

Vision and Action Plan

A Guide for Kirk Sessions

A discernment process for shaping a five-year Action Plan

Presbytery of Clyde

Before you begin

Whose mission is this?

The Church does not have a mission. God has a mission, and the Church is invited to share in it.

This is the starting point for everything that follows. The Action Plan is not a strategy your congregation owns and delivers. It is a faithful response to what God is already doing in your parish and what God may be calling your congregation to join in.

That matters because it changes the questions you ask. Instead of “What should we do?” you start with “Where is God already at work? Where is the Spirit calling us to pay attention? What is God asking of us here, in this place, with these people?”

Vision is received before it is built. Plans are faithful responses, not corporate targets.

What this guide is

This guide offers a suggested five-stage process for moving from prayerful listening to a draft Action Plan ready for submission to the Presbytery Congregational Support Committee.

It is a guide, not a prescription. Some congregations will have their own ways of doing this work. Some will already have done much of the listening described here. Use what helps. Adapt what needs adapting. Set aside what does not fit your context.

The guide draws on the Church of Scotland's Vivid Vision material. Where that material works well, we point to it. Where the Action Plan needs something different, we extend it.

What you will produce

- A short vision statement or picture of what your congregation might be in five years.
- A completed draft Action Plan, ready for submission to the Presbytery Congregational Support Committee.
- A renewed sense, in the Kirk Session and across the congregation, of where God is leading.

Five things to hold in mind

- Vision and realism go together. A vision without honesty produces frustration. Realism without vision produces decline management. You need both in the room.
- Listen widely. The congregation, those who have drifted away, and the community all have things to say. So does the Spirit. Make space for all four voices.
- Take your time. The five stages typically span eight to thirteen weeks, but the work of listening cannot be rushed. If you need to slow down at any stage, slow down.
- Be honest. Name what is hard, what is uncertain, what you might be tempted to overpromise. The Presbytery would rather receive an honest plan than a polished one.
- This is the start of a rhythm. The Action Plan is reviewed every year and re-evaluated every five. You are not writing the last word. You are starting a conversation that will continue.

Overview of the five stages

Here is the shape of the suggested process. Detailed guidance for each stage follows in the rest of the document.

Stage 1: Kirk Session preparation

Indicative duration: one to two weeks.

The Session commits to the process, prays together, agrees the timeline, identifies who will lead each part, and decides who they need to hear from.

Stage 2: Listening widely

Indicative duration: three to four weeks.

Three listening streams running in parallel: the gathered congregation, those who have drifted away, and voices from the community.

Stage 3: Discerning the vision

Indicative duration: one to two weeks.

The Kirk Session gathers everything heard, looks for themes, and drafts a vision of what the congregation might be in five years.

Stage 4: Building the plan

Indicative duration: two to three weeks.

The Session works through each Action Plan heading, translating vision into honest commitments for years one, two, three to five.

Stage 5: Drafting, testing, submitting

Indicative duration: one to two weeks.

The draft plan is shared with the congregation, revised, approved by the Session, and submitted to Presbytery.

A note on pace: Added together, the indicative durations sit at roughly eight to thirteen weeks. Some congregations may move faster. Some may spend longer on one stage than others, especially where listening reveals more than expected or where the Session wants to sit with what it has heard. It is important that you take the time to listen, discern and plan.

If you already have most of this work done: Use the guide as a checklist. Skip stages that are complete. Focus your energy where the gaps are.

Stage 1: Kirk Session preparation

Indicative duration: one to two weeks.

Before the listening begins, the Kirk Session needs to gather itself. This is not a planning meeting. It is a moment to pause, pray, and prepare.

Hold a dedicated Session meeting

Set aside one Kirk Session meeting for this work. Do not try to fit it onto the end of a meeting about other business. This work deserves its own space.

At that meeting, the Session should aim to:

- Read and discuss the theological framing. Whose mission is this? What does it mean to participate in God's mission rather than run our own?
- Agree the timeline. The five stages typically take eight to thirteen weeks in total. Confirm what works in your context.
- Identify who will lead each part of the process. The minister and Session Clerk will be central, but others should be involved. Consider asking elders with particular gifts to lead specific stages.
- Decide who you need to hear from. Not just the regulars. Who are the missing voices?
- Agree how you will communicate the process to the congregation. People will want to know what is happening and why.

Who are the missing voices?

Most Kirk Sessions hear from the same group of people week in and week out. The vision work needs wider input. Think about:

- Members who have stopped coming. People who were once part of the congregation but have drifted away. Their reasons matter.
- People in the community who would not call themselves church members. Neighbours, school families, those who use the building for groups, local shopkeepers, those involved in community organisations.
- Younger voices. People under forty, and especially under twenty-five, are often missing from these conversations. Where will you hear them?
- Those on the edges of congregational life. People who attend occasionally, or who are connected through family but rarely come themselves.

A practical note: Make a list. Names of specific people, not just categories. Decide who from the Session will approach each of them. A one-to-one conversation over coffee is often more revealing than a formal questionnaire.

Communicate the process to the congregation

Before the listening begins, tell the congregation what is happening. A short letter or pulpit announcement, repeated in print and online, should cover:

- What the Action Plan is and why it matters.
- What the Session is doing and over what timescale.
- How the congregation will be invited to contribute.
- That this is a prayerful process, not a tick-box exercise.

1 Kings 19:11-13. *“Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. Elijah heard it and went to the mouth of the cave.*

Prayer through this stage. *Lord, before we plan, teach us to listen. Before we speak, teach us to wait. Before we set out on this work, remind us that it is your work, and we are servants in it. Open our ears to the gentle whisper, and give us the patience to hear. Amen.*

Stage 2: Listening widely

Indicative duration: three to four weeks.

This is the heart of the process. Three listening streams, running in parallel. The gathered congregation, those who have drifted away, and voices from the community.

Each stream needs different questions and a different invitation. Do not use the same approach for all three.

Stream 1: The gathered congregation

This is where the Vivid Vision material is most directly useful. The Church of Scotland's Participant Guide and Facilitator Guide give a tested format for a two-hour congregational conversation built around the Vivid Vision film.

The format moves through:

- Sharing sadness and lament about the church as it is now.
- Reading Nehemiah 1 and praying together.
- Hearing stories of where God is at work.
- Watching the Vivid Vision film.
- Discussing what was inspiring, what felt realistic, what raised eyebrows.
- Individual reflection on hopes for the local area.
- Forming a vivid vision together using post-it notes.

This material is well designed and worth using. The full guides are available on the Church of Scotland website.

Adapting the Vivid Vision session for the Action Plan

Two adaptations make the session more directly useful for Action Plan work:

- After the film, add a question. "Where in what we have just seen do you sense God speaking specifically to us, in this congregation, in this parish?" This pulls the national vision down to local discernment.
- Keep all the post-it notes. They become source material for Stage 3. Do not discard or summarise too soon.

Practical considerations

- Hold the session on a Saturday morning or after a Sunday service. Make it accessible. Provide refreshments and childcare if needed.
- Invite everyone, not just regulars. Send personal invitations to people who attend occasionally.
- Consider holding two sessions on different days if a single gathering would exclude shift workers, carers, or those with childcare needs.
- If the congregation is large, use small groups of six to eight for the discussion sections.

Stream 2: Those who have drifted away

This is the conversation Kirk Sessions most often skip. It is also one of the most important.

People who were once part of the congregation and are not now have something to say. Their reasons for leaving may include things the congregation can learn from. Their hopes for what the church might be may be more honest than those of people who are still inside.

How to approach it

Do not send a questionnaire. Do not write a letter asking them to come back. Both will fail.

Instead, identify five to ten people the Session knows have drifted away. Ask a specific elder, or the minister, to make a personal phone call or arrange a coffee. Frame the invitation simply:

Suggested wording: “We are taking time as a congregation to think about what the church might be over the next five years. You were part of this congregation for a long time, and your perspective matters to us. Would you be willing to meet for a coffee and tell us, honestly, what you think? We are not trying to get you to come back. We are trying to learn.”

Questions to ask

- What did this church give you when you were part of it?
- What were you looking for that you did not find?
- If you could change one thing about this church, what would it be?
- What do you wish the church understood about people who have stopped coming?
- Is there anything you would want to see this church do that would matter to you, even if you never came back?

A discipline: Listen. Do not defend. Do not explain why things are the way they are. Do not try to recruit. The purpose of this conversation is to hear, not to argue.

Stream 3: Voices from the community

Your parish is more than your congregation. The Action Plan exists to serve the whole community, not just the people who attend on Sundays.

Decide who you need to hear from. A useful starting list:

- Headteachers of local schools.
- Leaders of community groups that use the building.
- Local councillors or community council members.
- Staff at the local doctor's surgery, food bank, or community hub.
- Neighbours of the church building.
- People involved in local third-sector work.

How to approach it

Identify two or three elders willing to have these conversations. Make them short, focused, and respectful of the other person's time. Twenty minutes over coffee is usually enough.

Questions to ask

- What do you see as the biggest needs in this community right now?
- Where do you see hope or new life in the area?
- What do you know about our church? What do you think of it?
- If our church could do one thing differently or better, what would help the community most?
- Who else should we be talking to?

Confidentiality: Be clear at the start that you will use what you hear to shape your planning, but you will not quote anyone by name without permission. Then keep that promise.

Recording what you hear

Across all three streams, capture what you hear in a way that can be used later. This does not need to be elaborate. Suggestions:

- Post-it notes from the congregational session, photographed and kept.
- Short written notes from each one-to-one conversation. Not transcripts, just key points.
- A single shared document where everything is gathered. The Session Clerk or another nominated person should hold this.

Acts 10:34-35. Then Peter began to speak: “I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

Prayer through this stage. God of the stranger and the friend, of the faithful and the doubting, of those inside and those outside: help us to hear. Help us not to flinch when what we hear is hard.

Help us not to dismiss what we did not expect. Speak through every voice, including the ones we did not think to ask. Amen.

Stage 3: Discerning the vision

Indicative duration: one to two weeks.

Now the Kirk Session draws together what has been heard and asks: what is God saying to us through all of this? What might we be, five years from now, if we listen and respond faithfully?

Gather everything in one place

Before the Session meets, gather the material from all three listening streams. Post-it notes, conversation notes, any written feedback. Lay it out so the Session can see it together.

Look for themes

In a dedicated Session meeting, work through the material together. Some prompts:

- What words or ideas come up again and again, across more than one stream?
- What surprised us? What did we not expect to hear?
- Where do voices agree? Where do they disagree?
- What did the people who have drifted away say that we need to take seriously?
- What did the community voices say that points to needs we had not seen?
- Where do we sense the Spirit pointing? Is there a thread that feels like more than coincidence?

Resist the urge to rush: Discernment is not the same as deciding. Sit with the material. Let it shape you before you try to shape it. If one meeting is not enough, take two.

Draft a vision

Once themes are clear, draft a short vision of what the congregation might be in five years. This is not a slogan or a strap line. It is a picture. A paragraph or two that someone reading it could imagine clearly.

Good vision drafts tend to:

- Describe people, places, and activities, not abstractions.
- Sound like this congregation, this parish, this community, not a generic church.
- Include both growth and humility. What you hope for, and an awareness that you depend on God for it.
- Hold space for grief as well as hope. The Vivid Vision film models this well.

A test: Read the draft out loud to someone who was not in the room when it was written. Ask them: does this sound like our church? Does it sound like a real place? Does it make you want to be part of it?

Common pitfalls to avoid

- Vision that could apply to any church anywhere. If you could swap your congregation's name for another and the vision would still read the same, it is not specific enough.
- Vision that is really a list of activities. Activities belong in the Action Plan. Vision describes the kind of church those activities are building towards.
- Vision that ignores what you heard. If the community said the biggest need was loneliness among older people and your vision does not mention them, something has gone wrong in the discernment.
- Vision that overpromises. "We will reach every household in the parish." Be honest about what your congregation could actually become.

Habakkuk 2:2-3. *Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."*

Prayer through this stage. *God who calls us by name and knows our place, help us to see what you are showing us. Where we are tempted to make the picture safer or smaller than you intend, give us courage. Where we are tempted to make it grander than we can faithfully follow, give us honesty. Shape this vision so that it is your gift to us, not our project for you. Amen.*

Stage 4: Building the plan

Indicative duration: two to three weeks.

Vision becomes plan. This is where critical thinking and honesty come in.

The Action Plan has six mission areas and four cross-cutting areas. The Session works through each, asking the same set of questions, and writes down what it can faithfully commit to.

How to organise the work

Plan for two or three working sessions across this stage. Options:

- Cover one or two areas per session, with the Kirk Session as a whole.
- Form small working groups of two or three people for each mission area. Each group drafts content, which the full Session then reviews.
- Hold a single longer workshop, perhaps half a day on a Saturday, covering everything in one go. Bring food.

Choose what suits your Session. The first option is most thorough. The third gets momentum. The middle option spreads the load.

The areas to cover

Mission areas, from the Action Plan template:

- Worship and Teaching.
- Pastoral Care and Fellowship.
- Youth and Children.
- Local Mission and Community Outreach.
- Wider Mission, including Ecumenism, Interfaith Relations and World Church.

Cross-cutting areas, also from the template:

- Finance.
- Communications.
- Property.
- HR/Staffing.

The five questions for each area

For each mission area, work through these five questions in order. Take notes. The notes become the raw material for the template.

1. Where is God already at work here?

Before planning anything new, name what is already happening. What signs of life are there in this area of church and community life? Where do you see growth, faithfulness, fruit? Sometimes the most important thing the Action Plan can do is recognise and support what is already going well.

2. What is our vision asking of us in this area?

Look back at the vision you drafted in Stage 3. What does it imply for this area of mission? If your vision speaks of a church deeply connected to younger families, what does that mean for Worship and Teaching? For Youth and Children? For Communications?

3. What did we hear from the listening?

Go back to the material from Stage 2. What did the congregation, those who drifted away, and the community say that affects this area? A vision built without reference to what was heard is not really discernment, it is wishful thinking.

4. What are the honest constraints?

This is the realism question. Name what is genuinely limiting:

- People. How many volunteers do you actually have? Who is already overstretched?
- Money. What is the realistic budget for this area? What would need to be redirected?
- Time. Is the minister or staff team available to lead this, or are they already at capacity?
- Skills. Do you have the expertise needed, or would you need to bring it in?
- Buildings. Does the property allow what the vision implies, or would it need adaptation?
- Energy. Some areas of work have momentum behind them. Others have been tried before and exhausted people. Be honest about which is which.

The honesty test: If a member of the Kirk Session reads the draft and thinks “we will never actually do that,” then it should not be in the plan. Aspirational filler is the enemy of a working plan.

5. What can we faithfully commit to in years one, two, and three to five?

Now translate vision into action. The Action Plan template asks for bullet points under each year. Some guidance:

- Year 1 should be specific and confident. These are things you can see clearly and can start now.
- Year 2 can be slightly less defined, but still concrete. What follows on from Year 1?
- Years 3 to 5 can be more directional. Where is this going? What might we hope to have in place by then?
- Each bullet should describe an action, not an intention. “Explore” and “consider” are weak verbs. “Launch,” “Train,” “Meet,” “Review,” “Appoint” are stronger.
- If nothing is happening in an area in Year 1, say so honestly. “No new activity planned in this area in Year 1. We will revisit at the annual review.” That is a legitimate entry.

Filling in the honesty boxes

The template includes two sections on each mission area page that the Session should treat with care.

“We will resource this area of mission by...”

Be specific. Money from where. People from where. Time from where. If the answer is “we do not know yet,” say so. “We have not yet identified a funding source for this work and will return to the question in Year 1” is a better entry than a vague claim.

“We have identified the following possible challenges...”

Name the real difficulties. Volunteer shortages. Vacant posts. Ageing congregations. Property limitations. Budget pressures. The Presbytery cannot help with what it does not know about. Being honest and naming a challenge is not failure.

Working through the cross-cutting areas

Finance, Communications, Property and HR/Staffing appear in two places in the template. They appear on every mission area page as ticks where they are affected. They also appear on page seven, where the bullet points from earlier pages are gathered together.

Some advice for the cross-cutting work:

- Do the mission area pages first. Then return to page seven and gather what emerged.
- Look for patterns. If three different mission areas all need volunteer recruitment, that becomes a single HR/Staffing priority on page seven.
- If a cross-cutting area has its own desired outcome that is not driven by a specific mission area, use page eight. Examples: a stewardship programme, a website redesign, a major property project.

Luke 14:28-30. *Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'*

Prayer through this stage. *God of the practical and the possible, give us the wisdom to count the cost. Give us courage to commit to what we can do, and humility to set aside what we cannot. Where we are tempted to overpromise, slow us down. Where we are tempted to underreach, lift our eyes. Make this plan a faithful answer to your call, not a polished document we cannot live up to. Amen.*

Stage 5: Drafting, testing, submitting

Indicative duration: one to two weeks.

The plan is nearly there. This final stage is about testing it and finishing it.

Pull the draft together

By now, the Session has notes, bullet points, and rough content for each section of the template. Someone needs to do the work of pulling it into a single draft document using the Clyde template.

This is usually best done by one or two people, often the minister and Session Clerk, working from the Session's notes. Their job is to assemble, not to invent. If the draft strays from what the Session agreed, it needs to come back.

Share the draft with the congregation

Before the plan is finalised you may wish to show it to the congregation. This serves two purposes:

- It honours the contribution the congregation made during the listening phase. People want to see how their voices shaped the result.
- It tests the plan. The congregation may spot gaps, unrealistic claims, or missing voices that the Session has overlooked.

Practical ways to do this:

- Hold a short congregational meeting after a service to walk through the draft.
- Make printed copies available in the church for a week, with a feedback form or comments box.
- Publish the draft on the church website and invite written responses.
- Some combination of all three.

Be clear about the purpose: This is not a vote. The Kirk Session has responsibility for approving the plan. The congregation is being asked for feedback, not consent. Make that clear, so expectations are right.

Revise

Take the feedback seriously. Not every suggestion will be incorporated, but every suggestion should be considered.

If significant gaps or problems emerge, do not paper over them. Better to revise properly than to submit a plan the congregation does not recognise.

Kirk Session approval

Once the draft is revised, the Kirk Session formally approves it at a meeting. This should be recorded in the minutes. The Session is taking responsibility for the plan and committing to deliver it, review it annually, and report on progress.

Submit to Presbytery

Submit the approved draft to the Presbytery Congregational Support Committee. The Committee will review it, comment, and may suggest revisions before the plan is finalised.

Treat the Committee's comments as part of the process, not as an exam result. They are working alongside you to make the plan as strong as it can be.

Psalm 127:1. *Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.*

Prayer through this stage. *Lord, this plan is ours and yours. We have done our best to listen, to discern, and to commit. Now we hand it to you. Use what is faithful in it. Correct what is wide of the mark. Give us the grace to live it out, the humility to change it when needed, and the patience to walk this five-year path one year at a time. Amen.*

After the plan is submitted

This is the start, not the end

The Action Plan is reviewed every year and re-evaluated every five. The work of discernment does not stop when the plan is submitted.

Build into the Kirk Session's annual rhythm:

- A formal review of the plan at least once a year, before the Presbytery's annual attestation.
- Updates to the status of each item (Not Started, In Progress, Complete).
- Honest reflection on what has not happened and why.
- Adjustments where the situation has changed. The plan is a living document, not a contract.

Keep listening

The weeks of intensive listening were a beginning. Listening to the congregation, those who have drifted, and the community should become a habit, not an event.

Some Kirk Sessions choose to set aside one meeting a year for ongoing listening. Others build it into pastoral visiting, community engagement, or the rhythms of school chaplaincy. Find what works.

Keep praying

The Action Plan is a faithful response to God's mission. Without prayer, it becomes a management document. With prayer, it remains what it was meant to be: a way of participating in what God is doing among you.

Ask for help

The Presbytery Congregational Support Committee exists to support, not to police. If a section of the plan stalls, if a constraint becomes overwhelming, if the vision needs to change, talk to the Committee early. They would rather walk alongside you than be surprised at annual review.

Appendix: Resources and notes

The Church of Scotland Vivid Vision material

The Vivid Vision film, Participant Guide, Facilitator Guide and supporting materials are available on the Church of Scotland website (Film: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/departments/faith-action-programme-committees-and-departments/faith-action-programme/vivid-vision> & Guides: <https://ascend.churchofscotland.org.uk/a-vivid-vision-for-the-church/>). The Vivid Vision session is most directly useful as the format for the congregational gathering in Stream 1 of the listening stage (Stage 2).

The Vivid Vision material was designed for a single two-hour session producing a broad vision. This guide extends it by adding listening streams beyond the gathered congregation and translating the resulting vision into the structured Action Plan template.

Stage summary at a glance

- Stage 1: Kirk Session preparation (one to two weeks). One dedicated Session meeting. Communication to the congregation.
- Stage 2: Listening widely (three to four weeks). Congregational gathering (Vivid Vision session). One-to-one conversations with those who have drifted. Conversations with community voices.
- Stage 3: Discerning the vision (one to two weeks). One or two Kirk Session meetings. Drafting a vision.
- Stage 4: Building the plan (two to three weeks). Two or three working sessions. Working through each Action Plan area.
- Stage 5: Drafting, testing, submitting (one to two weeks). Congregational feedback. Revision. Session approval. Submission to Presbytery.

If your congregation has its own approach

This guide offers a suggested route. It is not the only one. Some congregations will have established habits of discernment, listening, and planning that work well for them. Use this guide where it helps and set it aside where it does not.

If your approach differs significantly from what is suggested here, let the Presbytery Congregational Support Committee know early. They will want to understand your process so they can support it appropriately.

Final word

This is important work for your congregation and it also belongs to God. Walk it carefully, prayerfully, and honestly. The Spirit who has been at work in this parish long before any of us arrived is at work in it still.

Philippians 1:6. *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*