

## Mission Action Planning in the Church of England

### A Briefing Note from the Mission and Public Affairs Council

#### Summary

Mission Action Planning is a valuable tool for encouraging purposeful mission in parishes, and diocesan support has often enhanced its effectiveness. However, it is not clear that a single National Mission Action Plan would add significant new dimensions to mission activity at local level.

The National Church Institutions, including MPA, are committed to developing initiatives in mission wherever a national dimension clearly adds value. Planning for national mission initiatives is already happening. Responsibility for this work lies ultimately with the Archbishops' Council and the House of Bishops. National mission activity is central to the outworking of GS1815 (*Challenges for the New Quinquennium*).

#### *Mission Action Planning*

1. Mission Action Planning has been around for some time.<sup>1</sup> Information about it can be found on the Churchmaps website ([www.churchmaps.co.uk](http://www.churchmaps.co.uk)). The main book on the subject is *How to do Mission Action Planning* by Mike Chew and Mark Ireland (London: SPCK, 2009 – foreword by Archbishop David Hope). Chew and Ireland's book is an excellent introduction to the theology and practice of MAP.
2. There is no doubt that many have found Mission Action Planning (MAP) a highly creative approach to building up the church. Churchmaps.co.uk lists 20 dioceses which have run Mission Action Planning initiatives and gives examples from other denominations also. The homepage of the same site includes testimonials to the process from the bishops of St Albans and Blackburn.
3. It is unclear how many parishes have taken part in MAP initiatives, but it is clearly a large number. The available case studies focus on those which have found it a positive experience. Despite some anecdotal evidence of parishes which merely 'went through the motions' because their diocese expected it, there are sufficient examples of the positive benefits of MAP to support the motion's assessment of its potential.
4. The MAP draws on management methods to give a semi-formal structure to processes of planning and imagination around the mission of the local church. It is essentially a structure for thinking about particular situations rather than a rigid formula, and it has some similarities to the Pastoral Cycle (or hermeneutic circle) which many have found helpful in applying theological insights to concrete situations.
5. Mission Action Planning is a tool to be used alongside local wisdom, not a "brand" which must be adopted off the peg. Its great strength is in helping parishes and groups to understand mission in a more intentional way – as an active expression of Christian discipleship which does not "just happen" but which requires careful assessment of the context, the resources, the theology and the relationships which are particular to the local setting.

<sup>1</sup> The Churchmaps website points to evidence of similar approaches over the last thirty years.

6. Much of the impetus for imaginative mission in recent years has been generated by the close encounter between a church and its social context. Mission has come to be seen, less as something defined by the church and offered to the world, and more as a dialogue between cultures and the church, conducted through careful interpretation and translation between distinctive “languages”: the language of Christian theology and the language of local culture.
7. As the Fresh Expressions movement has helped us to understand, mission in Britain addresses not one but numerous cultures, often very local (geographically and in relation to social profiles) and each with its distinct “languages”. Much of the most effective mission activity of recent decades has been carefully and prayerfully responsive to local cultures, with the result that the church’s mission is multi-faceted and deeply contextualised.
8. As practiced in parishes and local church groups, Mission Action Planning is a valuable tool for precisely this kind of contextually sensitive and purposeful mission activity.

#### *Local and National Dimensions in Mission Action Planning*

9. Do the mission contexts, and mission opportunities, of the whole country have enough in common to enable a National MAP to be effective? Such a plan would have to speak with equal clarity to North and South, to rural, urban and suburban communities, and to places where the history of the community may promote or frustrate the reception of Christian witness.
10. MAP sees the parish as especially well placed to relate in mission to local communities. Because the bishop is the leader in mission within a diocese, and because the diocese is best-placed for sharing ideas and initiatives with parishes, MAP at diocesan level is capable of adding capacity and energy to parochial mission plans. The question posed by the motion is whether a National MAP can similarly add energy and capacity to what happens in dioceses and parishes.
11. The motion was discussed by the MPA Council in April 2011, and by the Archbishops’ Council and the House of Bishops in May. Each warmly endorsed the idea of Mission Action Planning at parish level, recognizing the importance of diocesan support and encouragement, but were wary of a National MAP as being too rigid, too top-down and likely to weaken, rather than strengthen, “ownership” of the plan at the local levels at which it takes effect.
12. All three bodies felt that mission activities should be organized at the lowest effective level and that, on this principle, the National Church Institutions should only take the lead in mission initiatives where it was clear that the national dimension added value or achieved objectives that could not be realized more directly by dioceses or parishes

#### *Mission Initiatives and the NCIs*

13. There are nonetheless important roles for the NCIs (not least, the Mission and Public Affairs Division) in creating and taking forward mission initiatives where a national dimension is integral. Experience has already shown that some national mission initiatives, carefully designed and targeted, can significantly enhance the capacity and energy of dioceses and parishes in their mission. The Weddings Project, the Youth Evangelism Fund, and Back to Church Sunday are three recent examples. The Archbishops’ Council is currently discussing future mission initiatives around funerals and “beginnings” (baptisms/thanksgivings).

14. **The distinction we are making here is between a “National Mission Action Plan”, along the lines of MAP as practiced in parishes, and “planning for national mission initiatives” which is a vital activity of MPA and other parts of the NCIs.**
15. The first involves extending a tool proven in local usage to the whole Church of England. The second is about identifying the points where national initiatives add value and directing resources towards them. (As the Archbishop of Canterbury put it in his Presidential Address in November 2010, we are called “to focus our resources where there is both greatest need and greatest opportunity”).
16. The processes for planning national initiatives are not unlike the methodology outlined by Chew and Ireland. For instance, their fourfold Review/Choose/Plan/Act cycle is paralleled by the Weddings Project methodology of starting with sound research in order to “Attract, Build, Care”. But the difference is that national-level work is about carefully chosen opportunities rather than a top-down plan binding the local church into a national scheme.

*National Mission Initiatives – and an Amendment to the Motion*

17. Arresting and reversing numerical decline, and making new disciples, are central concerns for the NCI, as for all parts of the church. One of the three priorities for the new quinquennium, outlined in GS1815, is “Facilitating Church Growth”, and MPA, with others in the NCIs, has this as one of its core responsibilities.
18. Mission Action Planning is clearly an important part of the toolkit available to parishes and groups in their pursuit of this shared objective. It can be warmly commended. The occasion of this debate gives us an opportunity to highlight the planning which goes into national initiatives in mission, and the subsidiarity principle which locates responsibility for mission primarily in dioceses and parishes.
19. With the support of the Archbishops’ Council and the House of Bishops an amendment will be moved to the final part of the motion so that it can affirm mission action planning and invite regular reports to Synod on the national work being done to support mission, consistent with GS 1815, without calling for a national mission action plan.

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June 2011

**Published by the General Synod of the Church of England  
and on sale at the Church House Bookshop**

31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN

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**£1**