

How to run a church vision day

A DIY training aid

A52 Articles series: Planning

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This article takes the form of a DIY training aid for any church's leadership body or even the whole congregation.

Its aim is to offer everyone a big-picture view of their church to enable them to form a future vision and then set up a plan to lead them to it. It is, in essence, a write-up of some of my own training on this topic but expressed in my 'Article' format.


Explanation for leaders and enabler

This material can be used for individual use but it is really designed for a church group with a leader/enabler, preferably someone who is not part of the host church and so not linked to particular people or internal viewpoints.

You may want to adapt what is presented in print here so that it better fits the church in question. This text gives you a structure and a possible text to work from.

You are welcome to rework all this for an event with some reasonable variation and without copyright restriction, other than to acknowledge source, please, and point to my website.

There are a number of practical exercises to take part in throughout. In a training event these form a vital part of the learning process and one of them (see below) is particularly important and forms a major section of the event.

There are also seven hand-out sheets covering headings and exercises at points marked with this symbol: 

The material here is based on a number of Training Notes on this website and these are clearly referenced so that you can check those out to give a fuller picture if required.

1: Parable – telling stories

One helpful way into planning is to focus on story telling. The plan can then be seen as the future story of your church based on an understanding of the past story.

Big-picture mode

The key feature of this event is that it is all about big-picture, not about the detail of day-to-day ministry. It is important that whoever is leading the event ensures that the sessions stay in big-picture mode, especially if some people find this difficult and want to bring up matters of detail. They are important in their place, but once you refocus on the day-to-day the session will lose its necessarily wide-angled lens.

The material is split into five sections:

- 1: Parable: telling stories
- 2: Purpose for the future
- 3: Principles for the future
- 4: Prayer for the future
- 5: Plan for the future

Part 3 is really about values and Part 4 about vision, if you want to think in those terms. So the event progresses within a context of 'story' (hence the 'parable' reference) from purpose to values to vision and, finally, to plan.

EXERCISE 1...

Ask people what stories they enjoy. These could be fiction or real life. They could be books, films, TV soaps.

What is it about stories that make them so powerful? What about storylines that cover many years and several generations rather than just one incident?

What are the elements of a good story? Why did Jesus use the medium of stories to teach the crowds?

Now ask how each of the four Gospels begins. They start in completely different ways but each is on a massive scale: Matthew with Abraham and all the generations that follow, Mark with a clear overall definition and then Isaiah, Luke with a broad context for the coming birth of the Saviour, John with the greatest scale of all, a cosmic picture of eternity.

So how are the Gospel writers setting the story of Jesus in its context? What is the context for your church's story?

Note: the handout sheets word the exercises for participants rather than for the enabler as here.

Although there are a number of exercises spread throughout the material, the key exercise comes in Part 4 and, with its talkback, needs the best part of an hour if possible. One way to run the material is to cover the input of Parts 1-3 in the morning and then have Part 4 with the main exercise after lunch. Or to cover the input for Part 4 in the morning and run the exercise after lunch. That is if you have a full day event.

Alternatively you can cut the material down to fit into half a day (four hours, minimum, including breaks) and shorten the exercise with talkback to 45 minutes within this.

Detail and perspective

Setting vision and planning into the future can be seen as part of the story of your church, moving from the known story (of the past) into the unknown story (of the future).

Draw out the lesson that we need 'detail' but we also need 'perspective' in which to set the detail. The four Gospel writers give us this right at the start of their story-telling. A church time-line (see Exercise 2 over the page) can help explain from past history why much of what is there today is as it is.

You can use the illustration of an Ordnance Survey map for detail and a road atlas or map of the UK for the big-picture. Churches live too much at the OS level and not enough at the road atlas level but we need both. However, it is easier to cope with detail than to think and live in the challenging perspective of big-picture mode.

If you see future planning without the perspective you end up with a personal wish list. If you engage with God's involvement in your church in the past and now, you are better placed to find his will for the way ahead from here.

So you might consider the big-picture story of your church in three tenses.

• The story of the past

What is God's story of your church over the past years? You need to learn *from* the past without living *in* the past. What patterns and trends are evident from an overview of the past (which may be 25 years but which sometimes needs to be 250 years or more).

Or...EXERCISE 2

You could try telling your church's story over the past 25 or more years. You might do this with a time-line on long sheets of plain wallpaper on a row of tables marked out in years.

You then ask people to fill in the key events in the life of the church and of the community at about the correct year.

You might use different colours for different types of event (people, happenings, local community issues, national events such as Covid, shifting cultures, etc.).

It may be that your more elderly and long-standing members need to take the lead in this.

What do people learn from undertaking this exercise?

- **The story of the present**

A quick check on Revelation chapters 2 and 3 might enable the group to consider what God might praise about your church today and where he might have sharp words of reprimand to use.

So what are the strengths and the weaknesses if you are to be fully honest?

- **The story of the future**

This depends on past and present for it is just a continuation of the time-line.

But though it is a continuation it is certain to be a story of change and therefore one of risk. We live in a world of change. We need to step out of the boat at times without knowing what will happen next.

Churches need to take these two words (change and risk) and accept them. If you seek to protect yourselves from change and stay, you think, safe, you will not have vision.

Summary

So key words and ideas in this introduction are

- **Storyline**
Setting vision and planning for the future are taking the story of your church into the coming years as an ongoing story.
- **Detail/perspective**
To do this you have to put detail to one side and think big-picture, of God's plan for your church which you are simply trying to fit into.
- **Past/present/future**
You need to see all three tenses because the story of your past and the analysis of your present state will provide clues for what might be right for the future.
- **Change/risk**
Any plan in God's work is going to involve change in some form because as disciples he wants to change us to conform to the image of his Son, and with change comes risk.

You need to keep all these in mind as you consider future vision and plan. This may be the point to get groups to consider how they react to this context and other words they might suggest to add in to the mix.

EXERCISE 3 ... only if time

What have been some of the biggest changes members of your group have had to face in life?

Examples might include leaving school, forming a new relationship, a change of job or church, childbirth, empty nesting, the death of someone close, moving abroad.

But be careful because some changes might have been very painful and people may not want to share too much.

How well did they cope and what or who helped them through the process?

2: Purpose for the future

Explain that 'Why?' questions need to come before 'How?' questions but are often overlooked. The following is adapted from part of Training Notes TN124, *What's the point of church?*, on this website. Here are two possible ideas of thinking about church purpose.

A: Discipleship

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 structure 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.

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 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.

KEY QUESTION: So if we centre ideas of church on being disciples of Jesus Christ, what now is the purpose of church?

EXERCISE 4

Find a couple of L plates from when you or another family member were learning to drive a car. Punch two top corner holes and attach a loop of string to each 'plate' so it can be worn around the neck.

Ask for a volunteer (someone prepared to take a risk!) and hang one L plate on their front and one on their back. Ask them to wear these for ten minutes and then hand them to someone else.

This forms a visible reminder that disciples are learners – we can never take the L plates off. Learners develop – they do not stand still.

B: Growing in relationship

A second way of looking at purpose is to try to sum up the New Testament purpose of church in a simply but accurate way. Some talk in terms of (Mike Breen) UP, IN, OUT or (Rick Warren) five Ms: Mission, Membership, Maturity, Ministry, Magnify. 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.

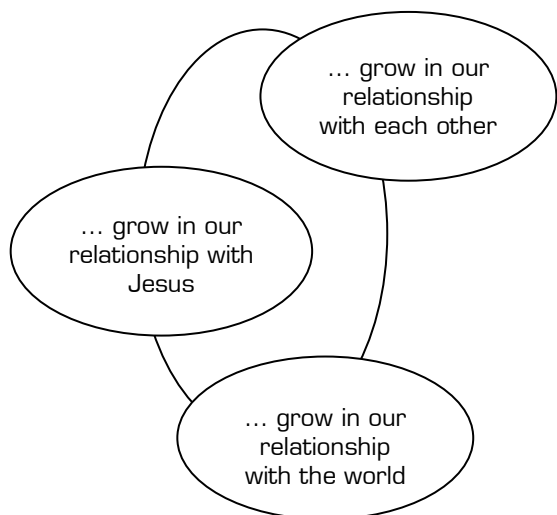
So take the idea of relationship as this seems to be at the heart of God's community purposes for people and then add in the concept of development, because again this is what discipleship is all about. Work to the same concept as the three-fold model but with a twist to it.

As a church you should see together:

- 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 (follow the wording in the ellipses on the next page) ...



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.

EXERCISE 5

If your church has a purpose statement (you may call it a 'mission statement', a 'strap-line' or, although this is something different, a 'vision statement'), ask each person to communicate what this means in a simple drawing or diagram but without using any written words.

Compare and discuss all the pictures. Sometimes a picture can be more powerful than words.

If you had time you might try to communicate the words in mime rather than picture.

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.

EXERCISE 6

Test your church's purpose statement on each one of the following tests, out of a total of five points, 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.

You cannot determine any vision (where you are heading) until you understand your purpose (why you are there). A vision must be true to your purpose. We shall say more about this when we come to consider vision itself.

3: Principles for the future

This section is adapted from Training Notes TN74, *Understanding values*.

Such principles or 'values' tell us something of who we are, what matters most to us, and how we go about things. Consider the three levels that follow and, for each, think about both what IS and what MIGHT BE.

1: Non-negotiables

These are the bedrock of your church life, the foundations on which you build the superstructure. They might refer to a credal statement if you have one, although a statement of that kind isn't quite what most people mean by 'values'.

Here are some ideas of what might go under this heading (different churches will focus on different items here):

- something about the Lordship of Jesus Christ;
- An explanation of denomination and what that means;
- a statement about the value of people or of justice in the world;
- an understanding of the place of Scripture or tradition;
- the relevance of the work of the Holy Spirit today;
- the need to care for God's creation;
- the place of discipleship or worship or prayer for the people of God.

2: Community principles

Next comes a lower order of principles. This is where churches often select a list of terms that really don't mean very much unless explained, and some of them are little more than saying that 'we try to be nice'!

One question: can you find the culture you define in the Acts of the Apostles? If not, why not? What was a typical church culture then?

Don't have more than a handful of ideas that explain how you operate. Then test what you do to see if you are following the culture you have defined.

If you want to define the culture for your church, here is a list of opposites that may give you some ideas. It is likely that several in the list will do nothing for you, but one or two may stand out as being specially 'you' as some defined point in the spectrum created.

- formal or informal;
- hierarchical or equal;
- open or closed;
- risky or safe;
- free or structured;
- traditional or innovative;
- changing or stable;
- qualitative or quantitative;
- proactive or reactive.

You can have two churches that have very similar non-negotiables, but one is as informal as you can get in its Sunday worship and the other straight down the line. These cultures then affect music styles, liturgy, congregational involvement, dress codes and much more.

EXERCISE 7

Groups are given one of the first two of these three categories to consider what the current position really is and, secondly, any changes they want to suggest. Then share back on what has been decided in each group.

So one group has a go at defining the non-negotiable foundations for the church. There may only need to be one or two but they are foundational and impact everything else.

A second group considers the community principles. They may need to check out an existing list. Are these actually true in practice? They should aim to come up with a list of no more than five or six principles.

Share findings with a flip-chart and invite comments.

3: Internal guidelines

The third level is more mundane and the list here may well be understood rather than written down. But these may be traceable back to one of the list of church culture. Take a Church Council (or Deacons or equivalent) meeting. Ask the following questions.

- Does everyone have equal value or is there an order of seniority?
- Is it OK to question the Chair's summing up or is that it?
- Will the meeting always start on time, or when enough people have turned up?
- Is there any sense of dress code for leaders or for everyone?
- Are we allowed to think the impossible?

The answers tell you about the unspoken guidelines.

EXERCISE 8

Only try this if time. Look on this website at Training Notes TN25, *The radical values that Jesus taught*.

- 1 How closely to these Kingdom principles match your church?
- 2 Which one might you work on to seek to match it to the biblical pattern, and how?

Be warned: the values are pretty radical!

4: Prayer for the future

This is adapted from Training Notes TN32, *What do you mean by 'vision'?*

There is great confusion about the idea of 'vision'. Many churches have a 'purpose statement' that they call a 'vision statement'. Here is the key distinction.

Purpose tells us what we are called by God to be and do as his church. So 'to love God and each other' is a purpose statement, not a vision statement. Scripture tells us that this is what is required of disciples.

A 'vision', which is then summarised in a 'vision statement' (and the difference between those two and the order in which they are considered are crucially important) says what you are praying God will bring about either within so many years or in eternity through you all if you fulfil your purpose.

A purpose is what we are to do (and every church's purpose is broadly the same with some different priorities). A vision is what we are praying God will do for a future date (and two churches with identical purposes can have very different visions). Even one church with unchanged purpose may have different visions at different times in its history.

So if we love God and each other then we are praying that God will change our church so that it looks like 'this' in five years' time. And the 'this' is your vision. As someone has said, 'vision is a picture of the future that produces passion'.

EXERCISE 9

Read Mark 8:31-34. For the future we need to have the concerns of God, not just human concerns. What are the dangers of focusing on human concerns? How can we together overcome falling into this danger?

Clarifying vision

Here are some key points about visions, which this Part of the event is calling 'prayer'.

- 1 **Vision is about destination**
It describes *a scene in the future* (or in eternity) and so is different from purpose.
- 2 **This includes changed lives**
Lack of vision means you are seeking to keep the show on the road. With a vision you are seeking to change the world. So a vision should speak of people changed.
- 3 **Visions are about ends not means**
On this basis you should not have your main vision as 'to complete a building'. This is a means to an end, not an end in itself.
- 4 **Vision is not the same as visionary**
Some people wake up each morning with five new visions. What is needed is one vision that the whole church is working towards.
- 5 **Visions are about what God might do**
The purpose is about your work, the vision is of what you have the faith to pray God might do if you are faithful to your purpose. *Visions must be for his glory.*
- 6 **Vision goes with leadership**
The role of the leadership (and hence

Minister, PCC, Trustees, Elders) is to hold the church to its agreed vision, even when the going gets tough. **People may be out of comfort zones** so quickly default to a longing for the past. Consider the vision Moses gave of 'a land flowing with milk and honey' and note how the Children of Israel found the journey there so taxing that they wanted to return to Egypt.

Ideas to help you get there

Here are a number of ways to help you define a vision for your church.

- **External encourager**
Invite in someone or a church team who has seen God work this way before.
- **Brainstorming**
A group allowed to lose restraints (such as finance) and dream dreams.
- **'I have a dream' input**
Someone outside the group produces a logical but challenging scenario in the future, if the church works fully to its purpose.
- **Reverse visioning**
Go into the future and look back after excellent outcomes. What has happened?
- **Emigrate to Australia**
We shall try this one shortly so it is explained in the next exercise.

EXERCISE 10

This is the main exercise of the day and is an application of the 'Emigrate to Australia' technique that has just been listed. It is described in the text that follows this box.

Main exercise

Give the handout sheet to everyone and suggest they find a quiet corner somewhere in the building or in the grounds outside where they can pray, think and write. Give them a time when they need to be back – preferably no less than after 30 minutes and ideally after 45 minutes. There needs to be no rush, even though some people will want to do things quickly.

Check that everyone understands what the sheet means. This is what it says:

Handout sheet text

"I have left (name of town you are in). I now live in Australia. I have been there for four years and during this time have heard nothing about my former UK church (they must be rotten correspondents!).

But I have prayed to God with passion every day for these four years, asking him to glorify his name through (name of church) in specific ways provided the church remains true to its purpose and its stated values.

I now come back to the UK for a visit and return to (name of church). To my utter delight I find all my prayers have been answered! What I was praying for has all been realised!

This is what I SEE and HEAR when I return in four years' time. (Note: what you write below must be visible by eye or audible by ear when you return – evidence that would stand up in a court of law, say.)"

There then follows a large space for people to write their answers. Some people let rip and write a great deal in my experience of this exercise.

Points to make ...

... before everyone starts.

- 1 Australia has been chosen to be as far away as possible so you cannot impact the outcomes.
- 2 The point about this exercise is that you have not had to live through the, perhaps, painful change process and so can be more free to express change.
- 3 You can write as long or as short a list as you like but everything you write must be seen or heard on your visit. So what you notice at a church service or on the website, or what you overhear people saying. You cannot say, 'The church is more loving' but you could say 'I saw wonderful demonstrations of love between those who had been sworn enemies when I knew them!'
- 4 The sheets are not named. We shall ask a few people to share in the group what they have written but this is only for those happy to do that. The sheets will however be collected in and analysed so please write legibly!

- 5 You will have xx minutes. Please write nothing for the first 15 minutes as a minimum. Spend the time praying for wisdom and inspiration, thinking carefully. Then spend the final minutes writing out your answers. This is an exercise of prayer more than anything else.
- 6 Use the notes of all we have covered this morning. That is the context for this exercise.

Note that four years has been chosen in the above for the period of time, but you may prefer three or five or even ten years.

When people come back

Ask if some would be willing to share one item they have written and summarise these on a flipchart. Allow 15 minutes for this, including asking how people found the experience. After this collect the sheets in and someone agrees to analyse them and put round a summary sheet within three or four days.

It is important to collect in all the sheets and ask someone (preferably not anyone with an obvious agenda that might influence their analysis) to group and list the suggestions so that a picture can emerge. A leadership group then needs to

work on this to, eventually, produce a clear vision for the church. So you may need to fix the date of that session at the end of this event. You need to decide on process from this point on.

Note some dangers

- 1 People may produce a personal wish list. So the prayerful context and the morning material is essential. You are seeking what may be God saying to everyone, not what you would like to see happen.
- 2 This exercise can generate enthusiasm. So the analysis of the sheets needs to be done within a day or two of the event, and a leadership group needs to meet soon after that. If you delay, the momentum may be lost.
- 3 It is not a good idea to produce visions by committee or you end up with something beautifully balanced and powerless. You are looking for not a majority vote on any idea but a sense that God is nudging you in a certain direction.

An event of this kind has to be seen as a step in a process, not the end point of producing a vision.

5: Plan for the future

The final session needs to underline the importance of a plan once a vision has been agreed. It therefore underlines what needs to be done later in the process, rather than trying to produce any kind of plan now.

Visions without plans may look impressive on paper but get you nowhere. A plan is simply a route-map to get you to a destination and needs to be continually updated to account for obstacles you find on the way, unexpected changes to the environment or agreement that one idea is not working and it will be right to adjust this.

For example, if your vision is to see a significant change in church life in some way by five years from now, what might be a reasonable expectation of distance of travel by the end of year one? And in that case what actions need to be taken during the year to enable progress?

So the purpose of this final session is to understand some principles of planning. Here are four principles to keep in mind. See Training Notes TN152 for more detail.

The plan must be true to your purpose

This event has led you through parable, purpose and principles to prayers. The plan, the story of the future, must show thinking and activity that is part of your church's purpose and true to your principles. It may be that in the process of planning you start to question some of your church's principles and you may need to rethink them. But you cannot have purpose and principles that do not harmonise with plan.

The plan might list annual 'aims'

An aim is a broad achievement for the year, which takes you towards your vision. It will not be a set of detailed points (that follows next) but a description of your planned destination at the end of the year. Aims may relate to activities, actions, relationships or any form of change.

The plan should list steps for each aim

Note: The language of aims and targets (or goals, objectives, etc.) is not in general agreed by all. I use 'aim' for a broad achievement over a period such as a year, and 'steps' for the measurable steps needed to achieve that aim.

Targets may have numbers attached to them but are more likely to be linked to dates. So if you have an aim of a major change in church life within a year, what specifically might this look like four and eight months from now?

But also, what does this aim look like in what can be seen or heard? That is what was covered in Exercise 10. That will give you a set of targets to demonstrate that the aim has indeed been achieved.

There has to be an understanding of the cost of change

This may need to be a change of attitude or a change in activity. Today is not the place for training on change but that may well become necessary. The plan may not be comfortable, and it may well be most uncomfortable to the church's leaders.

EXERCISE 11

Ask, or discuss in groups, what will be the likely blockers to the changes you will need to achieve this vision and what can you do to minimise the dangers.

Use this material in any way you wish. As stated at the start it can be used on your own but is written for an enabler to train a group of leaders or a wider group of church members. Over to you!

It is however only one event in what must be a process. Its aim is to help people understand concepts of planning within a Christian context and produce ideas for what may eventually become the church's vision. So the event needs to close with an agreement of process from this point, preferably with action taken for a leadership meeting within days rather than weeks.

Apart from Training Notes listed above, see also Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, and Training Notes TN103, *Planning the next step*.

Here is a link to the ***hand-out sheets***. You will find them in the Author's Notes section of the synopsis page for Article A52.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A52. See also a range of other Articles and Training Notes listed in the text.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A52 under Planning.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>