

Making the most of Mission Action Plans

Mission Action Plans are being used increasingly by churches in the UK and this section is designed to help churches get off to a good start by making the most of investing time in developing such a plan. MAPs resourcing, www.churchmaps.co.uk is a helpful source of information about what dioceses are doing and learning from the MAP making process. Worth visiting.

The four stages of the MAP process:

- 1 **Planning:** the vital groundwork of prayerful and wide consultation needed to develop a good MAP. An important part of this is the work of listening - to God, the Church and the wider community.
- 2 **Implementing:** the real work of a MAP is doing what we have identified as God's call on his Church.
- 3 **Reviewing:** whether working on a one-year or five-year perspective, an annual review is an essential element.
- 4 **Revising:** revising our original plans in light of experience.

Ten marks of healthy MAPs

- 1 *Rooted in prayerful reflection.* Good MAPs are the result of discerning what God is wanting to do with us rather than what we are going to do for God. Question: 'How do you make God laugh?' Answer 'Tell him your plans!' Prayerful discernment of the church's vocation is what our MAP needs to articulate.
- 2 *Wide consultative process.* Rightly understood, a church's vision and vocation arise out of the faith community rather than things to be imposed upon it, though in some situations a 'starter for ten' from the leadership may be needed to get things going. People today are much more likely to put their energies into plans they have been involved in shaping than into plans imposed on them without consultation. Moreover, they are the most likely source of 'ideas that work'. Ideally this should extend to the local community and to seeking their views of what is needed and how the church might best serve the area. However, this should be seen as valuable listening, rather than necessarily defining the call of God on the church.
- 3 *Good grasp of present church state.* We cannot undertake a journey unless we know our starting point. Some options here are:
 - Updating the Parish Profile.
 - SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), or using in-depth surveys.
 - *The Healthy Churches' Handbook* (Robert Warren, CHP 2004).
 - *Natural Church Development* (Christian Schwarz).
- 4 *Rooted in spirituality/theology/vocation.* Good MAPs are energized by a sense of call from God arising from an awareness of his loving purposes in the world.
Many parish churches overwhelm themselves with actions, meetings and projects that are not necessarily directed by careful theological reflection, and may in fact be a squandering of their energies and resources rather than a faithful commitment to engage incarnationally with God in the world. (Laurie Green)

- 5 *Clear sense of direction for next five years.* Anglican churches are familiar with the Quinquennial Survey of Church Buildings. MAPs can helpfully be seen as a quinquennial survey of the church's life and mission. This gives a longer-term framework than churches often work with ('Most people overestimate what they can achieve in one year and underestimate what they can achieve in five years'). If that time-frame is used, it is vital to build in an annual review (see 10 below).
- 6 *Sharp priorities widely communicated.* A MAP is more than a list of everything a church can, or 'ought', to do. MAPs are not a way overburdening ourselves, but focussing action, enabling churches to work 'smarter rather than harder'.
- 7 *Healthy balance between doing and being.* The danger of activism needs to be addressed ('Before we can be a mission-shaped Church, we have to be a God-shaped people'). A useful framework here is to consider:
- Looking up: how, corporately and individually, do we need to develop our relationship with God which is the energy source for all healthy mission?
 - Looking in: we are called to incarnate the truth, not just preach it. How can the way the church operates and handles internal relationships demonstrate the Good News of God incarnate in the life of a community for the sake of the world?
 - Looking out: how are we called, and gifted, to serve the needs of others in the local community and the wider world – remembering that most church members engage with others on a much wider span than just 'the parish'?
- 8 *Specific achievable actions.* Many dioceses using MAPs encourage the making of SMART plans; that is, plans that are Specific and Stretching, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Realistic, Timebound.
- 9 *Workable plans for implementation.* Plans need to be 'well costed' about
- Who will do what?
 - With whom?
 - With what resources?
 - Accountable to whom?
- This may well require that such people are released from existing commitments in the life of the church. Some current work may have to be delayed or stopped.
- 10 *Identifiable plans for monitoring progress.* It is all too easy for churches to put a great deal of work into writing a MAP and not fully grasp that the goal is to implement it. Inevitably we learn from putting things into action. We learn where the gifts are, what the obstacles within the life of the church and the wider world are, and will often see that our original goal needs to be revised in the light of that experience. Building in, right from the start, regular monitoring (e.g. once a year) is essential for this to happen in order to:
- identify and celebrate what has been achieved;
 - honestly address where things have not worked and/or obstacles have been encountered;
 - revise plans in the light of that experience.

The purpose of the church is to manifest an alternative way of seeing and living life.
John Westerhoff