

What's the point of church?

TN124 Training Notes series: Planning

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It's a particularly basic question but we need to ensure we know the answer. Everything we do as church should contribute to its proper purpose.

Many aspects of church organisation (such as features of leadership, decision-making, programme planning, any aspect of administration and much more) should depend on a correct idea of purpose. So it is worth investigating what it might be and how we might express this to help everyone get the message.

Christians are vague about this. Try asking a group of church members to see how they answer the question. Let me approach this in a number of ways.

Starting with Scripture

The word 'church' in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek *ekklesia* which refers to (literally) the 'assembly' of believers, whether in a locality or universally. It is never used for a building where the assembly meets. New Testament letters are addressed to a church in a city, such as Ephesus, or to churches (plural) in a locality, such as Galatia.

Key concepts for purpose

The foundational passages for church purpose can be stated as:

- The Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40)
- The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) together with Acts 1:8

The church belongs to Jesus Christ...

See, for example: Matthew 16:18; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 2:20; Colossians 1:18.

...and its ultimate purpose is God's glory

See, for example: Matthew 5:14-16; 1 Corinthians 10:31; 1 Peter 2:9-12.

It is based on the idea of community

Hebrews 10:25, but see also the body image of Ephesians 4, Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, and all the 'one another' verses such as Colossians 3:16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Its activities

See Acts 2:46,47; 6:1; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 1:14-16; 11:23-26; 16:2; Ephesians 5:19,20; Colossians 3:16. *(List from a presentation by Paula Gooder)*

Its pictures

It is worth examining the metaphors used for the church such as the bride of Christ, the family of God, a flock of sheep, the temple, the body of Christ....

Dangers that churches fall prey to

But churches today often fall short of the ideal (as they did in NT times as is clear from some of the epistles and from Revelation chapters 2 & 3). Here are four overlapping types of church that we might call, 'not the ACTS of the Apostles'.

The Activity-centred church

The focus is the programme. The website is often a give-away because services and mid-week groups and events form the headlines. The culture is 'busy'.

The Church-centred church

The focus is the club and its well-being. Service within the church is lauded and activity beyond its walls not seen as important. The culture is 'churchy'.

The Trivia-centred church

The focus is the detail. People have lost sight of what church is all about and give their time to other matters to keep an illusion of activity. The culture is 'petty'.

The Self-centred church

The focus is on the individual. This is the church which seeks to please each consumer as best it can in its teaching and activity so that people are kept happy. The culture is 'comfy'.

Churches in these categories risk following this path of decline:

Stage 1

A mission – the church that knows what it's there for with a clear purpose.

Stage 2

A movement – where the focus shifts from purpose to the means to achieve that purpose.

Stage 3

A monument – where the means have now replaced the purpose.

In other words, you start with the focus on Jesus but gradually come to see your identity in specific church groups or activities, or musical styles, or the building. So in all this it is vital that everyone understands their church's purpose and then holds fast to it.

A note on vision

Many churches muddle the concepts of 'purpose' and 'vision'. Your purpose answers the question, 'Why are we here?'. Every church will have a similar purpose although the priorities within it may differ slightly from church to church and from one time to another.

But every church will have a different vision. This answers the question, 'Where do we have the faith to believe God may be taking us?'. This may be five years ahead or even in eternity. But the difference is that purpose is what we are called to do and be, and vision is what we believe God might do if we stick to his purpose for us. It is a future destination.

So a 'vision statement' is not the same as a 'purpose statement'. These notes are concerned with purpose, in answering the question 'Why?'.

What is the 'why' of any church?

The 'Why?' question is the key to right teaching, right activities, right attitudes and right vision.

But before defining the purpose of a church it is necessary to understand the idea of church itself. Problems here stem from the same word applying to buildings, people and an institution. Here is a developing list of ways of considering the idea of church.

1 **Viewers – of a building**

Many people's understanding of church is of a building. This is usually a building that sits uneasily on a modern backdrop and, in the case of many historic buildings, is surrounded by death in the form of a graveyard. On the other hand many church buildings are highly visible and have an aura of beauty, prayer and presence in their communities. But in this picture Ministers are curators of a shrine.

2 **Attenders – of services**

The next stage is the idea of a building that you attend and hence the phrase 'go to church'. Church is therefore all about Sunday services or special occasions such as weddings and funerals. Health is indicated by 'attendance figures' at such events. Ministers are worship leaders.

3 **Members – of a body**

One more step forward takes you to the idea of church membership not just attendance. This is a body that you can join, a church you can belong to. Health is indicated by membership figures which may be defined tightly (eg. Baptist) or loosely (eg. Anglican). Ministers are leaders of a society.

4 **Disciples – of Jesus Christ**

But the next stage jumps to the idea of following and obeying Jesus Christ. The church building and even church membership become means to a greater end, that of a personal relationship with one's Lord and Saviour. Ministers are under-shepherds of God's people.

This list adds layers of meaning as you move through it. Disciples of Jesus Christ are part of a body, attend services and may value their building. But their primary allegiance is to their Lord.

This idea of 'discipleship' is key yet is one that many church members have never really embraced. The term 'disciple' means someone who learns from a teacher and follows a leader. See for example Mark 1:14-20,38. It is a term that is personal and challenging.

So if we centre ideas of church on being disciples, what now is the purpose of church?

What others have worked to

Simple models of church purpose in the UK owe much to Robert Warren's original thinking. The early ideas were based on terms 'Worship', 'Community' and 'Mission' as three overlapping circles in a Venn diagram. Others have used the same concept with labels of 'Communion', 'Community' and 'Communication' or, more simply, 'Up', 'In', 'Out' (Mike Breen).

Meanwhile Rick Warren (no relation) in the USA went for a five-part model in his book, *The purpose-driven church*:

- God's purpose to live for
- God's people to live with
- God's principles to live by
- God's profession to live out
- God's power to live on

Or, to use another alliteration: 'Mission', 'Membership', 'Maturity', 'Ministry', 'Magnify'.

These models are described in a little more detail on page 4 of the *Church Health Review part 1*, in the Health-checks index page of the Resources section on this website.

So: defining church purpose

So how can we sum up the New Testament purpose of church in a simply but accurate way? The formula I have devised and used for many years seeks to avoid the dangers of:

- Activity or 'doing' words – as these can never be the real purpose but means to the reality.
- Life or 'being' words – as, although closer to the reality, these can be static.

So I take the idea of relationship as this seems to be at the heart of God's community purposes for people and then add in the concept of development, because again this is what discipleship is all about. I work to the same concept as the three-fold model but with a twist to it.

A church should own:

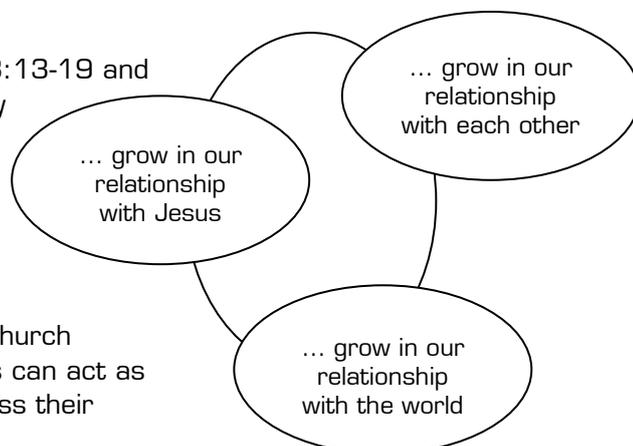
- A God-ward development: growing in our relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- An 'us-ward' development: growing in our relationship with each other.
- An out-ward development: growing in our relationship with the world.

This gets away from the idea of activities. Any church activity should have *each* of these three elements embedded within it.

These three are given together in Mark 3:13-19 and can be viewed as shown here. So for any Christian and any church we are to ...

You might like to end the statements with a phrase such as 'so that we glorify God'.

This gives a biblically faithful overview of church purpose in a memorable statement. This can act as the base for any church wanting to express their purpose in a clear way.



Six tests

The idea of a 'purpose statement' like this or a 'strap-line' is fine. The way that most churches use one is certainly not. Here are six points to save you going the same way as others. Test your church's purpose statement on each one, out of a total of five, say.

- 1 **Reality** Score
It needs to be true to your church's life or it is meaningless. There is no point in taking a statement from a large suburban church and applying it to a small rural community if the fit is not there.

- 2 **Challenge** Score
A purpose statement must never be bland. Yet many church purpose statements settle for a message that says in some form that their church is 'nice', that you will be comfortable if you join us. Is this what Jesus asks of disciples?

- 3 **Ownership** Score
It is of little use if it is in everyone's filing system. Everyone needs to know what it is and to have made it their own in understanding and application. It needs to be 'our' statement, not 'their' statement. It needs to be embedded in each member's life.

- 4 **Validity** Score
It should stand the test of the biblical model for church purpose (above). It should show a balance between the three developments rather than focusing on just one or two of them. It should reflect biblical teaching on the purpose of church.

- 5 **Meaning** Score
The statement needs to be clear in its meaning, rather than using a language that is open to different interpretations. Be very careful over generalised words such as 'worship', 'ministry', 'world', 'love'. Is everyone agreed on what it all means?

- 6 **Application** Score
The purpose applies to every department of church life and needs to be worked out in each one. It should impact the way the crèche is organised, the tone of PCC/elders/deacons meetings, the way the church presents itself in its local community.

It is my experience that few churches pass all these tests.

A final thought

To overcome problems in ownership or meaning, it can be helpful to encourage people to either draw or, in a group, to mime the purpose statement. Pictures on paper or in body movement are powerful means of putting across meaning and remain in memories.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN124. See also Articles A35, *Mapping your church*, and A52, *How to run a church vision day*, plus Training Notes TN25, *The radical values Jesus taught*, TN32, *What do you mean by 'vision'?*, TN48, *Let's get purpose statements right*, and TN152, *Should a church set 'targets'?*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN124 under Planning.

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