

Planning in the Local Church

Church planning is a means for churches and their leaders, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to be purposeful about developing a course of action to carry out their mission. It is a way to translate God's call and the church's response into specific goals to work toward. The plan itself is not the church's mission. Instead, the church plans for its mission.

History and Background

Planning is not new to the church. The church believes that God is concerned with bringing order out of chaos. That's what we read about at the beginning of the Bible. Jesus recognized that people plan before acting: "which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether [one] has enough to complete it? Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?" (Luke 14:28, 31). Counting the cost and taking counsel bring organization and direction and prevent disaster.

Churches have always done some kind of planning. They have determined that they wanted to have a church school, appointed a superintendent and a Christian education committee, determined how many teachers they needed, found teachers and curriculum and

sent them to teach every fall. The youth group decided to buy new altar furnishings, settled on a bazaar, worked all year making things and had a great time selling them. The youth and their advisors bought the furnishings, in consultation with the deacons and pastor or altar committee, and presented them to the church.

Churches realize that they can better perform their ministries by working together to discern their God-given ministry and mission, identify available resources, and organize the resources to work toward their goals. Church planning becomes a way a church expresses its understanding of what God is calling it to be and do.

Church planning is more than deciding the will of the members and moving forward. Churches have to be faithful as well as efficient and effective. It would be possible to do an excellent job of determining goals and plans of action but have those goals not be faithful to the mission of the church. The church must be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit as well as to its members' understanding of faith and hope. The primary job of planning is seeking to determine what God's plan for the church's mission might be.

All-church planning assumes that the opportunity to participate in planning should be available to all church members. That could mean each member is invited to a conversation in members' homes about the church's ministry and

mission. The annual meeting could be a time when people talk in small groups about what they believe God calls the church to be and do in their location, with their gifts.

Whatever the method, a church's mission is more fully understood and owned by the members when they help discern what it is in community.

What Church Planning Can Do

Churches undertaking systematic, detailed planning have found:

- People gain energy and enthusiasm from having a sense of direction and from understanding procedures.
- People feel God's mission and the ministry of the church are theirs to accomplish.
- People are motivated to carry out the mission and feel responsible for it.
- Leaders have a clearer picture of what is expected of them.
- Leaders know where they'll get support.
- The church is united in common commitments and feels a sense of wholeness.
- People are making a statement of their faith. A statement of what the congregation wants to accomplish is a kind of personal witness as well.
- Programs and activities of boards, committees and organizations are effectively coordinated.
- People can evaluate what is going

on. They can see when it is time to stop doing some things and when they are being called to do others.

Common Practices

There are all kinds of planning methods and procedures. Some are simple, some complex. Every church has an approach to planning. Some work carefully to discover their mission, while others let the life of the church emerge. Some ways your church may choose to plan are:

- Establishing a planning committee to give direction to the planning process.
- Developing a budget. The money set aside for the year ahead makes a statement about what the church intends.
- Continuing patterns of programs and activities from one year to another. The congregation may purposely intend to do what it has always done.
- Having the pastor, official board, committees and organizations each do their own planning for their area of responsibility.
- Establishing goals for the church at the annual meeting.
- Designing an annual retreat for church leaders for evaluation and planning.
- Having the governing board plan for the church and announce the goals and programs.
- Undertaking an extended period of self-study which leads to detailed planning ("strategic" planning.).

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One Church Planning Process

However your church usually makes plans, there are elements of the process which are similar. You may use the following description of a planning process to evaluate the planning you currently engage in and determine ways you may wish to revise your planning process or engage in an occasional more intensive period of planning.

- **Worship.** Our relationship with God is at the heart of all we do. Planning is a form of stewardship; it is a way of being more intentional and faithful in our use of all our resources. Every gathering of church members to engage in planning is first a gathering of worshipers so that planning can be done in the context of our covenant with God.

- **Community building.** Planning is done by people who bring together their own individuality, their own understanding of the mission of the church, dreams and hopes about the church and gifts to offer to the work of the church. These people need to sense their unity in faith and membership and to be comfortable working with one another in the planning process.

- **Faith perspective.** Church planning grows out of convictions about the mission and purpose of the church and the faith of its members. Sharing of these convictions is the foundation upon which planning occurs. A clear

theological perspective about God's intention for the church is necessary. Sharing faith perspectives helps develop a communal understanding of God's mission.

- **Data gathering and interpretation.** Even a more limited planning process requires data. In determining in broad stroke what its mission is, a church needs to know quite a bit about itself and its community. Data are the feelings, hopes, dreams and experiences of the members of the church. The church also includes statistical information about the members and financial trends in the local church. Data gathering includes discovering the needs of the people who live in the community of the church. As the church learns about itself and its community, questions about what this means in light of God's call to mission begin to surface.

- **Direction selection.** In a broken and hurting world, the challenges of ministry and mission before a church are immense. Each church must decide, based on its own situation and its own resources, where it wants to invest itself on behalf of the gospel. Of all the things it could undertake, what has priority at this time in its life as a direction in which to move?

- **Goal development.** Directions point the way into the future. Once these are determined it is necessary to translate them into statements describing what the congregation

hopes to accomplish through its efforts, what difference it hopes to make. Stating its hoped-for outcome in specific and measurable ways will guide its efforts and provide leaders with a focus for their work. One way to explore priorities might be to describe the ways people's lives will be changed as a result of the church's direction.

- **Coordination.** Often those who are leading a planning effort are not those who will oversee the plan of action, or may be involved with only a part. Plans may impact other groups. Ongoing communication between groups in the church is essential as direction begins to be seen, and throughout the planning process. This builds support as well as keeping the groups on the same path.

- **Plan of action.** Once goals are established it is necessary to map the programs and activities that involve people in working toward the achievement of the goals. A plan of action describes what will be done, who will do it, when it will be done and what resources will be available for doing it.

- **Follow-through coordination and support.** People carry out plans of action. Sometimes they become discouraged. Sometimes they encounter a problem they do not know how to solve. Sometimes they become diverted by side issues. A way needs to be found to help keep the plan of action on track and people encouraged and

supported in following up on the congregation's plan.

- **Assessment.** Almost every plan runs into unexpected complications that threaten it. Often, adjusting the plan is required or desirable. Ongoing assessment helps determine "how it's going" and assists in determining any changes and modifications that are needed.
- **Evaluation.** Every plan needs a time frame within which it is to be done, or after which a new plan will be needed. Once a plan has been completed, there is a time for looking back at what happened, for identifying accomplishments and for discovering learnings from the experience that inform the way the church will move into the future.
- **Celebration.** When a church has worked hard to set itself in important directions and has worked hard to achieve them over a period of time, there will be cause to lift up the experiences of that time joyfully and offer both the achievements and failures to God.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Many conferences and associations of the United Church of Christ have people trained to help churches with their planning. Ask your conference staff about planning facilitators or consultants.

Planning in the Local Church

Page 3 of 3

C-34

- Use an opinion/evaluation form in small-group meetings to share what has been done in the life of the church and what is being done. A selected committee can review the groups' summary notes and make a report to the congregation.
- Have a retreat where all-church planning can begin and take shape. Schedule the retreat to maximize attendance.
- The Alban Institute publishes helpful guides to visioning, mission formulation and planning. Consider using **Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations** by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, available at www.alban.org or 1-800-486-1318.
- Offer to lead a committee or small group through a planning process to get experience.
- Work with others in your church to lead the church through church planning.
- Find an experienced planner and work out an arrangement to assist her or him as an apprentice.
- Ask your conference if training in church planning is available.

Issues Facing the Church

- Some people criticize church planning for not allowing the Holy Spirit to work. How do you respond to this criticism?
- It's possible to become so preoccupied with the planning

- process that nothing gets done. How can you balance planning with doing?
- It may be difficult to adapt tools and techniques developed in business settings, since the "bottom line" is not the same. Behavior in congregations is different from that of workplaces, too. How will you review the appropriateness of business and non-profit approaches to planning? Can you supplement them with faith-oriented tools and get the results you seek?
 - Sometimes the goals that come out of church planning seem to be "more of the same", or trivial. How can you prepare ways that allow the prophetic voice be heard or a risk-taking decision be made when the congregation is gathered for planning?
 - It's harder for really large churches to participate in all-church planning. How can this handicap be lessened?
 - Churches may turn to planning when they are concerned about decline. How will you ensure a positive and hopeful approach?

Questions

- Review the elements of a church planning process outlined here. Which are different for a church than for a business?
- What is new to you about church planning?
- Is there anything you think is missing in this process?

- What do you think the role of the pastor should be in all-church planning?
- What are ways your church's planning processes could be improved? How might you encourage this?