

Good Practice Guide



Urban Expression recruits, equips, deploys and supports self-financing teams to pioneer innovative and relevant expressions of the Christian Church in under-churched areas of the inner city.

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Introduction

Urban Expression began in 1997 and for several years operated quite informally and with a minimum of documentation. Our activities were limited geographically and in scope, and relationships between all involved were deep and strong. Our core values provide the foundations on which decisions and policies have been based.

Since 2004, however, the range of activities and number of people involved has grown:

- 2004: Urban Expression Associates
- 2005: Crucible course
- 2006: Manchester and Glasgow teams

The core values remain foundational, as do relational ways of operating, but we can no longer take for granted the impact of the values or the strength of relationships. As our activities diversify and more people become involved we need to reflect on who we are, what we have learned and how we intend to operate.

There is some reluctance to take this step, which signals transition from an organic to more organisation phase. There is a sense of loss as well as gain in the growth we have experienced. There are dangers of institutional inertia replacing the flexibility of being a movement. But there are dangers in not doing this that are at least as great: loss of vision, diminished impact, assumptions that are not justified, strained relationships, uneven and inequitable ways of operating in different contexts and loss of core identity.

This document sets out our understanding of ‘good practice’, based on experience since 1997. It is not intended as the final word on any subject but as a working document to be updated as experience requires.

Core values

Urban Expression is not a ‘purpose-driven’ but ‘values-guided’ mission agency. We are purposeful but we choose not to be ‘driven’ either by external expectations or by internal pressure to succeed. We began during a period of reflection in church planting circles as it became clear both that unrealistic expectations for planting churches during the 1990s were a liability and that much more attention needed to be given to ‘what kind’ of church was planted as well as ‘how many’.

Our core values, first developed in 1997 and revised substantially once since then, consist of 21 statements of conviction and 7 commitments. They express the heart of who we are and why we do what we do. They remain subject to revision but are deeply held by those who have been involved in Urban Expression since its inception. It is these core values that have held together church planting teams that have developed different modes of working and through whom different expressions of church are emerging. And it is these core values that have attracted to us new team members and Associates.

As Urban Expression grows and diversifies we intend to ensure that these core values remain central and influential. Good practice in this area means:

- We will investigate the attitude towards our core values of anyone applying to join an Urban Expression team, accepting only those who can enthusiastically affirm the values and commitments.
- We will investigate the attitude towards our core values of anyone we invite to become an Urban Expression trustee or join a regional steering group, endorsing only those who can enthusiastically affirm the values and commitments.
- We will investigate the attitude towards our core values of anyone applying to become an Urban Expression Associate, welcoming only those who can enthusiastically affirm the values and commitments.
- We will communicate our core values clearly to those who apply to study on the Crucible course, encouraging them to explore their implications for their own work and ministry.
- We will communicate our core values clearly on the Urban Expression website and in brochures, newsletters and any other material we produce.
- We will develop internal processes to continue reflecting on the core values so that these are not taken for granted but are indwelt and influential in all we do. These processes include informal conversations, discussion at meetings and the development of a daily liturgy around these core values.
- We will build in periodic reviews of the core values in order to reflect on their impact on Urban Expression and to revise them in light of experience.

Recruitment

One of the core activities of Urban Expression as a mission agency is the recruitment of teams to plant churches in under-churched areas. We recruit through personal contacts, the distribution of promotional literature and a website that is largely open-access. We regard ourselves as an ‘anti-hype’ mission agency that does not promise success or offer inducements to potential recruits. We invite recruits prepared to make sacrifices and to work in contexts where ‘success’ is hard to define or achieve.

The recruitment process includes personal conversations; the provision of Open Days to tell our story and explain how we operate; an application form; taking up references; and an interview/discernment meeting. Trustees or members of regional steering groups are normally involved in the interview/discernment meeting alongside existing team leaders and those working for Urban Expression.

Potential team members are asked to make an initial commitment of three years. Potential team leaders are expected to regard this period as a minimum commitment that is likely to lead on to long-term involvement. Although the recruitment process includes a formal interview, we prefer to regard this as a mutual discernment meeting with applicants and Urban Expression jointly exploring whether working together is appropriate.

Good practice in this area means:

- We will not idealise Urban Expression or glamorise urban church planting but give applicants an honest account of our activities and the prospects of church planting in inner-city communities.
- We will read carefully and use responsibly all information provided by those who apply and those who provide references for them.
- We will not short-cut the application process in situations where we have personal knowledge of the applicants.
- We will ensure that applicants are clear about what Urban Expression can and cannot offer by way of pastoral and financial support.
- We will act responsibly throughout the application process and will not accept applicants about whose suitability we have significant doubts.
- We will maintain confidentiality throughout the application process and will communicate clearly and promptly with all involved in this process.
- We will operate with a consistent application policy and process in all areas where we are recruiting team members.

Deployment

A second core activity of Urban Expression is the deployment of church planting teams in appropriate locations. The choice of location depends on several factors and requires careful research before teams are deployed, including adequate consultation with existing churches in areas under consideration. Team leaders (and where possible team members) will be involved in the choice of location alongside those who work for Urban Expression and the regional steering group.

Our primary commitment is to inner-city communities and especially to areas of urban deprivation and poverty. We are not interested in planting churches in communities with sufficient existing churches. We are concerned to deploy teams in ‘under-churched’ areas (we use this term in preference to ‘unchurched’ for reasons of ecumenical sensitivity, but we recognise that some inner-city areas are effectively without church presence).

Experience has also taught us the value of deploying teams in close proximity to other teams for mutual support. Although there may be exceptions to this practice, wherever feasible we prefer either to deploy more than one team in the vicinity or to deploy new teams near existing teams.

We choose to deploy relatively small teams (no more than 10 people) in order to limit the likelihood of teams imposing their culture and experience of church on the churches they are planting. We acknowledge that ‘planting in weakness’ is riskier and will usually mean the progress of the team is slower than with a larger team, but we are committed to this as an Incarnational approach that may result in the development of indigenous churches.

Good practice in this area means:

- We will carry out thorough research into possible areas for deploying teams prior to their deployment.
- We will consult with existing local churches and other Christian agencies with an interest in such areas and heed their counsel.
- We will invite potential team leaders to be fully involved in decisions regarding the deployment of their team.
- We will refrain from deploying teams that are large enough that they jeopardise our grass roots strategy and the emergence of indigenous churches.
- We will evaluate carefully and cross-reference the diverse factors that we have identified as critical for the decision about where to deploy teams.

Support and training

Urban Expression does not have extensive resources of personnel, time or finance. But we recognise our responsibility to offer adequate training (both induction and ongoing), accountability and pastoral support to the teams we deploy.

Training has been the weakest area of our work in the early years but the development of the Crucible course and links with the School of Urban Mission offer fresh opportunities for both induction and ongoing training. We need to establish a culture of training so that team members recognise the need for training at all stages in their participation in the church planting process.

Pastoral support and accountability has been offered through a number of strategies: bi-monthly meetings of team leaders for story-telling, news-sharing, theological reflection and prayer; one-to-one meetings in alternate months for each team leader with someone working for Urban Expression; annual day retreats (since 2004 with Urban Expression Associates); and the availability of someone outside Urban Expression with whom team members can speak in confidence. Team leaders have been regarded as responsible for the support of their team members.

In practice, much informal support has been offered and received outside this formal structure; and the one-to-one meetings with team leaders have diminished in frequency over time.

Good practice in this area means:

- We will be responsible (through the regional steering groups) for ensuring an appropriate support and accountability structure for the teams deployed in each region.
- We will provide regular ongoing support for team leaders and ensure that they are providing such support for their team members.

- We will identify someone outside Urban Expression with the experience to act as an external point of reference for any team member needing this and we will make sure all team members know they have access to this person.
- We will encourage all new team members to embark on induction training using appropriate links with existing courses.
- We will encourage all existing team members to participate in ongoing training (both generalised and specialised).
- We will look to provide regular opportunities for theological reflection and in-house training.

Mission and church

Urban Expression is a mission agency and has no intention of becoming an institution or a new mini-denomination. We are interested in planting new churches, not providing an ongoing framework for the churches that have been planted. If we are drawn into the latter activity we recognise that we will soon allow maintenance to marginalise mission.

There is no easy way to determine when a church planting team has developed into the core of a new church; nor when the emerging church is ready to stand on its own feet and move out from under the auspices of Urban Expression. But both transitions are crucial and must be identified in each team/church context. If we are slow to do this or reluctant to relinquish control we jeopardise the health of the churches we are planting.

Churches planted by Urban Expression teams are free to decide with whom to associate for ongoing support and relationship. Historically there have been very strong links with the Baptist Union of Great Britain but not all the teams have had this connection. Urban Expression is not a Baptist mission agency, nor do we assume that only Baptist churches will be planted under our auspices.

Good practice in this area means:

- We will not interfere in the activities of the churches our teams plant or expect these churches to feel accountable to Urban Expression.
- We will encourage teams to watch out for the transition from team to church core group and make adjustments accordingly.
- We will expect emerging churches at an appropriate stage to become independent of Urban Expression (although we hope friendship links will continue) and build links with a denomination or a network of churches.
- We will invite team leaders and team members still involved in such emerging churches to become Urban Expression Associates or to consider planting another church.
- We will concentrate our energies on recruiting and deploying further teams rather than overseeing the churches that are planted.

Governance

Urban Expression is a charitable trust with a board of trustees who are legally responsible for our activities. This board of trustees is comprised of representatives from the regional steering groups plus additional members. The regional steering groups are responsible for overseeing the recruitment and deployment of teams in their region and monitoring and supporting the ongoing work of these teams.

Because of our commitment to grass-roots mission, our policy is to include a current team leader on each of the regional steering groups and another team leader on the board of trustees.

Urban Expression is not an employer. The teams deployed are self-funding and there are no members of staff on the Urban Expression payroll. However, Urban Expression does raise funds in order to pay fees and expenses to those who work on our behalf. We do not engage in fund-raising for team members.

Good practice in this area means:

- We will keep the trustees and regional steering groups apprised of developments and of any issues that require their involvement.
- We will facilitate a good flow of information among the regional steering groups and between the regional steering groups and the trustees.
- We will ensure that teams are appropriately represented on the board of trustees and the regional steering groups.
- We will continue to raise funds for central costs but will make it clear to those we recruit that we are not responsible for their funding.
- We will ensure that regional steering groups operate in consultation with each other and apply the same principles in the various regions, albeit applying these flexibly.

Partnership

Urban Expression values the support of friends and prayer partners, with whom we share news via regular newsletters. Individual team members may also have a network of such supporters; and we encourage them to share with them also news of the other activities of Urban Expression. We also maintain a fairly extensive website with updated news and other information.

Although our primary mandate is to recruit and deploy church planting teams, we realise that urban mission is messy and that situations may arise where it is appropriate to enter into partnerships with existing church planting initiatives. We have developed a process for considering such partnerships (see the 'Exploring Partnerships' paper).

We are hoping also to develop partnerships of a different kind with churches outside the inner city – partnerships for mutual learning and encouragement, providing opportunities to share with others the challenge of inner-city church planting and to encourage church members to consider joining church planting teams.

Yet another form of partnership is with the network of people who have asked to become Urban Expression Associates. We provide a monthly email update to all Associates (and team members), sharing news and information and encouraging theological reflection and the pooling of ideas and resources. We also organise an annual Associates' Day, which has training and networking components. Further activities may also develop, some of which may also include those who have completed the Crucible course. And the Urban Expression website offers further opportunities for networking among Associates.

Good practice in this area means:

- We will speak and write honestly about Urban Expression on our website and in any communication with partners and supporters.
- We will operate in accordance with the 'Exploring Partnership' guidelines in any conversation about possible partnerships with other church planting initiatives.
- We will seek to ensure that any partnerships with churches outside the inner city are for mutual benefit and do not model paternalism.
- We will encourage realistic expectations among Associates as to the ways in which Urban Expression can act as a resource to them and will try to catalyse the development of a self-sustaining learning network.

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