

church growth: beyond mission action planning

"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Albert Einstein

The Council for Social Responsibility (CSR) has developed a new approach: **rdp** (rapid development programme). This programme has a strong emphasis on a structured outward looking process and engagement, assisting parishes and deaneries to find new ways to re-engage with their community (including sometimes the revitalisation

emphasises a series of practical steps, including undertaking a parish profile, history and community audits, an envisioning exercise, SWOT analysis, as well as analysing resources and setting priorities.

Because the two programmes, **rdp** and MAP, can sometimes exist alongside each other, there is a healthy debate about the merits of each. This paper sits within that emerging debate, seeking to examine the MAP approach in comparison with the learning from **rdp**. Our belief is that, in the context of a crisis of credibility and viability for the church in England, the imperative to secure church growth needs to lead us into a wider and deeper social engagement and into deliberate conversation and alliances with our communities in specific local contexts.

In some contexts MAP has helped churches to become more intentional in engaging in mission. For leaders seeking numerical growth, MAP can offer an attractive and relatively simple toolkit to enable churches to take the first steps towards growth. For many churches, to take any intentional steps towards growth will be a positive and fruitful exercise compared to their previous inertia. Yet little critical or theological evaluation has taken place of MAP's methods, results or its underlying philosophy.



of their spaces). **rdp** focuses strongly on community engagement, working selectively with local people, businesses, schools and community organisations and using adapted social/business development techniques to help participants think in a focused and creative way about the potential role of their Church in bringing light, hope and belief to their community (see our 'Growing Together' document¹).

At the same time, Mission Action Planning (MAP) has become the most popular church growth tool in recent years, which is now broadly used across church traditions. It

¹ Our *Growing Together* paper outlines the growth literature and a social model of growth in more depth and it is available in the resources section of our website (below).



There is a danger that Mission Action Planning (MAP) is now seen by some as the ‘magic bullet’ that will save our current models of church and lead to growth. Whilst we support any initiatives which are prayerfully developed and thoughtfully implemented, we are concerned that, in too many situations, MAP has been thought of and deployed as a continuation of current failed mission frameworks and strategies. If such mission efforts, which are perhaps best described as “more of the same”, are the only available option, then we believe that the current dynamics of decline in large sections of the church are likely to continue.

This short rapid review analyses the Mission Action Planning approach. In addition to examining the published mission action plans from several dioceses, we draw on learning from our own rapid development programme (rdp), and from the church growth research in order to offer a positive critique of MAP and some suggestions for further ways forward.

The 1851 census, which showed that only half of the population went to church, was a shock to the church. This led to the massive church building programme of the later Victorian years and the perpetuating belief that all of the church's problems could be solved by increasing its supply of mission opportunities (on its own terms). This has not ultimately led to growth in attendance - certainly not to the extent that the Victorian era's pews and churches have ever been filled in the way that their sponsors hoped and prayed for (but supply side solutions still dominate thinking and action).

If the Church of England wants to recover its position as the established church - the community of choice for celebration, worship and social action - then we believe that it will need to move away from these supply-side strategies for growth, and bring

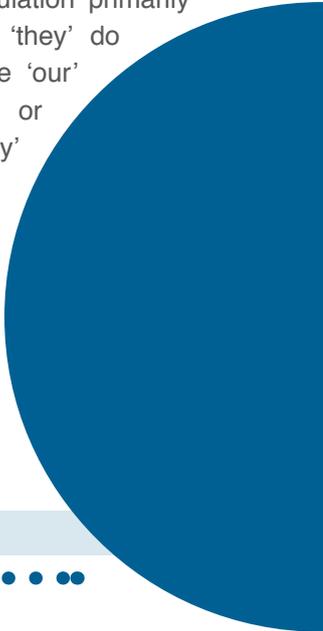
about deliberate and rapid change and improvement in its networks, narrative and social engagement. This, in turn, will generate demand and achieve population-level impact and growth (demand-side strategies), reaching our largely unchurched population and networks, and creating new awareness and opportunities for participation within a resonant and meaningful new narrative.

Greater intentionality, the assumption that underpins the MAP model of change, is a proven and important factor in church growth, but it is unlikely to be a sufficient or even primary factor in delivering growth in the current unchurched context. There is a particular risk, we believe, in MAP's approach, of tending to undertake only limited participation within and around the edges of our existing church communities, without an appropriate degree of external dialogue and challenge.

We would argue that there are now at least four irrefutable social ‘facts’ that need seriously to be considered in framing and choosing our mission strategies and development in contemporary contexts and situations, at almost all scales:

a. An unchurched society requires a different approach

We cannot engage or communicate with a largely unchurched population primarily on our own terms as ‘they’ do not understand or share ‘our’ frameworks, language or understandings – ‘they’ are not like ‘us’ and ‘they’ will not become ‘us’.



Fundamentally, this means we now need to invest in new models of growth based on a new vision, narrative and engaged/engaging models of 'church'.

b. Our communities have changed

Mission has to be designed around the actual existing context, the community that lives here now, not the one that existed thirty, or more, years ago. It is not sufficient simply to profile or audit a community – we need to understand the dynamics, values and networks of what are now fundamentally different communities so that we can actually engage saliently and meaningfully with them and move from being a passive presence, to achieving greater resonance, involving them generously in leading/making the necessary changes (growing together not further apart).

c. We need to listen (discern) that we have been rejected

For many people, we are no longer the church of England and we have been rejected by the majority of people, including the majority of Anglicans. Offering more of the same will simply not work and does not constitute listening. We cannot assume that God only or primarily works through the church. The building of the Kingdom should not be confused with the institution of the church. Growth is more than achieving consolidation within a small minority. We have to work primarily outside of our current frames, narratives, artificial boundaries and increasingly limited constituency.

d. New ways of living and expectations

How people live, relate, belong, communicate and what they expect from any organisation has also changed radically in recent decades and this is accelerating. What we offer and how we offer it and engage has to change. This is not about accepting crass consumerism,

but seeking to challenge and subvert it with an accessible, meaningful, generous and inspiring alternative. We need to rebuild our relationships and recapture people's imagination and involvement.

In a largely unchurched population, creating a new awareness and opportunities for participation in a meaningful narrative and offer is what is required. This should be based on a fresh and challenging understanding of the make-up of our communities, the negative and positive dynamics, and their beliefs, with a much more intentional, creative, generous and risk-taking mission approach. Although this need not inherently be the case, it is indeed true that these elements appear to be missing from many of the current results from mission action planning.

We will examine this in more depth by looking at some of the recent MAP reports that have been produced. After briefly revisiting the key themes in the church growth literature, we will look in greater depth at a total of 33 published MAP and rdp plans.



growth assumptions

The research literature on church growth as a whole is still rather limited (though the recent Church Growth Research Programme is a good start). For an organisation of its size, the Church of England has invested very little in practical research, related business development, the tracking of innovation or systematic market research. Much of the available and utilised research is premised on assumptions that start with inward looking, institutional-driven assumptions about mission and growth. Even the assumption that ‘mission’ (‘core’ or holistic) actually does lead to net growth is never fully unpacked or tested.



A further key issue, not widely addressed in the literature, is the basis of the approach to growth. Essentially, will the basis be an *intensive* (i.e. a small input, focussing on deepening and improving existing offers) or an *extensive* growth model (i.e. a wider investment in new sectors and wider adoption of new approaches)? The chosen approach should be largely determined by the evidence of the current level of penetration and resonance from the current offer.

At the very least, a church with a fast-shrinking national profile and market share will initially need to adopt new and primarily extensive techniques to stabilise and then reverse the situation. Ironically, some of the new extensive approaches are likely to be identified from our current more successful intensive efforts (e.g. those well-matched fresh expressions and messy church) when they are tested against their ability to generate new demand. The majority of elements of a new offer, however, are likely to come from new and innovative approaches outside the current offer and vary in each context.

A variety of sources confirm that church growth is possible across all church traditions, sizes and locations. The available literature is clear about the key elements required for church growth, whatever the tradition or model for mission.

The consistently identified key factors are:

Contextually:

- I. Understanding and developing a narrative and offer that are responsive to the dynamics and opportunities which will resonate in that context.
- II. Developing a dynamic and positive presence and reputation in the local community, with effective relationships that help things to get done (access to resources – people, skills and money), help to navigate and mobilise networks and excite and involve new people.



Institutionally:

- I. An appropriate tailored mix of traditional and contemporary styles of worship and activities. The provision and promotion of a number of targeted, accessible, relevant and dynamic small groups and activities (for young people, young families, recently retired, etc.) alongside collective celebration.
- II. A developed and broad open team working together, with lay leaders, and access to resources, skills and systems that help them engage intentionally, connect and communicate internally and externally.

The current discussion and initiatives in the Church of England under the church growth rubric are largely focussed on institutional (supply-side) development. The reality is that no denomination, in a mature, largely Christian and socio-culturally comparable country, has halted or reversed the aggregate decline in church affiliation and attendance (as opposed to achieving a greater 'market share' of a shrinking 'market').

It could be argued that this is the result of the insufficient levels of commitment and resources dedicated to strategies (leaving aside the questionable strategic nature of some of these 'strategies') to 'reverse' this relative and absolute decline, as opposed to the overwhelming proportion of resources that are invested in servicing the declining model. It is also the result of the chronic failure to respond proactively to the fundamental social and cultural changes of the last forty or so years. It is likely that both these factors play a significant role.

It is clear that we now have to move beyond the small project-by-project approach, as well as radically to rethink the content and presentation of our wider and local narrative and offer. Success for the Church of England

now means urgently achieving change at a population level. To achieve this, we need to focus on demand, contextual factors and the strategic matching of our efforts. It is likely that the model of 'Church' we will need to create will be based on a more open, creative, active and participative model, with new and more fluid forms of affiliation alongside new more open approaches to leadership.

Many of these core wider socio-cultural and growth issues are simply not present in the published Mission Action Plans. This is not necessarily the fault of the MAP process, but it is a consistent weakness of the reports. Those few parishes that did note change had actually developed nothing substantive in response.

Mission Action Planning reflects its origins in linear 1980s management thinking, which is itself linked to a behaviourist approach, placing emphasis on observable behaviour, rather than underlying values, experience, feelings, relationships and beliefs. The society in which we live now is an infinitely more fluid, fractured and demanding one than such an approach could have conceived of then. We see this evidenced, in particular, in the way that business development and turnaround/growth thinking have moved on, seeking now to encourage more open, organic, inclusive, diverse, creative, customer-led and innovation-based approaches in order to achieve shifts in organisational culture, and to transform brand, experience and resonances. We believe that our approaches to church growth now also need to move on.



method and results

The rest of the briefing presents the results of a rapid review of Mission Action Planning reports and a comparison with rapid development programme (**rdp**) reports. It briefly discusses the assumptions, models of growth and emphases affecting the two development programmes. For this briefing we have drawn on several sources:

- Mission Action Planning literature.
- Published Mission Action Plans and rapid development programme reports from several dioceses.
- Our experience and evaluation of **rdp**.
- The published church growth literature.

We reviewed over forty Mission Action Planning (MAP) reports from ten dioceses and 20 rapid development programme (**rdp**) reports from four dioceses. We carried out a more detailed content analysis of 23 of the more substantive and recently published MAP reports and ten recent **rdp** reports.

These MAP reports were included in the content analysis based on the following criteria:

- It included a coherent vision/narrative, or
- It had clear and understandable objectives, or
- It outlined several proposed key actions.

Many of the excluded MAP reports were truly awful and reflected an astonishing level of denial by the authors (e.g. a list of services and a statement of tradition).

Of course, as it reaches scale there is a risk to the quality of any development process. It could be argued that the MAP reports we accessed and assessed are more representative of the 'better' end of reports as they were published

online, mostly in a pdf format. This might be an indicator of the better-resourced parishes and those that have engaged in the MAP process in more depth. Our MAP sample covered 27 parishes from all traditions across several dioceses. We cannot claim that this is a representative sample, but it is illustrative of some of the long-identified issues in parish and deanery level development.

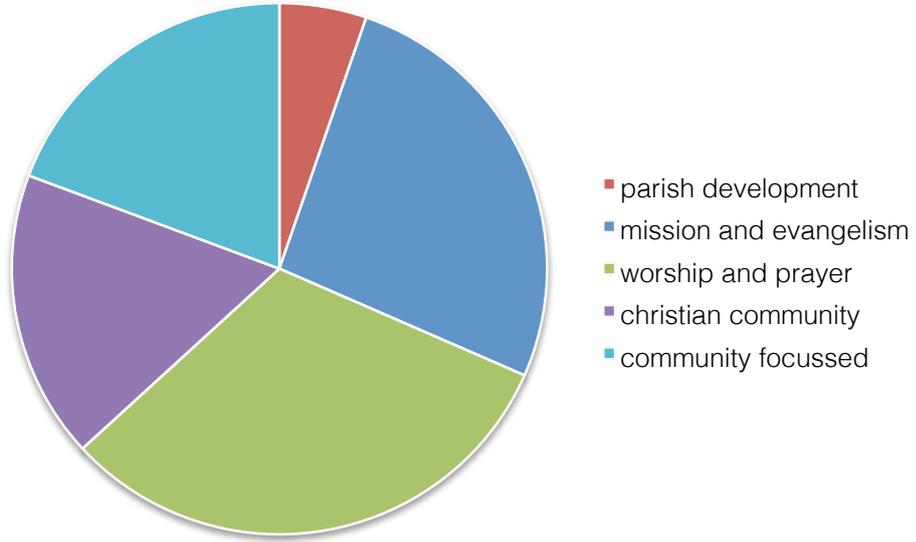
We focused on the agreed priorities and actions outlined in each MAP report and the priorities and recommendations outlined in **rdp** reports. We then allocated them (see appendix) to one of five categories:

- a. Parish development
- b. Mission and evangelism
- c. Worship and prayer
- d. Christian community
- e. Community focus and engagement

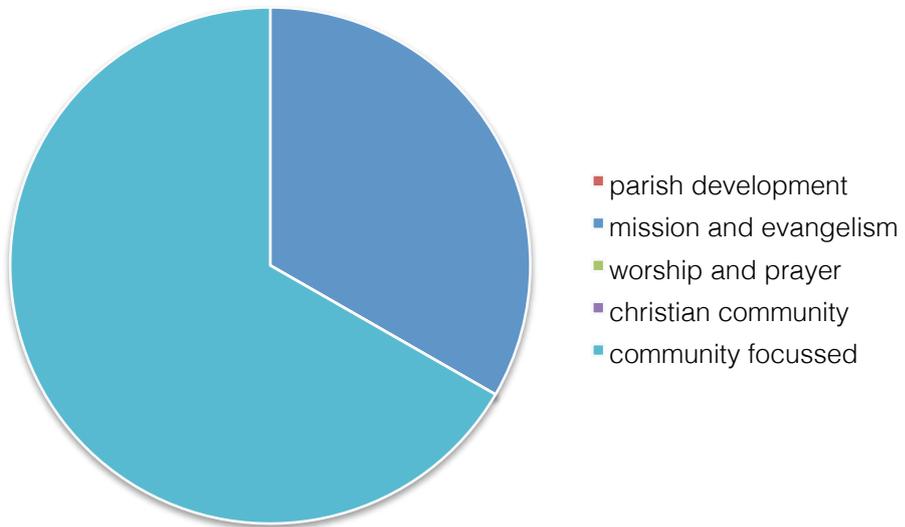
The graphs on the next two pages present firstly, the goals of MAP reports and priorities of **rdp** reports, and then the agreed actions in MAP reports and **rdp** recommendations.



MAP goals:

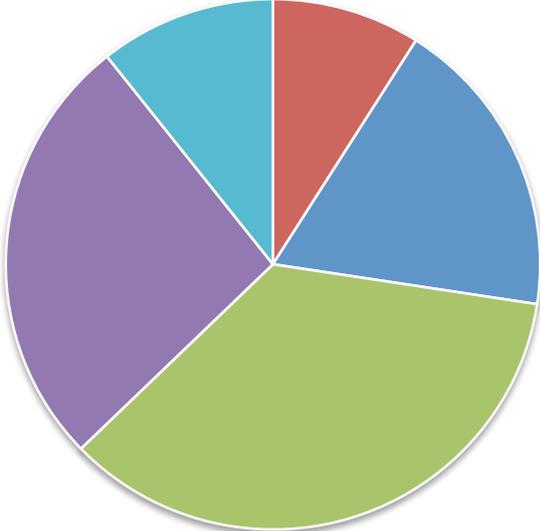


rdp priorities:



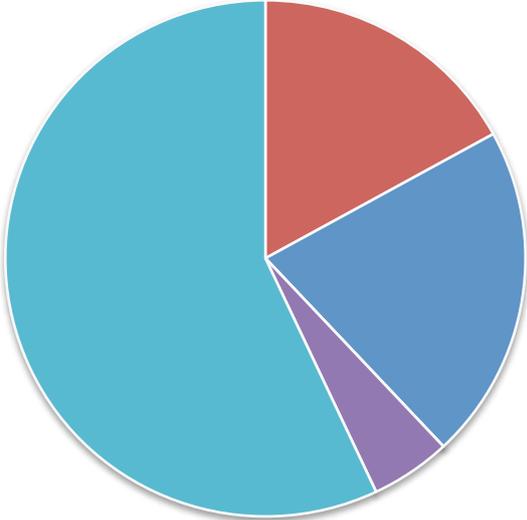


MAP actions:



- parish development
- mission and evangelism
- worship and prayer
- christian community
- community focussed

rdp recommendations:



- parish development
- mission and evangelism
- worship and prayer
- christian community
- community focussed



discussion

Both mission and evangelism, and community focus and engagement scored well in MAP goals (second and third respectively) but both were a significantly lower priority for the actual planned actions (third and fourth). It is clear from these results that the current crop of published mission action plans reflects path-dependent thinking - that is, more of the same - and indicates a relative paucity of effort going into either mission and evangelism or community focus and engagement approaches. This is disappointing, if not necessarily surprising.

The results from the **rdp** reports show an exclusive focus on priorities around community engagement (first) and mission (second), reflecting the emphasis in the programme on community engagement and mission in an unchurched society. There was greater diversity in the recommended actions (see below), although these related more closely to the identified priorities.

In the MAP plans, development of worship, prayer and better internal communications were the three most popular planned actions. The three main actions recommended in the **rdp** reports were: external communications; forming an alliance with one key community ally; and renewing community spaces.

In the first hour or so of the **rdp** sessions, we are often presented with the same frames, assumptions and ideas which have been dominant in forming the planned actions in the reviewed MAP plans. These amount to a continuation and actual reproduction of the existing model of church with perhaps more emphasis on "welcome," though largely on "our" terms (essentially, come to us and be like us).

If not challenged and unpacked, then this can actually end up being about the churches'

own and exclusive (intentionally and unintentionally) spiritual journey, as some of the agreed MAP visions showed:

"Drawn together by Christ's love, we seek by his grace to live out his commandments to love the Lord our God with all of our being; and to love everyone we come across as we love ourselves. To put this into practice, we need a strategy to help all of us in the congregation and community of St ++++'s to progress on their journey towards a fuller relationship with God."

"Our vision for St ++++ is to develop our vibrant all-age worshipping community, growing spiritually, broadening our pastoral care and living out our faith in Jesus Christ in all we do."

"To foster a vibrant living heart for God in the heart of ++++ through worship, prayer and engaging with holy scripture, individually and corporately."

Almost all MAP reports contained a very similar list of planned activities which largely reflected what the current congregation want. The core activities identified were: more bible study, prayer, increasing the variety of worship, social activities for the congregation and developing youth and children's work for members of the congregation. Thankfully this was not the case for all of the published plans:

"Our vision is to be a lively, fully-inclusive church rooted in God's love, and providing a significant christian focus and stimulus for the entire community."

The largely internal focus was made even clearer in the small numbers of MAP reports that also included their own background (i.e. SWOT) thinking. It was not clear how many of the others had undertaken a SWOT analysis.



The main additional identifiable features in the reviewed MAP reports included:

- Where community profiling was carried out or included, it was usually done very badly (a simple list of statistics) and there was no obvious use of any of the data/insights in structuring the majority of plans. Local perceptions, dynamics, expectations or opportunities were never systematically identified.
- One way that parishes ‘admitted’ their weakness in evangelism or community engagement was by identifying the need for specific practical mission training in areas such as communications and youth work.
- Two parishes recognised the need to develop 'something new' and that they would consider this over the coming MAP period.
- The majority of planned new projects were mostly aimed at the existing congregations (e.g. children and youth work, communications, events or the reordering of spaces).
- This inward focus was continued with plans for securing increased resources. Fundraising was for “our” project (organ restoration, hall etc.) with no clear or planned community involvement whatsoever. Stewardship and the congregation was still the clear default source for the resources for almost all of the proposed projects. There were no plans to secure increased resources in the medium or long-term through new social enterprises or any other more diverse sources of income.

In contrast with this last point, the **rdp** reports

identified the establishment of a growth fund, developing social enterprises and accessing identified untapped local resources as the main ways to resource the implementation of its recommendations.

It was very clear that almost all of the Mission Action Plans produced are inward-looking and focused on increasing provision for the congregation's personal spiritual development and institutional building. In the majority of reports mission was largely conceived of and based on individualistic models that are unlikely to lead to significant growth. This, of course, is not a new insight but reflects the debates in the earlier church growth literature.²

This briefing is not an argument for ignoring purposeful institutional building, more conventional forms of evangelism or spiritual enrichment. It does, however, seek to draw attention to their current dominance in a largely closed and homogeneous system that looks inwards for thinking, relationships, resources and inspiration, which sometimes even deploys prayer and discernment as tools of a denial and/or blocking mechanisms.

It also seeks to argue for a rethinking of the idea of "keeping the church going for the sake of keeping the church going" and largely for ourselves, and instead prompts us urgently to reach outwards into new relationships and uncharted and occasionally risky areas.

“However, the decision to go for growth will also require planning and willingness to change. It is folly, as we know, to keep doing the same things over and over and expect a different outcome.”³

² See J Cox (2008), *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700*, see chapter 11 for a discussion of the early church growth literature.

³ Private Member’s General Synod motion, *Mission Action Planning in the Church of England*, The Archbishops' Council 2011.



Many of our churches now urgently need to find a new purpose and resonance and it is clear that this purpose, resonating narrative and offer will not be found or discerned from conversations between ourselves about ourselves, or increasing the offer to ourselves.

Since the 2004 publication of Mission Shaped Church there have been repeated calls for a shift in models and resources. One exercise on **rdp** asks the parish participants about external perceptions of their parish or deanery. We deliberately use this to break out of the self-obsessed conversation. It is interesting how difficult it is for some parishes to have this conversation and face the sometimes disruptive, but liberating, results.⁴

Quotes from some of the **rdp** reports that were reviewed include:

"How does the church in ++++ position itself at the centre of its changing and growing community with a high profile and dynamic offer that secures sustainable growth to provide sufficient resources, energy and spirit to sustain itself and bring good news to ++++? In particular, to reach a greater number and more diverse range of people, who are currently not being reached/engaged by our current messages and offer."

"The Church has a unique legacy... to secure a dynamic presence, mission and resources for ++++ in the near future, then some potentially positive and radical options will have to be identified and explored. This does not have to be an onerous task, but rather it should form the basis of a positive, joyful, confident and exciting engagement-based mission that looks outward for the rest of this decade."

"In the area covered by the parish there are significant differences in profile, dynamics and therefore opportunities for growth. The offer across the three sites needs to be more segmented and rather paradoxically also consolidated as a joint offer. The approach of trying to keep all the sites offering the same activity, worship and profile is not working now and is not going to be sustainable or effective."

A culture of hopelessness and helplessness has arisen, and many parishes have experienced a collapse in confidence and morale. They are not confidently or effectively able to engage with their community or sell their offer. There are signs of hope, however, within some of our churches and communities. As we have undertaken **rdp** programmes we have been inspired by the willingness and energy for change, once the issues have been reframed. Some of the key lessons from the **rdp** programme are:

- a. Parishes are not nearly as conservative as they have been made out to be: there is a high level of latent and expressed demand for positive change when people are released from the current ambition- and spirit-limiting frameworks. The team approach, in-house events, challenge and non-church input encourage a wider set of views and experiences and have helped promote parish-level change in most cases.⁵
- b. The programme has increased understanding of the extent and depth of the local and wider social and cultural change affecting parishes. It has been successful at identifying local dynamics and opportunities that have not been methodically identified before.

⁴ Another activity is to meet with someone who reflects the changes in their community and discuss what it is they think the church should be doing.

⁵ Both our experience and the SWOTs included in the MAP plans show that there are a few, sometimes several, change agents in every parish. They need to be identified, encouraged and released!



- c. Many of the original ideas for a physical development or mission were based on obsolete thinking. In many cases the proposed development or mission project was unnecessary and would not achieve its objectives, which were usually unstated but which could be achieved more creatively and cheaply by other means.
- d. When challenged, parishes are able to identify clear and salient priorities for growth and make substantial shifts in their approach, confidence and pitch. The competencies and energy to develop and deliver effective mission do exist in most parishes and deaneries and in the wider community, but it often requires a fresh eye to identify and release them.
- e. There are, in all communities, specific local dynamics and opportunities for parish and deanery growth. There are also significant new income- and resource-generating opportunities as new growth opportunities are identified. For many, there is a potential to release assets and/or to generate income, with a virtuous cycle of making money from doing good, leading to further investment in doing more good.

Of course, it could be argued that the published actions in **rdp** plans are too outward looking. This may be the case since, as an independent social responsibility charity, we do not come from the same place as most dioceses.

rdp was not intentionally designed as a church development or growth programme, although it has emerged as one. In some situations we have deliberately chosen to work with those parishes that were facing near terminal decline, where being radical and generous is

the only option apart from closure. (We are not against closure and these two renewal options may be linked.)

Most importantly, we are clear that in an unchurched society, effective community and network-level engagement is the main basis for outward-looking mission. We need a holistic model of mission - disruptive, inspiring, hopeful and generous - which prefigures the Kingdom itself. MAP claims to be a one-year strategic-planning process, while what the church now actually needs to secure growth is a major and systematic repositioning, re-engineering and re-engagement process.



conclusion

MAP can often work well for the parishes that are already 'good', as measured by their comprehensive website content. It makes a significant contribution to intentionality and provides some direction for further internally-focused development. In short, the MAP results so far show that it can help to consolidate an existing model of church.

In the published plans reviewed, however, it was also clear that MAP does not change thinking, shift emphasis or resource, or help to reconnect or resource a new and more engaged and creative model of mission. It is clear from this rapid review and our own experience that if MAP is going to work, then there is going to have to be both a significant refocus and serious investment in:

- + more direct and challenging input into mission visioning, planning and review along with more entrepreneurial parish development resources.
- + more skill development around dynamic and sophisticated community profiling and analysis in localities (not across whole dioceses).
- + parishes and deaneries being introduced to more animating and creative ideas about community engagement and social action.
- + more practical skills-based training in areas such as externally-focussed communications, youth and community work.

It is clear from this review of the published Mission Action Plans that the focus of effort for most churches is still largely on inward-looking institutional factors. We do not believe that this will generate substantial growth; nor

do we believe that it will build the Kingdom. For this we will need new, more engaged and embedded models of mission:

*"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..."*⁶

Given the acute nature of the crisis in relevance and credibility of the church, there now has to be a more challenging, outward-looking and rapid, intensive parish and deanery development process that will result in more innovation, social entrepreneurship, creativity and risk-taking.

We are not suggesting that those dioceses which have already heavily invested in MAP should abandon it. We do believe that dioceses which are still in the early stages of mission planning should look at a different model: one such as **rdp**, which is much more outward-looking and engaged with the needs and hopes of the local community. For parishes which have made a good start with MAP, we believe that they would benefit from moving to a more challenging and creative model which would offer them ways to develop and dramatically extend their contextual resonance. Deanery and diocesan models which encourage and support such an approach are urgently needed.

In short, we now need to deploy techniques which will help us to rethink and re-energise the church, enabling the Church of England to reconnect with and inspire both local communities and the nation.

⁶ Giddings P (2011), *Mission Action Planning in the Church of England: A Briefing Note from the Mission and Public Affairs Council.*



appendix: allocation of priorities and actions

Areas of priorities / actions emphasis	Activity
Parish development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure • Finance • Staffing • Stewardship
Mission and evangelism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission (gospel proclamation) • Mission (projects) • Discipleship • Training (internally focused) • Course offer e.g. Alpha • External communications (50%) • International mission
Worship and prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worship development • Prayer • Bible study • Ministry development
Christian community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve spaces for church use • Internal communications • Christian community services • Improved welcome • Pastoral • Music and choir • Youth work (internally focused) • Church schools • Events (internally focused) • Church collaboration
Community focus and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events (externally focused) • Improve spaces for community use • Community profile or development • External communications (50%) • Youth work (externally focused) • Develop a community offer • Community partnerships • Giving • Environmental measures



Series Editor:

The Revd Canon Nick Ralph

contact

If you are interested in finding out more about what we are doing, learning and how we could work together, we would love to hear from you. More details about the **rdp** programme and a number of free resources, including this document, are also available to download from our website.

info@rapiddevelopment.org.uk

023 9289 9674

Council for Social Responsibility

1st Floor, Peninsular House

Wharf Road

Portsmouth

Hampshire

PO2 8HB

[**www.rapiddevelopment.org.uk**](http://www.rapiddevelopment.org.uk)

A horizontal dotted line in a dark blue color runs across the bottom of the page. On the right side, there is a large, solid dark blue circle that partially overlaps the dotted line and extends towards the bottom right corner of the page.