BAPTISTS TOGETHER

Faith and Society Files: How do we do community research?

A step by step guide through researching a local area, offering some suggestions about how to get both quantitative and qualitative data.

Why should we do Community Research?

It sounds surprising but sometimes we don't know as much about our own communities as we think we do. Often the things we perceive are just those that happen to be the most visible, while the real needs remain hidden. Many churches have planned one course of action, such as a children's project, and have only much later discovered that the overwhelming local needs are those of another group within the community, those of older people, for example. There is no substitute for community research and there are no shortcuts. It is a necessary part of the foundation upon which good effective church activities are built.

The purpose of community research is to discover more of the truth about a particular area, the people, their needs, their feelings, their attitudes, their relationships and about the environment the people inhabit; the housing, the public space, the facilities and so on.

Any agency which wishes to provide a worthwhile service to a community is well advised to carry out some community research. This applies as much to the church as to any other group. And it applies equally to all kinds of church activities; evangelism, church planting, youth work, local campaigns and social action projects. It is not a substitute for reflection and prayer but is complementary to them; they should inform one another. Together, they help the church to ensure that all its initiatives are appropriate and sensitive. They help it to see its own efforts in the context of the community as a whole.

There are other reasons for carrying out some research.

Firstly, it may help you to assess the effectiveness of your work. It will provide some base line data about conditions before your activities commenced. When the new activity has been going for a while, you can repeat the research exercise to find out what real impact is being made through your efforts.

A second reason for doing research is that it can help you to campaign effectively. If you hope to put pressure on the local council to fund a playgroup or to put a pelican crossing on a busy road, then some facts and figures and a survey showing popular support may help persuade the authorities to take your proposal seriously.

Thirdly, engaging in research can help to demonstrate your resolve to relate appropriately to the local community and can help you gain the goodwill of other local agencies.

Finally, you may find that you need financial support from outside your own church in order to carry out the activities you have planned. Nearly all donors will want evidence that you have carried out research and will be meeting a proven need before they will consider making a grant.

Don't be put off, or try to shortcut Community Research

Many people feel intimidated when they are first advised of the importance of community research. It can sound rather daunting, but it needn't be. In fact it can be an extremely rewarding activity in its own right and need not be seen simply as a means to an end. It is important to remember that what needs to be done is not something that requires special talent or training. There is no need to carry out anything so thorough as a full census or to seek the statistical accuracy of a national opinion poll. What is required are some straightforward activities that bring in helpful and usable information about the neighbourhood concerns and the way local people feel about the area where they live. The summary page of this document will help you conduct your community research in five simple steps (see page 9).

Two types of Research

Research may be of two different kinds. The first is **quantitative** or 'hard' data. In theory this type of data is objective. It states the facts about any given area. It might include, for example, the number of churches, pubs, community centres, health clinics, schools or playgroups that serve a given neighbourhood. Census data and other statistical information is usually regarded as falling into this category.

The second kind of data is **qualitative** or 'soft' data. This information tells you about the impressions people have of their neighbourhood and of the services that are provided within it; it will tell you how people feel about living where they do.

It is a good idea for any report of community research that is produced to contain elements of both these different types of information.

This module is designed to lead you step by step through researching a local area. It offers some suggestions about how to get both quantitative and qualitative data. Remember that this information is vital to all the work of local churches. What is more, obtaining it can turn out to be a very interesting process. You will meet new people, visit new places and you may find yourself looking at your own community through different eyes.

Five things to do

1 Form a small research group

It is important for responsibilities to be shared out among a number of committed people. This will prevent the entire burden from falling on one person. Ensure that group members understand the tasks they are given and why those tasks need to be done. It is helpful if the group reflects the community which is to be surveyed as closely as possible. In addition it should include people with a range of the necessary skills and abilities.

2 Define your community or 'parish'

Before you begin you will need to decide what area, or what group of people, is going to be the object of your research. For example, it might be a good idea to define it as all the people who live within the parish boundary, or you might use the boundaries used by the local government. Another possibility is to use major physical boundaries to define the area; railway lines, rivers, major roads etc. Then again, some housing estates are very clearly defined and one or more of these could be regarded as the area to be researched.

You should also bear in mind that some areas contain significant numbers of people who don't actually live in them. For example, city centres attract people from elsewhere who come to work and to shop. These people may have needs that could be met by local churches. If you do a house-to-house survey, you may only speak to residents, and you will not discover the needs of the whole daytime community. On the other hand, this daytime community may be the most visible one while the residents themselves remain hidden.

So, before you begin it is important to decide which community you wish to serve. You will need to think about the geographical area and about whether you are interested in residents, or in the other people who, for whatever reason, come to the area for part of each day. Of course, you might decide to research all these groups.

There's a lot of talk nowadays about 'cultures' - ways of belonging which are not geographical. It would be helpful to do some preliminary quantitative research on who is 'out there' in the area you can feasibly reach, then narrow it down to a group you have a heart for. This could be done initially from the Census data[1].

1 www.statistics.gov.uk

3 Consult and network widely

This sounds straightforward and it is. It involves going to see people and talking to them about their work, experiences and perceptions. **It will help you as you prepare an activity and it will also help build a network of relationships that may prove useful in the future.**

Anybody and everybody is worth talking to. All have a story or an anecdote that sums up their feelings about the area. However, there are certain individuals or groups that you should make a special effort to see because they usually have a particular knowledge of the area and are especially aware of the neediest groups.

- **Other local churches:** A good place to start is with the local clergy, ministers and other leaders of Christian groups and missions that meet in the area. They may have useful experiences to share and they may be, or have been, involved in activities similar to those you are planning. They may be able to suggest other people to whom you should talk. They may even want to be involved in your project, perhaps in a supportive, advisory or even collaborative capacity.

- **Caring agencies:** The statutory and voluntary agencies that serve local areas have valuable experiences to share and may be able to identify gaps in existing provision.

  The statutory bodies, like the local council social services, housing and education departments are working more and more closely with local voluntary organisations. They are a vital source of support and information. All sorts of formal groups are worth consulting; playgroups, schools, clinics, surgeries, the police, the probation service, community centres, youth clubs, housing offices, advice centres, social services, meals on wheels, plus the local branch of Relate, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the local Community Service Volunteers' office, and the many other agencies that may serve your area. Ring up those that seem most appropriate and ask for an appointment to discuss your work, especially if you are planning a project of some kind. Links built now will be of service later. Do not neglect those which already have a link with your own church.

  www.police.uk is the local crime and policing website for England and Wales. By typing your postcode into the search engine, you can instantly access street-level crime maps and data, as well as details of your local policing team and beat meetings.

  www.upmystreet.com provides a wealth of information about your local area (including schools, transport, crime, council tax and articles related to the area) by simply typing your postcode into a search box.

- **Elected Representatives:** All the political parties are keen to promote work by voluntary agencies. Your local councillor should be prepared to meet you and advise you about his or her perceptions of the area and its needs. If the councillor is sympathetic to your proposals, he or she may be able to help when you negotiate with the local authority in the future.

- **Informal Networks:** It is always worthwhile getting to know the key informal networkers within an area. These might include people like the lollipop man or woman and the landlord or landlady of the local pub. They tend to know a lot of people and to see what is happening in an area from a different perspective. It might be worth asking local people who you should tell if you want word of something to get round: this might help you discover who the key people are in the local networks.

"Right, we want to know about shops, schools, hotels, pubs, clubs, community centres and leisure centres. Oh, and don't forget to ask if there are other churches in the area ..."

4 Gather information

Census Statistics:
Your local library will have the results of the local returns from the most recent national census, or these can also be easily obtained on the internet[2], using your postcode to obtain local information. It is possible that you may be able to get the same information from your council's planning department. The data from the local enumeration districts is detailed and wide-ranging. It will help you to identify local needs and to work out what kinds of projects and activities would be most needed and most appropriate. Of course, you should bear in mind how many years it has been since the last census; this can make a big difference if your area has a high turnover of population. Nevertheless, the figures should give you a good overall impression of your area.

The Faith and Society File called, *Obtaining Demographic Data From The Office For National Statistics*[3] is well worth a read and gives a step by step description for using the internet to gather National Census statistics.

If you want to compare your area with the nation as a whole, you can either do this online as above, or for more details on the whole nation refer to the current edition of *Social Trends* which should be in your local library. It is a collection of social statistics published by HMSO for the government's Office for National Statistics.

Local Authority priorities: Most local authorities publish their priorities intended to make your town, city or community a better place to be.

Often they will have been negotiated between all the main public sector organisations in your area, your local authority and central Government. Researching the priorities in your area will enable you to find out whether they include areas that you could help to deliver on. Local authorities often have loads of other valuable information on their websites too.

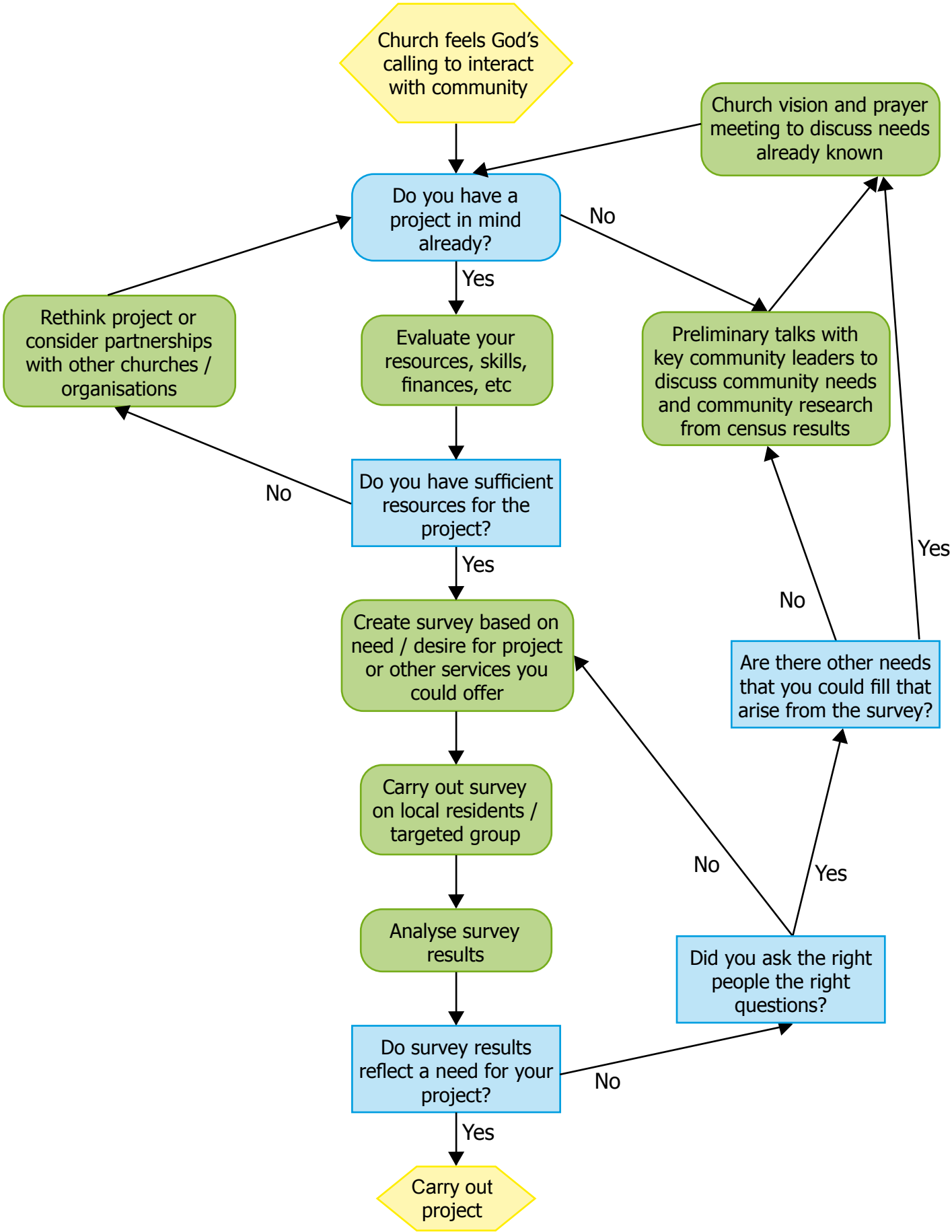
You can also find out who to email about different aspects of the area, and council officers are generally very willing to help you find out information about their area.

Local survey: A community survey can be carried out in a number of different ways and can have a number of different purposes. They may not be statistically accurate or wholly scientifically objective, but they can give useful information, especially in areas with a quick turnover of population which can mean that the census data are quickly out of date. They can also give useful factual data on issues not covered by the census, including information on the possible role of the church. In addition they can give helpful qualitative information, such as an assessment of the feelings of local people about their own community and the things that they perceive as local needs.

You will usually need a form of some kind with a series of questions. Examples are available from the Faith and Society Team[4]. The most obvious way to use these is to go door-to-door and either ask people the questions and make a note of their replies on the doorstep, or leave the form and a stamped addressed envelope. The former is probably more effective. Another method is to set up a stall near the local shops and canvass opinions from passers-by. Such a stall might also be set up in the local library or community centre. However, make sure your method matches your target group – for example, if you're asking elderly people how often they get out, then standing outside the shops will omit many housebound people who your project could be trying to reach!

2 www.statistics.gov.uk
3 Download free of charge from www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366574/Faith_And_Society.aspx
4 Contact faithandsociety@baptist.org.uk

Process for community surveys



These methods provide useful information and also help to raise the profile of the church. Remember that if people have helped you by providing information or completing questionnaires, it is courteous to inform them of the final results of the survey.

In addition, all church members should be encouraged to listen to what their neighbours, and others who live in the neighbourhood, are saying. The way people feel about their neighbourhood may be just as important as the factual data; it is a most significant factor and should always be borne in mind.

All these methods can produce helpful information for you to take into account when planning and when praying.

Other activities: There are other things that can be done as a part of this activity. It is a good idea to collect local publications such as books, community magazines, pamphlets and newsletters.

Also, you can search on the web, either by the name of your area or the need you are seeking to meet, to see what other information it can give you. These provide useful information on the activities and perspectives of other local groups.

Draw a flow diagram of the ways in which different community groups or groups within the community relate to one another. Don't forget to include your church's *crossingplaces* in the local community. The result should be a graphic representation of who talks to whom within the area and this may prove to be a useful tool in understanding the way in which the local community functions. This exercise should help you to appreciate the fact that communities are dynamic and not static things.

Another good idea is to take some photographs of the local area. These will be useful when you come to compile reports and to create exhibitions.

5 Spiritual Preparation

It is very important that community research is not seen as something unspiritual. Good community understanding should be a spur to our individual and shared prayer life and should be incorporated into it. The church lives in tension between the world as it is and the world as it has the potential to be. Our understanding of both these aspects of the world is what motivates our prayer for the world. Prayer is also a means by which we can be prepared by God to serve in the world. This can be done in any number of ways and listed below are exercises that some have found to be

helpful.

- **Prayer walks:** It is often a good idea to walk through the neighbourhood of the church in ones, twos and threes (bigger groups might prove intimidating). This is especially helpful if done on days or at times when those walking are not normally in the area. Take the opportunity to walk slowly and take in the sights and the sounds, the people and their needs, the problems and the possibilities. Stop and look more closely at the buildings that you normally hurry past. Share the impressions gained and use them in prayer and reflection.

- **Making a map or model:** Work together as a group to draw a map or make a model of the neighbourhood in which your church building is situated. It should be large and bright so that all can see it. Put on the key local landmarks, significant buildings and places. It is not supposed to be to scale but to sum up the church's perception of the area which it serves. It can then be used as a

visual aid for learning about the area and for worship and prayer. It can also be displayed and used as a talking point with other local people.

These are some basic suggestions about approaches to community research. They do not pretend to be exhaustive. You may have lots of other ideas. It bears saying again, those who have been involved in church work have found that their work has been more rewarding and more effective when they have prepared themselves using the kinds of approaches described in this leaflet.

Next Steps

Once you have gathered all the relevant information, two things remain. The first is to present your findings to all the people who might be interested. These may include the members of your own church, other churches, other local agencies and the community as a whole. You may want to send a summary of your findings to everyone who helped you, including the agencies you consulted and the individuals who completed questionnaires.

It is a good idea to take some good quality photographs of the local area and to use them as part of a presentation of your findings to be put on display in the local library or community centre. The second thing to do is to use your findings as a basis for an activity: evangelism, social action, prayer or all three!

Other Resources:

The Discovery Pack produced by Tearfund and Livabilty, from: www.communitymission.org.uk/resources/courses/discovery.aspx

Livability questionnaire pack which you can buy: www.communitymission.org.uk/resources/printed_publications_for_purchase/default.aspx

Faithworks community audit pack to buy: www.faithworks.info/Standard.asp?ID=2536

'Obtaining Demographic Information from the Office for National Statistics' available for download from: www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366574/Faith_And_Society.aspx

For information and details about Mission Project grants go to your local association.

Community Profiling (Auditing of Social Needs), by Janie Percy-Smith, Murray Hawtin and Geraint Hughes, published by Open University Press, ISBN 0 3351 9113 4.

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BUGB operates as a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) with registered Charity Number: 1181392

June 2013

1 Engage other interested individuals, agencies and groups

- Identify other individuals and organisations who should be involved: eg local churches, local authority, statutory and voluntary groups, charitable groups, etc.

2 Focus

- Discuss with other parties how they might participate and even contribute practically towards research. Share your motives for researching community.
- Form a small research team
- Prayer walk in your local community
- Define purpose and goals of research
- Define research breadth and depth
- Determine method and approach
- Allocate tasks to team and other interested parties
- Define and map your geographical 'parish' for research purposes
- Identify sources and write questions for qualitative research
- Pilot qualitative questions/ questionnaires

3 Collect Data

- Identify sources for quantitative information
- Census statistics: www.statistics.gov.uk (see BUGB Mission File: 'Obtaining Demographic Data From The Office For National Statistics)
- Local crime statistics: www.police.uk
- Summary of various local statistics: www.upmystreet.com
- Search your Local Authority website
- Identify and map all community groups, organisations and assets
- Visit local library/internet to see existing reports on area
- Conduct formal and/or informal qualitative survey/questionnaires with local community.
- Observe the community on different days and at various times of the day
- Network widely and gather the thoughts of everyone and anyone

4 Analyse

- Collate, process, analyse and interpret data
- Identify what new information has been learned
- Reflect upon the limitations of the data collected
- Identify how the data affirm/ challenge previous assumptions
- Determine how the quantitative data and qualitative data agree/disagree
- Identify how data demonstrate gaps or duplication in provision
- Identify potential new partnerships with other individuals, agencies and organisations already working in the area
- Produce a report telling the story of your community including: a summary, acknowledgements, a list of contents, an introduction, profile of the area, conclusions, recommendations and appendices

5 Use

- Share findings and lessons learned with church and other interested parties
- Use research for decision-making
- Prayerfully determine next steps whilst considering other factors identified within the **re:focus** journey (especially modules 4-6)
- Motivated and aided by research results, nurture new partnerships, campaign and even source funding