

Need Orientated

Discovering Needs

This is now the fourth section of this resource looking at the subject of need-orientated evangelism. The earlier sections are available to download on the Healthy Church website at <http://www.healthychurch.co.uk>

If it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously (Romans 12:8)

We cannot presume that we know the needs of the community because we are aware of the needs of church members. They may not be representative of the whole community. If the church members themselves form a homogeneous group their needs may be quite different from those in the wider community.

The surrounding area from which the congregation is drawn should be the initial 'mission field' of each local church. It is the area where most of the members live and for which the fellowship bears responsibility for communicating the gospel. Before undertaking any programme of Need Orientated Evangelism it is obviously necessary to identify the needs in the community around the church.

Limiting Needs

It is all too easy to imagine that we know the needs of the community, whereas in fact, we may only be guessing. As we noted above church members may well not be representative of the needs and understanding of the local community, but how will we know without some research. There is the additional danger that the members themselves may deliberately restrict their friendships and social activities to the church fellowship thus restricting their awareness of needs in the community.

The Mission Field Comes Home

We attempted to show in the previous article that the mission field in Britain today is highly complex. The presence of more than four million people of non British ethnic origins is an indication that the overseas mission field has become the home mission field for

many churches, particularly those located in inner city and urban communities. For them the mission field may be highly complex with a mixture of language groups, religions, cultures, ethnic origins as well as all the usual social differentiations of age, sex and social class.

Identifying Needs

Identifying the needs in such a mixed neighbourhood is not an easy task and requires a great deal of patience, skill and dedication. We have to be prepared to listen to those of other cultures. The only way to identify needs in such a complex area is to move among the people, visiting in their homes, talking with teachers, Health Visitors and Social Workers, learning the culture and winning the confidence of community leaders. There are no short cuts to discovering and understanding the needs of ethnic minorities if the church really wants to serve them. There has to be real commitment and a passion to reach those as yet untouched by the gospel.

In some areas the mission field is clearly more complex than others but there are certain principles in discovering needs which apply in any area. Before undertaking any programme of mission it is essential to have some



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understanding of the social composition of the area. There are two categories of information required. The first is demography and the second is social groups.

Demography

The demographic composition of an area can be obtained from an analysis of figures obtained from the General Household Survey published by the Office of National Statistics or their counterparts (General Register Office) in Scotland and Northern

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Ireland. The General Household Survey which gives all the basic population statistics of family types, age, sex, ethnic origins and other information is broken down into regions. Statistics relating to each local area can usually be obtained in Public Libraries.

This data is important for a holistic picture of the distribution of ethnic groups. It also gives an indication of the presence of different religious communities. Additionally the data gives an indication of the age distribution of the local population showing whether there is a preponderance of elderly people or large numbers of children and young families. The figures also show the proportion of single occupant households and one parent families. Again, this information is important in assessing the mission of the church and in deciding where it is best to concentrate limited resources.

Social Groups

In every area there is a variety of social groups such as political associations; Conservative, Liberal Democrats and Labour. Additionally there are often Residents Associations, or Working Men's Clubs or Trade Unions. Lists of registered associations can be obtained from local public libraries or from the Town Hall Information Service. The Town Hall would also have information on a variety of voluntary agencies such as groups for the disabled, the partially sighted or those with impaired hearing, plus information on

a variety of agencies offering services to the public on a wide range of social issues from legal aid to homelessness. Once again, this kind of information is very useful in spotting the gaps in social provision in an area and in providing useful background data for planning the mission of the church.

Breakdown of Family Life

The major social phenomenon that is found in every area throughout the UK at this time is the breakdown of family life. That is why we placed such an emphasis upon the family in Chapter Three. The revolutionary forces of social change which we identified in that chapter which had been gathering momentum throughout the twentieth century show no sign of slowing down. This is the cause of a great deal of the instability that we are witnessing today. Social structures that have underpinned the nation for hundreds of years have been jettisoned in a single generation.

The rate of breakdown of the family is now so alarming that we are on course for some kind of a meltdown early in the twenty-first century. This sounds an alarmist statement but when the family breaks down the whole structure of society becomes destabilised; law and order, education, the economy, are all affected. It is small wonder, therefore, that many church leaders are bewildered by what is happening nationally and in their local area. It is, indeed, hard to know how the church can make any kind of impact in the community that will stem the tide of social change and bring some kind of stability to the nation.

Understanding Society

The first step towards a programme of action which will lead to the communication of biblical principles of personal and corporate morality has to be an understanding of society and the recognition of the seriousness of the situation in the nation today. This is all part of the process of discovering needs which is an essential preliminary to the formulation of a programme of Need Orientated Evangelism.

Uniqueness of Mission

It should be emphasised that there is no model for an evangelistic outreach based upon the needs of

a neighbourhood. Indeed, NOE is an integral part of natural church development, which is based upon principles of growth rather than models. The community in each area is unique to that area and a programme of outreach that works in one place will not necessarily work in another. We can, of course, pick up ideas and learn from the experience of others, but to attempt to transfer a successful mission from one place to another usually ends in disaster.

For a successful programme of need orientated evangelism church leaders have to go through the sometimes laborious process of understanding the local community and discovering the particular needs in each neighbourhood. We have already suggested ways in which the basic demographic data and information on social groups can be obtained. This gives a broad social profile of the area and may be sufficient to indicate gaps in provision that can be used for planning. This information needs to be backed up and localised by a neighbourhood survey which pin-points needs in the catchment area of the church.

Neighbourhood Survey

Carrying out a neighbourhood survey can be an exciting adventure for a church. It needs careful planning and maximum participation of the church members. If the church is properly prepared for the exercise and it is properly carried out, the results will be of great encouragement.

Gathering Opinions

The survey itself must be carefully designed with a simple questionnaire which the interviewers can complete on the doorstep. The interviewers must be carefully prepared and should go out in pairs, ideally male and female. The interviewers should have a church identification badge and at each household they should introduce themselves by saying something like 'We are from . . . church and we are doing a survey of community facilities in the neighbourhood. Our report will be going both to the church and to the District Council. We are looking at pre-school age provision, facilities for young people and for the elderly. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions which will only take a few minutes?'

Wider Information

Most people are willing to co-operate and are usually eager to give their opinions on community facilities especially if there is a promise to pass on the information to the local council which, of course, is not difficult to do once the findings have been collated. The local ward councillor can be involved at an early stage and is usually only too keen to co-operate.

The survey will not only gather opinions on the provision of local community facilities but if properly designed it will give a great deal of information about the households in the neighbourhood.

Involve Everybody

Involving as many church members as possible in the survey is important, but not everyone is able or willing to go door knocking. Those who are not going out can remain behind in the church to give

prayer support to those who are out visiting house to house. This is a vital part of the outreach. If they know which street is being covered and the whole exercise has been properly planned the names of each householder will have been obtained from the list of voters in each ward which is available at the local public library. The prayer group back in the church can be praying for each family to be visited household by household. This prepares the way, gives valuable prayer support to those doing the interviews and involves the whole congregation in the mission.

Offer Help

An important part of the survey is to offer personal help to each family interviewed. Following the completion of the questionnaire the interviewers say something like 'at our church we regularly pray for families in the neighbourhood. We have a group who are praying for each household in this street tonight. Do you have any particular prayer requests?'

If it seems appropriate, the interviewer can add that the church regularly prays for the sick, or for any difficulties which local families are experiencing. It often surprises church members how willingly people respond to such an offer of help! Information about behavioural problems with children, or sickness, or a wide range of personal problems, often emerges. The interviewer can then arrange for a follow-up visit from one of the church leaders or from a church member who is involved in the caring professions.

If it is appropriate the interviewer can say 'would you like someone to call and tell you about Jesus, or talk to you about the Christian faith?' In one area of the East End of London, where such a survey was recently carried out, 60% of households responded positively to the request for prayer for a wide variety of personal problems. Many also requested a visit from someone to talk to them about the Christian faith. Such a survey can therefore be used not only for gathering information on the social needs of the area but may also have a more directly evangelistic purpose.

Moving Further

When the information on the survey has been gathered and collated it would give valuable insights into the perceived needs of local residents. This then provides a basis for planning a programme of Need Orientated Evangelism.

For Discussion:

1. Where are the boundaries of our 'mission field'?
2. What are the main needs of our community?
3. How do we know this is the case?
4. How will we set about discovering the felt needs of our community?
5. Who will help to design the questionnaire?
Who will we involve in gathering opinions?

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