

Mapping your community

Topic: Leadership and Vision

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Biography:

Laura currently works for YFC as the head of the church resources department, she is married to Andy who is the youth pastor in their church where Laura volunteers. Before YFC Laura worked as an outreach worker with vulnerable young people and before that as a youth pastor in London.

INTRODUCTION

When a church or a youth ministry looks to consider it's impact, its outreach strategy, its purpose or even a greater understanding of it's place in the community then mapping your community becomes a really helpful tool and exercise. One of the central purposes of community mapping is to establish the need and demographic in the community that your ministry exists within. This leads to our better serving our community, better engaging with our community and a wider spiritual impact on the people that surround the builds that we often determine as our churches.

Throughout the new testament and the early years of the Church we see direct engagement with those in it's surrounding community, providing for their needs and demonstrating Gods love in practical, creative and innovative ways. The first step of this is finding out what the needs of those around you actually are, and these may vary depending on the demographic that you choose to focus on. Here as we begin to think about the needs of young people these will vary again depending on the nature of the community in which you are based, a community map can be as individual as a town or cities fingerprint and the church can not only be a part of that but make a significant impression upon it.

A well known church leader commented that many churches see things a little upside down, that the surrounding community to your church serves as a pool to feed the numbers of your church, rather than a church existing to truly serve the village, town or city that you are based in. That the church has a remit to impact entire communities, not just those that manage to find their way through the churches doors.

Community mapping therefore begins the process of this engagement, truly living in and asking questions of the community around you in order to establish it's character to gain a greater understanding of the lives that God would have us impact.

THEOLOGY

In the New Testament we look at what it means for the church to be established and the example

that we are given in how to establish and live out community as followers of Jesus. In Acts 2:42-47 we witness the formation of a community who begin to study and devote themselves to the apostles teaching, the result of this is a movement of the miraculous but also the beginning of a movement where the church provides for the needs around it, which of course must begin with an understanding of that need. In Acts 6 we beginning to see this even more clearly, not only is local need being met but a restructuring happens with seven well respected individuals being given specific responsibility of distribution of food to the widows.

IN recent years there seems to have been some discourse around the role of social action and need provision in the church, which seems to have left it separated from teaching and proclamation of the gospel. Of course, the two are designed to go hand in hand and for your heart to be fully broken for the community you live in it must also mean to make an impact and transformation that goes beyond the walls of the church.

PRACTICALITIES

When beginning to map your surrounding community there is only really one effective way of doing that and that is to fully engage with the community that you are surrounded in. This means not only planting yourself in that community but searching out the voices of those community leaders and spending time with those who's lives you are wanting to impact.

This may mean the establishment of focus groups, initiating meetings, forming questionnaires, spending time in your community to recognize rhythm and patterns of the teenagers there as well as engagement with other agencies that serve the audience that you are trying to impact, in this case young people.

Establishing what you want to know is really important, when beginning to approach individuals to gain their feedback on demographics and the cultural patterns of an area, however the most important question might be 'Where is the area of greatest need that you see in the young people in this area and what would you love to see the church do about it?'. Different members of the community will see need from different perspectives, however there are some key individuals that would be worth hearing the thoughts of. Some of these might be locals schools (head teachers and assistant/ deputy heads), your local MP, your local police Sargent, local PCSO's, your councils voluntary services department, other youth workers in the area to name but a few. It is also important to hear the voice of the young people that you are trying to reach, therefore creating focus groups and questionnaires around areas of need are also important as well as gathering young people into these groups who are from minority backgrounds who may not have a voice elsewhere.

Another effective way to gain feedback from young people is by establishing a detached work team to converse with young people in the local area to gain feedback around what they see, as well as exploring access to public records and archives about the demographic data in your area.

This may appear to be a lot of effort to establish what may seem like a fairly obvious need in your area, however, it is vitally important to differentiate between actual need and perceived need in a community, as catering to what is only a perceived need is a waste of both time and resource.

REFLECTION & LEARNING

Once feedback has been gathered and a pattern has been established then a time of reflection and prayer is vital in how to move forward. These are some questions that might be helpful to consider:

- What resources does your church have to offer in relation to the feedback that you have received? This might be finance, time, physical space etc.
- Are you currently meeting community need or meeting what you now realise is a perceived need?
- Is there funding available to help you meet the needs that you see around you? Does the church/ youth work currently reflect the community around you?
- Are there other organisations in the community that already work in this area or organisations that you could partner with in order to meet a need or cater for a demographic?

DEVELOPING PRACTICE

When looking at the results of community mapping great wisdom and discernment is often needed to establish which of the local needs or characteristics you are going to engage with and how that fits with your wider vision and strategy, this becomes even more challenging when funding is readily available but may not fit what you see is needed.

Alongside this there is the ongoing challenge that the church is not called to simply be another social provision, therefore asking yourself the question, how will young people meet with Jesus because of this? This may merely be a case of signposting or having Christians openly engaging with the young people you are trying to reach, but understanding the significance of transforming your village/ town/ city and being a church for that community whilst helping introducing them to the person of Jesus is an important balance to find.

FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/develop-a-plan/main>

http://strengtheningnonprofits.org/resources/guidebooks/Community_Assessment.pdf