



Should a church set 'targets'?

TN152 Training Notes series: Planning

These notes were first published on the website in February 2024. They are 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.

The idea of setting 'targets' gets a bad press.

Governments and national institutions announce them with pride. So someone may pronounce a target that by the end of two years hospital waiting times will be halved, or house-building increased by 25% or, immigration levels pinned back.

But often, as time goes by, it becomes clear that the target will not be hit. So:

- the issue is quietly dropped in the hope that no one notices;
- or the failure is blamed on circumstances that 'could not have been foreseen' such as strikes or the global economy;
- or the meaning of terms used or the way the metrics are calculated is changed so that a target can be shown to have been hit when it clearly was not.

So most people are pretty fed up with, at least, national targets. It is hardly surprising.

What about targets for a local church? Here there may be an outcry that this is a managerial approach to the life of a living body. Or the target may appear to be telling God what he has to do. Or it may come across as a Minister's latest idea which will be quickly forgotten. Or people may be uneasy about the changes implied in something like a Mission Action Plan.

Sometimes an exciting target may be set (such as 'to grow the congregation by at least 10% each year') and then the congregation declines. Church members become disillusioned seeing this as failure.

So what is an appropriate view on our use of such terms? Should we ignore targets as tools for commercial business but inappropriate for a church? Let's go back a bit.

.
.

Is it right to plan?

It is difficult to argue against the need for planning. We are all used to the idea of a shopping list, a diary, an insurance certificate, or a holiday itinerary, all of which are plans.

If your church is organising a major event, a teaching syllabus or a building project you cannot do this without some careful planning.

A big picture look at the Bible shows a very definite plan of salvation worked right through the Old Testament to the New. The lists of Christ's family line are evidence of a plan. Christ's ministry shows up a careful strategy starting with defining who he is and then working towards Jerusalem and his crucifixion. Paul had a plan for how to reach as much of the Roman world as he could.

The real issue is *how* you go about making plans whether for yourself or for a church. There is much difference between writing out a plan because a church has been instructed to do so and praying about how you might achieve a passionate vision that you believe is from God.

Think three levels

You will hear of 'aims', 'objectives', 'targets', 'milestones' and 'goals' within some form of 'plan'. You may also come across KPIs, key performance indicators, or other terminology from the business world past or present. An in-term these days is for things to be 'strategic' or 'intentional'. Another phrase in common use is 'direction of travel'. These terms get used in various ways, not always consistently. They are all to do with getting somewhere, or achieving some form of position.

I prefer to think in terms of three levels of detail. First there needs to be a '**vision**' from God, a grand idea of a future point which people are fervently praying for. Secondly a few broad '**aims**' within that 'vision'. Finally there need to be specific '**steps**' that would take you to each 'aim' and hence towards the 'vision'.

So you might come to believe it is God's plan for your church to have a 'vision' of seeing a Christian presence on a new housing estate.

Then you might have 'aims' of seeing church members moving on to the estate, Christians getting involved in local societies and political parties, church planting on the estate, and then a physical church building eventually based there.

Finally you might have a number of 'steps' to reach each of these aims such as (for the church planting aim) finding leaders for this venture by a certain date, starting a Sunday meeting in a home or a community hall by another date, and so on.

To explain the jargon, 'aims' or 'goals' usually relate to the more general idea (I am using 'aims') and 'targets' or 'objectives' to the more specific steps towards that (I am using 'steps'). So: level one '**vision**', level two '**aims**' and level three '**steps**'.

A note about personal planning

These notes assume a church plan. But the principles work for individual plans which, for an employee, will be discussed and set at an annual review. The vision here is: 'to become as effective as possible'. Then an annual review might identify two of three aims for the coming year, each with a set of steps with dates to enable the aims to be achieved.

The idea of SMART

SMART stands for achievements that can be described in terms that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timed. Visions and aims do not need to be too specific but steps are best if they are. If they are too vague they are open to being more easily redefined.

Take the first of those: Specific. To say you want to 'love one another more' is not very specific. What would that look like in specific actions and achievements? But it can be dangerous to be too specific such as in giving numbers for the size of congregation to reach – see Principle 5 below.

A Measurable achievement is specific in value so you know for certain whether you have achieved it or not. 'We need resources' is not very measurable. 'We need to raise £5,000 by Christmas' is. And so on.

So here are some basic principles for making church plans – and even, possibly, the setting of so-called 'targets' ... I mean 'steps'.

Seven key principles

1 Place vision within purpose

Churches frequently muddle purpose and vision. 'Purpose' answers the question, why is our church here? The New Testament has principles for answering that. Every church has the same basic purpose but two churches may well have different priorities within that and a variety of ways of expressing it.

'Vision' is quite different. A vision describes an achievement within the purpose. So if one ongoing purpose for any church is to develop our relationships with God, with each other and with the world outside church, then at one point in your church's history you might feel you are being called to plant that congregation on a new estate. That fits within any church's purpose but is a specific vision of an achievement to reach. It becomes a statement of faith, an outcome to focus our prayers on. In fact 'faith' and 'prayer' are other names for 'vision'.

So the vision is what you are praying God will do provided you fulfil your purpose. You will find more about this in Training Notes TN32, TN38 and TN124.

2 Place vision before planning

This may sound obvious but I have come across churches that have been told to follow Mission Action Planning and so make a plan that sounds fine but which is not based on a passion for a vision. The plan must serve the vision, not exist in isolation. So don't try to plan anything without a clear vision in sight. A vision without a plan is powerless. A plan without a vision is meaningless.

Visions are not bright ideas. They are given by God to churches prepared to serve him in whatever way he chooses. They may come through anyone in the congregation, including children, but it is the role of leaders then to hold the church to an agreed vision. Everyone is challenged in their faith with a vision. Everyone should be praying for God to bring about the vision you believe he has led you too.

Only then can you start to think in terms of aims and steps as part of your plan.

3 **Pray for the planning**

But if a vision comes from God, the details of the plan, the broad aims and the specific steps to see that vision become reality, also need God's guidance and hence gifts of wisdom and discernment.

There will often be many different ways of approaching the vision but what is God saying to your church at this one time about how to proceed?

4 **Keep the number of aims small**

Keep the whole plan simple. Three or four specific aims for one vision will be fine.

5 **Beware specific numbers**

Be very careful about citing specific numbers unless you are convinced God has called your church to do so or this is a financial figure that is needed for a building or missionary project. It may well be God's will for the vision of a planted congregation, but do you really believe God wants it to number 50 people by a certain date? Is there a danger of assuming it will be only by your own efforts (and your brilliant plan) that people become Christians or grow in the faith?

But to avoid any talk of growth or development can make a plan lack challenge because it will not be SMART. A church adopting such an approach is likely to slowly decline. It may therefore be wiser to talk about prayer for 'significant growth' rather than either 'an increase of 17% at Sunday services' (where did that figure come from?) or the vague 'we hope to grow'.

A better approach is to be specific in your dates for achieving each step. So, going back to the example of a vision to plant a new congregation on an estate, you could give a date for each of the steps to the aims listed for that. Dates can be adjusted if they prove to be too optimistic. Dates mean that the plan can be monitored regularly and adapted as necessary. So...

6 **Review continually**

Some churches seem to have an idea for making a plan, with or without a vision, and then forgetting it. They have ticked the box marked 'Planning' without any real intention of working daily towards the vision. Plans need to be constantly reviewed and changes made as necessary. The work only starts once you have the plan. Yet many churches see the plan as the end point, instead of the starting line.

Sometimes you also need to rethink the broad aims. Perhaps God has worked in an unexpected way and new aims to replace some of the old are called for, with new steps then defined. Beware insisting that the plan must stand. Do not change it without good reason, but do not hold to it at any cost.

Leaders need courage to hold a church to the plan when the going gets tough and people waver and start to complain (think of Moses taking the Children of Israel to the Promised Land). But leaders also need godly wisdom when they discern that an aim needs to change or the steps need to be adjusted.

7 **Involve everyone**

If a church leadership alone takes responsibility for any plan, it runs the danger of never being owned by the congregation. Defining the steps needs to involve everyone in some appropriate way, with excellent communication to bring everyone on board.

So what about the question that entitles these notes: should a church have targets? Well, yes, they are an important part of any planning process but:

- avoid the word 'target' – it has too much baggage;
- don't even start to think about such steps without broad aims defined;
- focus on a vision from God for your church before you even consider planning anything;
- keep everything focused on a challenge to faith and a need for constant prayer;
- don't just copy the business world (and the online apps designed for them) – see this as a spiritual journey in seeking God's will to be done.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN152. See also Articles A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, and A35, *Mapping your church*, plus Training Notes TN32, *What do you mean by 'vision'?*, TN48, *Let's get purpose statements right*, and TN124, *What's the point of church?*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN152 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>