

Our Church's Future Story

Guidance and resources for mission planning



The **Methodist** Church 

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Using the cards

These cards are designed to be used by a facilitator – perhaps a presbyter, deacon, local leader or external mentor – working with a church to reflect on its future direction. Some of the cards are introductory (**Cards 2-5**), some explain the 8-step mission planning process (**Cards 6-16**), and some offer activities that can be used to facilitate great conversations about your church's future (**Cards 17-33**).

Feel free to adapt and use the cards in whatever way works best for your situation; one suggested process is offered below:

Week 1

Commission a small group of friendly volunteers to conduct a community audit using **Cards 9** and **20**.

Weeks 1-3

Meanwhile, schedule two or three opportunities at different times for people from the church congregation to come together to review the church's strengths and assets. Use **Cards 3b, 10, 18-19** and **21-26** to design these sessions.

Find a place in your building or on your website (preferably both) where you can display the strengths you have discerned, and leave it there for others to see and consider. **Card 34** offers a simple structure for presenting this information as you gather it.

Report back the findings from the community audit, perhaps as part of a Sunday service or midweek gathering. Add them to the information on your church's strengths and assets (suitably anonymised if necessary).

Using the cards (cont'd)

Weeks 4-5

Schedule another 2-3 opportunities for the church congregation to gather. Use the time for dreaming together, using **Card 11** for guidance and choosing activities from **Cards 27-32**. Capture people's dreams and display them alongside the information from your community audit and your church's strengths.

Weeks 6-7

Offer two opportunities, perhaps one online and one in person, for people to prayerfully consider and prioritise the dreams that are emerging, bearing in mind what you have been hearing about your community and your church. Use **Cards 13, 30** and **31** to help you.

Weeks 8-9

Identify actions and consider what fruitfulness might look like (**Cards 14, 15** and **33**). This detailed work may be easier to begin in a smaller group, such as a small task group or meeting of the Church Stewards, and then offered to the congregation for comments. It is essential that the church is consulted, so that everyone understands what the church will be doing and what fruit you are all hoping to see from your actions.

Week 10

Write your mission plan down and put it up somewhere where everyone can see it. You can find an example and a blank mission plan form on **Card 36**. Set a date when you will review your mission plan, and then start putting it into action!

Why mission planning?

Mission planning (or 'mission action planning') is a vital tool in pursuing spiritual and numerical church growth. A mission plan is simply a plan of action saying what the church will do in the next year or 18 months to reach their community with God's love.

Mission is, first and foremost, God's work. That means that mission planning is not a dry managerial tool, but rather a process of listening attentively to God speaking through the Holy Spirit. We discern a mission plan, as much as write it. The plan should flow out of a series of conversations, in which as many people as possible have been involved in listening to God together, then sharing what they have heard. The mission plan is both a record that these conversations have taken place and a means of holding each other accountable.

It is essential to plan regular opportunities to hear God speak throughout the process of discerning and writing your mission plan. We all hear from the Holy Spirit in different, equally valid ways. Some people thrive on silent prayer, while others need to pray out loud. Some have a strong intuitive sense of what the Spirit is saying; others discern the Spirit's prompting through circumstances or in the words of others. The important thing is to be intentional about asking God to speak, and to pay attention.

Listening to God together

Listening to God together will involve praying together. You could also incorporate reflecting on Scripture together, or even periods of silence in which you listen to God together.

Here are some questions you could use to draw each other's attention to the work of the Spirit:

- Where do you see the Holy Spirit at work through our church?
- Where do you see the Holy Spirit at work in our community?
- What is God saying to you through our circumstances?
- After a time of prayer, what words, ideas or impressions is God bringing to your mind?
- After contemplating Scripture, is there anything in this passage which you sense is particularly relevant for our situation?

What's in a good mission plan?

An explicit desire for growth

A mission plan should show a desire for more people to: • explore faith and encounter grace • come to a living faith in Jesus Christ • grow in faith and discipleship • become committed members of your church. This is not to ignore the challenges or to reduce mission to an obsession with numbers. Instead it is an attitude of praying, looking, hoping and working for transformation which goes beyond Sunday morning worship attendance.

Concrete and specific

A really useful mission plan will include concrete actions and specific goals. This will ensure you know exactly what you are going to do and it will help you review how you are doing. There may be good reasons why you do not meet a goal in the proposed timeframe, but having the goal in the first place gives you something for which to aim.

Do a few things well

It is not possible to do every good thing there is to do. Churches and circuits need to choose a few things on which to focus. One district has written guidance for circuits which begins by asking: *What will you stop doing?* This reinforces the message that it is sometimes necessary to stop doing something which may be good in itself, but which needs to make space for something else which is a higher priority.

What's in a good mission plan? (cont'd)

Being prepared to take holy risks

Mission involves change and change involves risk. A good mission plan prioritises experimentation and action above the safety of maintaining the status quo.

Focus on New Places for New People

New Places for New People is a key focus of the Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth. New Places for New People are the most effective means of connecting new people, new people groups and new residents to Christian exploration and community. Churches and circuits are encouraged to make New Places for New People a key priority in their mission planning.

Continuous reflection cycle

A useful mission plan is a working document that is reviewed and updated regularly. As a rough guide, you should return to your mission plan every 12 to 18 months.

Mission planning for circuits

Each circuit will probably include churches with a range of attitudes to mission planning. Some may be very keen, while others may see mission planning as a 'tick box' exercise. To enable your churches in mission planning, consider the following:

- **Provide resources to help with mission planning**

Make sure each church has a copy of this pack, and point them to www.methodist.org.uk/missionplanning

- **Organise mission planning training in your circuit**

This could be a one-off training day, or perhaps a course delivered over several evening sessions. This may help your churches to feel better supported and more motivated in mission planning.

- **Access support**

If you have a district and/or circuit mission enabler, ensure your churches know how to contact them. Talk with your regional Learning Network Coordinator about support their team might provide.

There may be individual churches who sense a call to start a New Place for New People (NPNP), and whom you can support with advice and resources. Alternatively, it may be when you gather all your churches together that you discern the need for a NPNP that is planned at circuit level. Perhaps volunteers, skills and resources from various churches in the circuit can make the NPNP happen.

Mission planning for circuits (cont'd)

Once your churches have begun the process of discerning their own mission plans, you will be in a better position to produce a circuit mission plan. This will ensure that your circuit plan is rooted in the strengths of the individual churches.

By gathering churches together, it will be possible to gain an overview, helping to ensure that work is neither duplicated nor neglected. Not every church needs a thriving youth ministry, for example; and not every church needs a strong social media presence.

When churches understand the strengths offered across the circuit churches, they are released from the burden of feeling they have to do everything.

Your circuit mission plan will focus on resourcing your churches with all they need to carry out the mission priorities they have discerned. By choosing to prioritise churches with mission plans in allocating resources, you will ensure that limited circuit funds are used where they will have the most mission benefit.

The eight-step mission planning process

1. DECIDE ON A PROCESS

2. DO A COMMUNITY AUDIT

3. CONDUCT A CHURCH REVIEW

4. DREAM TOGETHER

5. CHOOSE PRIORITIES

6. IDENTIFY ACTIONS

7. CONSIDER THE FRUIT

8. SET A DATE FOR A REVIEW

The eight-step mission planning process (cont'd)

This process is devised to aid churches in their mission planning. It is not intended as a straitjacket, but rather as a guide to help churches ensure their mission plans are as useful as possible.

You should expect to spend about two to three months from start to finish. This will allow time for consultation with the church congregation and wider community, as well as time for decisions to be made in a prayerful, reflective way.

Although the eight steps are presented in a certain order for the sake of simplicity, in reality there is likely to be some overlap. For example, you could be doing your community audit at the same time as conducting your church review, and dreaming all the while.

Decide on a process

You will need a series of conversations over a period of several weeks in which you consult widely, both with your church congregation and with friends from the wider community. You will need a small group to guide the process who can meet from time to time to pull together the insights you are gathering. You will also need to think about the timings of Church Council meetings at which your mission plan can be discussed and signed off.

You may want to consider how you can include people who don't attend Sunday worship in your conversations as they will also have valuable insights to share. This could include:

- your Messy Church families
- those who attend your church coffee morning
- community groups who use your buildings
- people from the wider community.

Consider, too, how you might use digital technologies to gather people together for mission planning. This could help people whose health needs or caring commitments make it difficult to get to an in-person meeting.

Video conferencing software (eg Zoom or Microsoft Teams) can be used for meetings. Mind-mapping and idea-sharing can be done online using tools such as Google Jamboard (<https://jamboard.google.com>) or Padlet (www.padlet.com).

Decide on a process (cont'd)

Plan a number of different methods of consulting with people in your church and wider community.

- You could start with a well-planned questionnaire. Arrange to meet with the people who use your building as well as with groups from your church congregation, then pose your questions and really listen to the answers. (See **Cards 9** and **10** for further ideas.)
- Provide opportunities for people to come together, pray and discuss what they are hearing from God about God's mission for your church. These could be in person, over Zoom, or a mixture of the two, to enable as many people as possible to participate. People in your wider community may also be keen to offer their thoughts, even if they don't attend church, so consider holding an open forum and inviting their contributions.
- Some people won't feel free to say what they think in a group setting, so consider a mixture of group and one-to-one meetings. One-to-one meetings are a really effective way of making useful connections with local community leaders – whether or not they are Christians – such as local councillors, school headteachers and local community activists.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

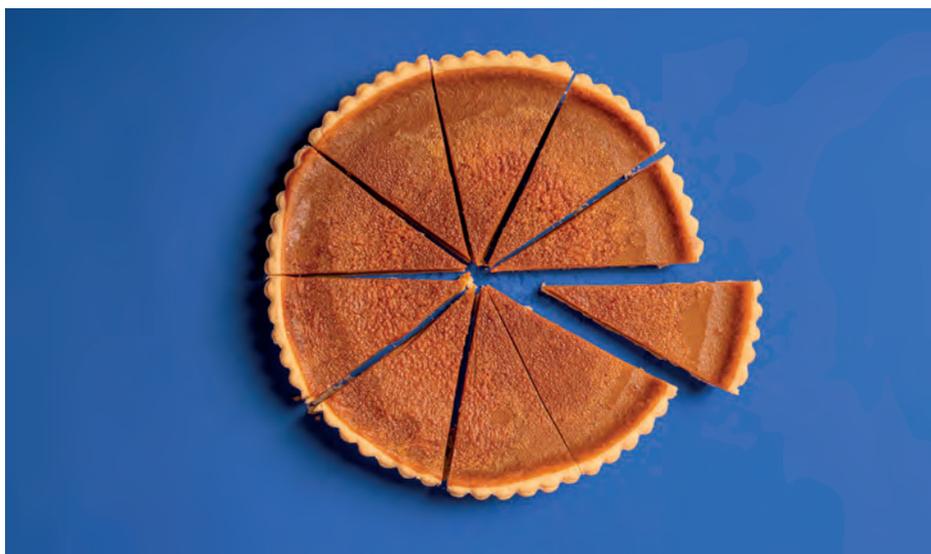
As you design your mission planning process, be alert to issues of equality, diversity and inclusion. Try to notice who is not part of your conversation, and think about how they might be actively invited to participate. Some things to consider:

- Think about the times when you meet. Can people with day jobs and/or caring commitments easily attend? Do you always meet at the same time of day, or do you offer a range of times? Could people doing shift work access your meetings?
- Think about the places where you meet. If you are meeting in person, can people with limited mobility easily attend? Are you expecting people to come out at night? If you are meeting digitally, what are you doing to support and include people who may not have access to a laptop or tablet, or may lack confidence with digital technologies?
- Who is leading the mission planning conversations? Who does most of the talking? How could they be encouraged to listen to others more?
- What discussion and facilitation techniques could you use to encourage quieter voices? There are lots of suggested activities in the facilitator's toolkit (**Cards 17-33**).
- What level and style of language are you using in what you write and say?
- Could people be shown some of the questions in advance? Could they be encouraged to share their responses via somebody else, if they are not able to join you?

Children and young people

As you design your mission planning process, consider how you will actively seek the participation of the children and young people who are part of your church community, or who live in the area served by your church.

Consider the 'Pie of Power'. Each group within your church has a slice of the pie, but some slices are larger than others. How large a slice of the 'pie' do young people have in your church?



For ideas and resources, have a look at www.childrenandyouth.org.uk

365 is a year-round process of engagement with children and young people in their local setting to enable them to listen to God, discern what God is saying, deepen their faith and be confident in sharing their faith with others.

Do a community audit

To write a great mission plan, you need to know the local community to which God has called you. You need to understand the hopes and fears of the people who live near your church, so that you can work out what 'good news' might look like in your community.

Different groups of people will have different experiences of living in your area, depending on factors such as their family situation, wealth, education, ethnicity and so on. Looking up the census data for your local community will be a really useful starting point.

Details to find out about your area:

- The socio-economic profile
- The population density and distribution across age groups
- Which ethnic groups are represented and which languages are spoken
- Information on how people live (eg alone, in family groups, in rented accommodation or in their own properties)
- The percentage of people who attend a church
- The other faiths represented
- How levels of educational attainment compare with the UK average
- Which local community groups offer practical care and support
- What poverty looks like
- Which groups of people experience marginalisation

Do a community audit (cont'd)

Once you have lots of basic data, you will then need to delve beneath the statistics and speak to people who live near your church. The conversations you planned in **Step 1** will give you a richer understanding of what it is like to live in your area.

The questions below have been designed to get you thinking and wondering about your community. They could be the starting point for your conversations with local community representatives, as well as members of your church:

“What made you come to live here?”

“What is it about this area that makes you praise God?”

“In your experience, how much do people talk to their neighbours around here? Why do you think that is?”

“What would you like to change about our area, if you could?”

“What would you like the local church to be doing?”

“When did you last experience hope? What happened?”

“When did you last say a quick prayer?”

Conduct a church review

As well as understanding your community, you also need to review your church. Some churches are large and have lots of potential volunteers; many churches are small and volunteers are scarce. Some churches are rural and others urban; some are rich and some are poor. We can't all do the same things and we don't need to – but we can all do something. Every church and every circuit is an essential part of the mission of God and has a part to play.

- Use **Cards 21-26** in the facilitator's toolkit to help you review your church's strengths and assets, understanding what you have to offer your community.
- Be honest and realistic about the resources you have, in terms of money, skills, and people's time.
- Trust that God is not done with you yet – there is still a part for you to play in God's mission.

Think digital

Not every church needs a highly polished digital ministry, but every church needs to consider what is needed in their own particular context. There are many digital tools that are cheap and simple to use, and there is training available from the Connexional Team for those who would like to improve their skills.

- Most people use the Internet to find a church. How easy is it for people to find you online? Is your information up to date?
- What social media platforms do your members use, and how do they use them? How might you use social media, both as individuals and as a church, to share your faith with unaffiliated people in your community?

A word of warning

It is possible to get stuck when conducting a church review, talking endlessly about where you are as a church, and not moving forward into positive action. Set a time limit, agreeing how many meetings you will spend on your church review, and commit to moving on once you have reached that limit.

It may be useful to have an outside facilitator to help you, especially at this stage. It is sometimes easier for an 'outsider' to see a situation clearly, and easier for them to speak truths that may be hard to hear. If you have a district officer responsible for mission and evangelism, ask them to help you. Ask your regional Learning Network Coordinator for their support. They can help you to navigate difficult conversations and to move on into future plans.

Dream together

God is transforming all of creation, and God graciously chooses to use the Church in this mission. Our calling as God's people is as big and as broad and as exciting as that. The 1999 statement *Called to Love and Praise* declares:

At the heart of [the Gospel of Jesus Christ] is the revelation that God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, embraces the world, each member of the human race, and every living creature, with a love which not only creates, but re-creates and heals... This is God's 'mission' to the world...

In 2000, the Methodist Church adopted *Our Calling*, affirming:

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

We dream together prayerfully as churches in response to God's love in Christ. We ask God to show us how we might cooperate with the mission God is bringing about. We begin to discern our small part in living out the transformation of all of creation.

Dream together (cont'd)

At this stage of your mission planning process, encourage people to dream about future possibilities, in the light of the insights from the community audit and church review. Given your community's needs and your church's assets, what might God be asking you to do? Allow people's creativity to flow, and make a note of all dreams and visions that come. There may be some dreams that seem too big or too impractical – that's ok, because you will sift and prioritise at **Step 5**.

For now, give people permission to put practicalities to one side and prayerfully imagine an ideal future.

Encourage your church to dream by:

- asking questions such as...
 - “If anything were possible, what transformation would you love to see in our area?”
 - “What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?”
 - “If money were no object, what would you love this church to be doing?”
- covering a wall with paper and encouraging people to paint, draw and doodle their ideas (this is also great for encouraging participation from young people, and those who tend to stay quiet in meetings)
- listening to the ideas of people in your wider community too: what are their dreams for your area?

Creation care

God is bringing about the transformation of all of creation, and that includes our planet. Creation care is a key priority for the Methodist Conference, which recognised the climate emergency in 2019. As part of your dreaming together, ask yourselves what God is calling you to do in relation to creation care.

Could you take steps to become an Eco Church? This involves considering God's creation in every area of your church's communal life, as well as the lives of your individual members. The Eco Church survey asks about:

- The place of creation care in your worship and prayer life, such as the songs you sing, the topics you hear preached on, your Bible study materials and the subject of your prayers.
- Your building's carbon footprint, such as your energy supplier, insulation, glazing, and recycling facilities.
- Your church's level of community engagement on environmental issues, such as local campaigning and activism.
- The choices of individual members of your congregation when it comes to sustainability.

Find out more about how your church could contribute to the transformation of all of creation:

www.methodist.org.uk/climate-change

New Places for New People

At the dreaming stage, consider seriously whether God might be prompting you to start a new Christian community alongside your existing congregation. The Methodist Conference has called on every circuit to consider starting a New Place for New People by 2025.

A New Place for New People is a new Christian community designed especially for people who are not religiously affiliated, who are not currently part of a faith community. Robust mission means caring for people – body, mind, soul, spirit – and intentional faith community is important in that. We want to help people explore the Christian faith and become disciples of Jesus Christ that help transform the world.

As you dream together, consider what a New Place for New People might look like that focuses on the needs of your community. How might you help people explore discipleship and church in a new way?

Who is there in your church or wider community who could help you? Could you partner with other churches in your circuit to start a new Christian community together?

Choose priorities

At this point in your mission planning process, you will have lots of dreams, so you will need to start sifting through them, discerning which one or two dreams God is prompting you to prioritise in the coming 12-18 months. Mission planning is not about adding lots more things to everyone's to-do list; it's about deciding what few things we will do well.

There is no point choosing too many priorities as it will scatter your energies too much. If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. One to three priorities for the year is about right, depending on the size and capacity of your church. Better to do one thing well than three things badly.

Your priorities are the areas of your mission which you will aim to focus on and to develop in the next year to 18 months. They should be outward-facing, focused on sharing God's love in word and deed. You might choose to focus on a specific area of mission, such as digital evangelism or debt advice. Alternatively, you may choose a particular group of people on whom to focus, such as isolated older people or single-parent families.

Choose priorities (cont'd)

Choosing priorities is not about following what the majority of people in the church want to do, but about hearing from God. It can be helpful to vote on priorities in order to help the church discern the right way forward.

Ask people to vote according to where they sense the Spirit is moving, rather than simply following their own personal preferences.

Part of the discernment will also involve looking back at what you have learned about your community and its hopes and dreams, as well as your church's strengths and assets.

Look for those dreams that chime with the dreams of your community. Look for those dreams which play to your church's strengths. They are probably the ones that should be prioritised.

Identify actions

Once you have decided upon your priorities, you need to decide what you will do to develop each one, who will do it and when. This helps you to keep each other accountable, makes it much more likely things will get done, and ensures the work is shared out fairly.

You don't need to do everything all at once. Some things can be actioned fairly quickly; others take lots of time to plan. You may decide to spread your activities over the next 18 months, for example. Some churches divide their action points into three categories:

now (in the next few weeks)

soon (in the next few months)

later (sometime this year)

It doesn't matter if your mission plan takes time to implement, as long as you are taking action.

There is an example on the other side, 14b, showing how a priority might be translated into actions. It is good practice also to identify a person or group responsible for each action, and a timescale, such as 'in the next three months' or 'by October 20__'.

From priorities to actions

Here is an example of how a priority could be translated into three specific actions:

Priority	Activity	Person	Timescale
Explore ways of offering practical support to local single-parent families on low incomes	Contact the local authority to discuss the support that they offer to single-parent families on low incomes and to discover where the gaps might be.	Ade	By March 20__
	Trial a one-off activity, eg offering good-quality second-hand school uniforms in August.	Joan, Amrit and Peter	This summer
	Following the one-off activity, decide upon a regular rhythm of offering support that can be sustained, eg a uniform event three times a year.	Church Council in conversation with J, A and P	By November 20__

Consider the fruit

Churches want to make a difference and to realise change for the better – in other words, to ‘be fruitful’ for God. It is relatively easy to think of things we will do. It is harder to identify the fruit we are hoping to see as a result of our actions, and this is probably not something most churches are used to doing. The kinds of words that help us think about positive change include: increase, develop, enhance, reduce, grow, more, less, improve, and greater.

For example, let us imagine that a church decides to run an after-school club for children of primary school age. When the church comes to review this activity in a year’s time, how will it know if the activity is fruitful and worth continuing?

- The church might count the number of children who come each day, and their parents. It is useful to know this but remember that simply knowing that ‘x’ number of people have attended is not evidence of positive change in itself.
- Instead, the church might look for the changes that occur in the children as a result of the club. For example, they may develop new skills; grow in social confidence; participate more in healthy eating; and/or increase their well-being. These are signs of fruitfulness.

There may be people in the church who point out that none of the children or their parents have started attending Sunday worship.

If that was never fruit that was planned for or expected, then it is irrelevant: the after-school club is doing what it was planned to do.

Consider the fruit (cont'd)

It is often difficult to measure the impact of church activities. Just because the impact of mission is not easy to measure, however, does not mean that it *cannot* be measured. Here are some of the ways we might seek to 'count the fruit':

- We could be specific about who exactly we are seeking to engage with an activity: their geographical location, religious identity, gender, ethnicity, age, level of ability, etc.
- We may wish to look at the difference we are making across a range of domains: faith development, skills gained, volunteering levels, personal growth and community involvement, for example.
- Finally, we may seek to describe the journey travelled by those we are serving. Things like levels of understanding, extent of participation, responsibility taken, contribution made and awareness gained.

Let us imagine that a church decides to offer digital midday prayer via Facebook Live. Viewing figures are good as far as they go, but you cannot tell by viewing figures alone whether you are helping unaffiliated people explore faith or whether you are primarily appealing to disaffected Christians.

Fruitfulness could mean not simply 'views' but engagement via comments; the same people coming back again and again over a sustained period; unaffiliated people using midday prayer as their main act of Christian worship; under-40s engaging with midday prayer, and so on.

Set a date for a review

Once you have completed **Steps 1-7**, you can write your mission plan using the blank form on **Card 36**. There is one final stage, however – putting a date in the diary to come back to it. You may decide to wait a year, or possibly 18 months – that's fine, as long as there is a date in the diary. Here are some questions to help you reflect, once the time comes to review your mission plan:

1. Look back at the results of the community audit and church review. Are there new things you have learned about your community and/or your church since the mission plan was written? Have there been any significant changes to your community or church? If you envisaged any new uses for your building/s, have you begun to explore any of these? What has been the outcome?
2. Return to the dreaming you did as a church. Have the dreams changed, or are they largely still the same? In what ways have you seen them start to come true? Have any new possibilities occurred to you since you wrote the last mission plan?
3. Consider the priorities on your mission plan. Are these still the things you believe God would have you focus on, or have they changed? Is there still work to do in each of these areas?

Set a date for a review (cont'd)

4. Reread the list of actions you planned together. Did everyone do the things they committed to do? If not, why not – was someone ill, perhaps, or too busy? Could more support be put in place so that it could be done? If anything wasn't done, does it need to go on the new action plan?
5. Reflect on the fruit you have seen. What is there to celebrate? What has been positive and brought new life? Did each activity achieve what you expected? Were there additional positives that you didn't foresee? Was there anything you tried that didn't work? Will you give it some more time to see what happens? Will you adapt the activity and carry on? Or will you stop doing it to make time for something else?

Be sure to celebrate what has gone well and to thank those who have worked hard – whether or not their activity achieved what you had all hoped for. Now it is time to rewrite your mission plan for the coming year, based on your new insights.

Facilitator's toolkit



Facilitator's toolkit contents

Card	Exercise	Step
18	Prayer ideas	All steps
19	Techniques to stimulate discussion	
20	Community questionnaire	Step 2: Do a community audit
21	Responding to 'Our Calling'	Step 3: Conduct a church review
22	Life cycle of a church	
23	What is your church's story?	
24	Getting our compass bearings	
25	Wants and wishes	
26	Reflecting on the pandemic/property	
27	A new heaven and a new earth	Step 4: Dream together
28	Building a new story for your church	
29	The new story	
30-31	Eggs in baskets/priority traffic lights	Step 5: Choose priorities
32	Best and worst case futures	
33	Great expectations	Step 7: Consider the fruit

Prayer ideas

As you seek to understand the future that God wishes for a church or congregation, it's important to start with prayer.

Some prayer ideas:

- Write a prayer or a series of prayers for people to use at home, or to be read at or before church services every Sunday.
- Actively encourage church members to talk honestly about what they think God might be saying to the church. Pray together about this.
- Open a prayer room or a regular prayer station.
- Add a list of prayer points to church notices.
- Hold a prayer event at your church, specifically focused on discerning God's call for your church.
- Allocate a day for prayer and exploring vision, perhaps with a lunch.

Prayer ideas (cont'd)

Make sure you involve house-bound members in praying.

Commit to a regular prayer walk around your area; or find another way to pray outside your church for the community your church was called to serve.

For further ideas on prayer, look at these websites:

www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/prayer/

www.24-7prayer.com

www.prayerspacesinschools.com

The Prayer of Good Courage

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Techniques to stimulate discussion

Throughout the process, you will need to explore various questions to determine the direction of your mission plan, and it is important to gather the views and stories of as many people as possible. Whether using questions from exercises within this pack or your own, these two methods might be used to stimulate discussions by giving participants control over which questions they ask.

Paperclips

- Write each question on a separate piece of paper or card.
- Provide everyone with three paperclips (or coloured dot stickers).
- Give everyone time to read the questions.
- Invite them to attach their paperclips to the three questions they would like to explore as a group.

The question with the most paperclips becomes the starting point for the group discussion. This process enables the most relevant questions to be chosen by the group rather than the facilitator.

Techniques to stimulate discussion (cont'd)

Round-table discussions

- Write each question on a separate card and spread these randomly on a table.
- Ask each member of the group to pick up a card and read it aloud.
- The reader can then choose to answer the question or pass it on to someone else.

Depending on group size there could be several tables and discussions going on at the same time, or there could be conversations just in twos or threes.

The important thing is to get people talking, not necessarily to feed back what everyone has said.

This could be a really positive opportunity to invite the wider church to come together to just start talking honestly about the future, perhaps when sharing food together.

Community questionnaire

As part of your community audit, you will want to find out how local people feel about their area and what they think the church should be doing. You may be tempted to simply send out a questionnaire, either by email or posted through letterboxes. You will get a much better response if you ask people your questions in person, however. It is much easier to ignore an email or a piece of unsolicited post; when asked for their opinion face to face, however, most people will probably be happy to talk to you.

The benefit of conducting face to face interviews is not only that of collecting more and better data. By asking people personally for their opinions, you will build new relationships and strengthen existing ones in ways that could never happen through an impersonal approach.

Start with people with whom you already have a connection. This could be:

- your building users
- your local school headteacher
- people who own businesses that operate near your church building

Even as you gather information, you will already be building links with your community.

Think too about the places in your community where people bump into one another, such as the village shop or community centre. Ask for permission to spend a few hours there talking to people as they turn up, and ask for their opinions.

Community questionnaire (cont'd)

(Adapted from URC 'Inviting Forward')

1	What do you value about <i>(church name)</i> and why?
2	Describe a time when <i>(church name)</i> has been important for you, or made a real difference. <i>(It can be just a small thing.)</i>
3	What does <i>(church name)</i> do really well?
4	What would help <i>(church name)</i> to become even better?
5	Is there anything you think <i>(church name)</i> could be doing that it isn't doing already?
6	Think of a small step which could help achieve your answers to Q4 and 5. <i>(This might be either a small step for (church name) as a whole, or for an individual.)</i>

Questionnaire completed by: (name of questioner)

Responding to Our Calling

How does your church express the calling of the Methodist Church to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission – through Worship, Learning and Caring, Service and Evangelism? Take some time to explore two or three questions related to each of the four areas of Our Calling.

Worship

The Church exists to increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love.

- In our church what helps us to centre our worship in God?
- Where and when do we feel God's presence in worship in our church?
- How do visitors experience our worship?

Learning and Caring

The Church exists to help people to grow and to learn as Christians, through mutual support and care.

- What church activities help us most to deepen our faith in God?
- How effective are our small groups in linking faith to everyday life?
- What makes it easy for people to join us?

Responding to Our Calling (cont'd)

Service

The Church exists to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice.

- How are we involved in service to the community?
- How do we give attention to the moral issues raised by daily work?
- How do we use our premises and money in serving the community?

Evangelism

The Church exists to make more followers of Jesus Christ.

- Do we have a clear message that is meaningful to those outside the Church?
- What attracts people to the Christian faith?
- In what ways are we as a church reaching out in evangelism to those outside the Church?

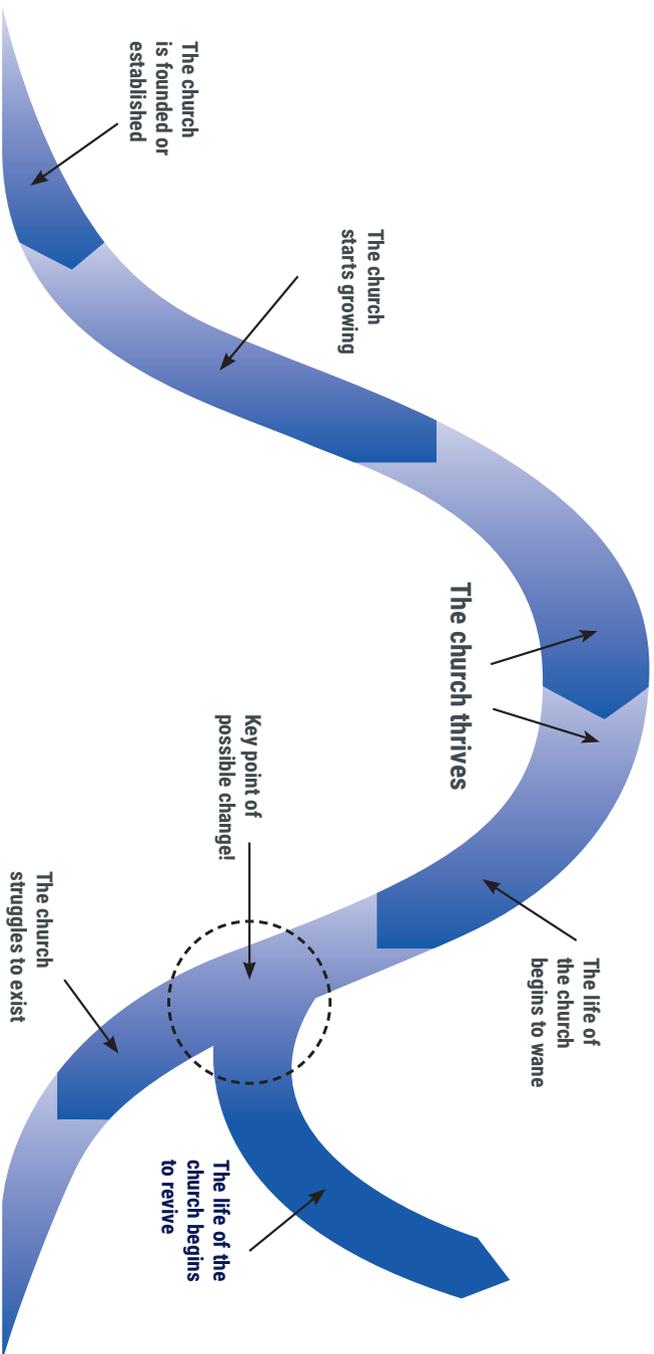
Life cycle of a church

Churches have life cycles, just as people do. Often a time of growth occurs after a church is founded or established; at times churches will thrive. But there will also be times when the life of the church begins to wane. Churches can reach a point at which they struggle to exist; they may even close. At such times, church communities can explore ways to revive themselves, and green shoots can appear again.

Draw the diagram of the life cycle of a church from **Card 22b** on a large piece of paper, and ask people if they can think of times in the life of the church that seem to match the various phases.

- How much of the church's life have people seen?
- How much of the church's story do people know?
- Where do they feel the church is now on the life cycle diagram? Take some time to discuss this.
- What opportunities and challenges does that present?

Life cycle of a church



What is your church's story?

Ask everyone present to form a line across the room, with the person who has been part of the church for longest at one end, and the newest at the other. It will be necessary to talk to each other to get the order right. If people are less mobile, do this around a table, with symbols representing each person placed on a line drawn on a flip chart. Ask people to talk about their earliest memories of the church, and the changes they've seen in the time they've been there. These could be recorded on a separate flip chart sheet.

The aim of this exercise is to show that everyone has a story about the church and that change is nothing new. All these memories make up the wider story of the church – they are part of it. This is living heritage. These stories also illustrate how much or how little the church building is part of the story. How much do people know about this history of their church? Even modern church buildings often have a story that pre-dates the current building.

- How does the story of your church overlap with the story of the local area?
- How has your church shaped the local community?

What is your church's story? (cont'd)

The story of your church's activity in the local community is an important part of its heritage. How could you tell this story?

Good starting questions can be:

- When was it built? Are there any foundation or date stones? Are there names?
- Are there any plaques, pictures or windows in memory of individuals?
- Do you know what records the church has and where they are?
- Are there any photos, old booklets, papers and so on about the church's story that members have in their homes?

Questions for more detailed research could include:

- Were there other churches nearby that merged with this one?
- Was there another building on the site before this one, or did it replace one nearby?
- Why was it built there? What was the mission need then? What did the church do?
- Was there a particular person or family associated with its story? A famous member?
- Was there a dominant employer or industry in the area? Was this where church members worked?
- Did the employers worship here too? Were they benefactors?

The reason for asking these questions is to start unearthing stories shared with the wider community. This could unlock an opportunity for engagement with local people who might not otherwise have any connection with your church. Could a research project with a school or local/family history society be another way to reach new people?

Getting our compass bearings

Step 1. Starting the conversation

With everyone sitting in a large circle, ask each person:

- Tell me a bit about your church.
- What are the best bits?
- What gives you a sense of personal satisfaction?
- Are there things you would wish to change?

Step 2. Treasure, Trouble, Potential, Puzzle

Move the chairs to the edges of the room to allow the group plenty of space to move about. Place four people at four 'compass points' in the room and give each one a sheet of paper and some pens to make an improvised sign for one of the following (each person is allocated a different word):

- Treasure
- Trouble
- Potential
- Puzzle

Note: Signs could also be made in advance.

Getting our compass bearings (cont'd)

Step 3. Moving around the compass

Choose one of the subjects raised during **Step 1** and ask the person who raised it where on the compass they would place that issue. Is it a treasure, trouble, potential or puzzle? Encourage them to move towards the compass point that they feel fits best, and explain why they chose it. Then ask the others in the group to move the individual representing that particular issue around the 'compass', encouraging a debate about why they think they might be best placed elsewhere. Make a big fuss of deliberately moving the person in the directions suggested. When a final compass point is chosen, repeat this exercise with another person and subject.

Note: It is not where people eventually end up that matters! The important thing is that, in the discussion, the strengths and the value of the subject are highlighted, and new approaches are generated. Negative positions are counteracted by positive arguments.

An alternative approach: If working in a limited space, or with people who are less mobile, this could be a table-top activity. Use a cuddly toy, or similar item, pick a subject and then take turns to move the item towards an appropriate compass point, marked on the table, explaining your reasons as you do so.

Wants and wishes

This quadrilateral is a useful opener to help a group begin to think about their church. It encourages people to focus on what they really want and don't want, without judgement.

- On large sheets of paper, draw copies of the quadrilateral on **Card 25b** – enough for one between two.
- Give people, working in pairs, five minutes to write as many items as they can think of in each quadrant.
- Then ask each pair to share one item with the larger group, one quadrant at a time.

Everybody, whatever their age, level of involvement or attendance, should be included.

The answers can be written up anonymously so everyone can see the whole group's thoughts.

This exercise can be used for whole-church consultations, church council meetings or action teams.

Wants and wishes grid

<p>What we have that we want to keep</p>	<p>What we don't have that we wish we had</p>
<p>What we have that we don't want</p>	<p>What we don't have and don't want</p>

Reflecting on the pandemic

Our churches and communities have been impacted profoundly by the pandemic, and the poorest are likely to feel the effects for years to come. We will be listening for, speaking of, and living out good news in a profoundly changed world.

Though we would never have chosen the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, by taking the opportunity to reflect on our experiences, we may gain new insights into our core identity and purpose as the Church. Use the questions below to help you reflect on what God has shown you through this time of tremendous upheaval, and to help you shape a fresh commitment to God's mission.

- What did you learn during the pandemic that excites you about evangelism and building relationships with new people?
- What did you not grieve for, or miss, as a church during lockdown? What might you decide not to pick up again?
- In your personal experience of the pandemic, how have you perceived God's presence and hiddenness? How might you speak differently now about the good news of the kingdom of God?
- How did you express your discipleship during the periods of lockdown, when in-person gathered worship was not possible?
- What did you learn about what it means to follow Jesus?

Property

As part of your mission planning process, you will need to consider any buildings you have.

The Connexional Property Team has produced this set of questions to help Methodist churches think about whether to vacate their building and/or move to a new premises:

- How does this church property shape and give expression to the circuit/district mission plan?
- What alternative uses might be made of the property/site as an expression of Methodist mission and ministry?
- Is the site of strategic importance within the locality?
- What other Christian presence remains in the locality, particularly in rural areas?
- Is this the only community space in the locality?
- What are the alternative uses with the site vacated, taking into account, amongst other things, the local authority strategic plan – could it be redeveloped to generate income for mission elsewhere?
- What ecumenical/other partnership opportunities exist for using the property?
- Are alternative sites available which better enable mission?
- Is there no longer potential for Methodist mission from this property?

More detailed guidance for considering the use of property in mission can be found at www.methodist.org.uk/missionplanning

A new heaven and a new earth

Contemplate Revelation 21 and encourage people to write their own version for your village or town:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new **[our village/town]**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
_____ **will be no more;**
_____ **and** _____ **and** _____ **will be no more,**
for the first things have passed away.”*

(Adapted from Revelation 21:1-4, NRSV)

A new heaven and a new earth (cont'd)

Have people imagine what your village or town might be like in God's promised future.

In Revelation, John declares that death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more. What would you like to see no more of in your area? No more poverty? No more isolation? No more people living in shame, not knowing the love of God?

As well as imagining what would *not* be there, what positive things would you love to see? Neighbours loving one another and looking after each other's needs? Everyone knowing the love of Jesus and living life in all its fullness? What specifically might that look like where you are?

Building a new story for your church

Preparation and structure

Note: This exercise requires the use of **Cards 28** and **29**.

The aim of the exercise is to fill in the four sheets of paper represented on **Card 28b**. Write each of the headings on **Card 28b** on large sheets of paper and attach these to a wall or a board so that the whole group can see them. Mark them as a, b, c and d as on **Card 28b**.

In order to complete this exercise, people will be asked:

- to work in pairs initially
- to join with another pair to work in fours
- to get together as a whole group to arrive at a conclusion.

The essential part of this exercise is to capture the ideas and insights that come out of the discussions (in pairs, fours and the whole group). While working in pairs and fours, write down everything that comes out of the discussions. These notes will be needed to fill in the details on each of the four sheets when the full group comes together.

Building a new story for your church (cont'd)

<p>(a) The first chapter of our story is about all that we are doing well:</p>	<p>(b) From all our dreams, the next chapter of our church will be about:</p>
<p>(c) To help us write this story, we have these people, with these gifts and talents, and these resources:</p>	<p>(d) To complete this story we will need to let go of these things which we have, or are doing at present:</p>

The new story

In pairs, explore together the ways in which you are doing well as a church. You might find the following questions helpful (although there are likely to be other points to consider also):

- What do people in your church do really well together or individually?
- What are the positives about your buildings?
- What do you contribute to the church, personally, that you particularly enjoy?
- What do you think other people would say is your most valuable contribution? (Partners could answer this last question for each other.)

The pairs should then join in groups of four. Ask members of each pair to report the highlights of what their partners said. Then take time to dream how you might build on the strengths you have identified.

The following questions may be helpful:

- What are the opportunities that come from your gifts and talents?
- How might you build on the strengths of what is already happening in the church?
- Could you bring in other people who might have something to contribute?
- Are there other ways of achieving what may need to be done?
- Who might benefit from changes that could be made?

Remember to write down everything that has been said, and underline anything that might be particularly achievable.

The new story (cont'd)

Still working in fours, consider the things you might need to let go of in your church.

- What are the best bits, which you really want to keep hold of?
- Which things are getting difficult to hold on to, or to do well?
- Are there any other things that you are unsure about in the life of your church?

Now, as a whole group, share the significant points from the conversations you have had. Write these points down on the chart sheet (a).

- What are the good things about your church at present?
- What is going well?
- What do you need to keep?

After you have entered all things on sheet (a), go to sheet (b) and write down your image of the future that you envision for your church.

Take a moment to celebrate the potential you see for your church, and perhaps offer it to God in prayer.

Then consider who and what you need to make these dreams a reality by completing the sheets (c) and (d).

Eggs in baskets

Give people the following imaginary scenario:

Wesley Methodist is a small rural chapel with 15 members and about 25 people who attend worship at least once a month. It is situated in a village popular with retired people. It is an affluent village with high property prices, but there are pockets of poverty, which often go unseen. Transport links are unreliable.

The following dreams have been suggested by members of the church as part of the mission planning process:

- Satellite food bank
- Messy Church
- Debt advice centre
- Daytime coffee club for older people
- Mental health support group
- Alpha course.

Now imagine that Wesley has 12 eggs, representing the total time, energy and money available for mission. Each of the baskets over the page represents one of these dreams.

Where would you put the eggs?

Eggs in baskets (cont'd)



Satellite food bank



Messy Church



Debt advice centre



**Daytime coffee club
for older people**



Mental health support group



Alpha course



Eggs in baskets (cont'd)

Ask people to allocate their eggs and explain their choices. During the discussion, ask the following questions:

- Does each basket need an egg? How many 'baskets' can one relatively small church sustain?
- What if, in order to do an activity really well, you needed to put six eggs in the basket? Where would you put the eggs?
- What if the church only had six eggs? Where would you put them?
- Consider what you know about the village. Which 'baskets' represent activities that would be particularly needed?

Affirm that these are all valuable activities, but that to do every activity justice is beyond the resources of one small church. Draw out the point that putting more eggs in fewer baskets will allow the church to be more effective in mission.

Now that you have considered the importance of choosing well, decide as a church how many 'baskets' you can sustain. You may feel that you can only do justice to one mission priority – that's fine, as long as you have discerned and agreed this together as a church.

Priority traffic lights

The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans, suggests the following activity for identifying church priorities.

Write up all the possible priorities that have been discerned during the mission planning process so far, and stick them up on large sheets of paper around the walls. Then give everybody three green sticky notes, three amber (ie yellow) and three red (or pink will do).

Green signifies 'I think this is God's priority'

Amber signifies 'I'm not sure this is a priority'

Red signifies 'I don't think this is a priority'

Ask people to go around and place their sticky notes against priorities. This enables everyone to take part in the discernment, without the loudest voices, or the voice of the minister, being privileged. It also means everyone can see at a glance where the group discernment is leaning.

From Mark Ireland and Mike Chew, *How to do Mission Action Planning: Prayer, process and practice* (London: SPCK, 2016), p. 114-115.

Best and worst case futures

This exercise will help you explore, in a group, your current situation as a church and the best and worst case scenarios for your future. It will also ask you to think about the steps that would need to be taken to get to either the best or worst future position.

Note: A diagram illustrating the exercise is shown on **Card 32b**.

You will need: Lots of paper hexagons, lots of floor or table space, bold marker pens and sticky notes.

Step 1. The current situation

Write the word 'NOW' in large letters in the centre of one of the hexagons. Place this on the floor or table and ask the group to think of six short statements that describe your church's current situation. These six statements need to be agreed by the whole group before being written in hexagons and then placed around the original NOW hexagon.

Step 2. Worst-case scenario

Take another hexagon and write 'WORST' in its centre. Place this at a distance from the NOW hexagon. Then ask the group to come up with another six short statements – this time describing the worst-case future scenario for your church. Now ask the group to build a single line of hexagons from the NOW cluster to the WORST cluster. Each hexagon in this line should describe a step in a fictional story of the road to WORST.

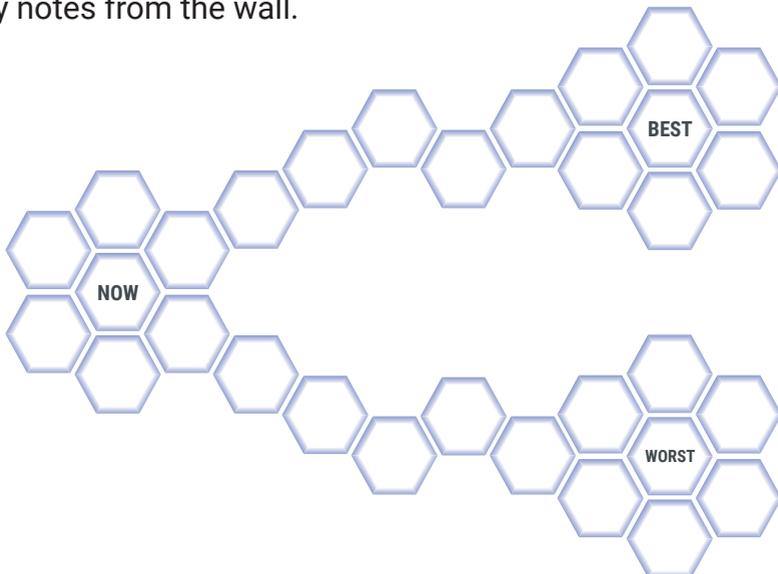
Best and worst case futures (cont'd)

Step 3. Best-case scenario

Finally, write 'BEST' in another hexagon and again place this at a distance from the NOW hexagon. The group creates six more hexagons, describing their ideals for the future of the church, and then places these around BEST. As before, the group then creates a single line of hexagons from NOW to BEST, describing the step-by-step fictional journey the church could take to get to that point.

Step 4. What could stop us?

Initially working in pairs, brainstorm all the obstacles and issues that might stop the church from reaching the best-case scenario. Write each obstacle on a sticky note, then place these on a wall where everyone can see them. Group similar issues together and remove duplicates. Then, as a larger group, discuss how these obstacles could be overcome. As you find solutions, remove the sticky notes from the wall.



Great expectations

This activity is great for revealing unrealistic expectations. You could use it at a Church Council meeting to start a conversation about fruitfulness, and to identify realistic ways in which a mission project's effectiveness might be judged.

Start by giving everyone the following scenario:

A church has discerned that under-11s and their families should be a key priority in their mission plan, and they have decided to start running Messy Church. A lot of time and effort has already been put into the project, and everyone has great expectations for it.

Church Council – The church will be able to pay its assessment easily once the parents start attending and giving to the church.

Children – They will finally get fun social events and their own space.

Messy Church leaders – They will be given freedom to develop Messy Church in whatever way works.

Church parents – This will ensure their children grow in faith and won't start refusing to attend church when they become teenagers.

Parents from the wider community – This will give them a break from their kids for an hour a week.

Church members – There will be children at the 9.30am service on Sunday, and they will integrate well into their existing worship.

Great expectations (cont'd)

Discuss the various ways in which all these expectations are probably unrealistic.

For example

Church Council – The church will be able to pay its assessment easily once the parents start attending and giving to the church.

This is very unlikely to happen quickly, if at all. Becoming a committed member of the church and contributing to the offering represents a much higher level of affiliation and commitment than is represented by participation in Messy Church. Messy Church offers a worship experience for people who are just starting to explore faith, and while an offering could be taken, significant levels of financial giving probably should not be expected. Having said that, Messy Church families might well be keen to give money occasionally to a social justice project whose aims they believe in, such as a food bank or debt advice centre.

Now have participants rewrite each expectation. Think about what fruit each group of people might realistically hope for and look for from a Messy Church.

For example

Church Council – The church will greatly increase the numbers of people in the wider community with whom it has warm contact.

Capturing your mission planning conversations

You may find it helpful to capture your mission planning conversations as you go, using a simple form like this. You could put up a large piece of flipchart paper on the wall of your church hall for each section, and record what you are discerning as you go. This is a simple way of ensuring everyone knows how your mission planning conversation is unfolding.

Community audit

This is what we are hearing from our community

Church review

This is what our church is good at

Capturing your mission planning conversations (cont'd)

Our dreams

This is what we would love to see happen

Our priorities

These are the dreams we believe God would have us focus on in the next 12-18 months

Capturing your mission planning conversations (cont'd)

Our church's strengths

This is what our church has to offer

Our church's dreams

This is what our church would love to see happen

Capturing your mission planning conversations (cont'd)

Priorities

These are the dreams we will be focusing on in the next 2-3 years

Resources

This is what our church needs from us to make the dreams happen

Sample mission plan

Priority	Action	Person	Timescale	Fruit
Develop faith-sharing opportunities via social media	Offer weekly midday prayer via Facebook Live	Linda, Pedro and Jon	Over the next three months	People who are new to the Christian faith: like, share and comment; grow in understanding and commitment to Jesus; make a first-time faith commitment.
	Start a private Facebook group for faith exploration	L, P and J plus pastoral team	By November 20__	
	Boost seasonal posts six times a year	Jakob and Alex	During 20__	

Blank mission plan form

A digital version of this form can be downloaded from www.methodist.org.uk/missionplanning

Priority						
Action						
Person						
Timescale						
Fruit						

Further resources

How to do Mission Action Planning: Prayer, process and practice

by Mark Ireland and Mike Chew, revised and expanded edition
(London: SPCK, 2016)

Voice Activated

www.methodist.org.uk/voiceactivated

Written as a way of capturing the learning of the Youth Participation Strategy, but useful for every context. Section 4 in particular contains lots of creative facilitation techniques.

Positive Working Together

www.methodist.org.uk/positiveworkingtogether

In the 'ministers and office holders' section of the website, these pages contain many resources to help transform conflict and promote good conversations.

Creating Great Conversations

This set of cards, which uses an appreciative inquiry approach, is a useful tool for enhancing group communication. They are available to purchase from www.appreciatingpeople.co.uk

What's your church's future story?

Reflect on your church's strengths and discern its place in God's plan to live out the gospel within your own community in today's changing times.

Designed to help churches explore their future, using an eight-step mission planning process, this set of cards offers practical and enjoyable ways to guide you and resource you throughout the process.



The **Methodist** Church

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