



Rural Ministries: *Missional listener*

Background

A pilot scheme of ‘Missional listener’ was intentionally created between Rural Ministries and the Free Methodists in North West Lancashire in 2012. It was an approach that intentionally slowed down church planting and the birthing of mission initiatives, and instead emphasised a process of listening and reflection, in order to discern what shape of mission and perhaps church might be needed by different rural communities, and then discern who might be brought together or additionally resourced to achieve these aims.

This paper has been created to outline and further develop this process, identifying stages/phases that could serve as a guide to those looking to pioneer something in the rural context, as well as provide a structure for those sponsoring and resourcing the project. Ideally, three distinct but linked bodies should sponsor each ‘missional listener’ project, one of whom would be Rural Ministries and another being a denominational or Para-church body, and the third being local or personal support.

Our vision at Rural Ministries is to see churches and mission initiatives that are fruitful, effective, and also pioneering ways of communicating the hope that can be found in the Gospel. Our overriding desire is to see more and more people introduced to Jesus as their Saviour, and for these people to help us shape, influence and change culture to reflect more Kingdom-like values.

The individual listener

A key to this project is identifying the right kind of person. It is envisaged that theological colleges, denominational bodies as well as individual churches would play a key part in the identification process. Ideally, the ‘missional listener’ would be someone who is not just gifted with the ability to see new possibilities, but has the character and temperament to stick around and see the initiative develop and grow, nurturing this for as long as it takes.

They should be teachable, committed to on-going learning and not necessarily have fixed ideas of what works and what doesn't; this should outwork itself in a willingness to study and read widely. The listener should not be hasty in making judgements or taking action, but willing to think and reflect about something for a while. Ideally, they should be people who are naturally curious to know the ‘*something more*’, and not afraid of asking the tough questions in order to discover this.



Pioneering can by its very nature be a lonely exercise, as such potential ‘missional listeners’ should be willing to submit themselves to a group for support, encouragement and monitoring. Whilst some form of dissatisfaction with the present shape(s) of church is anticipated, it is essential that the individual listener is at least sympathetic to the inherited church, and seeks to work with and relate to it wherever possible. They would equally need to be willing to undergo external spiritual supervision/direction.

The process

Those engaging in the task of ‘missional listening’ might find that some of these phases blend together, or may even be missed completely; the steps are not intentionally designed to serve as a ‘tick list’ to complete, but rather a process that offers some shape and form to the task of listening and observing what God is doing, taking away some of the cultural pressure to ‘perform’ and ‘achieve immediate results’. Above all, flexibility in mission is an important principal that should not be lost.

- **Place** – The first task in this process is to identify a suitable location/community for the project. Ideally this should be somewhere that the Holy Spirit has already placed on the heart of a potential listener. Care should be taken to carefully research the area to ensure that missionally effective congregation(s) and active churches do not already cover it. Also, difficult and isolated areas are not avoided in favour of those more accessible suburbs. There would need to be an open and honest conversation between denominational and regional church groupings to ensure that there was wide agreement in principal with the project in a particular area, and that concerns are addressed wherever possible.
- **Prepare** – The listener will identify a number of people who share their passion for mission, and have a heart for the community the *listener* feels called to reach. There could be endless debates about how many should be selected for this group; discerning the actual number should be left up to the *listener*, however we would suggest a minimum of three. Regardless of how many, these people will be the core group to journey with the *listener* and support them throughout the process. The *listener* should seek to draw them together and begin to pray more intentionally for the area on a regular basis, at least fortnightly. It would also be advantageous to assemble some varied reading on mission, and undertaking to study these with the core group together, as they regularly meet.

It will be not uncommon for the Holy Spirit to reveal a passage(s) of scripture to the core group. These passage(s) are worth noting down as they will often be part of the ‘go-to places’ to return to again and again, when the core group needs reminding of the original vision, encouragement, challenge and comfort.



If a local church is part of the sponsoring body, then the *listener* might like to use any opportunity to preach and teach in the church on the ‘go’ of mission (see Matthew 28:19ff), and of the church being outward focused. This would hopefully broaden the support and engagement of the church.

Ideally, a spiritual director should be identified and secured early on in this step, with whom the individual listener maintains their own spiritual health, and also with whom they can also theologically reflect on key issues such as ‘what is church?’ and ‘what is the Gospel?’ We would always advocate where possible using someone outside of your current denominational background. Their insights and experience of doing church ‘differently’, may well be the catalyst for further reflection and listening.

- **Probe** – With the core group, the *listener* should begin by asking questions such as: “What will Christian community look like in this location in 5 years time if nothing changes?” and “Who are we not currently reaching by doing what we are doing as churches?”

Researching the area at this point is important, paying attention to the demographics and how these may be challenging or supporting any early thoughts. The *listener* should seek to find out if anyone else is planning to look strategically at the area, and where possible discover any proposed housing developments and major shifts in employment.

Seek to list all organisations in the community you can think of, and then any links that the core group or local Christians may have with it. Marking perhaps on a map where these organisations are, where members of the core group live and work can also prove insightful; it will help you begin to identify areas of opportunity as well as possible places of neglect.

Spiritual archaeology forms an important aspect of the listening, digging into the past utilising minute books, parish and other historical records as well as local historians, in order to discover the story of the area, and how this story has been shaped over the years. It may be helpful to assemble these into a visual a timeline of the community, and with the core team, prayerfully discern which of these events from the past might still be echoing into the present.

The *listener* should try to identify who are the community gatekeepers, who could unlock this area and any relational links already in place. Furthermore, researching what others are already running locally, and then seeing how these might speak into and address any issues raised through the spiritual archaeology exercise can add further insight and texture.



We would encourage those called to 'missional listening' to do very little in their first year beyond researching the local community, getting to know people, hanging out in public areas, and listening to God. Pubs, cafes, libraries, post-offices are all great places for hanging around and listening. Social media can also be helpful, looking for what people are saying about your community through the various groups. Local papers and magazines can be very helpful at this point, especially the letters page – it begins to give the *listener* a flavour of the issues and opportunities in the community.

It is worth mentioning at this point that we would strongly advise against the forming of any new faith-based activities. We are not seeking to dampen the enthusiasm of entrepreneurial and pioneering Christians, nor are we suggesting that this is a full-proof system for success; we simply recognise the need to listen more in order to be more strategic in our investment in mission.

- **Prayer** – It would be the expectation that prayer has already begun, nevertheless this step should build from the previous, turning research into prayer. The *listener* should seek to pray together with the core team about what they sense the Spirit of God is drawing to their attention. Through prayer, the core team should seek to praise God for achievements made in the region in the past by others, but also seek God's forgiveness for the things that may have grieved His Spirit, which the core group may have discovered through the previous steps.

The core team should look for the opportunity to undertake a walk of awareness around the region/community they feel called to reach. If the team are a little self-conscious in undertaking this, something as simple as the act of litter picking and combing this with prayer can help. Not only would this further open their eyes to the needs of the community, but also it will take them to the more overlooked areas of a community. As the core group collects litter, a simple prayer may help, for example, 'as we remove this piece of litter may the light of Christ fill this space and dispel any darkness.' A walk of awareness involves the senses that we might not readily associate with 'listening' such as smell, touch and sight. I would also counsel against looking only for the problems, but also looking for the joys, surprises and encouragements; the team may want to note down any particular things for which they can give thanks to God for.

Inviting other Christians to join with the core group in praying for the community/walk of awareness is an important step to begin to envision a way where local Christians might link together more strategically and ask God through prayer, to open doors of opportunity in the future. It is important to say that this step should continue to run throughout the whole of the listening process.



- **Position** – It is absolutely imperative that the *listener*, places themselves intentionally within this community, so that they might better understand the ebbs and flows of people during the day, and also the natural rhythm of the area. That either means living in the area, or taking up local employment. Rural communities are by their nature parochial, and as such require people to be dwelling among them rather than bussing in and out.

As the *listener* locates themselves within the community, they should seek to identify the gathering points; the natural places and hubs where people congregate, and the natural flows of people at different times of the day. They should also attempt to find the person(s) of peace (Luke 10:5-7); this person does not necessarily need to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus, but they will be an influential and soulful person, who recognises the great value of what believers bring and becomes the *listener's* 'protector, promoter and pathway finder' in their area of influence.

- **Partner** – As the *listener* is by now firmly placed in this new area, they should seek to discern with the core group, opportunities and others who they could join with, without having to compromise their beliefs and values. Rather than necessarily seeking to establish Christian alternatives, the *listener* and core group should offer to serve on the local council, debt advice centre, listening service at the local doctors etc., and other such places as Christians. Our experience suggests that it is often easier to introduce issues of faith and belief into these groups through the relationships that have been built, rather than trying to start a specific 'faith' or 'enquirers' group, and inviting people to join this. It is of primary importance that we are never asking the 'seeker' or 'enquirer' to undertake the cross-cultural mission in order to come to us, but rather that we should be making every effort to go to them where they are. (1 Corinthians 9:19ff)

Another important aspect of 'partnering' is joining a learning community sponsored by Rural Ministries. These will have a geographical as well as a missiological focus, and link the listener together with others who are on a similar journey. The learning communities enable the sharing of best practice, prayer and support of one another and also an honest critique of what is and isn't working.

- **Providential** – With the core group, God given providential opportunities should be identified that have opened up with people or places in the community in which the core group have taken a prayerful interest, and perhaps whom the core group have already joined in with (see the previous step). Throughout the gospels it seems that Jesus often deals with people's physical needs before addressing their spiritual needs. Are there some practical needs that could be addressed by the core group, such as the establishing of a local community shop, a hospital lift service, a debt advice clinic, visiting service for those isolated through age and



mobility or perhaps a youth drop-in.

We would advise not starting any new initiatives in the first year unless there is an extremely compelling reason to do so. At this stage, the *listener* and core group are not necessarily looking to share Jesus (unless invited); they are simply being a practical demonstration of His love within this community.

- **Presence** – Having identified providential opportunities that may have opened up with the core team, **the findings should be presented to the project sponsors** to discern together if a tangible presence could be established from this, and what additional resources might be required. Presence initiatives could include a regular prayer group, occasional outreach activities like Cafe Church, Toddler group, healing room, Messy Church, or running courses like Marriage Course, Christianity Explored, Celebrate Recovery or Freedom in Christ to name but a few.

Local congregations that could be partnered with to work together to reach the ‘cherished missing’ should have already been identified, and where appropriate drawn into the conversation about forming an intentional Christian presence in the community. It is important to recognise that the task may well be to help and resource an existing church in order for it to become healthy and missionally effective, before the core group focuses on establishing any new initiative in the region.

- **Promote** –What could the core group do to further promote the providential and presence opportunities? Don't forget to maximise the use of social media; it is estimated that nearly one in four people worldwide will use social networks, so do advertise what you are doing on Facebook, Twitter and other such platforms. If there is a village magazine, write a feature article for them on what you are doing, being sure to highlight the benefits for the local community. If you are using poster or flyers, don't forget 'AIDA': attention, interest, desire and action. If you advertise, do it where you can afford to do it often; research shows a message must be repeated several times to be remembered.

The core group should seek to work with the sponsoring partners to promote good practice and the values of the project, with others. The goal is not to discover a ‘silver bullet’ to fix church decline, but identify a number of principals and values which are transferrable.

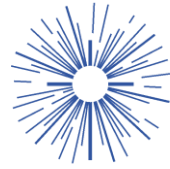
- **Plant** – If God blesses the initiatives taken, and no long-term partner is found who can take the work forward, it may be that God is asking the core group to plant a new congregation/expression of church in this community. Please note however that this is the final part of the process, and not the beginning. If you start with church, experience suggests that mission then becomes an item on the agenda. If



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however you start with mission, you unvaryingly end up with a church where mission is the agenda.



Job specification

JOB TITLE	Missional listener
PURPOSE	A 3 -5 year fixed term contract to be a point person to oversee the listening process
ACCOUNTABILITY	Sponsoring partners, the core team and a local congregation
KEY RESPONSIBILITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To undertake a full demographic survey of the area • To encourage and facilitate prayer for the lost within the geographical area • To be the point person liaising between different churches and community groups • To build meaningful relationships with community leaders • To run community groups/initiatives in the area • To support on-going ministries of local churches where appropriate • To encourage, organise and equip local Christians for personal evangelism • To provide literature and promotional material for potential sponsors
GENERAL REQUIREMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To earn the confidence and respect of other local church leaders, and the sponsoring bodies • To attend and actively participate in the RM annual conference • To follow the pattern of recreating daily, resting weekly and retreating monthly
PERSONAL SPECIFICATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to study, understand and communicate the belief, practices, story and scriptures of the Christian faith. • A pioneering spirit • The ability to communicate clearly in public and private settings, including small groups, written material and social networks • The ability to develop and maintain a spirituality that will sustain this ministry, together with a willingness to develop personal growth and learning • The ability to understand ministry and mission in an ecumenical and rural environment • The ability to manage self, workload and the strengthening of significant other relationships in order to maintain a balanced ministry and life.