

Latchford Methodist Church

Five Year Strategic Plan

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Executive Summary

We are a family church with a current membership of 58 and an average congregation of 32. The attendance numbers have been falling for a few years with the decline more pronounced in the children and young adults age range. This decline has been slightly offset by an increase in attendance in the mature adults age range.

Warrington local government reported a 2015 residential population of 16,158 within the Latchford East and West wards with more housing scheduled to be built.

Latchford Methodist church mission statement is “To work together to lead people to God through Jesus Christ, with the power of the Holy Spirit.” We are centrally located to disciple to the needs of this large populace.

So why are our numbers declining?

Random local surveys suggest a lack of awareness of Latchford Methodist Church within the local community which will have a detrimental effect on any campaign to increase church membership; People can't attend if they don't know we exist.

This paper will explain our five year plan to grow our church by addressing our discipleship plans for the Latchford area, improving the lack of local community awareness of our Church within Latchford and renovating the fabric of our church. Each of these categories supports the aspirations of the other two categories and assist in the delivery of our achievable objectives.

Our fear of change

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I don’t know, we’ve always done it this way.”

“How do you know you’ll like it?”

“It sounds nice, but I just can’t.”

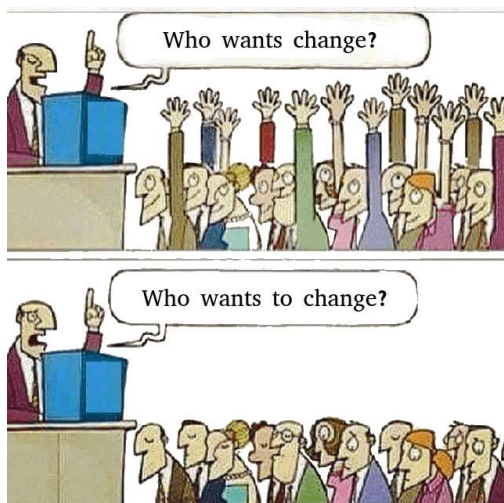
“I don’t think I could do that.”

“But what if it doesn’t work?”

...and the list goes on.

We all have fears. Some of us are afraid of heights, while others are afraid of spiders but one fear that many of us have in common is the fear of change.

It is inevitable that things in life will change but life itself is not about the changes; it is about how we react to these changes. We should accept change and understand things change for a reason and usually it's for the better:



If we, as a church, don't welcome change then we will get left behind. We need to evolve and develop to keep pace with the changes that occur all around us so we can better support our community, in their eyes stay "relevant" but above all else further spread the gospel.

We should never be afraid of change and always remember that God will never take anything away from us without the intention of replacing it with something much better.

Grow the church / Discipleship

It could be argued that our behaviour has been too insular; we have focused on “work within the church” and “working with our existing members” and therefore how can we expect the Latchford community to know we exist when we, for the best part of the year, stay behind closed doors?

Being a Christian means a lot more than just attending Church on a Sunday, it means going forth and spreading the gospel. The dictionary defines going forth as “go away from a place.” We believe it means a lot more than going outside of the church building. We believe it means going away from our comfort zone, and our regular routines, and instead perform tasks we wouldn’t normally do.

Latchford Methodist church is active in the Latchford community but awareness of this is poor. Perhaps we are active in the wrong community areas and so we need to ask ourselves the following:

- How best can we help our community?
- Using our Methodist heritage; How best can we help our community understand Jesus?
- How can we help strengthen family bonds, work life bonds and the bond of Latchford and our church with God?
- How can we spread the Gospel?

One way of doing this is to lead by example but to lead we need a destination. The journey towards this destination can be defined and measured by a series of goals. These goals help us to stay on the right path and arrive at the destination by the shortest route. We believe Latchford Church can make the greatest and an immediate yet long lasting impact by focusing our mission on supporting the **lonely people and lost souls of Latchford of all ages.**

Loneliness drives so much sadness, aggression, despair and a risk of suicides and it is something that can affect everyone at different times of their life both physically and mentally. Helping to eliminate loneliness further helps with the cohesion and well being of the community around us.

Objective #1 First and foremost, provide opportunities for the spiritual lives of our congregation to grow, enabling them to feel empowered by Gods Spirit to implement the action plan in terms of outreach, mission and growth. Examples include:

- Increase the number of Minister led Sunday Services
- Introduce and experiment with an alternative style informal 4th Sunday Service with increased informal teaching.
- Introduce themed and team preaching.
- Build on the foundation of the monthly Holy Communion service at Lyons court residential home and introduce them to themed preaching.
- Formation of a team to regularly pray for the teams working on this growth plan so that they may seek guidance from the holy spirit and understand the wishes of our Lord.
- Introduce biblical study groups
- Open a Spiritual Lenders library for both the church and community to utilise.
- Introduce awareness and attendance of different faiths seminars, retreats, and similar events to help the congregation experience different perspectives of our faith and energise our own worship.

Without fully realising it, we as a church have been working to address loneliness. The following objectives will help to consolidate our current efforts, provide clear direction and with greater efficiency focus our direction and efforts.

Objective #2 Define and agree wording for our mission outreach goal. An example could be “Help lonely people and lost souls of Latchford, irrespective of age, creed or nationality.”

Objective #3 Form a working group to develop projects to progress our mission outreach.

Objective #4 Work with our existing clubs, and service users such as rhythm time for babies, Butterfly’s nursery, Friendly Club to integrate in, or assist with, our mission outreach.

Objective #5 Establish communications with existing Charities, medical teams, elected officials and subject matter experts in Warrington to learn from their experiences of helping the lonely. Fast path some of their solutions into our plans.

Objective #6 Form a working group to spread “Themed Love” around Latchford throughout the year. Examples of this could include handing out free Hot Cross Buns at Easter, Mince Pies at Christmas and Water during summer with a Christian message.

Objective #7 Latchford Christmas Angels deserve a special objective as it’s so important we continue to spread them around the village at Christmas. Feedback has shown angels help for what can be a difficult period for some. Whilst they take almost the full year to make, they overlap with our objectives of addressing loneliness, spreading love and helping the community to understand we are there for them.

Objective #8 Establish a location for unscheduled prayer outside of Sunday’s. In the short term a prayer tent could be set up on Saturday’s and then in the longer term, establish a room that can be accessed unattended during the week without the need to open up access to the whole church. Usage of the prayer tent could be continued with “Themed Stories” acted by our worship leaders and volunteers outside of scheduled service times.

Objective #9 Explore options to meet or hold services outside our church. This could start with Carol singing at Christmas and progress to holding full Sunday services outside with a view to “be seen,” encouraging passing people to join in.

Objective #10 Develop on our participation of the “Churches together” program within Latchford, and identify common areas of interest that we can work together and improve the lives of Latchford residents.

Objective #11 Improve our communication with church members who are no longer able to attend church either by use of the website, facebook, call tree, audio recordings of our service and maybe developing a church newsletter or similar correspondence. A call tree is a contact network where members regularly reach out to each other (by invitation) using a phone, post or home visits and help them to stay in touch with the latest news from our Church family. Develop a home communion program.

Objective #12 Continue to reach out and strengthen our relationships with local schools, businesses and care facilities, in particular to inform them of our “Eradicate loneliness program” so they can help or refer people to us. Perhaps some local businesses could provide talks, demonstrations or other involvement.

Objective #13 Invest in equipment that allows us to be mobile; hold events outside of the church such as tents, table and sound equipment.

We need to warmly welcome visitors to our worship services and provide an experience where they would look forward to returning again.

Objective #14 Ensure new attendees to our church receive a warm welcome from the moment they set foot through the door until the moment the service starts. At the end of the service ensure they are invited to join us for free coffee and tea.

Objective #15 Ensure new attendees receive an introductory welcome pack that explains all church events whilst being careful not to overwhelm them.

Objective #16 Increase and improve on our existing active presence within our community through events such as litter picks and planting. We need to improve and expediate our internal communication process to improve awareness of events such as these. For some situations, the weekly church notices are just not fast enough and the strength of our congregation is not being utilised in a timely manner.

Improving the fabric of our Church.

Visibility from afar

Latchford Methodist Church was built 124 years ago within the heart of Latchford Village. Whilst Latchford Church remains centrally located within walking distance of the large residential population of Latchford the surrounding buildings and streets have changed over time to effectively offset the church away from the eyeline of a street view, block our visibility due to nearby buildings and swamp our presence by the bright lights of a nearby garage forecourt. This combines to result in a near invisible church building. This is best highlighted by a recent visitor to the church calling at the garage asking for directions to our church which was only next door. It's further highlighted by the garage staff not knowing the answer!

Objective #17: To improve the visibility of the church from afar by the installation of LED outdoor lighting to wash the church walls at a brightness level that will complement the brightness levels of the nearby garage forecourt. An outdoor lighting system that provides the ability to change colours for secular events, such as Christmas or weddings, will further help include the community in church events and include the church in community events, if planned properly. A balance of subtlety and restraint is key; we are not lighting a new airport runway!

Outdoor LED lighting will also improve the security of the church and its congregation visiting the church. It should also reduce anti-social damage to the church, such as graffiti.

Objective #18 Form a group to improve local awareness and visibility of church events by deciding what to publish and which media to use. Possible ideas could include asking each church club to provide a poster. However, it is key that once started the information must never be allowed to get stale; it is much better to display NO information then to display something that is out of date.

Objective #19 Investigate installing an electronic notice board in the car park area to display relevant church information and further improve local awareness. Some examples could be: "Shoppers Coffee Morning now being served", "Christmas Fayre next Saturday", "Next Sunday's service is" or "Lonely? Come in and meet..."

Similarly, improve the use of our website, facebook page, church outdoor notice board and local news mediums.

Objective #20: The outdoor Church notice board is in a difficult location to read, especially after dark. Re-evaluate the location of the outside Church notice board and provide illumination during darkness. Should it be moved closer to the entrance and bus stop? Will it be no longer needed if an electronic notice board is installed?

Objective #21 Organise open days and encourage people to step inside and look around. Use existing events, such as the Christmas Fayre, to inform attendees about our faith as well as the events that occur within our premises.

Objective #22 Increase local awareness of our church by placing cards and leaflets in local businesses and homes to inform them not just of our Sunday service, but also of events that occur during the week.

Objective #23 Publish our community involvement in local newspapers and radio. Examples might include Walking Day, Christmas Fayre, film night, Church building improvements or the multitude of events organised by our clubs and societies whom could all submit reports and advertisements.

Visibility from nearby

Latchford Methodist Church frontage hasn't changed much in the 124 years since it opened. Some efforts have been made to reduce the size of the perimeter wall and provide car parking space but the main front entrance does appear opposing, unfriendly and closed. Random local surveys suggest some of the local population believed the church closed years ago due to the appearance of the front entrance. Some viewed the church as appearing as not being a friendly or welcoming environment. However, new attendees to the church often comment how friendly and welcoming the church congregation are and "this isn't what we expected when we walked through the door".

Objective #24: Improve the frontage of the church by opening up the front with glass panels and doors to make the church more inviting and welcoming. The glass panels and doors will be constructed in a way to maintain security and prevent vandalism. Landscaping, lighting, sloping pathways and less steep steps will draw the line of sight into the church entrance, which will be bright, roomy and visible from the street. Removal or repair of broken outdoor fixtures will complete the image makeover demonstrating, by example, that this is a loved and cared for church and open for worship.

It is difficult to spread the love of God if it appears we don't show love for our place of worship.

Objective #25: When the Church is in use, leave the doors open as an invitation to enter. The inner doors at both the Church and hall entrances would need a little work to improve their operation and ensure weather proofing concerns are addressed.

Objective #26: To improve the internal fabric and atmosphere of the church by constructive decoration of the ceiling, walls and floor walkways and replacement of broken light fixtures with long life LED lamps. A combination of decoration and lighting will allow hymn books and bibles to be read in poor light and/or by those with poor eye sight. A brighter environment will help reflect the happiness of the congregation, convey the warmth we all feel and help retain new and existing members. As Methodists, it is difficult to spread the love of God if it appears we don't show love for our Lord's house.

Objective #27 Remove some of the chorister pews to provide open up the space in front of the alter which will allow us to make better use of this area, such as holding smaller events or meetings here.

Objective #28 Install removable hand rails to assist the infirm negotiating the chancel steps therefore enabling a more inclusive service for the congregation.

Visibility from within

The church has to be a friendly atmosphere with good quality services. Latchford continues to excel at this but is let down by the fabric of the building.

Our church hall or meeting rooms can be mistaken for any community hall or meeting room; There is very little visible presence of our faith and we are wasting such an important opportunity to welcome facility visitors to our worship services.

Objective #29: Decorate the hall and meeting rooms with welcome messages, information on our faith and invitations to attend our services. Leave copies of our welcome leaflet in the hall and meeting rooms clearly marked with an invitation to take a copy.

Objective #30 Upgrade and replace the church heating system. The heating system is old with large industrial sized pipes that are rusting and leaking. It's almost impossible to find anyone qualified to work on them. These pipes also cause obstructions and trip risks. Their removal would allow us to open up and make better use of the nave area. Due to our outside window security screens it isn't possible to open any window which can result in uncomfortable temperatures during summer and winter months as the temperature is difficult to regulate. New heating would address these issues and pre-empt any future major failure of the heating system.

Objective #31: Any work must not detract from the existing strengths of our lovely church and congregation.

Objective #32: Maximise the utilisation of our existing facilities for church services. Consideration of switching to use either the church or the hall for some activities should be made instead of defaulting to always using the church for services and the hall for societies. For example, would singing for fun or the Brass band benefit from the acoustics of the choir stalls? Similarly, Revd. Linda's powerful Maundy Thursday Service was spiritually enriched when held in the guild room.

Improve our community facilities

Latchford Methodist church is superbly located within the community and within walking distance of a large number of the population. Within this community we are blessed with a large Church Hall, kitchen and two separate meeting rooms. These facilities are constantly used by the community but we need to maintain and grow this level of usage with more secular emphasis.

An understated item within the Church Hall is the sprung floor, which would be invaluable to some community groups if they were aware of it.

We, Latchford church, have a responsibility to our community and in a similar way to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we want to care for our community and lead by example towards the Methodist faith. We therefore open our facilities for community usage with the faith that if it encourages just one person to join our worship then it is time and effort well spent. Remember, one of the hardest battles we face is to encourage someone to step inside our Church.

Objective #33 Improve and maintain the Church hall facilities

The Church hall décor is dated and in need of a refresh along with improvements to the stage and hall lighting and sound system. Similar requirements exist for the meeting rooms which are looking more dated with worn carpets and poor illumination.

Several funding grants are available to improve community halls and meeting places. Further investigation should be performed after the Church restoration work has been completed.

Objective #34 Stop hiding behind closed doors

To most people, a closed door means “Private” or “No Entry”. The majority of our doors are solid and kept closed for various reasons. We need to investigate how we can address this negativity, perhaps by adding windows within the door or completely replacing a solid door with glass; subject to fire regulations. For example, by permitting a view of the beautiful nave from the hall, hall users could be encouraged to attend our services.

Objective #35 Automatic External Defibrillator (AED)

There is a large foot fall within the church grounds which we hope to grow. The age groups we aim to grow have a higher risk of heart illness. There are charity programs to install AED's in locations that may have a higher attendance of at risk age groups, or otherwise can serve the community. We should investigate these programs to see if an AED installed within the Church grounds would benefit our community.

Objective #36 Investigate the feasibility of providing a covered, safe and access friendly walkway between Lyon's court and the Church

Objective #37 Invest in equipment that allows us to divide the church hall into smaller units to allow multiple events to occur at the same time.

Objective #38 Investigate the feasibility of installing a second kitchen for the term time use by Butterflies nursery. This would release the use of the hall, existing kitchen and guild rooms for spiritual events, working with lonely people, community events and reduce the risk of nursery staff carrying hot objects long distances.

Continual development

A church does not grow by standing still. We need to cut a path forward. Change must be embraced and welcomed but with the recognition of not impacting on the successes of our past. It is a difficult path to follow and some mistakes will be made. We have to be able to accept our mistakes and be nimble enough to correct them before causing too many issues.

Objective #39 Continually track progress of this plan and update it as the needs of the church and community change.

Objective #40 The church is only as strong as it's congregation and we continue to ask the congregation to challenge themselves. We are blessed with talented and dedicated people who spend a lot of their time organising and performing the back office tasks required to operate the church. We need to ensure we set the foundation to seek and train new members of the congregation in some of these tasks to safeguard the future of the Latchford Church.

Funding and timelines

You cannot build a house without installing strong foundations to lay the house upon. Similarly, we cannot implement some of our spiritual objectives without first ensuring the completion of some of our property objectives. Our implementation timeline must take these dependencies into account.

Initial analysis suggests there is some availability of local and regional grants that will fund our building objectives within the church. Some fund raising will be required by Latchford Church to partially fund the work. Sadly, grants for places of worship are few and difficult to obtain.

Given the type of grants available, and the initial quotes received, we should be able to open up the front of the church, decorate and install lighting (inside and outside) within 2 ½ years.

Reaching this point in the plan will serve as a good resting point to allow the church to recover from both the fundraising efforts and then later the disruption to services whilst the work is performed.

Our next steps should be to focus on improving our church facilities. Initial analysis suggests there is easier access to community grants that will fund our church hall and meeting rooms improvements. Some fund raising may be required by Latchford Church to partially fund the work. A timeline of a further 2 ½ years of work should ensure completion.

Funding and timelines for the other objectives will be considered on an object by object basis. For example, “Themed Love” can be self-funded by the church and immediately implemented.

Overall, costs may prevent the implementation of some of these objects and we shouldn't be afraid to discard the impractical or prohibitively costly objectives but we should be able to implement the remaining objectives with minimal cost and in parallel to the other objectives.

It will be highly desirable to hire the services of a professional fund raiser. These people understand who to approach for grants and can help submit the paperwork to ensure the best possible level of success in obtaining a grant.

Finally, we should always remain aware of the environmental costs of our labour and minimise the impact of our efforts to the Earth.