

## MISSION AUDITS IN UPAs : TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE METHOD

Greg Smith: DECEMBER 1986

The suggestions in this paper are based on my experience in the "God at Work in the Inner City" research project and in the community based surveys I undertook at the London University Institute of Education (1979-85). Much of what I suggest comes from the experience of mistakes that I have made in the past!

### INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the Faith in The City report in December 1985 urban parishes in the Church of England have been taking up the suggestion that they should undertake a mission audit. For the members of ACUPA this was seen as a valuable exercise in dispelling the fog about the state of the church in the locality, and as a way of challenging the Christians of the parish into a more effective mission in the neighbourhood. With the establishment of the Urban Church Fund, and on orders from the diocese, a baser motive for doing a parish audit has emerged in some places. There is at least a hint that extra funds will only be available when an audit is completed, and a suspicion that the higher you score on the indices of social deprivation the more resources you will be given.

Mission Audits were not invented by ACUPA but have developed out of a number of research initiatives. The term itself appears to have originated out of Anglican/ ecumenical work in Milton Keynes. The pack of this title first came out from the BMU in 1984. The Church Growth school has produced many tools for a similar research task, for example Robin Thompson's work book, "Can British Churches Grow" and the text books of Eddie Gibbs and Roy Pointer.

The items mentioned above are not specifically urban but have some useful ideas. David Wasdell's "Urban Church Project" produced many of the seminal ideas in the field, but tended to be threateningly academic. John Vincent's Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield has been teaching and doing urban situational analysis for years and has published various kits including "Discovering the Poor" which helps you find your way through the census. The EUTP workshop kit, "Know your church, know your place, know your gospel" was the first method where involvement of local people from the non-book culture was a fundamental emphasis. Other groups such as Church Action on Poverty have produced brief guides to "Local Social Analysis". Finally anyone with any gumption will make use of what Local Authority Planning Departments, and any other neighbourhood surveys have already done.

The God at Work in the Inner City research project, 1984-86 was a joint venture of ECUM and the BCGA. In the course of this work I was involved in two area (network) surveys in East London, two

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church profile surveys in Forest Gate, and a borough wide Christian Youth Work survey (in association with Newham Youth for Christ). I also engaged in extensive interviewing of inner city Christians from a wide variety of church backgrounds in Bradford, Leeds, Wolverhampton and Walsall. In these provincial cities I also drew on wider research undertaken by local groups for background information. The results and thinking behind this project are written up in the various publications listed in the bibliography.

Much of my thinking about urban research methods derives from my experience with the DES funded "Linguistic Minorities Project" (1979-83) and its follow up "Community Languages and Education Project" (1983-85). In these projects we were investigating patterns of bilingualism and mother tongue teaching among a wide range of ethnic minorities in several inner city areas, (Coventry, Bradford and Inner London in particular). Alongside school based censuses and surveys we developed community based household surveys, using bilingual questionnaires and interviewers and network surveys of supplementary mother tongue schools. Later I was involved in a case study of language use and politics in the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. The results of our surveys were actively disseminated through a sister project, the Language Information Co-ordination Project. The project is written up in "The Other Languages of England" (1985) and various other working papers.

The fundamental methodological issues which came out of these projects concerned the relationship of information and power in social research. As white academic researchers, employed by the establishment on relatively high salaries we were often challenged by community activists about our social and political values and on whose interests we were serving. As a result of discussions on these topics our understanding of the role of research, and of the relationship of facts and values was profoundly transformed. It was in this process that I came across the tradition of participatory research, a style of social investigation and involvement which owes much to the educational work of Paolo Freire and his Latin American colleagues. I have come to the conclusion that many participatory research (hereafter PR) insights can be of use in Mission Audit situations, and will go on to outline ten such insights which may be of value in church related research. I believe that a participatory style of research is essential in any mission audit or church survey if it is to be of value in turning the ethos of the church from maintenance to effective mission.

1) PR is for "us". It is something we are involved in, not something done on or to "us" by "them".

An audit cannot be imposed on a congregation as a bright idea from above or outside without being counter

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productive. This is doubly so in UPAs where people are fed up of government and council statistics and of the way they are turned from human beings into indices of deprivation. If the vicar is the only person who wants to do an audit, or if it is perceived as yet another demand on our time by the diocese or denomination the work is hardly likely to be done enthusiastically or well. On the other hand someone has to initiate the idea. It may not be too manipulative to begin by planting questions in people's minds such as, "wouldn't it be interesting to find out why we can't get people from the Council Estate, or black people to come to our church?" or "why does Ebernezer Tabernacle down the road have a parking problem on Sundays?" Perhaps someone in the group will then say something like, "we ought to do a survey or something to find out."

The whole congregation must own the exercise, and as wide a range of people as possible must take part, in every stage from defining the objectives, designing surveys, putting them into effect, analysis and report writing and discussing implications. This implies that decisions to proceed should be discussed in a full meeting of the church, not just by the PCC, involving house groups or other groups which already exist. It may be worth having a workshop session in which everyone who is interested brainstorms to produce questions they want answering, ideas worth exploring and objectives for the audit. A team of committed people might emerge from this exercise, who would between them have the time and gifts to undertake the interviewing, analysis and reporting back that is necessary.

One must not rely on outside experts: rather the congregation must become their own experts. Urban working class people tend to distrust experts and consultants anyway. Remember the Bernard Cribbins song "There was I digging this hole" and what happened to the man in the bowler hat. As insiders the locals have a valuable expertise of their own which must not be devalued. A good trainer / enabler can build up their confidence and introduce them to ideas and materials (e.g. Mission Audit Pack) that will make the audit more rigorous, without putting anyone down. On the other hand a good enabler / trainer will be able to challenge unexamined assumptions and practices in the local congregation, by introducing a wider experience, perhaps in the form of a story from the Bible or from another church. Learning by doing, and learning in small groups are appropriate techniques for training groups of interviewers etc.

The process of sharing in an audit can be as important as the product. In a network survey approach people will discover new sources of information and new organisations in their neighbourhood. It is surprising how little some people know about libraries, advice centres, tenants associations and other churches until they take the trouble to find out. In a congregational survey relationships between church members can be strengthened, and a new pastoral awareness can be built up as people find out more about each others lives. It is surprising

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for example how many christians do not know much about the domestic and working lives of others in their church. In a neighbourhood survey it is possible to begin relationships with non-Christians which are the basis for neighbourly pastoral care, mission and evangelism. The whole process of audit should be one of encouragement as people discover more about themselves, each other and God.

2) PR is not problem centred.

Most social research is about pathology, "What has gone wrong with this section of society?" Unfortunately this tends to label the people involved as "problem people" and often results in blaming the victims for their suffering. Alternatively a socio-political analysis shows that major structural forces are to blame and that nothing short of a revolution will make the fundamental changes which are necessary. PR would begin with an open mind about whether there is a problem or not, would ask questions about what is good and bad in the community. If the locals identified a problem PR would go on to ask, "what resources have we got to do something about it and how can we best use them?"

Therefore a mission audit must pick up the signs of hope as well as the problems and "failures" in the church. It must ask why people do come to church as well as why they stay away. It must look at the opportunities and resources that already exist in buildings, activities, finance and above all in friendships and networks. It must ask how God has already been at work in individuals, in the church and in the community. Otherwise the typical inner city church will be overwhelmed by its own powerlessness, despair and guilt.

3) PR recognises that values help to define what is seen as fact.

Most sociologists and other scientists now recognise that the attempt to discover pure facts and build totally objective theories is impossible. Therefore more and more are making an honest admission about their presuppositions, describing a social situation and feeling free to become involved rather than remaining as a detached observer. The danger of remaining detached is that the observer merely legitimises and supports the status quo, which may well be seen as wrong, unjust or evil as soon as value judgements are applied. PR makes a virtue of commitment and involvement, refusing to see people and communities as "objects" of study, but works alongside them as subjects.

Applying this to the church situation it is clear that an audit must have a spiritual dimension: it is not just a sociological or management exercise. Many Christians would see such an approach

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as purely "worldly" or trying to organise the Holy Spirit, and therefore be reluctant to participate. However, getting people talking and praying about how God is already at work in the church and neighbourhood is one way to overcome this. The process of the audit must be integrated into the worship and prayer of the church, and the theology behind it must be made clear. A fundamental problem here is that the majority of Christians in all traditions can only see God at work in privatised individual lives (conversions, healings, provision, guidance etc.) and in the life of the church when there are bottoms on pews which were previously empty (bottomless?). In the inner city mainline churches this assumption tends to produce despair. Perhaps Biblical teaching and the work of the Holy Spirit is needed to enable people to have a wider vision of the mission of God. (It may be beginning with the rediscovery of fellowship and the body life of the church.)

Many examples of Church Growth research can be criticised along these lines for false objectivity. Although they stress the need for facts and claim that these are neutral, the underlying presupposition is that what matters is numbers in organisational membership, and that anything that boosts numbers is therefore good. Thus for example receptivity and the homogeneous unit principle may be elevated above other Biblical values such as concern for the poor and the breaking down of barriers between peoples. On the other hand most church growth teachers stress their value position on the importance of prayer, spirituality and sound Biblical teaching, while using a sociological approach which is "methodologically atheist", and producing recommendations which would work fairly well in a tiddleywinks club recruiting drive! Church Growth and Mission Audit research needs to take on board the issue of which distinctively Christian values and presuppositions should influence its methods, and how. For a more detailed discussion see my paper "In the inner city: How can we tell if God is at work?"

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4) PR recognises that academic language and style excludes and marginalises most ordinary people. So far most PR has been done in Third World countries with low levels of literacy. Therefore non-literary techniques such as story telling, drama and visuals are used to explore issues and communicate discoveries.

Gradually the church has come to realise that in UPAs everything must be expressed in language and style which ordinary people can understand. Wycliffe and Luther made their vernacular translations of the Bible to enable the common people to understand, the Roman Catholic liturgy then took 400 years to catch up. But by then the dominance of print and the growth of literacy in Europe meant that Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists were handing out five books to Sun readers at services in the East End. We may have progressed to the Good News Bible, but the majority of inner city people are in the TV and video age. Yet face to face communication is still the best way of getting through. EUTP has made some progress in appropriate training methods. There are obvious implications for mission audits.

Written questionnaires and reports can be daunting to the non-reader or Sun reader. Anything printed, especially on official headed paper is "them" not "us", and can be terrifying. Therefore an audit using personal interviews, or group discussions, will be much more effective and produce a better response than just circulating a questionnaire and asking people to fill it in. (In any case the principles of design for an interview schedule and a self completion questionnaire are radically different, and the former is much easier to produce.) While it may still be necessary to produce reports on paper these should be written and laid out in Daily Mirror style, with lots of headlines, pictures and illustrations if possible. They should be aimed at the popular market and distributed accordingly. Bishops and academics also find this style easier to take in, and are quite capable of delving deeper, or translating into Guardianese, on their own initiative if they really want to do so.

It goes without saying that sociological and theological jargon must be ruthlessly pruned from any reports. It is a good idea to find someone with no specialist knowledge to do a radical purging job at the proof reading of the first draft stage.

Statistics must be presented, clearly and visually (and honestly and accurately). Most people don't bother to read tables of figures. Therefore pie charts and bar charts are particularly useful. Watch for example how ITN presents the rising unemployment figures each month. Such charts can be printed in reports and also put on OHP transparencies to accompany oral presentation. Another appropriate way to show statistics in a meeting is to use ten or twenty people as a visual aid. e.g. In

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this parish of 20 people for every 2 people in church on a Sunday morning 18 are not (5 in bed, 3 at the Sikh temple, 4 in the pub and 6 in a caravan at Clacton!)

The interpretation of statistics is tricky. Phrases like "only 40%" or "as many as eight out of ten" carry a loaded value judgement. It is the difference between the optimist who sees the glass as half full and the pessimist who sees it as half empty.

Stories, games and role play or drama can be useful ways of exploring the issues, arising in a mission audit. A good group leader should be able to invent them where necessary, but there are a growing number of publications with ideas which can be used or adapted.(e.g. Zebra ECRJ on racism, Youth Games book. etc). Video clips of relevant news items, ads or soap operas can be used as discussion starters.

5) PR involves looking at situations from different angles and not within the boundaries of a single academic discipline. PR tends to debunk the idea that a sociologist has a different expertise from a psychologist or a theologian, and even exposes the separation of disciplines as not much more than the vested interests of the professional academic classes. The teacher becomes a learner and the pupils become teachers in the process of PR. It is therefore important to explore issues from a number of different view points (triangulation), not just that of received wisdom.

In urban church research it is essential to go beyond the perceptions of the institutional church and its members if we want to approach the whole picture. After all we believe God is concerned with the whole universe, don't we? Possible sources include.

a) Census statistics, which are the nearest thing to reliable facts that exist, although the categories used obviously betray bureaucratic and governmental perceptions of problems and political issues. The biggest issue of interpretation concerns which level of geographical breakdown to use. In general the smaller the better, as is shown by the detailed work done in Lichfield diocese and translated into parish maps.

b) Survey / interviews with church members: These are fairly easy to design and conduct and can reveal a lot about the overall profile of the church which may not be immediately obvious, or believable. The whole membership should be interviewed if at all possible as this neatly bypasses questions of sampling accuracy. Church members are usually easily contactable for interviews and there is some sort of moral obligation on them to respond and tell the truth. If they don't it tells you something else about the church anyway! There are of course some very sensitive issues that it might be tactful to avoid. Here local inside knowledge is once again worth its weight

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in gold. Other general issues may need to be explored in a roundabout way. For example it seems that most Christians don't even accept there are social classes and even if there are they insist they don't matter in the church.

c) Network Survey / interviews of other churches and voluntary agencies. It is often this level of research that produces the widest range of new information and relationships. For example the West Ham (1984) and E7 (1985) surveys in which I was involved strengthened my own networks considerably, and in many cases brought people into contact via the interviewers who had never previously met each other. In terms of information they highlighted the fact that the mainline Protestant churches were now a minority presence in comparison with the Black Pentecostal and newly planted House churches in our area.

d) Survey / interviews with non-christians in the community. A community survey could have one of two functions a) to get a broad general overview of who is out there and how they see the church. b) as a way of contacting and building relationships with people in the neighbourhood. If a) is the main object of the exercise a short questionnaire on a large random sample of people is appropriate. If b) is more important the numbers involved do not matter but the quality of the contact and the follow up is vital. There are of course particular questions of pastoral confidentiality, and in these days of computers, legal safeguards of the Data Protection act to bear in mind if you intend to keep personal records from such visits. Again the general principle of working with, rather than on, or against the local community should be borne in mind.

6) PR is based on a partnership between the research enabler and the community. While the researcher rejects the role of expert or consultant there is still a recognition that particular skills are a valuable asset to be used for the common good.

In many UPA parishes there is a shortage of people with research skills, e.g. questionnaire design, statistical analysis using computers, report writing and communications skills. This should not in itself prevent a church from doing an audit. The implications are

a) there must be a realistic assessment of what the church can undertake in case it bites off more than it can chew. There is little more disheartening than doing a survey which takes years before the job is completed, only to be written off as a mere amateur effort by those "who know about such things".

b) there is a case for looking for outside expertise, but there needs to be a clear contract with any consultant, which covers questions of role, time input and remuneration, if any. If expectations are not shared by all parties there is likely to be miscommunication and eventual disappointment. The consultant



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fellowship in the gospel wherever possible. It is possible that out of a network survey new united events and projects will grow. For example the growing links between the Newham Christian Fellowships network, Youth for Christ, London ECUM and some of the local Black Pentecostal churches owe much to the various surveys that have been undertaken in recent years.

The strength of research/networking is that it presupposes a willingness to learn from other Christians. Ray Bakke advocates the use of a non-threatening opening gambit when approaching another church leader in the form of the question, "You've been here longer than me, tell me the most important thing you've learned in the nnn years of ministry in this community?" If you have this type of conversation with all the churches on your patch you will soon have a unique deep understanding of what is going on locally. Such an overview of the sociology of religion in the neighbourhood enables one to evaluate other models of mission which may be more successful or more appropriate than your own existing ones.

8) PR does not accept dominant definitions of a situation, and seeks to include minorities.

Within a mission audit in a UPA church there must be a conscious effort to avoid racism (and sexism) in the whole process of audit. Black people (women) can be marginalised and treated as invisible because of the following factors among others.

Minorities are not adequately represented in the core group / decision making bodies of the church. Even though women make up 65% of most congregations, and black people account for half the Christians in many UPAs there are no women, and few black people in the clergy or Synods of the CofE. Other denominations are not much better. In one congregational survey I did the white / black ratio in the congregation was 50/50, the church membership 70/30, the diaconate 80/20 the Bible study group 90/10 and the group of interviewers 100/0. It was no surprise that the response rate was also 75/25.

Black people, manual workers and women are excluded from involvement in many meetings because of extra domestic and work pressures (shifts etc.). This is not always an insuperable problem if the timings of the church programme, and sessions concerning the audit can be adjusted. Often nothing but tradition dictates the timing of church events.

Underside groups are less likely than white middle class males to be gripped by a theoretical paper based exercise. This is not a piece of racist/sexist stereotyping but a reflection of the way middle class white male institutions use information power to effectively (if unconsciously) exclude black/ female / working class people from full participation. PR

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should be someone with as few vested interests as possible, or at least have an awareness and openness about what his/her vested interests and values are. There must be an attempt by that consultant to become as much an insider as possible according to the principles of participatory research. The consultant therefore should be expected to attend worship and other church meetings, to become part of the church family at least for a period, and to assimilate as much implicit and background knowledge as possible. An outside expert must not be allowed to dictate the terms of the discussion. "Total power is when you can set the definitions of a situation and get everyone else to believe you." Quoted by Jim Wallis.

The strongest case for outsiders to be involved in a mission audit is in the role of "candid critics" of the life of the church. A consultant with a wide knowledge of other UPA churches should be able to pick up some of the strengths and weaknesses of a parish. There is a limited pool of such experienced people available so as an alternative a church might consider using a group of people from a neighbouring parish, a church of another denomination or theological background, or even a non-christian local tenants' group, or a friendly social worker or business manager.

7) PR uses community development insights and builds alliances to work on issues. For example a project like the LMP discovered there were common concerns in mother tongue teaching between Urdu speaking and Polish speaking people in Bradford and was willing to bring them together in a united lobby on the local Council and the DES.

In a similar way a mission audit must be set in a fully ecumenical context, and in the action which follows should not be ashamed to make a common cause with Muslim or Marxist groups if this is appropriate. (The Sunday trading campaign put Christians and Trade Unions on the same side for once!)

The network survey approach is crucial here. This means contacting ALL other churches in the neighbourhood, including the hidden black churches, newly planted fellowships, and ethnic churches (possibly sects and other faith groups). So often only churches with a building and a visible identity are included in our thinking and research. e.g. Faith in The City and Faith in Leeds said nothing about House churches and little about black led and ethnic churches. There is also a need to contact voluntary organisations, especially in respect of new ideas and projects in mission. After all why set up a Christian advice centre if the CAB is providing an excellent service just down the road.

With fellow christians this means a commitment to non-competitive mission at the very least, to collaboration and

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methods in themselves tend to counter this trend, but the process needs to be monitored constantly.

Often the contribution of minorities is not seen to be of value (implicit racist assumptions of superiority), or not seen as having something distinctive to say ("we treat everybody the same") by the leadership of the church. If this is the case and the audit exposes it, it puts a spark into the tinder box! Racism awareness training, or obvious affirmative action programmes often produce reactions among white people which are either guilt trips or vigorous reassertions that "we want equal treatment too." The recognition of sexism is more commonly followed by joking avoidance behaviour on the part of men. Minorities often collude with such reactions, if only for a quiet life. In a mission audit it is important to give minorities the confidence to tell their stories in a way which honestly confronts the domination of the majority. An articulate underside person can be a real asset within the group, if no one person stands out the EUTP rule that "no-one talks twice, before everyone has spoken once" can help enable full participation.

9) PR assumes collaboration and co-operation between people, but is ready to face up to conflict. A Marxist variant would tend to maximise the conflict emphasis and aim towards outright victory for the oppressed classes. A more Christian approach as advocated by Freire would realise the folly of replacing one set of oppressors by another, and seek to win hearts rather than battles.

The whole of the audit must be conducted in a spirit of openness, trust and honesty. Christians despite (or perhaps because of) the commandment to love one another are notoriously bad at dealing honestly and openly with issues and feelings that may provoke conflict, for example on social and political issues which are bound to arise. How can a church in docklands where all the new members are incomers in £100,000 houses make room for homeless one parent families in a bed and breakfast hotel nearby? How does a church of old ladies cope with youth work and evangelism among the street kids who regularly disrupt their evening service?

There will probably be a rump of people who even after the audit will refuse to face facts. They will still hang on to the traditions with the cry "We never done it that way before." The audit may make it very clear that such attitudes, and people are the major blockage to the progress of the church. Murder is not a viable Christian option! So pastoral care and sensitivity for those who are in disagreement with the majority will be essential.

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10) There is a time and cost to be borne in mind in PR

PR assumes that time in preparation and the process of building trust is both necessary for effective research and valuable in itself. It is certainly not the quickest or most secure way to obtain a Ph.D. or funding for further research. In fact academics who move into PR are liable to find there are costs in terms of career prospects, and in certain countries in terms of being treated as political subversives.

Anyone who wants to initiate a mission audit should first count the cost. Do not expect to solve the church's financial, spiritual and mission problems by just doing an audit. Do not attempt to build a career in ministry on the success of what you discover and how you respond. Do not rush the early stages of planning, networking, training interviewers, audit design etc. in a mad panic to "do a survey" and produce a report. It will take twice as long as you think anyway, and if it takes five times as long it will probably be five times as useful.



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