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How to Carry Out a Church Community Survey

This paper sets out questions to ask yourself and actions to take in order to carry out a good community survey. It includes a series of actions/reflection points which are the items in **green**.

1. Why are you doing a survey?

Before you even think about writing the questions for a community survey you need to decide **WHAT YOUR AIM IS**.

Undertaking a community survey is definitely time-consuming and might also cost a significant amount of money. So you need to be really clear why you are doing it before you begin.

Also the purpose of the survey will drastically affect the survey design – not only the questions you ask but the way you ask them (online? Face-to-face?).

Common reasons for undertaking a community survey include:

- You are doing a building project and want to know the community's views on the building itself (e.g. architecture, scale) or the activities that will happen in the building once completed.
- You would like to get to know the makeup of your community in terms of age, ethnicity, income or other factors
- You would like to understand the perceived needs of your community in order to reshape your ministry to better meet those needs
- You wish to understand the spiritual/theological views of your community in order to more effectively communicate the Christian message to people

Before you start you should be able to complete the following sentences:

- **We want to undertake a community survey in order to understand...**
- **The decisions that this survey will enable us to make better are...**
- **The consequences of us not doing this survey would be...**

2. Has somebody else already done your survey for you?

Once you know what information you want to understand you should ask if somebody has already done this work. You can get information from the census (2011) on a vast array of data including ethnicity, gender, age, household composition and income down to areas just a few hundred households in size. See: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea>

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Has another church in your area already done such a survey? If not would it be worth collaborating with them to enable you to get more surveys done or share costs?

Complete the following sentences:

- **The closest set of data we can find to our survey is...**
- **Our survey will add to this because...**

3. Survey Type and Sample Size

All surveys are essentially a trade off between three elements – number of people, detail of answers and cost. You can do a very big detailed survey (e.g. the national census!) but it will be very expensive. In practice, therefore, churches have to choose between a reasonable amount of detail and a small number of people and little detail but more people.

You must also distinguish between quantitative and qualitative data.

- Quantitative data (e.g. how many times a year do you come into our church building?) is generally easier to deal with and compare – you can find patterns, averages etc. However when used in a survey the results can often be inaccurate (many people will not accurately recall the last time they visited your church building unless it was very recently), it can limit creativity (e.g. if you have a survey question whether the church's ministry should focus on children, youth, families or older people there may be other ideas people have that literally don't fit in the box!) and it can't answer some of the most important questions that go to our motivation.
- Qualitative data (e.g. what would make you more likely to want to come to an activity at our church?) gives more meaningful insights into people's lives and motivations but is harder to organise and work with. Generally qualitative questionnaires take longer to complete and benefit most from face-to-face collection so you will get fewer responses.

Think about the purpose sentences you wrote in (1) above. Given those purposes and the resources available to you complete the following sentences:

To achieve our aims and with the resources we have the best way to construct this survey is:

- **For us to survey a total of X people**
- **To do this face-to-face/by phone/online/using paper questionnaires/by text/other/combination**
- **The questions will be all/mostly/equally qualitative/quantitative because....**
- **The questionnaire will take people X minutes to complete (online surveys generally no more than 2-3 mins, face-to-face surveys can be longest)**

4. Response Rates and Participant Weighting

If you put forms through 1,000 doors in your area with a prepaid envelope to return them you will be lucky to get 20 back (2%). If you knock on 1,000 doors in your area you may well get 200 forms filled in (20%). If you ask people to fill a survey out during your Sunday morning service you will probably get an 80% response rate. But you may not want the views of the people who already come to the church – or at least you might want to weight their views differently.

If you have used the census data (see 2 above) to understand the proportion of people of different ages/genders/ethnicities etc in your area you can include questions to see if the responses you are getting are reflective of your whole community or just part of it. It's not a

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problem if, for example, you get more older people responding to your survey but if you are asking whether the church should do things for old people or young people it's important to understand that!

Thinking about who you want to hear from must shape how you do your survey. If you want to hear from working families it's best not to do door-to-door surveys during the day in the week. If you want to hear about the views of young people don't do a Facebook survey (the average Facebook user is 41). If there is a regular community meeting where lots of people go that's a great opportunity – but be aware that those will be the people who are already engaged with their local area. One-off events like a local fete can be a good way to get a reasonable cross-section of people who may answer your questionnaire.

Complete the following sentences:

- **We anticipate a response rate of X% which means we will have to contact X people in order to obtain our desired number of responses**
- **Our chosen method of doing a survey may result in an over/under representation of the following groups and we are:**
 - **Comfortable with this because...**
 - **OR going to correct for this in the following way...**

5. Writing the Questions

Writing survey questions is a topic large enough for several books! But here are some hints...

- Don't use leading or loaded questions – e.g., “do you agree that our church is the best church ever in the history of the world?”
- Only use yes/no questions where there really is no alternative – e.g., “since you have lived in this area have visited our church more than once a month, about once a month, once every few months, once a year, never” rather than “have you ever visited our church? Yes / No”
- Remember that many people are not comfortable with writing so unless you are doing surveys face-to-face try not to ask questions that require people to write long answers.
- In multiple choice questions have an even number of answers – this avoids the problem of people picking a middle/neutral answer and forces them to choose
- For every question you include refer back to your aims (point 1). If the answers you are going to get to this question don't help you achieve your aim then don't include that question!

There are some good resources on writing good questions for a web survey at:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/writing-survey-questions/> and

<https://blogs.constantcontact.com/how-to-write-survey/>

This is a good general guide to writing survey questions:

<https://www.uxbooth.com/articles/the-essential-guide-to-writing-effective-survey-questions/>

For a slightly more detailed and academic approach see:

https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/files/psr/files/PSRQuestionnaireTipSheet_0.pdf

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6. Design and Engagement

If your survey is paper or web based it's important to spend some time making it look right. It should:

- Make it very clear, using your church name and logo, who it is from at the very top of the first page
- Include your charity number if you are a registered charity
- Not be too long – if on paper ideally on one sheet (two sides) of A4
- Have plenty of white space – a crowded web or printed page is very off-putting
- Be in a clear font (sans serif fonts like Arial and Cambria are ideal) and a good size – normally at least 12 point and ideally 14 point.
- Be in black ink on white paper
- Include a prepaid envelope for return if you are asking people to fill in paper forms

7. Communicating Results and Actions

There is zero point in surveying your community if you are not going to listen to what they have to say! So if, in reality, you have already decided what the building you build will look like and be used for, or how you will do your outreach, just save yourself the bother.

You have to be open to both likely and unexpected responses and prepared to respond to either.

It's also really important that you don't just disappear. So, after you have collated your results, you need to go back to people, in a way that's appropriate to the survey, with a summary of what we said and what you plan to do.

If you plan to communicate results specifically to people who have filled in your survey using their personal data remember that you will have to be compliant with GDPR (see 8 below)

Before you start your survey answer the following questions:

- **What kind of responses might we get to the questions we are going to ask?**
- **What is our range of options for action depending on the responses?**
- **How are we going to communicate the results of the survey and our actions to the community?**
- **Do we anticipate that what we are planning to do will create objections or upset people and how do we answer those issues?**

8. GDPR

You may well have heard of the General Data Protection Regulations which came into force in 2018. They are designed to protect people's personal data, so if you hold any personal data – not just names and emails but anything that concerns their “physical, physiological, genetics, mental, economic, cultural or social identity” – you will be a “data controller” under GDPR and have to comply with its requirements.

This is actually a lot less scary than it sounds! In practice it means that you have to explain to people in the survey what data you will keep and what you will do with it. For example you could have a statement in the survey that says:

“All the results from these surveys will be anonymised. Nobody will be able to connect your contact details to your answers. If you wish you may give us your contact details. We will only

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use them for the purposes you give permission for and will never pass them on to any third party.”

I consent for X Church to contact me by:

- Post
- Phone
- Email

For the following purposes:

- Informing me of the results of this survey only
- Inviting me to participate in future surveys
- Letting me know about X Church meetings and events
- Receiving X Church fundraising appeals

[To comply with this obviously you then have to store the survey results and contact details in separate, unconnected databases or spreadsheets and destroy or delete the original forms!]

There is no fixed period for which you are permitted to keep personal contact data but in most organisations good practice is that consent to contact people should be renewed every 2 or 3 years.

There is good material on privacy compliance for community groups at:

<https://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/information/data-protection-for-community-groups/#privacy>

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Sample Survey 1

Church Building Project

This survey could be carried out face to face or online (or a combination of the two). Either way you should deliver letters to all the houses you would like to participate telling them the web link (which should be very simple – try using <https://bitly.com/> or a similar site to generate a short web link) or letting them know a week in advance you will be calling and giving them an option to opt out and ask you not to come to their house.

Please fill in one survey per household

Number of people in your household aged:

0-4 ___ 5-10 ___ 11-17 ___ 18-24 ___ 25-34 ___
35-44 ___ 45-54 ___ 56,64 ___ 65-74 ___ 75-84 ___
85 and over ___

How long have you lived in [name of area]: 0-4 years 5-9 years 10 years of more

What do you think is the single biggest issue facing our local community?

How do you feel about facilities for older people (over 65) in this area:

excellent good satisfactory inadequate poor very poor

Which of the following facilities for older people are you aware of?

List here of things you know are available in your community for older people

We are considering providing the following services for older people in our new building. Which of the following do you think would be most important?

List here of things you are seriously considering providing

How do you feel about facilities for young people (ages 0-17) in this area:

excellent good satisfactory inadequate poor very poor

Which of the following facilities for young people are you aware of?

List here of things you know are available in your community for 0-17s

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We are considering providing the following services for young people in our new building. Which of the following do you think would be most important?

List here of things you are seriously considering providing

How do you feel about facilities for other groups of people (e.g. women, parents, people with disabilities) in our community?

excellent good satisfactory inadequate poor very poor

Which of the following services in our community are you aware of?

List here of things you know are available in your community e.g. food bank, CAP debt counselling, counselling services, parenting classes

We are considering providing the following services in our new building. Which of the following do you think would be most important?

List here of things you are seriously considering providing

Since you have lived in this area have visited [name of church] for a church service or any other reason:

more than once a month about once a month once every few months
once a year less than once a year never

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

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Sample Survey 2

Community Needs Assessment Survey

Needs Assessment Survey is a way of your community what they see as the most important needs of the community. You should only carry out such a survey if you are willing in principle to shape your future action around the needs that your community rates as most important.

Increasingly grant-funders require or prefer this type of survey in many applications for funding.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

[Each question in the survey has the same six possible responses:

definitely agree	tend to agree	neither agree nor disagree
tend to disagree	definitely disagree	not relevant to me]

My Local Area

I am satisfied with my local area as a place to live.

There are job opportunities for me here.

I am able to learn (e.g. night classes, university provision, adult education).

There are good sports and leisure facilities

I have good access to community activities.

We have good to shopping facilities.

There are plenty of 'green' open spaces/nature.

I have good access to cultural facilities (e.g. museums and cinemas).

I am able to meet relatives or friends at least once a week.

I feel free to practise my religion or belief.

I am treated with dignity and respect in this community.

I have good access to childcare services.

The authorities are dealing with crime and anti-social behaviour in my area successfully.

I am not afraid of being a victim of crime.

I feel safe outside in my local area after dark.

I feel safe outside in my local area during daylight.

What do you think are **the five things that most need improving** in your local area?

Access to nature

Activities for teenagers

Affordable housing

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Clean streets

Community activities

Community relations

Cultural facilities

Education provision

Facilities for young people

Health services

Job prospects

The level of crime

The level of pollution

The level of traffic congestion

Parks and open spaces

Public transport

Road and pavement repairs

Shopping facilities

Local cost of living

Other _____

What things do you think we as a local church might be able to do to help with the issues you have identified?