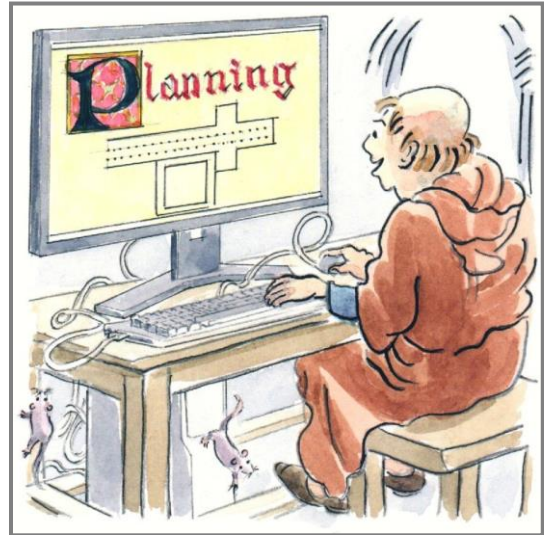


# Mapping your church

## *Practical planning tools*

**A35** Articles series: Planning



*This article was first published on the website in April 2015 and last updated in March 2021. It is copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.*

**This article describes a range of ways to help you understand your church's life and membership so that you can plan wisely for the future.**

The first tool, the Five Themes Map, is based on the author's Church Health Review (CHR) and provides a mapping of church life to help gain an idea of the whole without being caught up in the detail of each part. CHR, as a major tool to assess church health, is described in detail elsewhere on this website.<sup>#</sup> But here just the basic structure behind the review is used in a simpler way to map the whole of church life under five 'themes' with nine 'areas' for each theme.

This is followed by a range of practical and varied applications including Mission Action Plans, committee structures and even prayer topics.

The tool offers a straightforward way to understand church life and should prove of value to Ministers, leadership teams, administrative/operations staff and Trustees.

Four other simpler means of mapping elements of your church and its membership are then described. Each of these can be used on its own and some readers will no doubt prefer to try one of them out, but they may work better when applied as follow-ons for church leadership teams considering the Five Themes Map.

The four consist of:

- the idea of a time line to understand the present and plan for the future in the light of the recent past;
- physical maps to understand the location of your congregation at work/school and at home;
- the use of statistical diagrams to illustrate changes;
- the effective use of a church database to provide vital human resource information.

<sup>#</sup>The Church Health Review (CHR) is a major tool for assessing the health of every area of a church's life and is described in papers HC4 and HC5 on the Health-checks page of the Resources section of the website.

# The Five Themes Map

This takes the basic structure of the Church Health Review but uses it in a simpler way to define five 'themes' in church life and to give each theme nine different 'areas' to check. This means that 45 aspects of church life are listed in a logical framework to provide a checklist to help understand the whole.

It is vital to grasp that these areas are not activities as such. They are more like lenses through which church life can be viewed. The idea behind this planning tool is to avoid the 'activity' approach that churches tend to adopt, because Scripture teaches that churches are, first and foremost, communities of Christians, not organisations with an activity programme.

Three of the five themes are expressed in terms of relationships and all are viewed as developments which are in movement.

The five chosen here include the three basic ideas, common in much writing on this theme within the UK, of meeting God, meeting each other and meeting others. But here they are seen in terms of 'growth in relationship' over all church life, rather than individual activities. The tool then adds two other themes: Leadership and Support, both means of enabling ministry and mission. So:

## The five themes

- G Godward – growing our relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- U Usward – growing our relationships within the body of Christ
- O Outward – growing our relationships with the world in which we live
- L Leadership – at every level within the church
- S Support – the often overlooked practical means of enabling ministry

Each of these five is then given nine areas: in each case the first four are linked together, the second four are also linked with each other, and the final one links with the final area in each of the other four themes.

This provides 45 (5x9) aspects of church life which can be used as a checklist. The aim is to cover all church life within these 45 – but of course this is a simplification and churches will need to adapt the tool to fit them. A multi-parish or multi-site church will need to apply them

slightly differently from a single church. A small rural congregation will be different from a city centre mega-church.

Here now (over the page) is a listing of these five themes and, for each of them, the nine areas with a brief explanation of each.

### Planning ahead as a spiritual exercise

Is it right for churches to plan at all?

Planning in a church will be a different kind of exercise from that in a secular business for the simple reason that churches are to seek God's way forward and his wisdom and then fit into that.

So what is described in this paper becomes a spiritual exercise. This is assumed throughout what is written here, rather than feeling any need to continually remind you that each step should be covered in prayer and seen in the context of seeking God's guidance.

To take no thought for such planning is to stop our ears to messages that God may well have for us. We are to use our God-given minds, we are to read the signs that are all around us, we are to take notice of relevant statistics, and we are to have a Christ-centred view of what a church should be.

I define an effective church as one that

- puts Christ first;
- focuses on its purpose;
- makes wise choices; and
- does things well.

These exercises are designed to open you up to information that you may already have but which at present may not be available in a form that is helpful for effective decision-making.

## **G: The Godward theme**

This theme covers the growth in people's relationship with the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The idea is of progress in movement towards God. The first four areas cover this movement in a corporate setting, the next four more in personal discipleship, and the last one takes the idea of growth in this relationship.

### G1- 4 GATHERING

#### **G1 Form and liturgy** *Meeting with God*

Corporate times of meeting with God: how these are devised and led in such a way to enable everyone to participate within a range of forms.

#### **G2 Music and worship** *Praising God*

The styles of music that are used to inspire and lead people to a real engagement with God in awe and wonder, rather than to pander to personal tastes,

#### **G3 Scripture and teaching** *Listening to God*

The place and authority of Scripture in the life of the church, and the way in which it is taught to change lives and prove applicable to daily living.

#### **G4 Children and teens** *Young people with God*

Opportunities for younger members of the church to meet God through Jesus in a relevant way, whether in age-groups or in all-age events.

### G5-8 DISCIPLESHIP

#### **G5 Enthusiasm** *The reality of faith*

The level of passion people have for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the way they live this out in who they are and the discipline of how they live.

#### **G6 Prayer and Bible** *The source of faith*

The centrality of both prayer and the study of the Scriptures in the lives of church members.

#### **G7 Lifestyle** *The outworking of faith*

The impact of their faith on the lives of church members living in a way that stands out from the crowd at work, at home and in their networks.

#### **G8 Stewardship** *The challenge of faith*

People's generosity for God's worldwide work shown through the use of time, gifts/experience and wealth for the benefit of others.

### G9 DEVELOPMENT

#### **G9 Spiritual growth** *Evidence of movement*

People's growth towards spiritual maturity over time.

## **U: The Uward theme**

This theme covers the growth in relationship with each other as Christians. The first four areas cover this movement in the reality of love for each other, the next four in the means used to enable that to happen, and the last one the idea of growth in this relationship. The word 'Uward' has been coined, as 'Inward' does not give quite the right impression of the intention here.

### U1-4 BELONGING

#### **U1 Community** *The life of the family*

The idea of 'belonging to a local group of Jesus' disciples' instead of 'going to church' and how this depth of love for each other within a congregation is shown to newcomers, for example.

#### **U2 Support** *Sharing within the family*

The levels of support for each other so that practical needs are being met and no one can drift away without that being noticed.

#### **U3 Care** *Special needs within the family*

The degree to which the church shows

costly love to those in special need, both within the membership and those the church is seeking to serve.

#### U4 **Integration** *Welcome into the family*

The way in which newcomers become part of the Christian community from their first welcome on through a process of growing into a full part of the membership.

### U5-8 BONDING

#### U5 **Small groups** *Growing together*

The effectiveness of the small group structure within the church, its coverage of the congregation and the encouragement and support people find from it.

#### U6 **Young people** *Growing up together*

The health of relational groups for each age band from crèche to senior teens, with young people valued as full, contributing disciples and members of the church.

#### U7 **Involvement** *Working together*

The idea of the church as an army of workers not passive observers, with people trained in their gifting to serve God in both church and world.

#### U8 **Communication** *Staying together*

Effective communication channels to link leaders and members, and groups within the church, to create a sense of purpose and unity.

### U9 DEVELOPMENT

#### U9 **Relational growth** *Evidence of movement*

People's growth in love towards each other over time.

## O: The Outward theme

This theme covers the growth in relationship with the world in which church members live. The idea is of progress in movement towards an openness with others, rather than a closed community with little concern for everything beyond their own boundaries. The first four areas cover the church's mission thinking, the next four the idea of mission engagement, and the last one the idea of growth in this relationship.

### 01-4 OPENNESS

#### 01 **Gospel outlook** *Thinking on the outside*

The idea of the church being gospel-centred and outward-focused as the very reason for its existence, seeking to engage with people on their terms rather than through a church-centred agenda.

#### 02 **Local presence** *Living on the outside*

The church's presence within the local community, seen as a place of healing, siding with the powerless,

#### 03 **Ways in** *Welcoming all from outside*

The range of ways in to belonging and believing, catering for those for whom standard church services would be intimidating, not putting up unnecessary barriers.

#### 04 **Wider concern** *Linking to the outside*

The church taking an active and informed interest in the wider world, secular and ecclesiastical, locally, nationally and internationally.

### 05-8 OUTREACH

#### 05 **Network witness** *Being good news*

The encouragement given to all church members to be active Christians 24/7, supporting them in daily lives at work, school, home, in their networks.

06 **Practical service**  
*Living out good news*

The church offering a healing ministry to a hurting world through acts of compassion and service to the local community and to the poor everywhere.

07 **Direct evangelism**  
*Sharing good news*

The church's involvement in activity designed to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ through all available networks.

08 **Global mission**  
*Supporting others in good news*

The enthusiastic support for mission elsewhere in the UK and globally through personal support, prayer and giving to all engaged in outreach and development.

09 DEVELOPMENT

09 **Numerical growth**  
*Evidence of movement*

Growth in numbers over time.

**L: The Leadership theme**

This theme covers the growth in every aspect of leadership within the church. The idea is of the ability to help the church develop in an appropriate way. The first four areas cover the spiritual quality of the church's leaders, the next four the performance of the leadership, and the last one the idea of growth in wisdom.

L1-4 PRIORITY

L1 **Minister**  
*The leader for the leaders*

The idea of the Minister(s) being released from non-essential work to focus on their real role and priorities, free from unacceptable levels of pressure.

L2 **Character**  
*Standards required for leaders*

The need to appoint leaders throughout

the church based on Christian character so that they are respected as people of God, worthy role models of teamwork, godly behaviour, family life and wise judgement.

L3 **Vision**  
*The driving force for leaders*

The place of vision for what God might do through everyone, with a willingness to follow his Spirit even though he may take people out of their comfort zones.

L4 **Christ as Lord**  
*The spiritual foundation for leaders*

Leadership passion throughout the church for Christ to be Lord so that decision-making seeks to follow God's will rather than to be determined by human logic or preference.

L5-8 ACTION

L5 **Planning**  
*Preparing and monitoring the journey*

The preparation, outworking and monitoring of a suitable planning process with the big picture clearly distinguished from the daily detail.

L6 **Decision-making**  
*Choosing the route for the journey*

The efficiency of the decision-making process and its effectiveness in what it achieves (engaging with real issues instead of trivia).

L7 **Difficulties**  
*Managing hardships on the journey*

The ability of the leadership to handle external attack and internal difficulties with wisdom and discernment, managing change well, taking advice when appropriate.

L8 **Outcomes**  
*Reaching the end of the journey*

How well balanced the church is in relation to the Godward, Usward and Outward themes, with a sense of working well towards the vision, whatever the cost.

## L9 DEVELOPMENT

### L9 **Attitudinal growth** *Evidence of movement*

People's growth in thinking and acceptance of wise changes introduced.

## S: The Support theme

This theme covers the organisation of the church to achieve its purpose, considering structures and systems to enable everything to function smoothly. The first four areas cover the church's operational systems, the next four the church's human and physical assets, and the last one the idea of growth in quality of life and service.

Smaller churches will need to decide how to apply terms such as 'church office' and 'staff' in an appropriate way.

## S1-4 ADMINISTRATION

### S1 **Office** *The hub of the church's operation*

The effectiveness of the office (or the equivalent) for administration, reception and communication, separate from pastoral ministry but seen for its spiritual value.

### S2 **Structures** *The shape of the church's operation*

The church's structures and staffing for present size and future development, and the church's programme given the amount of resource available.

### S3 **Co-ordination** *Collaboration within the church's operation*

The co-ordination between different areas of the church to avoid clashes of interest or loss of opportunity.

### S4 **Good practice** *Professionalism within the church's operation*

Adherence to all necessary legislation and best practice in the way the church deals with people and handles its ministry.

## S5-8 RESOURCES

### S5 **Staff** *People to enable ministry*

The staff team (however defined) and, if paid, the way they are employed and managed, and how they work alongside all other church workers.

### S6 **Plant** *Buildings to enable ministry*

The suitability of the church building, any halls, houses or hired buildings and the equipment whether owned or hired.

### S7 **Finance** *Money to enable ministry*

Finances seen as a key area of spiritual ministry to serve rather than dictate vision, and the way they are managed.

### S8 **Records** *Information to enable ministry*

The maintenance of records, databases, files, etc. to enable effective pastoring, mobilisation, communication and administration.

## S9 DEVELOPMENT

### S9 **Professional growth** *Evidence of movement*

The church's growth in terms of quality of life and service over time.

## Applications for the Five Themes Map

The following consists of a deliberately varied range of ideas for how this tool can be used.

### Strategic planning

The five themes and their nine areas offer a framework for any church seeking to plan ahead, including those preparing Mission Action Plans (MAPs), a specific means of planning.

It may be that the overall plan or MAP can be produced under the five thematic headings to ensure that there is a balance and that there is a holistic approach rather than plans based on activities. The areas in the mapping tool involve

thinking as much as action, but the action is seen across a wide range of church life rather than just in single activities. A strategic plan is unlikely to take each area, but the process of devising the plan will be helped by working through them all as a checklist and selecting priorities.

The themes and areas offer a logical checklist and a means of helping balance out any plans so that all five themes are represented. For example it is not uncommon for a church to plan for new initiatives in any of the first three themes without considering what resources of both leadership and support will be required to undertake these. Or a church may focus on one dimension at the expense of the others.

See also Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, on this website.

## Committee structure

Churches tend to have one leadership body (such as PCC, Eldership, Kirk Session) and then a range of committees (although the C word is best avoided in practice).

Such groups are often formed around activities, such as a Worship Group tasked with oversight of Sunday services. But a different approach would be to use the five themes instead. So instead of having a group responsible for Sunday services, you have one group responsible for the Godward theme in church life as it impacts every church activity, perhaps breaking into two sub-groups, one for the Gathering and one for the Discipleship aspects of the Godward theme. Every part of church life has a Godward aspect to it so this is a very different approach.

So under a Council or Trustees you might have:

- Godward Group
- Usward Group
- Outward Group
- Leadership Group
- Support Group.

Some of these might require specialist sub-groups (a Finance Group and a Buildings Group both under Support, for example). It would work out differently for each church, but the foundation would be to take the five themes, all of which relate more widely than just to specific activities.

See also Training Notes TN58, *Beware committees*, on this website.

## Annual reports

Many churches produce lengthy reports for their Annual Meeting where each activity is asked to prepare a few paragraphs. But this can make for a turgid document where the detail drowns out any sense of overall purpose and direction.

A different approach would be to divide the report (under an overall editor) into the five themes outlined above and address church life under these headings instead. Any activity report would then be fitted into this overall structure where its place could be seen as to how it was building up the body of Christ.

An even better approach would be to list future direction for each of these themes rather than past activity.

See also Article A20, *Annual meetings can be different*, on this website.

## Church profiles

The mapping idea explained in this article offers a helpful structure for anyone preparing a church profile document, perhaps for a new Minister or any new member of staff. By addressing each of the five themes, and perhaps using various groupings of the nine areas, a more coherent idea of church life can be communicated rather than a bland listing of activities.

See also Training Notes TN114, *How to prepare a church profile*, on this website.

## Sermon themes and small group programmes

The five themes can be used to test how well a teaching syllabus or sermon programme is covering the ground over a reasonable period of time. A church that is basing a programme on books of the Bible may find that this is giving more attention to certain themes than to others: for example, is there teaching on areas of practical support or on how the church needs to have an outward perspective so that it does not just become an introverted community?

Each set of nine areas can then be checked out in a similar way. So is teaching on the Outward theme covering all the different aspects listed there, such as local presence, interest in international issues, practical service, direct evangelism, global mission?

## Prayer themes and meeting agendas

You can use the five themes and each set of areas as a way of structuring how you pray for your church; in service intercessions, in mid-week prayer gatherings or in printed prayer diaries. So a monthly prayer diary might focus on one of the themes each month. Or you might check out leadership agendas to ensure no theme is constantly being omitted.

# Four supplementary mapping tools

The Five Themes Map is a basic listing of 45 areas but, alongside this, there needs to be other means of using raw data to provide useful information for planning ahead. These are only described now because they need to be seen within the context of the Five Themes Map. Too often ideas such as those that follow are undertaken in isolation and their impact then fails to be fully realised. Here are four ideas.

## Time lines

The idea here is to explain how the past of your church impacts the present culture and to see what changes have occurred. The issue is to take a longer-term view of your church than you normally manage on an annual cycle of events.

A time line consists of a roll of plain wall-paper laid out on a floor or, better, on a long line of folding tables. An axis is marked out showing years along the lower edge of the paper. The range taken needs to be determined, but a typical choice would be 20 years ago to today, then possibly extended five or ten years into the future if you want to look ahead.

You then take a range of coloured marker pens and write in, by the correct year, key developments in the life of the church. One colour might be used for local events of note plus any national or even international events that had an impact. Local events might include such matters as:

- the building of the town's by-pass;
- the closing of the local community centre;
- the change in head for a local school;
- the death of a key local resident;
- the major fire at the local shops.

Another colour is used for changes to do with specific people in the life of the church. Events of note here might include:

- the arrival and departure of each Minister;
- ... and of other members of staff;
- the death of a long-standing member;
- movements of particular groups of people.

A third colour can then be used for changes in the life of the church, such as:

- the closing of the evening service;
- the opening of the new hall extension;
- the change to a new 'Introducing Christianity' course;
- the change to a new form of leadership team;
- the switch to screen-based songs from books.

This can be usefully organised as a group exercise, and it is often the older members who

come in to their own here because they know the history of the church and will be able to assess the correct dates from the past. It is also useful to keep the time line out so people can add to it over a week or two as they remember other events.

The point is that a line like this shows up the bigger picture which otherwise gets lost in the daily detail. It often shows trends over time, and explains why certain things happened when they did. It is common to find a number of key changes one to three years after a new Minister arrives, for example!

Here are the kind of questions leaders then need to ask.

- 1 What lessons do we learn about God's engagement with us over a 10-20 year time-span? Are there signs that we have failed to notice, or trends that we need to take corrective action over?
- 2 Are there any points in the Five Themes Map that the time line goes some way towards explaining?
- 3 What might this teach us about our future: direction, use of resources, etc?
- 4 Putting the whole picture together, what might need to be our priorities over the next five or so years?

## Geographical maps

There are a number of variations possible but the basic concept is to show each church member (and the concept of membership may in some churches need to be defined carefully if it is not already clear) with their location. This is done by displaying a large-scale map of the local area and locating each member by means of a pin – or it can all be prepared digitally for projection. Here are some possibilities.

- 1 Location by where people live. Here the pin is placed on the location of the house or flat. It does not have to have any identification but it can be helpful to have numbered pins with a key so that each



person can be identified. This may require one map of the locality and a smaller-scale map of a wider area for those who live at some distance from the church. Include children, or have larger 'family' pins. If you want to add more detailed coding, use different coloured pins.

- 2 Location by where people are on a typical weekday morning, say. The point here is to identify where people work or at school/college without highlighting those who are not employed. So there may be pins on a range of employment centres, local schools and colleges, shops and homes. Some people are likely to travel distances to work so there may need to be a range of maps, including one of a nearby city if a number of members commute there. You can also include a map of the country for students away at uni.
- 3 Location of where small groups within the church meet, if based at the same location each time.
- 4 Global maps for mission partners and others whom the church supports.
- 5 In a multi-church benefice or multi-site church it may be helpful to use just one display but code pins by the congregation each person is most closely associated with.

It can be interesting to then look at the map that has been created, but it will only prove helpful as a tool if your leaders ask particular questions about what is shown. Here are some examples for a map of people's home bases (1 above), but there will be many more, and different, questions for the other examples.

- 1 What do we learn about the distribution of our membership, especially when linked to the areas where we are especially strong or weak? What actions might we need to consider in the light of this?
- 2 What do we learn about the distances people travel in to our church hub and our impact on the immediate surroundings of that? What actions might we need to consider in the light of this?
- 3 What might all this mean for the location of groups and activities we run or plan to run for church members and for the local community?
- 4 Are there ways in which these actual maps link up with the Five Themes Map areas?

## Membership statistics

A third form of visual mapping, much better known, is to show statistical information using simple graphs, pie-charts and bar diagrams. These can be used for the estimated age and gender profile of the congregation, for the size of church membership over time, for newcomers and leavers each year, for the length of time people have been members of the church, for attendances at different services, and so on. You do not need to restrict such tools to the Treasurer's financial report!

One simple means is to plot church attendance year by year and to note any points on the timeline that might affect this (such as the start of a new service). What is the trend? What does this tell you?

Provided you have the necessary data or can at least estimate it, plot the number of people joining the church each year (a) by transfer, (b) by birth, (c) from no recent church background against the number leaving each year (d) by transfer – leaving the area, (e) by transfer – locally, (f) by death, (g) to no known church connection.

On a church awayday you can undertake some living tabulations too. For example, ask everyone, without speaking, to stand in one long line along the wall of a hall or other suitable space, with the person who has been a member the longest at one end and the most recent joiners at the other. People find that an interesting visual representation, and it quickly shows up whether people have been joining your church regularly over recent years or not.

As a variation, you can do the same for the length of time people would say they have been Christians.

Questions to ask in the case of analyses such as these:

- 1 What does this tell us about our joiners and why they have become part of us?
- 2 What does this tell us about our leavers and why they have left us?
- 3 What is happening to our make-up as a congregation by size, age, gender, etc. and what action if any do we need to be taking in the light of what this analysis show us?
- 4 Is any growth we are experiencing caused by people joining from no church background or by transfers from other congregations?

## Church database

This may not sound like a mapping tool, but it is certainly related to everything else above.

One of the most useful tools available to church planners is the database – but this will depend on what information you hold for people (and the ways you use to discover this), and how up-to-date your information is.

It is sad that many churches fail to keep helpful information about their greatest earthly resource: their people. Could you easily discover the following information from the data you hold (these are just examples):

- which church members are likely to be at the gates of each your local schools on a typical weekday afternoon;

- which of your church members are a part of, or in contact with, local charities, social services, and other caring professions;
- who can be called upon at short notice for help with a counselling need, practical issues about the building or equipment, IT/web support, etc.;
- whom to approach about a vacancy in working with children or teens.

In a small church such information may be in people's heads, but in a larger church an effective church management system is a must.

But to keep the information current is no small task and there are of course issues of GDPR to consider too within your Data Protection Policy.

This article has described the author's Five Themes Map, a tool which seeks to chart every area of church life under a range of carefully grouped headings. This has a range of practical applications in addition to being a helpful planning aid.

Four supplementary means of describing and explaining church life have then been added. This article is work in progress and the writer welcomes feedback via email from churches.

If you then want to use the fuller *Church Health Review* to take a thorough look at your church's health, see this in the Health-checks index page of the Resources section of the website at HC4 and HC5.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A35. See also HC4 & HC5, *The Church Health Review*, in the Health-checks area of the Resources section on the website. Other items on the website have been listed within the text of this article.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services on any issue of church planning.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A35 under Planning.

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176 Email: [john@john-truscott.co.uk](mailto:john@john-truscott.co.uk) Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>