



Collecting data for mission

TN129 Training Notes series: Administration

These notes were first published on the website in December 2020 and last updated in December 2024. They are 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.

It is scary to discover just how much information the large tech companies hold about us. Amazon, Google and their counterparts are as much databanks as they are retail businesses or search providers. Every click of our mouse is recorded and analysed and, as a result, these huge corporations have power.

The point of these notes is most certainly not to recommend churches should follow this approach for selfish reasons, but to point out that we know little about our church members and our achievements. For example, are your church's decision-makers aware of:

- what methods of outreach have proved to be the most effective over the past few years with figures to prove it?
- who in your congregation(s) make effective use of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram?
- which congregation's age-profiles are showing shifts to older or younger people and at what rate?

The point is that without such basic data, our efforts in mission are likely to be less effective than they might be, our ability to serve people is restricted, and the need to take action to prevent losing members is not noticed.

This is not about turning everything in life into numbers or of being fixated on quantity rather than quality. It is about reading the signs and seeking means of measuring that quality. Basic information always needs to be interpreted with wisdom and care.

Many churches will collect a certain amount of data because their denomination requires them to make annual returns so that large-scale trends can be noted. Yet many of these churches fail to use such information for their *own* planning and decision-making.

These notes assume you have a data protection policy in place and seek to be GDPR compliant.

1 **Personal database**

You may well be using church management software such as ChurchSuite but the kind of information you need about your congregation, collected under GDPR, might include:

- names in family groupings;
- children's ages and groups;
- postal address;
- landline, mobile, email, social media;
- permissions to contact;
- membership and congregation(s);
- teams and rotas involvement;
- gifts, skills, interests, etc;
- small group involvement;
- financial giving information.

This kind of information allows you to:

- send mailings by email, text or post to different sectors of the congregation;
- let members contact each other;
- put urgent information round a prayer chain;
- register children in their Sunday groups and monitor attendance;
- remind people of forthcoming rota service and let them arrange swaps;
- invite people to a newcomers' event or allocate to small groups.

Church management software will also help you to arrange room bookings, enable your members to register for events, and produce statistical diagrams to help you understand membership growth and other factors.

Such data need to be continually updated and, too often in my experience, no one is responsible for ensuring that this is so and hence the usefulness of such information reduces.

People are a church's most important earthly asset. It is crucial that we know enough about our people to be able to serve and mobilise them effectively. In all this it is vital to keep the personal touch or people feel manipulated and uncared for.

2 **General databank**

But there is another type of information that we need for planning in a mission context. This is not so linked to personal detail but provides overall evidence of what is happening. Here are some of the obvious things that could be useful.

Note that this is a comprehensive list to select from. If you tried to go from zero to everything here you would be utterly swamped! It is provided to give ideas to enable you to select a small number of metrics which might prove helpful for your church's mission.

Membership

Some churches have a defined membership. In Anglican churches there is the 'Electoral Roll' although the 'Worshipping Community' estimate may be a more

meaningful figure because it is more likely to reflect the committed core of the church. You might find it helpful to know:

- total numbers and changes over time;
- length of time in membership;
- geographical distribution home/work (plotted on a map);
- numbers and reasons for joining (new members);
- numbers and reasons for leaving (ex-members);
- people's involvement in the local community outside church;
- people's involvement in church ministries.

Attendance

Attendance is not the same as membership and, in an age where people come to church more erratically than in the past, you need to consider both the committed membership and the average attendance on a Sunday, and hence the frequencies represented. For some churches, attendance may be higher than membership, but for many it will be lower. The following might be of use to you for all ages (but see also list for 'Membership' above):

- average attendance for each congregation;
- whether seeing themselves as a Christian, seeker, etc.;
- estimated age, ethnic and gender profiles (including children/teens);
- numbers for joiners, leavers, transfers, births, deaths;
- those with disabilities and the church's support for them;
- children's educational distribution by school or college;
- numbers of people known to have become disciples year by year;
- trends in each of the above.

Leadership and staffing

It can be instructive to plot issues such as the Minister's tenure, staffing growth or decline and information about leadership groups. Here are some possibilities:

- tenure of Minister and other staff;
- number of staff, full time equivalents and costs over time;
- leadership teams: membership, role, authority, age profile;
- involvement of under 40s in leadership of any kind.

Small groups

How much do you know about the impact of your various groups (for adults and for children)? What proportions of your congregations are involved and so how many people have no links to something mid-week? Is group membership growing or declining? And, for evangelistic purposes, what is going on in your enquirers' groups and courses? You may need to consider:

- number of people involved and number of groups;
- distribution of groups by age, type, area;

- children's and teens' groups similarly;
- enquirers' groups and ongoing contact;
- trends in each of the above.

Finance

This is an important area but you may have much of this in hand already. The following should prove helpful:

- income, giving, expenditure and so surplus/deficit year by year;
- comparisons with budgets;
- level of reserves over time;
- mission giving to work outside your church;
- Gift Day results over time.

Life events

Many churches put a significant amount of clergy (and laity) time into baptisms, marriages and funerals – even if less than in past years. Do you know anything about the impact this input of effort is achieving? You may need to log:

- number of baptisms and links with families;
- ongoing links with parents/candidates through courses, groups;
- number of marriages;
- ongoing links with the couple through courses, groups;
- number of funerals and church/crematorium details;
- ongoing links with the bereaved;
- trends in each of the these.

Challenges

It can be helpful to plot significant events in the life of the church to see the impact these have had. A time-line can be a useful tool for this. Examples might include:

- major events over time and their impact;
- major financial challenges over time and their impact;
- significant changes over time and their impact;
- trends over time and their impact;
- people's estimate of their spiritual growth over the past year.

The local community

But it is also worth tracking the local area to see how that is changing over time and how the church therefore needs to adapt to reach people who are not yet part of your church. Here is a small selection of possible features to include:

- population changes by area;
- social make-up changes by area;
- other local churches;

- educational establishments, retail, office and industry;
- area divisions into streets for leaflet distributions;
- changes in time in all the above.

Other data

Here is a short list of other information that may or may not be relevant for your church:

- tourist numbers visiting the church midweek;
- sales/free acceptance of evangelistic or other literature;
- level of mid-week enquiries over graveyard, services, faith;
- number of visitors, phone calls, emails to the office;
- impact of the church website and church use of social media;
- bookstall sales and changes year to year.

3 How to collect data

Finally, some advice about how to go about this.

1 Don't do too much!

If you do not already hold much of this data, do not try to collect it all in one go. You will end up with far too complicated an exercise which no one will have the time to analyse. You might like to start with a very small selection from all the above points. Focus first on the 'Attendance' lists above.

2 Appoint a research analyst

By all means use a less fancy term but someone needs to feel the responsibility for data collection and analysis. This should not be the Minister who needs the results but should not have to do all the work. Make this an official appointment.

3 Take what you have or can work out yourselves

Get a group together to help your analyst and see how much of this information can be estimated with reasonable accuracy or is known in some form already. You probably have attendance figures, you can probably estimate how long people have been members, you can discover numbers in children's groups.

4 Keep mission as the purpose

You are collecting and analysing data to enable your church to be more effective, not as an end in itself. Never forget this. So, all the time, be asking what the information tells you about your effectiveness in outreach, or the areas where you are losing ground and need to try a different approach.

5 Use a congregational survey

If you then feel it would be worthwhile, try a simple, straightforward survey form with just a few questions. Ask people to fill it in on the spot in five minutes during a service. If it cannot be done in five minutes people will not do it. Keep it anonymous and use only a few, and so broad, categories for ages, length of time coming, etc.

6 Use interviews

Don't be afraid to talk one-to-one. Consider exit interviews when people leave your church. Talk to people as to what kind of areas of service they would be interested in.

7 Don't under-estimate the work of analysis

Your analyst needs to be able to carry the work out quickly and easily (using whatever digital tools they are comfortable with). Rather than just totals, produce results divided into multiple categories such as the number of men in the congregation aged under 40 living locally.

8 Learn lessons and take action

Then aim to learn three or four basic lessons and take action on those. With every piece of statistical information ask 'What is the key message of this analysis?'

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN129. See also Article A43, *Every member on active service*, plus Training Notes TN72 & 73, *Church administration explained*, and TN108, *What do budgets actually tell us?*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN129 under Administration.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>