



Understanding values

TN74 Training Notes series: Planning

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In a planning process for any organisation there are three fundamental concepts that are often identified. The principles here apply just as much to a church, although Kingdom concepts rather than worldly ideas should shape what is defined.

1 Purpose – or Why?

The 'purpose' or 'calling' of an organisation is the reason why it exists and the task it has been given to do. It is sometimes referred to as the 'mission' but this is a confusing term for Christians because it has several different meanings and is best avoided. So we are to get on with our 'purpose'.[#]

2 Vision – or Where to?

This is often muddled up with 'purpose' but the idea is quite different. I express it like this: our 'vision' is what we have the faith to believe God might do through us if we stick to our 'purpose'. So a 'vision' (or 'prayer') is all about what God will do and describes some kind of destination either a few years away or in eternity.

3 Values – or How?

If 'vision' is misunderstood, so is the idea of 'values'.^{##} These are principles about how we carry out our 'purpose' in working towards our 'vision'. They may be what we believe in or stand for, but they must affect how we behave. They define our distinctive priorities for our way of life and working. They say something about what matters most to us and therefore about our identity. We might talk about 'culture' instead. They exist whether written down or assumed.

So every church ought to have the same underlying purpose even if some details will differ. But two churches with the same purpose may have very different and valid visions in the medium term, even if their ultimate visions are the same ("Your kingdom come, your will be done..."). Should our 'values' differ too? You work it out.

[#] It is possible to distinguish 'purpose'/'calling' from the specific tasks of 'mission' but let's keep things simple here. See Training Notes TN48 for more on 'purpose' and TN32 for more on 'vision'.

^{##} There really is no need to add the word 'core' before 'values' as so many people do!

There is no one right way for how to express values but here is a three-part breakdown which may clarify things. It is one possible way of thinking. You don't have to see it like this. Some churches express their values under the headings of 'Upwards', 'Inwards' and 'Outwards'.

1: Non-negotiables

These are the bedrock of your church life, the foundations on which we 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.

These are really important. Nothing will shake you from them. They should mark you out as distinctively Christian. A church's non-negotiables will probably be very different from the equivalent list for a commercial company or even other charities.

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;
- 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.

Here is what I define as my 'foundations' (they are on this website).

"The foundations for my ministry are:

- *A belief that this is **God's work** – I am his servant. So prayer supporters are valued and essential co-workers.*
- *A determination to focus my work on **the gospel of Jesus Christ**.*
- *An enthusiasm for **the Spirit's gifts of administration** equipping the Church to serve Christ in the world.*
- *A clear understanding and right application of **Scripture** to provide the basic principles for all activity."*

Living up to them is a constant, but a great, challenge.

2: Community or church culture

Next comes a lower order of principles. This is where I see churches that have selected 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?

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.

Some years ago a friend and I ran a group in our church for the 9s to 11s age-group. This is the culture we defined for that group. We only had three points:

- *Learning found to be fun.*
- *The Christian faith real and relevant to school and home.*
- *Suitable activities cool* enough for friends to be invited.*

We ran the group on that basis.

**Well, I did say it was a few years ago. Fortunately my co-leader more than made up for my deficiencies here.*

Here is another set for a small group in a church.

- *The value of each member – we learn from God through each other.*
- *Costly love for and practical support to all.*
- *Honesty in all we say and do.*
- *Sensitivity towards each other for however we are feeling.*

I find that phrases like these often communicate better than single words. However, I have single words for my own ministry, (Wholeness, Service, Innovation, Quality, Simplicity) although I then take a couple of lines to explain each one.

Here are two examples for churches which I saw a few years ago. In both cases the church explained each point in an additional phrase. These cross over both my first two categories.

- *Culturally relevant*
- *All-age friendly*
- *Outward looking*
- *Working together*
- *Continually learning*
- *Open to God*

And, from another church:

- *Biblical in doctrine*
- *Relevant in ministry*
- *Caring in character*
- *Participative in ethos*
- *Flexible in programme*
- *Missionary in outlook*

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.

I can think of 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.

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?
- Can we have fun?

An example from St Matthew's Gospel

In Training Notes TN25, *The radical values that Jesus taught*, I study St Matthew's Gospel and draw out five values I believe Jesus gave to his followers. See the notes for the detail, but the broad headings are:

- 1 We are to give Jesus Christ absolute priority.
- 2 We are to seek the approval of God rather than other people.
- 3 We are to be vulnerable with each other.
- 4 We are to be clearly different in our behaviour.
- 5 We are to be radically different in our attitudes.

Are those non-negotiables or Kingdom culture (they are certainly not internal guidelines!)? Could a church ever use them as its value system? If not, why not?

Compliance

This is all very well, but how do you stick to your values if you define them? The danger with exercises of this kind is to come up with something that sounds great, to file them, and then to get on with life as it was before.

One issue is to consider where the values have come from. They may be imposed by a leader or a leadership team – in which case ownership by the group or congregation will not come automatically and there is much work to be done over some time.

They may be inherited from the past ("this is the way we've always done things round here") – in which case they may need to be questioned to see if they are still relevant for today and, if so, applied to every area of church life.

They may be created simply by present practice – so by listing them you are defining what is already there. In this case they need to be questioned to ask if practice fits well with what you believe it ought to be.

Your values will probably come from a mixture of all three. But, whatever the sources, they need to be worked out in practice in every area of the church's life and expressed in a simple, memorable way. How about asking every group that puts in a report to an annual report document to, one year, describe how they are seeking to work to the church values? That means the crèche, the Church Council, the small groups, the committees, and so on. How about preaching on the values, taking several sermons on each one? How about the leadership role-modelling them in the way they work and relate to each other?

Every church needs a check-up or MOT to assess itself against its values from time to time. Do you dare carry out such an exercise?

Group questions

- 1 What are our church's (or group's or organisation's) stated values? Are we happy that they should remain as they are?
- 2 Do they accurately match our actual attitudes and behaviour? If not, why not?
- 3 When did we last take a thorough examination of how well our church and each group within it are living by them and with what results?
- 4 In what ways do they make us stand out from the secular society we serve? Should they?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN74. For the Kingdom values from St Matthew's Gospel cited, see Training Notes TN25, *The radical values that Jesus taught*. For other ideas on a planning process try Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, A35, *Mapping your church*, Training Notes TN48, *Let's get purpose statements right* and TN32, *What do you mean by 'vision'?* You might also like to check out TN86, *Customer care for churches?*, and TN124, *What's the point of church?*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his consultancy services on any aspect of church planning.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN74 under Planning.

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