



Twelve questions to help you plan

A jargon-free toolkit

A4 Articles series: Planning

This article was first published on the website in October 2002 and last updated in November 2023. It is copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

If you are turned off by an approach to planning that always wants you to quote your mission statement, if you are confused as to what distinguishes your aims from your objectives, if you wonder if your 'core values' are 'core' enough, or if you feel that the Church has been taken over by management-speak, do not despair.

Here is a simpler, and perhaps more clearly Christian, approach that tries to be a little more sympathetic to where most people are coming from.....

This outline seeks to:

- apply to Christians on their own, together as a church, or working in a mission agency;
- explain a set of twelve optional tools to help you define what you believe is God's will for you, and to plan ahead within this;
- use principles from basic management that are valid in a Christian context;
- put these in question format, as ideas to consider, rather than statement format, as rules to obey;
- avoid management (and Christian!) jargon.

By doing this, I am seeking to sidestep some of the confusion that exists surrounding the world's use of Christian terms such as 'mission' and 'vision', high-sounding management words such as 'value' and 'excellence', and the danger of an over-simplistic approach to working within the Kingdom of God. But at the end, for those who want to know, I show how these questions link with conventional management terminology.

So here are twelve questions to ask yourself, your church or your Christian organisation. Some will be more relevant than others – no problem. These are simply tools to help you think, pray and plan. Choose just the ones that help you where you are today.

Questions 1-6: The big picture

Question 1

What do we long to see happen?

This is a 'biggest picture of all' question about God's kingdom. It is concerned with:

- an outcome ...
- possibly in the long-term or even eternity
- which you are passionate about.

It should be in terms that are more specific than 'to glorify God' or 'to see God's will done', but the answer should certainly be true to these.

The point about passion is important, because it is the answer to this question that should motivate and drive you forward. It is this horizon that should be just in view all the time. It is something that you believe God has put within you to help you work for him.

Note that the existence of some kind of statement is no guarantee that real passion exists. You cannot manufacture an answer to this question simply as a paper exercise.

The clear definition of an answer to this question is especially important when a new organisation or project is established.

It is often the founder's passion that sets the direction and provides the impetus to overcome indifference and opposition. But when passion cools, it can be helpful to go back to this fundamental question and examine ourselves against it.

It can be expressed in a 'I have a dream ...' format to follow Martin Luther King.

Examples

- 'The elimination of poverty throughout India.'
- 'For every group of people to have access to a printed gospel in their own language.'
- 'This church a vibrant and living witness to this town.'

Question 2

Why are we here?

This is a question of purpose, which is:

- best answered in terms of process or future outcome ('so that....');

- not related to present activity ('to do....') or past event ('because...');
- medium- or long-term.

This tool is particularly useful for a church. The answer must be broadly the same for every church (although the processes of determining what that answer is and expressing it in a home-grown way are important).

If Q1 proved to be helpful, then this one will usually be superfluous, because the answer will be 'to fulfil your answer to No. 1'!

'Purpose' is a term that most people understand and would not be regarded as jargon. 'Why' questions are often the most challenging things you can ask, yet too often Christians avoid them.

Example

My simple answer to this question, for any church, would be

- 'To grow in our relationships with God, with each other, and with the world.'

This is deliberately stated in terms of growth in relationships, not in terms of activity. There are many variations on this theme.

Question 3

What are we aiming to do, and for whom?

There are two questions here, but as they need to be seen as a pair they are treated as different parts of the same one. They are more likely to apply to an organisation, or to a specific project, and are the equivalent of Q2 for a church. They focus on:

- first, activity (either in terms of service provided or product made or sold);
- secondly, people (defining those you want to benefit from the service, or the markets you want to work in to sell your products);
- there may well be several different answers to both questions;
- these will usually need to change over time (as other factors in the environment change, or as you develop what you are doing).

The answers may well need to be expressed in terms of priorities.

Many organisations that lose their way have failed to define the answers to these two questions sufficiently clearly. On the other hand it is equally dangerous to hold on to these answers without realising that they need to change. One service you provide may no longer be necessary. A new opportunity may be opening up and you believe it would be wise to work to that and therefore leave an existing market.

Examples

- 'To provide quality health-care available to everyone throughout the region.'
- 'To produce and sell resources for Christian leaders in Baptist churches.'
- 'To run a weekly youth club designed to reach teenagers living on this estate.'

Question 4

What is distinctive in the way we go about things? or How do our beliefs affect our actions?

I move now to a question not about outcomes, nor activities, but to one of methods and behaviour; from questions of 'What?', 'Why?' and 'Who?' to a certain type of 'How?'. The wording of this question may need to be adapted to fit the particular group under consideration.

It can be helpful to subdivide the answers into three categories:

- non-negotiables – for Christians these may concern key points of belief such as matters relating to the creeds;
- specific approaches that shape the culture in which you carry out your work and which are specially important for you;
- internal guidelines, helpful for the efficient working of people together.

Some Christian bodies have a statement of faith which is designed to mark them out (sometimes from other Christian bodies!). This might fall into the non-negotiable category, but your answers to Q4 should focus more on the second category which determines how you go about your work.

The answers here should, to some extent, be the same for all Christian enterprises and reflect their Christian beliefs (and, in some cases, mark them out from those who do not hold those beliefs); qualities such as honesty, a working towards justice, and a high quality of care for people (sadly, these are not always the clear markers they should be). But they may well differ on other points.

Examples

Take two churches: one is formal in its style of activities, the other very informal. One seeks quality and beauty in worship, the other searches for reality in contemporary style. One has an ornate medieval building, the other uses a converted factory unit. They may have very similar beliefs, but quite different cultures.

Question 5

What is our story so far?

Management texts often omit this part of the process. Yet if your effort to look to the future, you must first turn back to the past. There are good reasons for doing so.

- God is a God of history. The Bible often tells us to remind ourselves of all that God has done for us in the past.
- What he will do for us in the future is likely to be a development of what he has been doing in us so far, so we need to spot the trends.
- Those who ignore church history usually make the same mistakes as others have made before them.

This is where the older members of your community come into their own: they are often your memories and can put together the story that you need to hear. This may provide warnings for the future, but it is even more likely to give you encouragement and hope. This exercise takes your eyes off the immediate and onto a wider canvas. You need this if you are to look ahead to the future.

Example

It can be helpful to draw a 'time line' for your church/organisation, a mapping of events and lessons learned over the past years. Try it for your own life: draw a line from the year you were born until now, and mark the years along it. Now insert key moments in your life, and specific points where God was evidently at work in you.

Question 6

What might God do through us?

You are now ready to move to a question of faith in God. If you are doing his will, what might he do through you? This places the concept of future outcomes not in terms of human achievement, but in your belief as to what is possible with your God.

This is a question about:

- specific achievements in the medium- or longer-term (outcomes rather than processes to get there);
- expressing yourselves in terms of your being servants in God's work;
- acknowledging that while you need to work, the outcome is in God's hands;
- setting clear direction.

It is closely related to Q1, but in a shorter time-scale.

The answers to this question may include specific numbers and dates but do not have to. I often feel it is wiser to be challenging without quoting exact numbers as though we had a hot line to heaven; too often people have had to forget the numbers they once put forward.

But to talk in over-general terms is not helpful either, or you will be tempted to claim that your vague ideas of what might happen were indeed met. So perhaps some idea of date more than of numbers is helpful. You need a balance of humility and boldness.

Examples

- 'Significant growth in both congregational numbers and spiritual maturity each year for the next five years.'
- 'A Christian home in every main street in the immediate area by the end of that time.'
- 'The new building paid off within three years.'

Questions 7-12: Moving into the detail

Question 7

What are the main options open to us as we work towards this?

I return to a 'How?' question. But this is not one of behaviour, but of choices. The answers will:

- list the main alternatives available to you in the way you shape all your work;
- help you to decide which are the ones you should be following now;
- allow you to make changes if these prove necessary.

Everyone has a range of choices to make on major issues such as these. Such choices need to be revisited regularly to see whether changes are required. To list all the alternatives (and to be ready to discover some surprises) is a good starting point. This usually means input from a wide range of people or some very possible ideas may well be missed.

Examples

- A publisher may have to decide whether to print in the UK or abroad.
- A mission agency may have to determine whether to send in mission workers or train local people to do the work instead.
- A growing church may need to consider whether to enlarge their building or plant a new congregation.

Question 8

What resources do we have and need?

Resources come in different forms: people, buildings, equipment, money, time, etc. Some can be exchanged: so money buys paid staff, but if volunteers can put in the time, you may not need staff, or at least not the same kind of staff.

So your list might include:

- staffing;
- volunteers;
- physical resources;
- financial resources.

Resources are usually limited, but this limitation must never be allowed to drive decisions. If you believe God has called you to do something that involves resources, you need to have the faith to expect them to be provided in some way. You need a balance of faith and wisdom.

Example

'To achieve our plans for a well-resourced outreach to young people in this town we expect to need:

- a full-time schools worker;
- sufficient funding for this appointment;
- people with experience and time to manage this appointment;
- a suitable base for them to work from'.

*Question 9***Where do we plan to get to this year?**

I have talked about big picture, but this now needs bringing down into a more manageable time-span. A year is a natural element of time you are familiar with, so it can be helpful to create a short list of where you hope to be in one year's time as you carry out your work and seek to achieve what you believe God is calling you to.

The list can helpfully include not only points relating to your main work or service, but also points about:

- your relationships as you work together;
- your personal growth in skill, understanding, etc.;
- your discipleship.

Example (as for Q8 above)

'By this time next year we are seeking to have:

- a suitable worker in post by the start of the autumn term;
- funding pledged for at least 18 months to cover salary and all costs;
- at least six local churches who have promised to support this initiative;
- the new management group working well as a team together;
- good relationships with at least ten local schools.'

*Question 10***What are the stepping stones towards these points?**

Even one year is some time away. This question takes you into the detail. If you are seeking to make a particular achievement by this time next year, what specifically needs to have happened by the end of next month, and three months after that, and four months later still? So the answers here provide a specific timetable of fixed points to help you see whether you are on schedule or not.

The answers to these questions do need to be:

- precisely measurable;
- checked regularly;
- adapted as necessary.

Example (as for Q8's point about team relationships)

- 'To undertake a Belbin exercise with an external trainer in November.'

- 'To hold a 36-hour residential event for the new management group by January.'
- 'To plan monthly meetings between now and next June, seeking 80% attendance.'

*Question 11***Where may we get it wrong?**

This is another question some standard management processes try to ignore. Some management writers work on the basis that positive thinking of unbounded success is the way to go. But this is not reality.

You may go wrong because your plans are human plans and not God's will for you. Or it may be because other factors outside your control come into play, and you fail to follow God's way but stick doggedly to what may have been the right way before. It may be that you have deeply entrenched attitudes that make you blind to God's way. Or it may be because of deliberate sinfulness and disobedience.

So to be honest about your weaknesses is to be true to your faith and true to life. All Christians, churches and mission agencies need to have sufficient humility to admit that they will not always get it right. Are you brave enough to ask the question heading this section?

Example

This is one stage in the planning process where you definitely need external help, preferably from people who know you well. Your view of your own abilities often fails to take into account your potential weaknesses.

*Question 12***Where have we got to?**

This is a question of review which can come at various points throughout the process formed by the eleven preceding questions. Many Christians fight shy of it. Yet, handled properly, it is the way to honour God and check you have not wandered away from where you believe you are being led.

Question 11 looks ahead to spot dangers. Question 12 checks the position on this, and on every area of how you are getting on.

A good review:

- can be of one feature or one activity, as well as an annual look back;
- should only look back so that plans can be made for the future;

- should be viewed in terms of development, not control.

It cannot be done without a clear sense of what you were aiming to achieve and why you are here in the first place.

It is a time to check back to what was originally agreed, to correct and adjust where necessary, and to encourage for the future. And so this list of questions comes full circle.

Examples

- Quick feedback of a one-off event to learn lessons for the future;
- a weekly look at diaries/programmes;
- an annual review of someone's work;
- an organisational review to check achievements against plans;
- a more major investigation by an external consultant.

Notes on the use of this tool

Working through the full list

One way to use the tool is to let a leadership group work through the complete list. This will mean not going into great detail but has the advantage of giving an overall picture. You might limit the group to 10 minutes per question and use a flipchart to note down ideas and lists. Then decide to return later to specific points.

There will not be time to evaluate ideas so this will turn into more of a brainstorming session – and you may wish to apply normal rules for this (such as no criticism of others' ideas).

Working through half the list

As an alternative, work through questions 1 to 6 and come back to 7 to 12 at a later session. This divides the list into big picture and medium picture. You can then have 20 minutes on each question and include some evaluation of ideas. Keeping to just questions 1 to 6 keeps you from wandering into detail and may prove a more productive way of using the complete list than the first idea above.

Using specific questions only

But you may feel that you have already done sufficient work on some of the questions in the list but realise that you have omitted others. Here it might be wise to select two or three questions that you feel you have ignored or not given enough time to and focus just on those. Here there will be time to go into greater detail.

Using the list for individual reflection

All the above three ideas have assumed a group exercise. But the list can be used solo too as a means of reflection on a big picture analysis of your church or mission. Nor does this have to

be a one-off exercise. You can use the list on an annual Planning Retreat (see Training Notes TN54, *Creating space for a Planning Retreat*) as a means of getting back to the foundations of all that a leader is seeking to be and do.

Planning for your own ministry

The list has been worded for a church or mission but can be used for one's own ministry too. Simply change the questions to

- 1; What do I long to see happen?
- 2: Why am I here?
- 3: What am I aiming to do and for whom?
- 4: What is the distinctive way I go about things?
- 5: What is my story so far?
- 6; What might God do through me?

and so on.

Planning for your own life

You can use the individual questions just listed for your life and not just for your ministry. This can be a valuable means of reflection for any kind of retreat and a means of opening oneself up to God and seeking his plans for your life.

Reminder

This list has moved from the broad picture down to the detail in a logical order. But this listing and explanation is NOT a call for every individual, church or mission agency to answer all twelve questions. Some are alternatives (such as 2 and 3), some will apply much more obviously than others. Don't be over-managed. See each question as a helpful item in your toolbox. At any one time you may need just one – or two or three. Occasionally you may need most. But do not let them rule you; they should serve you.

Key

And for those who cannot survive without some management terminology, I have been writing about:

- Q1 What I would term, the 'big vision' to avoid confusion with Q6.
- Q2 Purpose – which can be expressed in a 'purpose statement'.
- Q3 Mission – which can be expressed in a 'mission statement' although this term is often used to cover a wider range of issues than just this one.
- Q4 Values (or 'core values').
- Q5 Often ignored.
- Q6 Vision – different people use this term in different ways. I think of our mission (or purpose) as what we are called to do, and our vision of what we believe God might do if we are faithful to our mission.
- Q7 Strategies.
- Q8 Resources – no special term here.
- Q9 Aims (or, more correctly, 'medium term aims') – some talk in terms of 'Key Results'.
- Q10 Targets – although some call them goals or objectives, with many variations.
- Q11 Often ignored.
- Q12 Appraisal.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A4. See also Article A44, *Making things happen*, plus Training Notes TN17, *Suggested questions for an annual review*, TN25, *The radical values Jesus taught*, TN32, *What do you mean by vision?*, TN48, *Let's get purpose statements right*, TN74, *Understanding values*, TN124, *What's the point of church?*, TN133, *Planning the next step*, and TN144, *360-degree reviews for churches?*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A4 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>