

measuring church growth and health

a resource for church and deanery leadership teams

introduction

See: MAP for Derby Diocese Leader's Guide

Analysing the 'health' of a church is complex task; there is no one index or measure that can be used. Health isn't always easily measured in numbers or statistics, but in culture and heart.

We desire the church to grow. We should long for, pray for, expect and work for the growth of the church, in accordance with the will of God to see people reconciled to himself through Jesus. Measuring numerical growth can encourage or challenge us and focus us on the mission of the church, representing as it does real lives brought into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. So, measuring the growth of the church in attendance (e.g. Usual Sunday Attendance, Average Weekly Attendance) and membership (e.g. Worshipping Community, Electoral Roll) data is vital.

However, data about the numerical growth of a church won't tell us why a church is (or isn't) growing, so it won't tell us what we can do to maintain growth or reverse decline. That's because it is not we that grow the church, it is God (Acts 2.47b, 1 Cor 3.6). God instead calls His Church to be communities of Christian disciples; worshipping God in Christ, living out their faith in the world, bearing witness to his love and Good News, making mature disciples who can in turn do the same (Matt 28.19f). Healthy churches are those that are faithful to this call. Measuring numerical growth is a sign of that faithful call. We cannot *directly control* the growth of the church, but there is much we can do to *influence* it by creating an environment in which growth can more easily happen.

Bob Jackson writes,

...there is a subtlety about planning to grow, sometimes called the principle of obliquity. You don't aim directly at the outcome you want – growth. Rather you aim to produce the conditions in which God is able to grow the church – quality and relevance.

What Makes Churches Grow? [Kindle Edition], Bob Jackson (CHP, London, 2015), Loc 1495

Faithful churches are healthy churches; they are more likely to grow numerically, in depth of faith and in impact on their community. So, what does it mean to be such a healthy church, and how can we find evidence to tell us whether, and in which areas, a church is healthy and in which areas God may be challenging it to develop and change? This is the question this document seeks to address.

It is also this theology around which MAP for Derby Diocese is designed. The ideas and tools in this document have been drawn from that process. MAP for Derby Diocese is a tool, or process, to help churches to discover where their church is faithful to God's call to them (and therefore how healthy

they are), and the areas in which God might be calling them to grow and change. For more information, please visit the MAP for Derby Diocese pages in the Mission section of the Diocese of Derby website¹. At the start of every section in this document a reference is given to the relevant MAP for Derby Diocese document(s).

characteristics of a healthy church

See: *MAP for Derby Diocese Characteristics*

Several projects in recent years have sought to identify the characteristics of healthy, growing churches. These have usually been based on research among growing churches from a range of contexts and traditions, looking for characteristics held in common within them. For example:

- *The Healthy Churches' Handbook*
Robert Warren
- *Natural Church Development*
Christian A. Schwartz
- *The Evidence to Action Toolkit* coming from *Anecdote to Evidence*
The Church Commissioners

Each of these has developed a series of seven or eight summary characteristics of a healthy church against which a specific church may be assessed. There is, understandably, a great deal of commonality between these sets of characteristics, but there are also some differences borne out of particular emphases or church traditions in the project.

MAP for Derby Diocese uses a set of characteristics developed by combining all three of these models, alongside the Derby Diocese priorities, and bringing them up against Scripture.

The eight characteristics are:

- Christ-centred in life and worship
- focused on God's mission and purpose
- loving, servant-hearted and generous
- welcoming, open and inclusive
- willing to adapt for God's purpose
- encouraging in Christian vocation and service
- Christ-like in leadership
- engaging with children, young people and families

These are simple summary characteristics (they might be called values) with which every church can engage. How they do so, of course, will vary enormously according to context and church type.

These, then, form the 'yardstick' against which a measure might be taken. But how can we measure a church against that yardstick?

¹ <https://derby.anglican.org/en/our-mission/mission-action-plans-map.html>

subjective measures: church survey

See: *Church Health Check Leader's Guide*
Church Health Check Survey (short)
Church Health Check Survey (full)

All the church growth research projects above use a congregational questionnaire that seeks to assess how well a church is doing in each of the seven or eight characteristics that the project identifies. Completing these surveys at regular intervals (say, every three years) helps the church to see how the changes they are making are reflected in the views of the congregation.

MAP for Derby Diocese is no different. The survey we use is called the MAP Church Health Check. We use two different versions of the survey, depending on the type of church; short and full.

the short survey

The short survey simply lists the characteristics and asks the congregation to mark the church between 0 and 5 in each of them. It's a simple, single sheet survey. It is designed to be accompanied by some teaching and reflection on the characteristics and what the church that is displaying them might look like.

The short survey is used for small churches where the congregation would be daunted by a more comprehensive survey. The downside is that it's not very specific; the characteristics are broad, and the results won't tell the church in which areas of the characteristic they might need to work.

the full survey

The full survey is more comprehensive, and breaks down each characteristic into six areas, each of which is marked individually to provide a total score for that characteristic. This, then, is eight sheets, each with six marks on it, for a total of 48 'questions'. This is more daunting but does give much more detailed information. The survey can, however, be completed over several weeks.

why use a survey?

A survey is helpful because it gets behind simple data to the attitudes and opinions of the congregation; what they think and feel. A survey will also provide a wide view across the whole congregation, rather than the view of a few who might have loud voices, or just the vicar or the PCC. It can give a broad view over a wide range of factors in a relatively short period.

Crucially, though, the survey asks for the person's *perception*. It therefore has the disadvantage of being subjective, or anecdotal. An individual's perception is often skewed, through lack of information, personal bias or misplaced confidence (or lack of it). A larger sample will help to mitigate this skewing somewhat, but it won't eliminate it altogether.

Moreover, completing a survey, particularly every three years, can be tiresome for a congregation. Some will say, "But we did this three years ago!" It is therefore important that surveys are carefully embedded in a transparent process, with their purpose and value explained, the results shared and the church seeing the actions, and the fruits of those actions, arising from the information gained.

objective measures: statistical data

See: *Seeking Evidence for Church Health (under Further Help and Resources in Stage 2: Reflect)*

To give a check and balance to the subjective assessment of a congregational survey, it is wise to gather statistical information (numbers and other data) in each of the characteristics. Not all projects do this, because it is hard to identify objective measures for things like faith, discipleship and worship. Nevertheless, doing so has significant benefit:

- 1) Gathering statistics doesn't require the co-operation of the whole congregation and can be done more effectively by fewer people.
- 2) Statistical data (carefully selected and properly used) are objective – they work on facts (evidence) instead of opinion (anecdote). They can therefore be used to support and validate information received from anecdotal evidence or debunk long-held, and therefore powerful, myths that are nevertheless untrue.

MAP for Derby Diocese has a comprehensive resource, called *Seeking Evidence for Church Health*, suggesting measures that help to gather evidence in each of the characteristics, broken down into the six areas covered by the full congregational survey. However, there are a large number of measures and the church would need to select the characteristics in which they are particularly interested and which measures are appropriate for them; not all measures will suit all churches. Some of the measures are harder to collect or need adaptation in each church.

However, we have highlighted below a subset of measures that are more likely to be common over those churches and which are easier to collect. Some are even collected already or could be obtained from data we already have.

- Information marked with a green bullet are already available.
- Information marked with a blue bullet could be collected centrally (diocese or deanery).
- Information marked with a red bullet would need to be gathered via a separate data collection exercise, perhaps through the Archdeacons' Articles of Enquiry.

The measures will require some adaptation for data collection; they are designed to give an indication of the measure only.

Collected over a whole deanery or diocese, these data can help frame objectives by indicating areas of focus and potential strategies that might progress those objectives. Once the objectives and strategies are established, the data can also help to determine which churches require support and in which areas. They can also, collected over time, help to track progress in specific churches or across a deanery or diocese against specific objectives.

Christ-centred in life and worship

- attendance from the church at Learning in Faith diocesan events:
 - number of events at which the church has attended
 - number of people from the church attending events
- nurture courses (e.g. Alpha, Start) run in the last 12 months
 - number of unchurched / de-churched people attending these courses
- whether the church provides small/home/life/study groups
 - %age of the congregation attending these groups
- whether the church has provided discipleship courses (e.g. lent/advent) in the last 12 months
 - %age of the congregation attending

focused on God's mission and purpose

- presence of an up to date and active written growth plan / mission strategy (e.g. MAP)
- whether the church has run a stewardship campaign in the last 5 years
- whether the church is registered with the Parish Giving Scheme
- %age of deanery synod meetings attended by at least one church representative
- number of lay officer posts currently held:
 - wardens (x2)
 - pcc secretary
 - treasurer
 - parish safeguarding link

loving, servant-hearted and generous

- number of ongoing community activities the church is currently involved in where:
 - the church runs the activity
 - the church hosts the activity
 - the activity is carried out in partnership with another church / organisation
 - the church supports the activity (i.e. in resources, donations or volunteers)
- whether the church has carried out a community listening exercise in the last 3 years
- weekly average planned giving per planned giver / weekly average giving per congregation
- whether the church has engaged with the eco-church scheme
 - no engagement
 - enquired
 - registered
 - bronze award
 - silver award

welcoming, open and inclusive

- whether the church provides a welcome for newcomers through:
 - welcome desk
 - welcome team
 - visitor cards
 - welcome pack
- whether the church has held events for newcomers to the church in the last 12 months
- whether the church run 'Everybody Welcome' in the last 5 years
- whether the church has carried a DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) review in the last 5 years

willing to adapt for God's purposes

- whether the PCC has reviewed the MAP/mission strategy/growth plan in the last 12 months
- whether a congregational feedback survey been carried out in the last 3 years

encouraging in Christian vocation and service

- number of vocations to licensed or authorised ministry supported in the last 5 years
- whether the church has encouraged vocations in the last 12 months through:
 - vocations spoken about as a part of our sermon / teaching programme
 - a focus on Vocations Sunday (4th Sunday of Easter)

- vocations written about in our parish magazine
- completed a 'skills audit'
- other

Christ-like in leadership

- %age of the PCC in their first term (i.e. have not served on the PCC before they were elected)
- number of congregational members receiving leadership development training in the last 12 months

valuing children and young people

- whether the church has run or supported a family focussed expression of church in the last 12 months (e.g. messy church, Godly play)
- whether the church offers age-appropriate activities for children / young people during Sunday worship
- whether at least 2 hours of baptism preparation is offered to all baptism families
- %age of all schools within the parish with which the church is engaged through
 - collective worship
 - chaplaincy
 - lessons
 - governorship