

## *Your mission, should you choose to accept it....*

1 Corinthians 3:9-13 & Matthew 16:13-19

### Introduction

The book of **Proverbs** in its wisdom tells us:

“Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

At an imaginary **church meeting** in a parallel universe, committee members were planning programs and activities for the year ahead. The chairman, **James Orderly**, was feeling quite anxious about the meeting as only the annual budget meeting rivaled the amount of debate and heat that could be produced.

“Who wants to go first”, said the chairman. “This ought to be easy”, said **Ben Faithful**, a man who’d been on the committee for 10 years. “Last year was a good year. Let’s just repeat all the good things we did then. I’ve always believed that the tried and true is better than newfangled ideas.”

“Well, I’d disagree with that,” said **Bob Newman**. “Times have changed, and I think we need to reevaluate *everything* we’re doing. Just because a ministry program worked in the past doesn’t mean it’s automatically going to continue working next year. I want to start another worship service with a different style. We’ve all seen the growth at the neighbouring churches where they started a contemporary style gathering to reach the unchurched.”

“Yes, some churches will do *anything* to get a crowd,” replied Ben. “They forget who the church is for: it’s firstly for our members! We’re supposed to be different and separate from the world; not to pander to society’s wants and fads. I for one do not want to see what happens over there happening *here*.”

Over the next two hours a worthy list of ministries and causes was presented for inclusion in next year’s church calendar.

- ❑ **Karen Doer** passionately insisted that the church take an active role in Operation Rescue: a ministry to the street dwellers.
- ❑ **John Manly** gave a moving testimony of how the men’s ministry was the key to getting more males into church.
- ❑ **Linda Loving** spoke of the need to develop support groups for needy mums in the local area.
- ❑ **Bob Learner** made his usual pitch for Christian education programs to be given more a look in in the budget.
- ❑ And, of course, **Jerry Tightwad** kept asking, “How much will all this cost?” as each proposal was presented.

These were all very valid suggestions. The problem was that there seemed to be no standard of reference by which the committee could evaluate and decide which ministries were valid and which ministries, if valid, were most important to adopt.

Finally **Sophie Reason** spoke up. Sophie was the voice everyone was waiting for at this point. Whenever things got heated, she would usually make a short speech, and the majority would vote her way. It wasn't that her ideas were better; in fact, people often disagreed with her. But the sheer sense of her articulate summary and impressive personality would move the whole group as one.

In a meeting like I've caricatured today, the problem is **multiple driving forces** competing for attention. The result is often conflict, division and compromise - and sometimes, inaction.

### Definition of "drive"

The word "drive" in the dictionary can be defined as: "to guide, control, or direct".

- ❑ When you drive a car, it means you guide, control and direct it down the street.
- ❑ When you drive a nail, you guide, control and direct it into the timber.
- ❑ When you play golf, you *hope* to guide, control and direct it down the fairway!

The truth is that most churches have competing purposes among the members of the church. **Every church is driven by something.** There is a winning guiding force in each: a controlling assumption, a directing conviction behind everything that happens. It may be unspoken. It may be unknown to many. Most likely it may never be officially voted on. But it is there, influencing every aspect of the church's life.

What then is the driving force at this church: St Michael's North Carlton?

As you can see writ large on our church wall our **guiding purpose at St Michael's is summarized in the motto:**

**"Proclaiming Christ, Building Community, Sharing Hope, Serving Others."**

Before we launch into new projects, we must be sure we have a common understanding of God's consistent purpose year in year out for His Church. There are a variety of observable driving purposes in churches around our city. As I survey some of them here, you might think about whether these resemble any of your own thoughts about church.

#### 1. Churches driven by Tradition

In the tradition-driven churches the favourite phrase is: **"We've always done it this way."** The goal of a tradition-driven church is to preserve and perpetuate the past. Change is often seen as negative (and of course it can be). However, too often, in these churches, stagnation is interpreted as 'stability'. Older churches bound together by rules, regulations, and rituals rarely make progress in including a younger generation. Younger tradition-driven churches tend to be bound up in a cause or common minority purpose. In some churches tradition can be such a driving force that everything else, even God's Word, becomes secondary. Ralph Neighbour, a Christian writer from the USA, says that the last words of a church are, "We've never done it that way before."

## 2. Churches driven by Personality

At a personality-driven church the most important question is, **“What does the leader want?”** If the vicar has served the church for a long time, you will often find that he or she is most likely the driving personality. Alternatively, if the church has a change of church leaders every few years, a key member of the church may well be the driving force at such a church. One obvious problem here is that this church’s agenda is determined more by the background, needs, and insecurities of the leader than by a shared discernment of God’s will. The Apostle Paul encountered something of a personality cult going on at Corinth in Greece in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. People of that city seemed to have a divided following between Paul, Peter and another leader named Apollos. As you can imagine, a personality-driven church will often come to a standstill when its driving personality leaves or passes away. **At this church people ask, “What does the leader want?”, but they should ask, “What does God require?”**

## 3. Churches driven by Finances

The question at the forefront of everyone’s mind in finance-driven church is, **“How much will it cost?”** Nothing else ever seems quite as important as finances at this particular church. The most heated debates are about the budget. I am not questioning that good stewardship and cash flow are important, but at this type of church the issue is sometimes about control. The greater issue should always be what God wants us to do rather than whether a church can keep money in the bank. A fear of upsetting people by asking for money should not limit what God might lead a church to be doing. The Church’s annual meeting should not ask first, **“How much did we save?” but “Who was saved?”**

## 4. Churches driven by programs

The question at the forefront at this sort of church is, **“Can we fill these vacancies.”** The Sunday school, the choir, the youth group are examples of ministries that often drive this particular type of church. In program-driven churches all the energy is focused on maintaining and sustaining perennial programs of the church. The goal can subtly shift from developing people to filling positions and running programs and events. A person at this church might ask, “Which meeting am I going to tonight?” The Church leader might be asking, “How will I get someone to do this job?” The leadership committee that appoints people to leadership positions in these churches becomes the crucial force in the church. People in these programs can be led to blame themselves for not working hard enough. No one seems to ever questions if the program still works. This church shouldn’t ask, “How can we keep this going?” but **“What does God want us to be doing this time?”**

## 5. Churches driven by buildings

Winston Churchill once said, “We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.” In the buildings-driven church people too often say, **“Let’s go to church” instead of “We are the church”**. Buildings can so dominate the meaning of church in these examples that the word “church” refers primarily to the buildings and facilities rather than the mission and the people. Sometimes, such a church may desire to have nice modern facilities that cannot be afforded. Going out on a limb to pay for and maintain new facilities becomes the biggest budget item funded by offerings and gifts. Funds needed to operate vital Gospel ministries might get diverted to pay off the loan, and the actual ministry of the church might suffer. In this example, the tail wags the dog. In some cases, the church allows the smallness of their

buildings to set the limits of their growth. In still other examples, the desire to preserve historical buildings can overtake all other budget priorities and the church fails to reach out to others. This church shouldn't be asking, **"How can we care for our buildings?"** but **"How can our buildings best serve God?"**

#### **6. Churches driven by who's not in church**

In an honest attempt to reach "unchurched" people with the Gospel and to be relevant to today's culture, the outsider-driven church puts the needs of those outside the church first and attracting outsiders becomes the driving force. The primary question asked is, **"What do those outside the church want?"** This seems an honorable evangelistic principal, but to drive the total agenda of the church can reduce God's purpose for the church unhelpfully. God's church *should* evangelize and *should* deliberately and creatively relate to those who do not know Jesus, but should it be to the exclusion of all else? What about disciple-making, healing, intercessory prayer, raising children in the truth of God's word, etc. A business can justify being market-driven, but a church does not exist only to increase its market share. Our communication style and our culture should certainly not be allowed to unnecessarily alienate those who are not Christians, but nor should the church merely resemble its surrounding culture in every way. At this church the people shouldn't say, **"What will an outsider like to hear?"** but **"What is God's message to the world?"**

We could, no doubt, give examples of other dominant purposes that are often found in churches. But let's turn to the Bible to let it direct us to a common purpose for Christians.

Perhaps you remember the face of the white-haired, handsome secret agent who headed up a crack team of spies on TV in the 1960's? Remember the opening tag-line in every episode of that famous action series years ago: "Good morning Mr Phelps... Your mission should you choose to accept it..." Today, we might ask the same question about God's mission for the church (don't worry, the tape won't self-destruct after 5 seconds!)

#### **A Biblical point of view: Mission-driven Churches**

What does it mean to be a mission-driven church? In 1 Corinthians 3 we read that the Apostle warned against a personality cult in God's Church. He wrote: "The fire (of God) will test the quality of each person's work. If what we build survives, we will receive a reward" (1 Cor. 3:13-14). Using an image of the building of the temple, he taught that to build something that lasts one firstly needs the **appropriate building materials** and the **correct foundations**. In verses 10-11 he says: "... each one should be careful how they build. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:10-11).

The Good News about Jesus Christ must be the basis of all our purposes and plans. More correctly, Christ himself must be the groundwork and the materials for all we do.

What's important for a church is not to allow the manufacturing of purposes according to personality or convenience or relevance or profit or tradition to supplant Christ. Instead,

the foundation has already been laid by God for the church. Our task is to align our purposes with God's purpose as revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Plans, programs, buildings and personalities, good as they may be, are not the first principle issue. They are **not** foundational, but must serve a greater purpose. In Ephesians 2:20 we are told that the church is: "...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."

The Apostle urges Christians in 1 Corinthians 3 to build on that foundation of Christ with Godly and eternal materials. I expect he refers to people and gifts and resources and plans that God gives grants to us. They are like gold and silver and will last; they will withstand any earthly or spiritual pressure or opposition and will be pleasing to God.

Rick Warren, a pastor of a large church in the USA said that God's Church should... "have a great commitment to the great commandments and the great commission."

If we could only choose a few foundational Scriptures to keep us grounded in God's purposes for the church I would choose these:

- Matthew 22:37-39 sets out **two vital statements** of purpose:

- #1- Love the Lord with all your heart**

- The church should exist to *worship* God in everything we say and do

- #2- Love your neighbour as yourself**

- This is the purpose of *ministry*. The church exists to serve others in the name of Jesus in and outside of the church- especially the needy. We must extend God's love and generosity to all- even those opposed to us and to God.

- Matthew 28:19-20 sets out **3 more vital statements** of purpose that define our mission:

- #3- Go and make disciples**

- Here is the command for *evangelism*. This ministry is not merely about conveying a message, but helping people to respond and live out their new-found faith in Christ. This is clear in the next point...

- #4- Baptizing them**

- In the Greek text of Matthew 28 there are three present participle verbs: *going, baptizing, and teaching*. Each of these is a part of the command to "make disciples." These are essential elements of the *disciple-making*. Baptizing is prominent because it shows a complete dependence on what Christ has done for us to provide all we need to for salvation, and it indicates a belonging to Christ and his people, not just believing.

- #5- Teaching them to obey**

- The word that describes this purpose is *discipleship*. The church must exist to encourage God's people; that is, to equip them to live faithfully for God in the world today. Colossians 1:28 guides us on this point. The Apostle Paul says, "We continue to preach Christ to each person, using all wisdom to warn and to teach everyone, in order to bring each one into God's presence *as a mature person in Christ*".

- John 13:34 ties all these purposes together:

**#6- Love one another as Jesus loved us**

This is the command for sacrificial *fellowship*. Today too many Christians view their attendance at church as a mere complement to their Christian faith. Instead, we need to become a church where all members are partners in mission, bound by love of Christ. We need to grow in our need for each other and express the love Jesus himself had for us.

**The mission motto** at St Michaels North Carlton is: “Proclaiming Christ, Building Community, Sharing Hope, and Serving Others”. It’s a memorable way to keep focused on those important tenets from the Scriptures. It reflects well these Scriptural foundations of a mission-driven church.

*Rev. Steve Webster prepared this sermon for St. Michael’s Church North Carlton on 7 September 2008 for use within the St. Michael’s community and not for any financial gain.*

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