



Let's get purpose statements right

TN48 Training Notes series: Planning

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The idea of a 'purpose statement' is straightforward. It can be a valuable means of keeping a church, a mission agency or an individual on the right track. So why is there so much muddled thinking and lack of application in churches and Christian organisations on this topic?

These notes have been prepared to clarify and commend this simple tool. Their deliberate brevity means that they cannot cover all that might be said. But they offer a simple means of either checking out whatever you already have as a purpose statement or getting it right first time if you are about to formulate one.

1 **What are we talking about?**

The common name is a 'mission statement'. But the word 'mission' has too many different meanings in the Christian vocabulary, so I recommend you avoid this term. 'Purpose' is a clearer word: at least most people have some idea of what a purpose is.

Such purpose statements may be written for a church or an organisation, but there are other possible applications.

- It can be valuable to have a purpose statement for any team of people, for any department of an organisation, and for any specific function (such as a church office).
- Any job description should start with a purpose statement for that post. Article A6 on this website gives detailed advice on how to prepare job descriptions and argues that the first section (the purpose statement) is of equal importance to the people-links and to the list of responsibilities.
- Why not write one not just for your work but for your whole life?

2 What is a 'purpose'?

At heart, it answers the question 'Why?'. For a church or Christian mission it answers, 'Why do we exist as this church?' or 'Why is this society here?'. For a job description it answers 'Why do we have this post?' or, more personally, 'Why am I here in this post?'. For your own life it is 'Why has God placed me here?'.

Note that the 'Why?' question is more fundamental than 'What am I supposed to do?'. We too readily rush into answering this one, but it is essential we deal with 'Why?' first. What we do will depend on why we are here, not *vice versa*. Too many people, however, justify actions by then defining a purpose that fits in with what they are doing. Wrong way round! You can end up doing quite the wrong things that way.

3 What is a 'purpose statement'?

The 'purpose', not the 'purpose statement', is what matters. But this may be written out in a way that is too long or cumbersome to remember easily. So you devise a 'statement' as a simplified 'purpose' put in a memorable way. Thus the 'purpose statement' is NOT the 'purpose', but a simplified form of it.

The 'purpose statement' can therefore be expressed in ways other than words: consider a diagram, a picture, or even something more like a concept. One valid 'purpose statement' for Christians might be: 'to be to God the aroma of Christ' (2 Corinthians 2:15). Something like that can be more memorable than a set of neat phrases that alliterate!

So the golden rule should be, write (or whatever) the 'purpose statement' as the final stage in the process, and only after the 'purpose' is clear. The danger is that people come up with the 'statement' first. Once again, wrong way round!

4 How should we answer the 'Why?' question?

Never start the answer with the word 'Because'. That throws you back into the past. Q: 'Why does this church exist?' A: 'Because back in 1876 this part of town was being developed ...'. You get the idea.

Instead start the answer with 'So that'. That anchors you in the present and pushes you forward into the future. Q: 'Why does this church exist?' A: 'So that we can be a living witness to Jesus Christ ...'

I am sometimes told, when I make this simple point at a training event, that this idea is the most valuable lesson learned that day.

5 Is this the same as a 'vision statement'?

No! They are quite different, but some people use either term at random. Getting this right matters; there are two distinct and valuable ideas packaged up in these terms.

A 'purpose' tells you why you are there (in 'so that' form). It is all about what your role is. Your responsibilities flow from it.

A 'vision', on the other hand, is about what you have faith to believe *God might do* if you fulfilled your purpose. It should be stated in a future outcome either at a fixed point (in five years' time), or at some unspecified point in the distant future. This is very

different from your role. For a Christian, try substituting the word 'faith' or even 'prayer' for 'vision'. Training Notes TN32, *What do you mean by vision?*, tells you more.

I find it helpful to make purpose about 'Why?' and us, with vision about 'Where to?' and God. This simple distinction stops us claiming for ourselves what only God can do without detracting from the real responsibilities God places upon us.

And, for completeness, a 'values statement' is all about the distinctive way you go about things: what matters most to you as you go about your purpose praying that you will get to your vision. It really does pay to sort out the meanings of 'purpose', 'values' and 'vision'. We too readily bandy these terms around without clear definitions.

6 What else needs to be asked other than 'Why?'

The idea of a job description can be usefully applied to a church, organisation or department as well as to an individual. A 'job description' (it's probably wise to avoid that term here, by the way) answers three questions:

- Why am I here? (the purpose statement)
- Who do I relate to?
- What are my responsibilities?

Try the second and third questions for your church, society or church office. This gives a valuable extension of the purpose statement.

But why not try this for your own life too (not just the 'work' aspect of it?).

- 1 Why has God put you here? ('so that ...').
- 2 Who are the people you relate to in any way? The answers here will include family (up and down), friends, work colleagues, those you serve, your local community, and so on. Don't make the list too long.
- 3 What are the responsibilities that God has given you? Answering this can be a challenging way of shaping your life.

7 How do people take it for themselves?

You have hardly started yet! The process of designing a purpose and its statement can be valuable in itself. But the purpose then needs to be worked out in practice. That takes a lifetime. Yet many at this point open a filing drawer and pop the statement inside. Disaster! The statement is the start of a journey, not the end of a process.

A purpose, and its statement, should shape the whole life of the church, society or individual. It should go on doing this year by year.

Printing it on a weekly notice-sheet will not in itself do this. It needs to act as a foundation for every decision-making meeting, every action, every department. It needs to go on being communicated in creative ways, in different ways and in many ways.

When a church tells me that their purpose statement includes something like 'We are to love God and one another', I often ask how that works out in practice in, for example:

- the crèche;
- meetings of the church's council or business body;
- each small group;
- a plant and grounds working group.

I want to know what the statement means in practice: how much love for God we are supposed to have, what love for each other means when seen, and so on. I want to know if the children know what it is and what it means (in a form suitable for them at various ages). Without tough questioning, something like this, however biblical its roots, can become bland. It has no bite.

This is often called the 'ownership' of the purpose. A church purpose statement needs to be the foundation for everything. A quick test: first ask any church member to quote the statement to you; then to tell you how they are working it out in their life. If you hear immediate answers to both parts, the statement is doing its stuff.

Communication – Ownership – Application. Three key ideas without which the statement becomes a dead piece of paper. Useless. Yet this is exactly the state that many churches leave their purpose statements in.

8 Is it worth it?

Yes! The basic idea of a clear purpose is good and health-giving. Check out Mark 3:14,15 to see a purpose statement for the twelve apostles (and, incidentally, note that it has three parts and the first comes first!). A good purpose, provided it follows the guidelines given above, should, among other things:

- give clear direction;
- lead to positive thinking;
- motivate your leaders;
- provide a sharp focus;
- lay down a measure for effectiveness;
- pull everyone onto one agenda;
- enable change;
- bring different factions together;
- lead towards vision.

But a purpose statement has no value in itself. Its existence proves nothing. It is a tool – the value is in how it is used. Beware a statement invented just because your church was told to carry out the exercise, or at the instigation of a leader who had few followers. Now, can anyone remember which filing drawer we put that sheet in three years ago?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN48. See also Articles A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, and A6, *Job descriptions*, plus Training Notes TN32, *What do you mean by 'vision'?*, TN74, *Understanding values*, and TN124, *What's the point of church?*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of consultancy on any issue of big-picture thinking: purpose, values, vision, etc.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN48 under Planning.

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