

Listening to Networks

Mission auditing is a process that has been around for many years. ACPI has always been keen to use this process as we have worked alongside church plants and pioneering mission initiatives, in order to best equip them to engage in their mission context. The importance of mission auditing has gained renewed momentum since the Mission21 conference of March 2006, when Bishop Graham Cray pinpointed mission auditing as a key church planting strategy, calling for updated resources to be produced.

Through ACPI and Fresh Expressions we have responded by producing the Listening for Mission training booklet, as well as writing training sessions for both the Mission Shaped Ministry course and Fresh Expressions Vision Days. We have also produced questionnaires that can be downloaded from the ACPI website (www.acpi.org.uk). The Methodist Church have also recently produced an excellent resource pack called Pilgrim's Way. The growing variety of resources is both refreshing and full of really helpful ideas to enable fresh expressions to fully and prayerfully consider the community God has called them to, and to be spurred into the mission field through research and building community contact.

Alongside this renewed focus on the importance of listening and mission audit, there is also a lot of attention given to the changing nature of culture in the west. Increasingly it is being recognised that our communities are defined as much by the **networks** we move in as by the **neighbourhoods** we live in. There is a growing tide of material available looking at this developing understanding of culture and how it affects church, but what I want to concentrate on here is how this changing culture can be reflected in the mission audit process.

Both the Listening to Mission booklet and the Key Person Questionnaire that can be found in the Mission Audit section of the ACPI website, have been written to be equally valuable for auditing both a neighbourhood and a network context, and certainly much of the process is the same regardless of your situation. However, there are some significant differences that it may be helpful to have in the forefront of your mind if you are approaching this process from a **network** perspective.

1. Identifying Your Team

The main thrust of the mission audit process – called in-depth listening in Listening for Mission, is broadly focused in three directions: know your team, know your community and know your gospel. When you are in a neighbourhood context – be that a parish/local church or a fresh expression/church plant working in a defined area (housing estate, new town, etc) – it is easier to know where to look as you gather your mission team that will “do the audit.”

The team is likely to emerge from the church community, and will be made up of a mixture of the most pioneering members of the church and those with a clear call to the focus community. The dynamics of relating back to the wider church can be reasonably straightforward and there may well be a clear church community who are making a prayerful investment in the project.

In a network context it can be more difficult. It may not be, but there is a greater opportunity to have a team made up from several faith communities. So a work-based fresh expression may be started by Christians from separate churches in different neighbourhoods. The temptation can be not to build such a dispersed team, and certainly it can raise issues of accountability and different expectations borne out of different church backgrounds.

However, this does not have to be a barrier. Teams may well be formed from a geographically and spiritually diverse group of people, whose only real link is a shared vision for a particular community. But this can be a powerful revelation of God's will over our own. Alternatively the team may be made up from people who do share a geographic or church based link, but have a heart for a specific network community.

In either case, when forming your team the key considerations need to be:

- What emerges from the prayerful prompting of God?
- Who has God gathered together with the same heart and sense of call?
- Where are the strong relational links that have grown from a shared vision?

When gathering team we need to be listening for what God is saying – who has He brought together? And we need to be ready to hear answers outside what we might have expected. Then we can begin to explore the variety of experience and gifts and ideas that God has gathered, which can be so influential in the eventual life and shape of the resulting faith community.

2. Listening to Your Network Community

Once you have a team together you can begin listening to what God is saying through and about your focus community. We have broadly highlighted 3 methods to help with this: observation, conversation and investigation. Again, there are some specific areas to consider as you engage with each of these methods when in a network context.

Get into the Scene

It is essential to experience the community in action and to become an active part of the network. It may be that this is already the case, but if it is a “cross-cultural” mission initiative into a network community (youth, urban poor, etc) it is important to invest some time and energy getting to understand how the network lives and moves.

Observation

Specific things to look for include:

- What are the habits and social patterns of the community?
- Based on the community activity, what are the shared values that stand out?
- Who are the key people and where are the “hubs” for the community to gather?

Conversation

- It is important to meet a broad sample of people from the community and talk with them about their life, network and spirituality.
- Meet/talk to the “key people” at “hubs” who have emerged to you in your observation. These people may include people such as reps/employees/venue owners, etc. (You will find a Key Person Questionnaire on the ACPI website, which you can download and use to interview these key people. You may wish to tailor it to include questions on things relevant to your specific context.)
- Steer conversations to explore issues such as Worldview; priorities in life; hopes, aspirations and needs.

Investigation

Specific areas to investigate include:

- What literature has been produced from and about the network?
- Are there films or music that define the community?

- Where do the people come from – social background; geography, etc... what brings them together?
- Make sure you take time to visit the central gathering points or places of importance to the community – this in turn leads back into observation and conversation as you see the community in action and recognise more key people.

3. Connecting with the Gospel

Once you have gathered your team and learned what you can about how God has shaped it and what doors of opportunity He is opening through the people he has called, and once you have been through the same listening and research process with your focus community, the final question is where does the gospel connect. Here is where the neighbourhood and network mission audit processes realign. The process here is the same: based on what you know, and what you feel God is saying, what is good news for your community? I recommend reading through Stage 4 of Listening for Mission for more specific thoughts on this, but whether you are in a network or a neighbourhood the focus here is the same. Listen to God for what He wants to say, and what He wants to do.

Conclusion

Auditing a network is just the same as auditing a neighbourhood, though some of the questions you ask and the things you watch for may be more specific than the more generic resources that often lend themselves more to neighbourhoods. But if you are called into a network it is just as important to listen to God for what He wants to do so that you can join in with Him and become an effective influence in the community.

I hope these ideas are helpful and spark more of your own, as you combine them with other mission audit materials or as you conduct your own research into the context Jesus has called you to.