecumenical ministry set up to assist rural churches develop and apply tailored mission strategies that are appropriate and sustainable for smaller churches.

We are field leaders in this particular aspect and can provide a range of services including local consultations, seminars, workshops, training events, and actual assistance in evangelistic and other special events.

WHY APPRAISALS ARE VALUABLE

Christians are called to share the good news of Jesus Christ with every person in the world (Matthew 28:20). In Acts 1: 8,9 Luke records the way in which mission was to extend out from Jerusalem, through Judea, then Samaria, then to the uttermost parts of the world.

We are called to bear the good news to others, but in order to do so effectively, we also need to **be** good news.

Community appraisals help us to understand:

- a) The context in which we are working;
- b) The needs and opportunities that exist for evangelism and/or social action.

Church appraisals help us to understand what human, physical and financial resources are at our disposal and could be used in our mission. We are also able to understand our strengths and weaknesses more clearly, and to see these within the context of the local community.

Both Appraisals together therefore help us to understand how best we can use the resources we have effectively in God's mission.

Understanding the circumstances also enables us to pray and share God's word more sensibly. When God sent Ezekiel to the Israelites who were in captivity, he lived quietly among them for seven days, observing their circumstances, and absorbing the conditions under which they lived. It distressed him greatly, but it enabled him to share the message more effectively. (*Ezekiel: 3:15,16*)

The sections that follow will explore:

- Defining our mission area
- The kind of information to collect
- Where such information can be found
- How to present the information to others within the church
- Asking the right questions
- Producing a plan of action

1. DEFINING THE MISSION AREA

The first thing to do is to decide on the area the church is serving. The church may have an ecclesiastical parish boundary that confines its activities by church law. If this is not the case, then other natural boundary lines such as civil parish boundaries, development areas, wards, or a simple circle drawn at a specific radius from a location could define your area.

Endeavour to obtain a map or produce your own. Large-scale maps can be obtained from the Ordnance Survey. They (and their agents) will even produce tailor made maps, though you should be warned that these could be quite expensive. If you have difficulties then you may find that the Local Authority Planning Department may help you. Try to get a map, which shows a reasonable amount of detail, but also bear in

mind the size of the map and the amount of information you wish to display – particularly if you are going to make a presentation.

Mark your boundary clearly. Drawing a line on a map is not building a wall, but it will help you to focus

The following classifications of information can be helpful. You will find it far easier to obtain information on your mission area if your boundaries coincide with civil parish or ward boundaries.

Some thought may need to be given to population density so that you draw your lines realistically. In a rural situation where population is sparser than in towns, it would be logical to draw the boundary further out. Ultimately you need to think about your mission area in terms of population rather than a physical area.

For example, Herstmonceux Free Church in East Sussex is situated outside the main village settlement, though well within the civil parish of Herstmonceux. Nearby are six other settlements, two of which (Cowbeech and Windmill Hill) make up the civil parish together with Herstmonceux. The three settlements that make up the civil parish have a combined population of 2,300. If the Herstmonceux Free Church considers that only those three settlements make up its mission area then, on the basis of current church attendance statistics, it would be difficult to maintain a viable non-conformist church.

A circle drawn upon a map with a radius of three miles from the Chapel includes the other four settlements (Magham Down, Bodle Street Green Wartling and Boreham Street). All seven settlements provide a combined population of around 4,000 people. There are three Anglican Churches and one Strict Baptist Church. The latter caters for people of a particular theological persuasion and does not serve the community in the same way. However, there will be those who commute to worship from within these settlements, we therefore need to allow the equivalent of five congregations that serve the communities.

Church attendance figures for the area indicate a regular attendance by 6% of the population with occasional attendance raising that to 10% (excluding the Easter and Christmas attendances). Allowing for a regular church attendance figure of just 5% would give an average of 40 for each church. The total figure would give an average of 80 per church.

If the Free Church could achieve that kind of attendance then it would certainly become viable, able to maintain a minister and offer a range of activities such as youth and children's work with a reasonable degree of quality.

A three-mile radius would mean that, by car, the Chapel could be reached within ten minutes from walking out of the front door even for those farthest away. The average travel time would be five minutes.

The boundary of these parishes or wards therefore became the boundary of the church's mission area. Happily, the boundary line also fell at least equidistant from the nearest evangelical non-conformist churches beyond the boundary. Neighbouring churches is another factor to consider.

Typically in England congregations average around 50. Taking the attendance percentage figure given above this means approximately one church for every 1000 people. You could use this figure for considering the potential of the area in which your church is situated, and to consider whether it is over or under churching.

2. WHAT INFORMATION DO YOU WANT FROM YOUR COMMUNITY APPRAISAL?

There is a wide range of data available but the following six points provide the most useful information for a church.

- **Population** How many people live within that area, and how does that population break down into different age bands?
- **Housing** How many households are represented and which other social factors have a bearing i.e. an analysis of the housing stock (owner occupied, rented, Local Authority rented etc.)
- **Population turnover rate.** The percentage of houses up for sale at any one time and the number of new people moving into the area each year.
- **Health** The number of people suffering long-term illnesses.
- **Mobility** Numbers of cars per household, households without cars etc. can be particularly relevant in a rural community.
- **Employment.** The percentage of the population economically active, the percentage retired, the percentage self-employed etc.

3. FROM WHERE CAN YOU OBTAIN INFORMATION?

- **Your Local Authority** will have a department that deals with demographic information. This is sometimes, but not always, the planning department. Try to find a helpful member of staff, as he/she will help you tease out just the information you need. Check whether your LA has a community development officer.
- Another source of similar information is your **local library**. Again, ask for assistance, explaining your reasons for wanting local data.
- **Estate Agents** (if approached appropriately) might give you indications of how many local properties have been sold during the last year, 2 years, 5 years etc. This will give some idea of population turnover. You might find estate agents a little anxious about imparting this sort of information so you may need to explain carefully why you're seeking the information, so that they know that it will not be used in any way to give an advantage to any of their competitors!

This information may also be available from national and local census data through your contact in the Local Authority and/or Library.

- **Schools** can be helpful sources of information too. The local Head Teacher should have clear indications of population changes, and be aware of any social factors that might affect their work.
- **Health Centres and doctor's surgeries** might also be useful, or they could put you in touch with a primary care unit that may provide useful statistics.
- **Local organisations/activities.** You may need to approach each organisation's secretary separately. However you might find it helpful if you

have prepared a questionnaire that would be used for all bodies in advance. For example this might want to know how many people in total are involved in the organisation, and how these break down by gender and age groups, and typically what an average attendance might be. You may also want to know whether the numbers of people involved are increasing, decreasing or static

More About Demographic Information

Your County Council Office (sometimes the local library) will have abstracts from the last National Census (the National Census is conducted every 10 years, 1991, 2001 etc.)

Nowadays often the data produced by the Census can be presented in all kinds of ways, and you need to think carefully about what kind of information would be helpful for **you**. For instance you can easily obtain the population figures and have these broken down as male and female, married, single, and widowed/divorced, but you can also have the information in age bands.

The Authority providing the information may have a standard format for this: e.g. it might classify the numbers of children aged 0-4, 5-10, 11-17. Adult groups might be 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 65-80, 80 +

The same census information will be able to provide you with details with regard to:

- Numbers of cars per household
- Households per community
- Kind of tenure of properties
- Employment statistics.

Illustrations of these are appended

Please note: *The Local Authority will almost certainly make a charge for providing these. This may be based on the number of pages of information you require, or you might find that they already have a publication with them available.*

Other Important Information

Census Comparison

Because the statistics are produced in much the same way every 10 years, you can also obtain comparative figures, which enable you to determine trends. Comparing it to the last Census is usually sufficient.

Employment Patterns

District Authorities and/or County Councils may be able to give you information with regard to work patterns e.g. who the major employers are, and whether people are commuting significant distances to work.

Social Activities

District Councils, Parish Councils or Community Centres may be willing to provide you with lists of clubs, organisations, societies, churches etc. Libraries can also be a useful source of information about local communities.

4. WHAT INFORMATION DO YOU WANT FOR YOUR CHURCH APPRAISAL?

- You will need some information about the people in your church. You may find it helpful to gather information from other churches in your area. They may be sensitive about sharing this information. On the other hand they may be keen to be involved in an appraisal venture.

This information you need will include an analysis based either upon membership, or upon a typical congregation. This may need to be done on several Sundays over a few weeks where significant fluctuations in terms of attendance figures occur.

Many churches have a wider contact with people through weekday activity links (e.g. children's activities, Women's Fellowship etc.) and this can provide additional information.

It is important to produce information on the same basis as the data you have gathered about the community. You can then make helpful percentage comparisons. For example 18% of the community might be over the State retirement age but you may also discover that 25% of those attending church are over retirement age.

You may find that 10% of the population has moved into the village in the last two years, and that 15% have not lived there for more than five years. However, you may find that most of your congregation have lived in the community for over 30 years and there is no one who has moved into the village in the last twenty years!

These comparisons will soon show up where there are failures in mission.

- You might also want to build up a more detailed picture of church attendance (e.g. 8 o'clock BCP communion, Family Services etc.) Similarly, you may find it helpful to look at attendance data over a period of several months. There may be patterns emerging that will provide valuable information.
- It might also be helpful to be able to list numbers of workers in the churches and how many different weekly or monthly activities in which they are involved (for example, children's workers might be involved in a Sunday programme and mid-week activities).
- It can be helpful to analyse the gifts and ministries within the church in order to formulate appropriate use of your resources. *Rural Sunrise can provide an appropriate questionnaire that may assist in understanding these.*
- Other helpful analyses might include the church's giving and management of finances.
- Location of your most important resources. Over a physical map of the area it might be helpful to indicate where your church members and others attending church activities live. You may find it helpful to do this on a transparent overlay.
- List all the local social activities that exist within the area and note beside them who from your church is involved in each of them. A village can be defined as

a network of activities and the church should be interacting and so being salt and light throughout the life of the community.

- Make a list of the people groups that make up the community too. Again you need to relate the people of the church to these groups. A sample is included in these notes.

5. HOW TO PRESENT THE INFORMATION

Basically there are three different forms of presentation. Which one(s) you use and how you use it should be determined by what you hope to achieve through the presentation.

Information you have gathered through your appraisal should assist the church in the development of an action plan or mission strategy.

Display

A display is particularly helpful if you want to stimulate both awareness and interest in the results of the appraisal over a period of time.

Publication of the information in a report

This is useful particularly if it is accompanied with appropriate questions. Each member of the congregation could be given their own copy.

Presentation

This would be in the form of a talk accompanied by charts, maps, summaries etc. on flip charts, flash cards, overhead transparencies, slides, computer based OHP or video presentation. The advantage of a presentation of this kind is that it will be possible to respond to questions and comments dynamically during or following the presentation. However it is limited in that only those who are present at the presentation will benefit from it.

It may be helpful to think in terms of all three forms of presentation. If a great deal of work has been put into obtaining the data, then certainly multiple presentations would be justified.

Whatever form or forms used it is vital that those responsible for presenting the information avoid using too much detail. Keep it simple and uncluttered. Make sure that conclusions can be easily drawn, or the appropriate questions are easily raised.

6. ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

In the main questions should flow naturally as you look at the information you have gathered. For example, a community may show a high proportion of elderly to which you might ask the questions

Are we aware of the needs of older people, their interests etc?

Are we doing all we can to respond to these?

Looking at the activities and organisations in the community (these should include pubs and school gates as well as organised institutions) it is important not only to ask which members of the congregation are part of these people groups, but also in what ways

might they affect the organisations because of their Christian faith? Hopefully it would be quite clear to see that there could be an influence in terms of policy, content, style. One does not have to think solely of overt evangelism, although relationships that are built up between Christians and those that meet in social activity should be used, perhaps through hospitality, as opportunities of sharing their faith with their friends.

Perhaps it would be helpful to have a group of people look at various sets of information and then brainstorm to produce the questions.

7. DEVELOPING AN ACTION PLAN

If all that has been achieved as a result of the appraisal is that you have gained some better knowledge and asked some interesting questions, then the whole exercise will have been a waste of time.

You might find it helpful if you break down the presentation into sections, which are followed by a list of appropriate questions and then by an appropriate action plan.

An action plan is no good without an implementation plan. This should ask:

What resources are needed?

What time scale is appropriate?

By what criteria might the action be judged successful?

When would a review take place etc.?

Community Questionnaire

You can gather much valuable information by conducting a local survey. However, in smaller village communities people are very suspicious about giving away information. In such cases this kind of activity should not be undertaken.

If you are conducting a local survey think long and hard about the kind of questions you want to ask. Remember you will be giving out messages about the church in the process.

You might find it helpful to provide advance notice that the survey is going to be conducted and why. For example

"Over the next few weeks someone from Twinkle Methodist Church will be calling on you. We are concerned that, as a local church, we are serving the local community to the best of our ability. Your cooperation in answering a few simple questions will help us. Nothing we ask is likely to be sensitive, but your answers will be treated in confidence. Questionnaire forms will be destroyed once the analysis has been completed and we will gladly make a copy of the analysis available to you."

When visiting to do your survey always start with a friendly smile and introduce who you are, why you are conducting a survey, what you expect of them. Tell them the process will only take three minutes (be honest and try it out to get it right), and ask if they have got time now to help.

Questions you may want to include could be:

How long have you lived in this area?

Has the community changed in any way?

Would you describe the community as friendly?

What do you think is the best thing about living here?

What do you think is the worst thing about living here?

What churches are there in this area?

Have you attended any of them?

Do you know of anyone who attends?

Is there anything you might like to suggest that the church(es) could do improve their work in the community?

Would they like more information about Twinkle Methodist Church?

If you need to make private notes (age, gender, ethnicity, etc) then do so discreetly afterwards.

SAMPLE CHURCH SURVEY

The following questionnaire was used in a large widespread village where the Methodist Church was struggling and needed information on how it was perceived within the community. The outcome of this particular survey was very interesting. Many people did not know the Methodist Church existed even though it had a prime location. Those who did know it existed had no real idea what went on there! There was a Parish Church, Salvation Army and Roman Catholic Church in the immediate local area.

1. How long have you lived in this village? _____
2. What churches are there in the village? (number in order of mention)
RC [] M [] C of E [] SA [] O [] _____
3. Do you attend a local church?
M [] CE [] SA [] RC [] O [] _____
4. How would you describe your attendance?
Regular [] at least monthly [] at least 4 times a year [] at least once a year []
5. (a) When was the last time you went to the Methodist Church? _____
Never []
(b) Why? _____
(c) If this was a regular service would you be likely to go again?
Yes [] No [] Maybe []
6. Do you know anyone who attends the Methodist church?
Yes [] No []
7. What sort of attendance do you think there might be?
over 100 [] 75 -100 [] 50 -75 [] 25 -50 [] 15 -25 []
less than 15 []
8. What would you think the average age would be? _____
9. Would you expect the congregation to be:
all men [] mostly men [] mostly women [] all women []
10. How would you describe your understanding of Methodist Christianity?
very good [] good [] know very little [] know nothing []
11. Please tick all words that you think might apply to the local Methodist church.
[] Caring [] quaint [] lively
[] Exciting [] boring [] irrelevant
[] Elderly [] modern [] relevant
[] Welcoming [] helpful [] active in the community
[] Old fashioned [] youthful [] inward-looking
12. Would you be interested in knowing more about the Methodist church?
yes [] no [] maybe []