

DIOCESE OF ELY

**MISSION
ACTION
PLANNING**

Resources for the Process

**3 - USING THE
“GROWING HEALTHY CHURCHES”
PROJECT**

The “All Good Gifts” report seeks to create ‘mission communities’ and so enable the local church to be more effective in its work and

witness. The development of the “Authorised Lay Ministry” programme is one way in which this is happening through the Diocese.

The “Growing Healthy Churches” project is a way of helping the local church/mission community as it seeks to express its faith and life in today’s world. It could be described as a “Mission Action Plan”.

The project is the fruit of ten years research and reflection and began its life in the Diocese of Durham. In these past ten years it has been widely used in dioceses throughout the country and in many different ways.

There are a number of **key concepts** which underpin the project:

- 1 Flexibility. This is not a “one size fits all” package. It can be done with the whole church; with the PCC; with a local ministry team etc.
- 2 Actions limited. Don’t try to do everything. We cannot cope with a whole range of new ideas and strategies.
- 3 Time – this is not a quick fix. It can take up to two years to identify strengths and weaknesses, decide where action is needed, take that action, and review progress.
- 4 It is about changing ATTITUDES and VALUES rather than creating new programmes and structures.
- 5 It is recommended (though not essential) to use the services of an outside facilitator – someone who can act in a ‘consultant’ role.
- 6 Everything must be rooted and grounded in prayer.
- 7 Build in times of celebration.

The basic principle is this: “Healthy things grow”. A number of churches in Durham Diocese were growing (numerically) and so it was decided to see if there were any common factors as to why

such churches were growing – and they came from across the whole range of church tradition.

Over the course of time, seven “marks of a healthy church” have been noted:

1 **Energised by faith.** From this, all the other marks flow. There is need for internal energy (Holy Spirit) or everything seems to be an enormous effort.

So where a church is energised by faith there might be:

- worship which enables people to encounter the presence of God “The Lord is here.” The ‘Minister’ has a key role here. Silence, testimony, sharing of joys and pains may be appropriate expressions of worship.
- people motivated to serve God and one another; buzzing with energy and enthusiasm. If church members are not motivated in this way, it is usually left to a few (often reluctant) people to do all the work. Motivation can be for the wrong reasons and this will result in personal agendas, personality clashes and power struggles.
- engagement with Scripture and seeking to apply it to daily values, choices and lifestyle.
- nurturing faith. People grow in faith and want to share it with others. People have their own ‘faith story’ to tell. Prayer matters and faith sharing ‘happens’ whether or not there is a specific programme in place. *Some churches have produced their own booklet of faith stories as an encouragement to others.*

2 **Outward-looking focus,** motivated by God’s love for all creation. We might find a church that is:

- deeply rooted in the local community; work with other churches and groups; a willingness to work alongside other partners.
- passionate and prophetic about justice and peace in the world – locally and globally.
- where faith and daily living are connected. Members are equipped to live out their faith in the world.
- which responds to need by loving service – a desire to give rather than to get.

These first two marks are an outworking of Jesus' summary of the commandments: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

3 Seeking to find out what God wants. A call to live the upside-down world of the Kingdom of God. People no longer see themselves as “Number 1”. Life is patterned on the Lord’s Prayer – dedicated to God (his name; his kingdom; his will), and willing to entrust to God our needs and his gracious provision.

There is a genuine desire to discern God’s call rather than to focus on our own agenda. This requires a church that:

- seeks to explore what God wants and how to do it. Concern for quality; about how people feel; about relationships; about how church impact community. Once energised by faith, we need to be asking: “What does God want me to do in and through the life of the church?” We need to become less frantic as we follow a sense of call. There is also a corporate dimension: “What are we called to do as a church?” We must not become overwhelmed with actions, meetings and projects. There is a real danger of power struggles as people try to force their own agenda.
- develops and communicates a shared sense of where it is going (VISION). This is more than a “mission statement” and is arrived at after prayer and reflection. Vital that it is owned by the congregation, so as many as possible need to be involved in the process.
- has immediate as well as long-term goals. It is one thing to have a vision – and another thing to carry it out! May result in doing less, but doing better (Matthew 11:28-30).
- is willing to face personal and corporate sacrifice in order to achieve the vision.

4 Faces the cost of change and growth. A group which is prepared to take considered risks. Change is a sign of life and growth, and a fact of life. Not one single atom contributing to the make-up of our physical being was part of our body seven years ago! Real change is a change of heart, and this takes time to grow and develop. “Busyness is the escape mechanism most people use to avoid the pain of learning and change.” (Loren Mead) Such a church:

- embraces the past, but dares to take on new ways of doing things. We can be evolutionary (take what is and rework it) or revolutionary (begin again). EVOLUTIONARY is church in its inherited mode as we seek to make “church” meaningful in today’s world. REVOLUTIONARY is looking for ‘fresh expressions’ of church to reach out where the inherited model no longer works. Both are needed.
- takes risks. Admits when things are not working and learns from experiences. There is no guarantee of success, so support for risk takers is crucial.
- responds creatively to new challenges. Trees bend with the wind – healthy churches are responsive rather than rigid.
- affirms and builds upon positive experiences of change – however small.

Healthy churches have to face costly experiences of pain, puzzlement, change and conflict. The call to follow Christ can be costly.

5 Operates as a community. So often we operate as a gathering of individuals. A community will value people; put a high value on good personal relationships; make people feel they belong and have something to contribute. Small groups are important (especially in larger churches).

In a healthy church that is a community:

- relationships are nurtured (small groups is one way of doing this) so that people can feel accepted and are helped to grow in their faith. Church should be able to celebrate and party! Many will be involved in different aspects of church life. Problems and difficulties will be aired and not swept under the carpet.
- lay and ordained people work as a team to create a healthy church. People are affirmed in what they can offer. Leaders are enablers and not just doers. Leaders are formulators of questions which the church needs to address, rather than mere providers of answers.
- all are valued and are able to give expression to their “gifts”. This is not just about what happens “in church” but what happens 24/7. It is more about BEING than DOING.
- people are prepared to move from a settled faith to a pilgrim faith.

6 Makes room for all. Inclusive, not exclusive. Such a church:

- works hard to include new members in the life of the church. New people have something to offer which will mean things have to change. A real welcoming church is noted by what happens after we have said “hello” to newcomers. If people are to stay, the formation of one or more “significant relationships” is very important.
- helps children and young people to belong, to contribute and nurtures them in faith. It is not a case of expecting them to come “on our terms”.
- encourages enquirers to experience and explore faith in Christ. Traditional Sunday worship may not be the place to start for those with no church background at all.
- sees differences as strengths. There is an ability to incorporate those who are “not like us”.

7 Does a few things, but does them well. A church which is focussed rather than frantic. A church which is able to leave some things undone and value what is being done, and:

- does the basics well – worship; pastoral care; stewardship; administration. A church which is “quietly efficient”.
- uses occasional offices as a means of helping people make sense of faith at times of joy and sadness. Weddings, baptisms and funerals are done well.
- embodies being good news in all we do. People take pride in what happens because it is done effectively.
- enjoys what it does and is relaxed about what is not being done. There is the presence of laughter and tears. A church that can say: “We are what we preach”.

Healthy churches live out a faith that is real to them and shapes what they do and how they do it.

Why these particular seven marks?

They are a reflection of Christ. If they are true of Christ, they need to be true of his disciples.

It can take up to two years to identify strengths and weaknesses, decide where action is needed, take that action and then review progress. This is not a quick fix strategy!

As we look at each of the seven marks, there are important things to bear in mind:

- a The importance of prayer. Is it possible to have a “prayer space” in church? Can there be regular prayer sheets with guidance as what to pray for?
- b Look for insights from other churches and church members. A “suggestion box” might be appropriate.
- c When faced with a decision, ask the question: “What do we think God wants us to do?”
- d Involve as many people – and as early as possible.
- e All views should be encouraged and welcomed.
- f If people feel they are involved in designing plans, then they are more likely to want to be involved in implementing those plans.
- g A “single-issue” focus can help to unite a church.

So how does the process work?

FLEXIBILITY is the key word.

1 The exercise can be done with a leadership group (PCC?) and then the whole church. The seven marks are explained and people are invited to score between 1 and 6 (and encouraged to give high/low scores as appropriate). Individual scores are transposed so that a corporate profile emerges. Questions can then be asked:

What are our strengths?

Are there significant differences in scores? Why is this so?

Are there things holding us back? Where is our weakest point? (*it takes courage to own and face up to our weaknesses*)

Where is action most needed? How might we move forward?

2 Church leadership must now decide key actions – but only one or two. A church will not be able to cope with lots of changes at once. Prayer is vital at this (and every stage), as is making sure the process is communicated well.

Take one step at a time:

Who will take action?

What resources are needed?

Is support available? (Diocesan officers; mission agencies etc.)

What is the timescale?

How will be monitor – and celebrate - progress?

3 Plans may need to be revised in the light of experience. There is no guarantee of immediate success. Times of celebration need to be built in. It may be appropriate to repeat the “Church Profile Exercise” after, say, two years, and see if things have changed in any way.

And once a “mark” has been identified for action – what next?

1 Be proactive. “The journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step.” First steps are vital – we could set off in the wrong direction!

2 Acknowledge that the “culture” of the church may need to change. How do we experience and understand God? How do we relate to one another? How do we engage with the community and wider world? A teaching programme may be needed. We are looking at far more than organisational change – a change in attitudes, values and priorities may be needed. Be prepared to “stick it out” when things seems to be struggling.

3 Plot the starting point so that people know how things are progressing. What are the anticipated outcomes? For example, if you are working on mark 1 (“energised by faith”), you may be looking for:

- more prayer life within the church

- more people involved in personal prayer
- Prayer School
- people speaking openly about their faith
- more people involved in Bible Study etc.

4 Identify specific areas for action.

5 Work (if possible) with a facilitator – an external person who can give an objective view and steer things in a positive direction.

6 Have a ‘diarist’ – someone who keeps a record of events (photographs etc.). What were the major steps? What set-backs did we experience? What progress did we make?

7 Raise awareness. Addressing any of the marks will involve the management of change. It will mean shifting the focus, attitude and spirit within the life of the church. This requires an approach that is communicated through as many different means as possible. It has been suggested that most people need to hear about something in six different ways before it lodges in their consciousness!

- sermon
- notices
- intercessions
- magazine
- visual display in church
- interviews
- small group study material
- prayer card
- one to one meeting with key people
- PCC agenda
- away day
- a simple “strap line”

8 Travel one step at a time. Massive five-year plans are now out of fashion, so plans need not be complicated. A “one step at a time” approach is simpler and more likely to bear fruit. Once one step has been achieved, moving on to the next step becomes that little bit easier. It is the first step that is often the most difficult. Celebrate your successes – however small. Do not be surprised or

defeated by seeming failure. It may be that the vision is right but that you have used the wrong strategy.

9 Appreciate this can be a costly process – though not necessarily financially. It may well be, however, that these steps safeguard the future of your church!

There will be those – maybe in your own churches – who say “it’s beyond us”, though this in itself can be healthy in that people are forced to acknowledge that success cannot be achieved in their own strength.

Others will say “we dare to believe that God can equip us to meet the challenge before us.” It is often at such times that untapped resources (often people) come forward as the church learns to trust God to provide.

What about FACILITATORS?

Many who have gone through this process have found it useful to draw on the skills of someone familiar with the process and who has had experience of handling it. Church leaders (especially clergy) need to be fully committed to the process, and so sometimes it helps to have an external facilitator.

Such a person can bring a sense of objectivity – addressing both strengths and weaknesses – and can keep the church “up to the mark” in working through the process. There are examples of churches who have completed the Church Profile Exercise but then have gone no further.

Facilitators can also be a good source of ideas when it comes to action – and able to suggest what might be dropped from the current programme to help the process succeed.

Facilitators have been used in various ways:

- run the Church Profile Exercise and then step back.

- run the Church Profile Exercise and then be involved on the basis of a “rolling review” as and when it is felt helpful to call that person back.
- agree from the start that the facilitator will run the Church Profile Exercise and then stay with the church until discernible progress has been made.