

Summary Report of Urban Mission Information work (Outcomes 1, 4 and 5)

These outcomes as defined in the early stages of the Project were:

1. linked **databases** of projects and denominational officers active in urban mission, for most of the major urban/metropolitan areas
- and
4. help for churches in **interpreting relevant government policies**
5. better access to **information on funding** for urban mission

The Project was also expected to support the production of *Urban Bulletin* published by ECUM, which was seen as a key vehicle for communication to urban practitioners.

1. Initial research

The Project undertook an initial consultation with 128 practitioners from 8 denominations and traditions across the UK. They were asked to rank their access to information on outcomes 4 and 5 against outcome 3, theological issues. The Consultation showed that people ranked theological issues more highly by a factor of between 2 and 3 to one.

It also showed that the lack of **access** by people in local mission to 'sifted' information from existing secular and Christian sources was the key problem, rather than the need for more primary work on this.

This was reported on in the *Next Steps* Report 2005 and at the Annual Review in June of that year it was decided that the Project would therefore concentrate on looking at information flows and signposting, rather than undertaking any information provision.

The ranking of databases of information against networking in person (Outcome 2) was less clearly defined. It was felt that the building of databases could sit behind networks and the priority was therefore given to network development.

2. Development

2.1 Christian agencies information work

The Project became a member of the Eccleston Group Process, set up in May 2004 by a number of national Christian social action and community development agencies to develop better working links between them.

Early in 2005, a piece of research work was commissioned by their information and communications staff to assess what sort of information their members wanted and where from. Unfortunately the Project was not made aware of this early enough to include the readership of *Urban Bulletin* in this process.

The Project took part in a residential in May 2005 and helped the main Eccleston Group to define the nature of its purpose. A presentation was made to the group during 2006 to test the idea of some sort of common database 'ring-main' that could connect together the members of the various organisations in membership. The group did not favourably receive this and the idea was abandoned.

Meanwhile, the Project became active in the Information/Communications sub-group reviewing the information research.

This showed that people mainly identified with particular organisations and their publications and were loathe to subscribe to more. The strategy was therefore developed for a shared information hub to which

all the agencies would supply information and from which all could download items to disseminate in their usual publications. CCWA undertook the development of a Content Management System on their website, to supply the process.

A 6-month pilot began in February 2006. By summer 2006 it was clear that the Pilot was foundering because of the lack of capacity of people to post items onto the CMS in addition to their normal level of work. This in return meant that people were not getting a rich enough set of additional material.

The Project undertook to encourage the Baptist/Methodist/URC Joint Public Issues staffs to hook into the system but it was already apparent that not enough fresh material would be made available to them.

In December 2006 the Eccleston Group decided to abandon the CMS. There was a proposal to look at some sort of common website to act as a gateway for new people into the various agencies.

CUFX was identified as the lead for this process, but no further progress has been made – partly for lack of capacity for work beyond the expectations of CUFX's government contract.

The Project had expected once the system was functioning to be encouraging a wider group of local practitioners to subscribe to the publications.

That publicity task has not taken place on a systematic or widespread basis.

2.2 *Urban Bulletin*

The Project has attended the biannual *Urban Bulletin* editorial group and contributed some articles.

The Project also supplied the current Methodist 'urban' (i.e. city centre, inner city and outer estates) churches list to Birmingham Central Mission, who undertake the distribution to Methodist Churches, in order for this list to be updated. Very little proactive promotion of *Urban Bulletin* was undertaken apart from this, awaiting the results of the Review.

A review meeting of *Urban Bulletin* was called by the UMDA in April 06, to which the existing sponsoring bodies and the agencies who were active in the Information/Communications Sub Group of the Eccleston Group were invited.

The meeting identified the need to revamp this publication, to make it more attractive within the modern visually rich market place. The meeting decided that a Task Group should take this forward.

A paper and on-line Reader Survey was developed to inform this process, and sent out by ECUM, with the Spring 07 issue.

The level of responses to that was low (14), and the results inconclusive in terms of medium, but clear in terms of content – theological reflection and stories were the most frequently highlighted items. Anything that will rapidly go out of date is not worth carrying in an occasional and irregularly produced publication, and there are other, better sources of information on events and funding.

3. Evaluation

3.1 Christian agencies

Had this process worked, and initially it looked as if there was energy and commitment for it, it would have greatly reduced the work that the Project would otherwise have had to do. It was therefore worthwhile to invest in the time to attend and support the information/communications sub-group in addition to the main Eccleston Group. The fact that it did not work was due to factors external to the Project, although greater experience might have let to the realisation that the willingness and ability of agencies to free their staff time to participate in joint ventures was perhaps over estimated by the Group.

The joint working was also hampered by the fact that the agencies did not commit to participation at the highest level – therefore when staff were replaced, participation in the Pilot was not embedded in their workplans nor passed on in their induction processes.

3.2 *Urban Bulletin*

This publication suffers from a similar reliance on a few enthusiasts.

The Project did not have the time or authority to direct alterations to format or distribution.

With a greater degree of web-knowledge amongst the editorial group it could fairly easily be published on the web.

Tighter production schedules might be possible with greater administrative support.

Negotiations could also take place with Tearfund and Grooms-Shaftesbury who are joint publishers of the e-bulletin *Wired-Up* to see if *Urban Bulletin* could be distributed as a twice-yearly 'supplement'.

There are other publications – Faithworks Magazine, and Faith Action (aimed at Black-led churches encouraging social action/urban mission) – that might be worth approaching, to see if they would take an insert etc..

Further consideration needs to be given to the funding and approach of this publication and its proper marketing. This is a major piece of work.

Once re-vamped, a clear marketing strategy through denominations and/or agencies could elicit a much wider readership.

4. Overall learning

4.1 Working with other agencies

Working with and through other agencies is time-consuming and difficult from out of London, as not enough casual meetings can happen in passing.

It requires a considerable level of diplomacy, and trust in the reliability of others to deliver as promised. Interagency politics, beyond the remit of the Project, also affect this.

The ability of a single-worker agency, without a strong or long track record to 'pull people to account' is also difficult.

The need to embed commitment to and time for participation in joint projects in all levels of an organisation is a key learning outcome for the Project. Lack of this means that joint work is entirely reliant upon the goodwill and enthusiasm of the individual staff member, and long-term input is unlikely.

4.2 a hub for information dissemination

Anecdotal evidence continues to show that there is a major task to be done to ensure that urban mission practitioners access good quality information.

The lack of generalist infrastructure hubs, with the exception of some of the CRCs is a key issue.

The Gweini model in Wales if successful, would give a much clearer set of pathways for people to access information on funding and Government policy – all of which is generic to the sector – apart from policy comment on the policy side.

There is the need for a clearer lead from somewhere to encourage the churches to engage effectively with the Change-Up process to create proper information hubs. However this is bedevilled by the fact that almost all of the denominations aspire to provide this function in some ways and by the complexity of competing agencies.

It may be that the creation of a UK Urban Mission Coalition could create the momentum for this, but by that time the funding opportunity will probably be passed, to support development at a regional level.

The experiment between the Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches to create a joint Public Issues Group should also be monitored.

The advantages of creating an urban mission centre, to coordinate information flows, should be considered in the longer run.