

# The 'Community Leader Interviews' Exercise

This exercise produces more than information - it builds relationships.

It is useful because in the process of fact-finding regarding possible areas of engagement, it actually gets the congregation to begin to engage with the community.

It is important at the outset to decide who should visit whom. Some of the people may be better for members of the churches leadership to visit in an 'official' capacity. Others may be better visited by members of the congregation.

You will have to decide whether engagement would be better served by limiting the research to a small group; employing an experienced outside researcher; or by spreading the net wide, including as many of the church as possible. Many churches that have undertaken this process have discovered that a mix of these options makes for more thorough, well-rounded results.

One tip that is worth giving is that since these exercises are not pure research, but about building new and building on existing relationships, you may be well served to get people to visit/speak to those they already know.

- Make a list of all the leaders from different sectors of community life in your locality. You are looking to identify people in influence; those who are in touch with a large proportion of your community on a regular basis. Make sure you don't miss out any minority groups within your locality.
  - Possible candidates might be: MP; local councillor; head of local police, head of social services, town planner, doctors, headteachers, health visitors, chiropodists, vets, and religious leaders from other faith groups. The list is endless. Make sure you don't make it too small to be clear, or too large to be unmanageable.
- Assign one or two people from your congregation to handle each interview. Allocate them according to suitability for the person they are going to arrange to meet.
- Arrange a 30-minute appointment with each community leader. Offer to buy them coffee; take them out for a meal; where appropriate offer to pay for half an hour of their time and advice. This is rarely necessary - most will be glad to impart their knowledge - but such acts do show seriousness of intent.
- Tell the leader right at the beginning that you have three basic questions you wish to cover during this short interview:
  1. What impressions, if any, do you have of our congregation?
  2. What trends and challenges are you seeing in our community today?
  3. What unmet needs do you see in our community?
- If they are comfortable, record the interview. If not, then ask if they mind you taking notes. If they do, then you will have to pool your memories of the meeting as soon as you leave.
- It is strongly suggested that you do not ask, "What should our church be doing?" Many community leaders balk at a request to tell the church what its business should be. That's your job. Ask them to talk about what they know best: the conditions and needs they confront every day in their own work.
- Be prepared for some awkward moments when you ask them for their impressions of your congregation. These leaders may not know who you are, where you are located, or what you have ever done as a church. Asking this question gives you a reality check on whether your congregation has much of a profile in the wider community - and whether the information others have about you is correct. Don't feel the need to defend your church against criticism or advertise what you are already doing. This will just sound insecure. What in fact you are looking for is what they don't say, as much as what they do say. Thank them for whatever they offer, sincerely. If it's negative, it took courage to tell you to your face.

- From the notes you have taken during the interview, write up a brief summary of the responses you received to your three questions, using as many of the person's own words and phrases as you can. This is not the time to interpret what you have heard, simply to record. If you want to draw conclusions, then make that a separate document.
- Bring these reports back to the church leaders for discussion and inclusion in the ongoing process of research and review.