**Action Plan Guidelines**

Written by Sr. Bethany Madonna, SV, co-chair of the 2016 GIVEN Forum

The Action Plan is your unique initiative to activate your God-given gifts in the Church and in the world. What do you consider your life’s mission? What moves you; sets you on fire; gives you life? Is there a particular population or group you feel drawn to serve? What are your gifts?

The Action Plan will be different for each participant because it gives expression to the unique desires the Lord has placed on your heart. Think BIG, dream big, pray deeply, take note of your desires and capacities, and mold your vision of an Action Plan that will be a gift of yourself that keeps on giving! Your innovation is needed in the Church and in the world!

Keep in mind--a GIVEN Action Plan is:

* A new initiative
* Benefits others
* Completed within one year after your Forum attendance

**Practical Suggestions**

The first few months of planning are critical, as you lay the foundation for the rest of the year. Consider the essential tasks of implementation. Do you need a team? Do you need to fundraise? How will you promote your initiative? Below are some practical suggestions to take into consideration as you begin to implement your Action Plan:

*Prayer*

* Pray with your Action Plan and its goals! Keep your heart focused on the mission, the people your Action Plan will serve, and the Lord’s will as you take steps to follow Him.

*Timeline*

* Draft a realistic timeline for your Action Plan, considering the months you have to complete it.

*Goals and Objectives*

* Make sure your Action Plan has clearly defined goals.
* Utilize the SMART model to evaluate your objectives: are they Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound?

*Task List*

* Create a detailed list of tasks to obtain your objectives and incorporate them into your timeline. Remember to be realistic with the amount of time needed for each task.

*Budget*

* Consider your start-up expenses and any additional costs.
* Reach out to people and organizations who may be willing to financially support your initiative.

*Collaboration*

* Does your vision require the support of a larger entity? (parish, diocese, school, organization, business etc.) If so, work on building a collaborative relationship and be flexible to consider their goals and needs.

*Contacts*

* Identify potential advisors who have experience that may help launch your Action Plan. Ask for advice about best practices and learn from their expertise. This is a great place to engage your mentor’s network and expertise as well.
* Begin reaching out to potential team members to help with your initiative. Clearly define and keep track of each person’s role in implementing the Action Plan.
* Share ideas and brainstorm with friends and other GIVEN Forum attendees--this can allow you to refine your Action Plan and make it more effective and relevant.

*Promotion*

* Do you need to design promotional materials to spread the word about your Action Plan?
* Would a social media presence help raise awareness and support?

*Record and Organize*

* Keep detailed records of what you do during the planning, execution, and follow-up stages of your Action Plan.

*Evaluation*

* How will you ensure that your project is effective in obtaining the desired outcomes?
* Incorporating an evaluation plan using indicators to measure your progress towards any outputs and outcomes will allow you to identify and make any necessary modifications.

**Discerning God’s Will in Implementing Your Action Plan**

*The Holy Spirit knows what you do not yet know.*

When we take on a project for God’s glory and the service of the Church, we let the Holy Spirit operate beyond our own planning and strategies--but also within our planning and strategies. On our end, we have to work and to pray. But we also have to know that all the details and the measures of “success” are in God’s hands. The Holy Spirit already knows what will work and what the long-term fruits of our service will be.

*Continue the discernment process.*

In order to discern the direction that God wants for our projects, we have to be able to discern His will. Prayer is the key to this sensitivity, but don’t expect sudden, loud, divine messages! Rather, when new ideas or possibilities present themselves - give them a hearing. It’s okay not to know exactly how things will turn out.

*How to pray through what comes next.*

You can pray anywhere and anytime, but there are privileged places and times that can make your prayer deeper. Take time before or after Mass to pray near the tabernacle, or spend some time in Adoration. These can be moments when we present to the Lord the past in thanksgiving and entrust all of the items on our “to do” list into His hands.

Praying before you begin working on your Action Plan can be just a short Hail Mary sitting in front of your computer - entrusting your work to Our Lady and asking her to present it to God is one way to bless your efforts. When things fall into place far beyond what could have been expected, take a moment to thank God for these graces and to grow in the work of a collaborator in God’s plans - a participant in His creation.

*Basic tips for Discernment of Spirits.*

When new and unexpected ideas come to mind for the project you are working on, this could be from God or it could just be a distraction! Pray about these movements of the Spirit and notice when they especially tug on your heart. Ask yourself a few questions in prayer: “Would this help someone become more holy? Does this lead me closer to the person God has created me to be? Or further away? Is this reasonable?”

You could even sketch out a “pros” and “cons” list. Look over these lists and see if doing (or not doing) such a plan seems more obviously not from God, or, in fact, more clearly from God. Don’t let the process be agonizing, but remain reasonable and calm. The Holy Spirit brings the spirit of peace. Do what you can, and God will do the rest!