

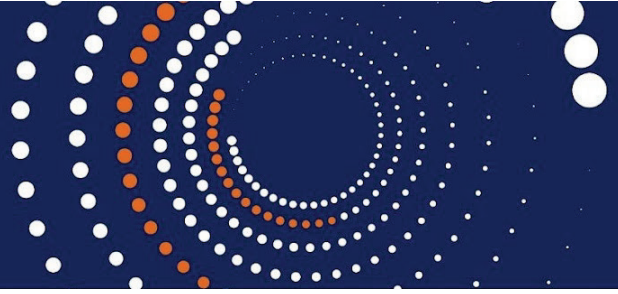
REFLECTION ACTION PLANNING PROCESS

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After taking part in a *Church Life Survey*, churches are encouraged to use their results to reflect and plan for the future. This Reflection Action Planning Process is one option to help churches move directly from their *Church Life Profile* to action. It enables churches to take the pulse of the church and to take some modest initiatives that will enhance an existing plan or help engage issues confronting the church.



Reflection Action Planning Process Outline

Two sessions of 2-3 hours each

Every church has its own unique strengths and weaknesses in various areas of church health and vitality. This process is designed to help a church focus on their strengths in each of the Core Qualities of church vitality, and decide on steps of action to build on their strengths.

The process provides an introduction to the *Church Life Profile*, which displays a church's unique survey results from the completion of a *Church Life Survey*. Any church can use this process to engage their *Church Life Profile* of results in a simple, positive and time efficient way.

The call of the Lord to mission is strong, clear and ever present. As part of our response, planning and acting should be an integral part of the seasons of church life, with every church located somewhere in the planning cycle: preparing to plan, actually planning, implementing a plan, reviewing a plan, evaluating the results, and preparing to plan again.

Who this process is for

This planning process is designed to assist churches to move directly from their *Church Life Profile* to steps for action. The Reflection Action process is intended for those churches that:

- have recently completed a planning process
- are already strongly pursuing a vision
- are presently not able to launch into a long planning process
- do not have the people or resources to carry through a thorough planning exercise.

Aim of the Reflection Action process

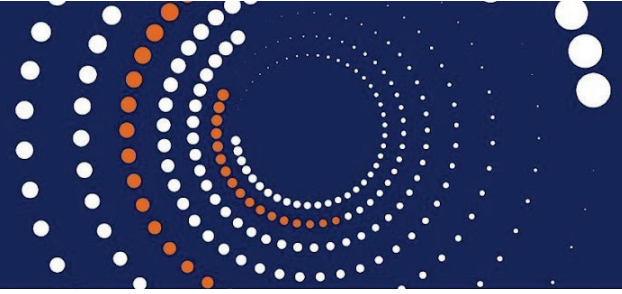
The process aims to immediately make use of the *Church Life Profile* as a moment to take the pulse of your church and to take some modest actions that will help to develop existing strengths, enhance an existing plan, or engage issues confronting the church.

A key to making this process work

The Reflection Action process enables a church to take some quick steps towards achieving a goal. However, if that is all that occurs, the process will soon die. It is critical that, once action steps are taken, the planning team meets again to plan the next steps. Rather than seeing planning as a one-off event, a church must develop an ongoing commitment to planning – a cycle of action and reflection – in order to keep enhancing the life of the church.

How much time is required?

Two sessions each of two to three hours are initially required to arrive at action steps.



Appoint a facilitator

A facilitator is recommended to lead the process. This should be someone who is a person of prayer, is comfortable with facilitating groups, and does not bring vested interests to the process. People other than the church's own minister, pastor or priest should be considered. The person does not need to come from inside the church, though some knowledge of the congregation is a definite advantage.

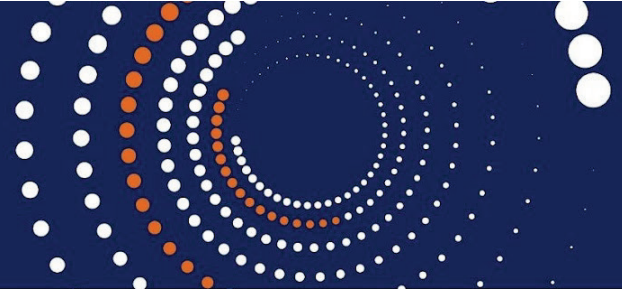
Who should be involved in the planning process?

The short answer is everyone in the church – though this does not mean that everyone will be invited to attend all planning sessions. Over the course of the process, everyone should know that it is happening, be invited and encouraged to participate, be kept informed of progress and be involved in accepting the results.

Outline of sessions

Session 1 – Identifying Core Qualities to Work On: To identify up to three Core Qualities that will receive immediate attention from the church.

Session 2 – Deciding on Action Steps: In the previous session, up to three Core Quality areas have been identified that your church intends to work on, along with some of the sources of life in your church. This next session determines some action steps to take these areas forward.



Reflection Action Planning Process

SESSION 1 – Identifying Core Qualities to Work On

Aim of Session 1

The aim of the session is to identify up to three Core Qualities that will receive immediate attention from the church.

Before the session

Studying the *Church Life Profile* beforehand will assist invited participants to arrive at a picture of the vitality of their church. Any report that has been prepared on the vitality of the church arising from the Profile could also be distributed. While it is always better that participants have gained an appreciation of the Profile prior to the meeting, the outline for the session does not assume that everyone has done so.

At the session

Step 1 – The *Church Life Profile* (30 minutes):

After introductions and prayer, participants are introduced to the nine Core Qualities of healthy churches and their church's results in their *Church Life Profile*. The relevant pages from your Profile and, where available, the pages including changes over time are distributed and the results explained in a brief way. Any other interesting results from the Profile should also be presented now.

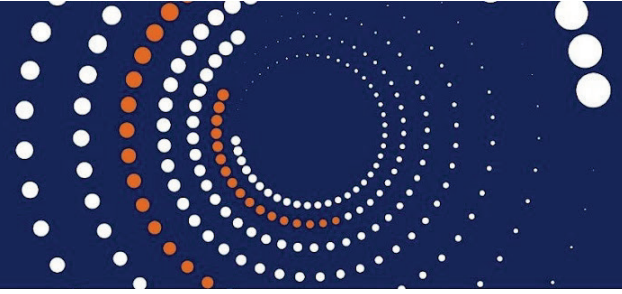
Step 2 – Prioritising Core Qualities for future attention (20 minutes):

The facilitator asks participants to decide the priority each Core Quality should receive in terms of attention in the future. In doing so, participants should take into consideration the survey results. Each of the nine Core Quality areas can receive a rating from 1 (not a priority at present) to 5 (the highest priority). The priority it receives may reflect that:

- it is an area central to the vision or mission of your church
- it is an area of weakness that should receive remediation
- it is a strength of your church that should be further enhanced
- there are opportunities and resources in this area that would allow it to be taken forward.

The facilitator now asks the group to select *one, two or three* Core Qualities to receive immediate attention by the church. At this point, the group should be encouraged to select *at least one* of the outward Core Qualities (service, faith-sharing and inclusion). They can indicate their selection by a show of hands. The group has now identified the areas in which they will be formulating action steps in the next session.

It may be hard to place a limit of three Core Qualities. However, the other qualities could be the subject of future planning meetings. For most churches, three Core Qualities will be more than sufficient to handle at this stage.



Step 3 – Identifying sources of life (60 minutes):

The next issue is to identify some of the factors that lie behind the Core Quality scores. Understanding what gives life now will help in planning the future more effectively. If large, the whole group divides into smaller groups of six. Each group identifies one Core Quality, from those selected, to consider what the scores are saying about the life of the church.

The group should note that a low score does not necessarily indicate a weakness in church life. It may, but the score could also be due to the church intentionally making that area a lower priority for a time.

There are questions on the *Church Life Profile* that can assist people to engage the results and identify sources of life. Some guiding questions for the group are:

- Are the NCLS results what we expected, or are there surprises?
- What do we think are the factors producing these scores?
- What are the sources of life within the high score Core Qualities; what is there that we can build on?
- What are the sources of life within the low score Core Qualities; what is there that we can build on?

“Sources of life” are those factors that create high points in the life of your church. All churches have had good moments in their history. What contributed to these? Possibilities include certain practices or traditions, people, programs, events and priorities. It could be things ever present or things that are momentary. Examples are below.

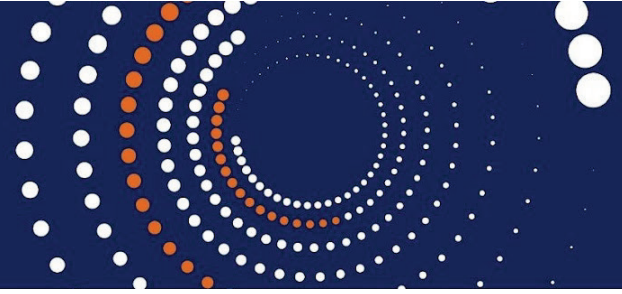
An Example of Five Sources of Life

- Our engagement of issues of poverty and justice in our local community continually stretches and energises us.
- The leadership of our minister and parish council involves listening to the desires of the community.
- We usually combine some social component with the work we do.
- Our Easter celebrations and Pentecost retreat take us to the core of who we are together and renew us as a community every year.
- Our use of the Alpha program yields continual blessings.

The group records its findings and moves on to consider another Core Quality, as time permits.

Step 4 – Reporting and general discussion (30 minutes):

Everyone gathers together again, and a member from each group tells what they have discovered about the sources of life. As the reports are given, common themes are noted. Then there is general discussion about what is standing out as common perceptions of life sources. A record of these is kept for the next session.



Reflection Action Planning Process

SESSION 2 – Deciding on Action Steps

Aim of Session 2

In the previous session, up to three Core Quality areas have been identified that your church intends to work on, along with some of the sources of life in your church. The aim of this next session will be to arrive at some action steps to take these areas forward.

Before the session

Participants should be encouraged to spend time beforehand thinking about possible actions that could lead to improvement in each of the selected Core Quality areas. A few participants should be asked to concentrate on particular Core Qualities, in view of their abilities or current responsibilities in the church.

At the session

Step 1: Identify your mission focus (40 minutes):

Break into groups, one group per Core Quality. People identified beforehand as having a special interest in a particular Core Quality should now join the relevant group. Where groups will be large, other individuals should be identified beforehand to assist the facilitator in leading these groups.

Before identifying potential action steps, each group should consider the question: Which people groups are priorities for our church's mission? Examples of people groups include young families, retirees, high-school students, new residents, baptism families, people connected with a sporting club, and unemployed people.

Core Quality areas such as faith-sharing, service and inclusion can be difficult to take forward without identifying the people that are a priority for your church's mission. Identifying these people groups can inform the kinds of changes or special requirements that will be needed by church services, small groups or mission activities in order to better serve or reach these people. Identifying these groups and their needs will determine whether existing activities can be adapted or whether completely new activities are needed.

Where action steps involve mission to particular groups of people, the question needs to be continually asked: How will this action step actually help us to better connect with these people?

Step 2: Deciding on action steps (60 minutes):

Each group works through the following questions:

- (a) Which aspect of the Core Quality do we want to work with?
- (b) What is already happening in this aspect?
- (c) What signs of life have we identified in the Core Quality that we can take forward?
- (d) How will developing this Core Quality help us in our mission to any priority people groups that we have identified?
- (e) What steps need to be taken to develop this Core Quality? How will these steps help us to better connect with any priority people groups?
- (f) Who among us will be invited to make this happen? Who else needs to be invited to be involved?
- (g) Who is to do what steps and by when?

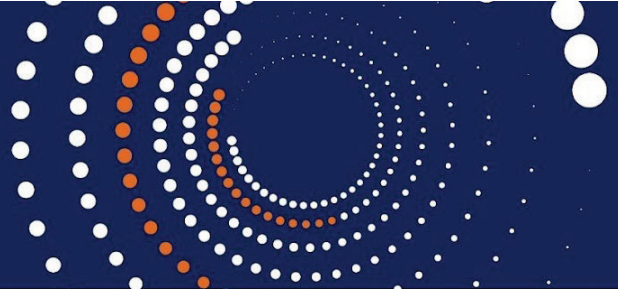


Each group then reports the proposed action steps to the whole group for discussion and endorsement. Larger churches may be able to handle a range of action steps. However, in smaller churches, it may be better to select no more than a few action steps that your church can feasibly manage over the coming months.

Step 3: Making it happen (20 minutes):

This step involves confirming who will be responsible for further developing and implementing the action steps. If this is not clear, a “coordination group” should be formed to ensure that the action steps occur. These are not necessarily the same people who will be carrying out the action steps, but they will invite individuals to be responsible for making the action steps happen.

Planning is an ongoing process that takes real leadership and commitment to ensure that action steps are achieved. *Keeping the Dream Alive* outlines what is needed to ensure that your plan will thrive as it is implemented.



Keeping the dream alive

Planning is an adventure at the boundaries of the church. It is the church continually creating itself in mission. If you have followed the main processes offered here, the adventure will have led your church community to a place where you now have a thoroughgoing plan ready for implementation. Oversight of implementation will probably be given to your minister, pastor or priest and leadership group. The main challenge for these people is to keep the dream alive.

Visionary leaders are essential

The plan will proceed well if it is tended by leaders who can continually look within the day-to-day of church life for the places where the plan can connect with it and strengthen it. It also needs leaders who can continually look beyond the day-to-day to the broader context of church life for opportunities to bring the vision to life which were not foreseen during the planning process. In short, the plan needs people with vision, people who are immersed in the vision that has been articulated by the church community and who are themselves visionary.

NCLS Research has identified churches around Australia which are growing in numbers and whose members score themselves highly on Core Qualities such as worship, belonging and faith-sharing. Our analysis shows that one of the key attributes of such churches is that they have leaders who inspire and facilitate a clear vision for the future. These leaders are people who communicate in creative ways that energise those around them, are able to articulate exciting plans for the future and draw their communities into a vision that is shared by everyone. That kind of leadership is needed along the way in the planning process and as the plan unfolds.

Constantly communicate the vision

In implementing the plan, the leaders will need to reach out both to those who were part of the planning process and those who were not so involved. Those who walked the journey of the planning process will be in tune with the church community's vision and, hopefully, will feel some fire about it. But there will come a time when the fire will fade and the flames will need to be fanned; people naturally get caught up in other things, focus shifts, energy dissipates.

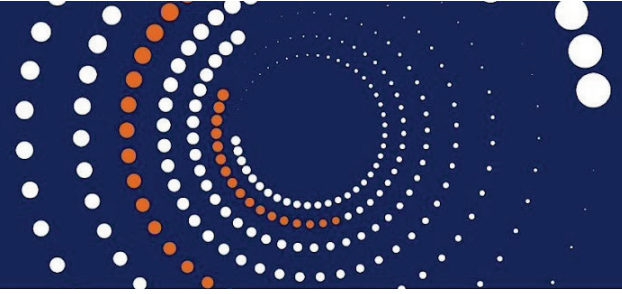
It is the church community's vision that can call them back. The vision is the centrepiece of the plan, the prime carrier of the inspiration and aspiration, so it needs to be centre stage. Display the vision in the church, publish it in newsletters, refer to it often in sermons and talk about it at meetings.

In short, the plan needs people with vision.

As the plan unfolds in action, announcing and celebrating achievements will also encourage people to move forward with other parts of the plan. For example, when the new outreach program to people who are socially isolated begins, commission those who have taken on this pastoral role and talk about the program as fruit of the vision.

Make sure to regularly evaluate

As the plan is put into action, it will be important for the leadership group to stay tuned to what is happening and to set regular review times to assess the progress of implementation. A review should consider the need for adjustments to the plan in the light of experience and assessments of how people and resources are faring.



Some questions to ask are:

- Of the goals we set, which have been realised so far and what is the progress towards others?
- What are the helps and hindrances we have found in working on the goals?
- Are the goal timelines realistic?
- How have our strategies worked in practice? Do we need to refine some or add new ones?
- How has the commitment of people stood the test of time, and do we have the right mix of skilled people to achieve our goals?

These questions are bound to point to areas which need attention in the plan. If they do not affect the overall direction of the plan, the group should feel free to make creative adjustments. Similar evaluations would be valuable every six months for the life of the plan. It may also be important to reassess vision and goals every year or two in churches and local communities where there are high levels of turnover.

At the end of the implementation period, an overall evaluation is important to gather together the lessons from the total experience. At that stage, the timing of a new planning cycle can be considered. The nature of mission is such that achievement of any one plan is not a destination but one point on an ongoing journey.

The infectious dream

For those who have not been part of the planning process, the fire might burn towards them, but don't count on it. Go out to them with a lighted torch. Find some small ways that individuals can contribute to aspects of the plan, ways that stretch but do not burden them.

The process, then, for those who are charged with carrying the plan forward, is to move with the church community's vision and extend its impact with the power of their own visioning capacity. Look for the opportunities on the horizon, take them up with imagination and foster other people's imagination. Writing about the vision challenge for leaders, Robert Starratt says that for the leader to encourage vision

...means spending a large portion of every day engaging the minds and hearts of his or her constituents in examining how they are reproducing the status quo every day and how they might alter it in small ways to make the drama of their institution work better for the people it serves and who serve it. As they take up that task they are improving, in some small way, the larger social drama of history. (Starratt 1993:149)

It is the small things that make up the big picture. We are part of the biggest picture there is – bringing forth the kingdom of God, a kingdom where we are fully alive in Christ. Jesus has offered us, as his disciples, a partnership with him in this sacred mission. And we achieve it in the daily events of our local communities. When our visioning is linked in with this vision, we can approach church life with the same energy as the prophet Habakkuk who, in the midst of the mundane and even in adversity, was able to say:

I will rejoice in the LORD
And exult in God my saviour.
The Lord my God is my strength;
He makes me leap like the deer,
He guides me to the high places.

(Habakkuk 3:18,19)