

# Four Elements of Effective Church Planning

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Any time we make plans that impact a group of people—whether it’s our church, ministry, business or even our family—we have the opportunity to deepen and enrich our relationships, both with God and the people around us.

But this takes discipline and deliberate effort, because every human interaction—including planning for the future—is tainted to some degree by sin.

Our busyness, pride, and self-sufficiency can tempt us to short-change God as we make plans, rather than spending extended time in prayer seeking his heart and discerning his leading.

These characteristics can also cause us to rely entirely on the ideas of a single individual or a small inner circle rather than drawing on the experience, insights, and wisdom of an entire group of people who are filled with the Spirit of God and desire to advance his kingdom.

I’ve found that one of the best ways to overcome these characteristics and achieve highly effective planning is to pursue a **“PURE”** planning process, which includes four key elements: **P**rayer, **U**nderstanding, **R**esults and **E**valuation.

I will describe these elements in the context of church planning, but they are just as relevant to ministries and businesses, as well as families. After I define these four principles, I’ll share the story of a pastor in Florida who leads his church through a highly relational and increasingly fruitful planning process every year.

## Prayer

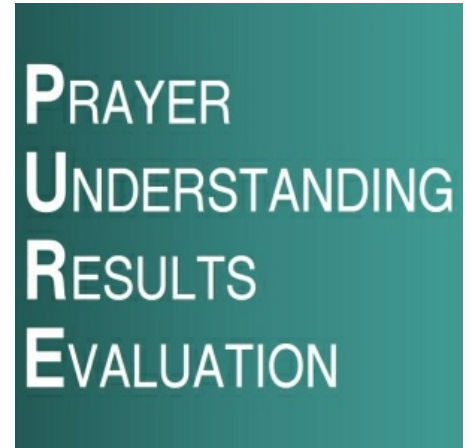
The most important relationship to focus on when you’re planning something important is your connection with God. So rather than offering short, token prayers just before you “get down to business,” follow the examples in Scripture and invest in repeated, extended periods of prayer in order to clearly discern God’s leading as you make significant plans (see [Neh. 1:4](#); [Mark 1:35](#); [Acts 13:2-3](#)).

This may involve asking your entire congregation to pray daily over a period of weeks or months as your leaders begin a planning cycle. It might also involve a day of fasting and prayer, or an evening of congregational prayer to seek guidance on crucial issues. And when either your leaders or congregation gather for planning discussions, you can always slow down for extended prayer for God’s direction before you start sharing your own ideas.

As Oswald Chambers wrote, “Prayer does not prepare us for the greater works; prayer IS the greater work!”

## Understanding

The second key element of effective planning is to gather as much relevant information and advice as possible. Although many final decisions will be made by a small group of elected leaders, don’t forget that God often gives insights, direction, and even correction through people who have neither title nor authority ([2 Kings 5:1-5](#); [Gen. 41:9-16](#); [1Sam. 25:23-35](#)).



This is why the Bible commends leaders who deliberately gather information concerning the condition of their flocks ([Prov. 27:23](#)), seek the counsel of many advisers ([Prov. 9:9](#); [Prov. 15:22](#); [Prov. 19:20](#)), and humbly listen to those who offer correction ([Ps. 141:5](#); [Prov. 15:32](#)).

So as your church plans for the future, carefully gather as much relevant information and advice as you can. This could involve personal conversations (where leaders are listening more than talking!), small group discussions, church-wide surveys, and periodic, open-agenda congregational meetings that encourage members to share their insights, questions, and suggestions on how their church could advance God's Kingdom more fruitfully.

This kind of relational data gathering takes time and energy, but in the end it will produce better-informed decisions. It will also give church members a greater sense of ownership, commitment, and excitement about the vision, strategies and goals their leaders eventually decide will best fulfill God's purposes for their body.

## Results

Many churches fail to achieve their full potential because they plan *activities* without defining the *goals* or *results* those activities should produce. These churches can look very busy, and they can spend a lot of money, but all too often they fail to produce as much kingdom fruit as they could if they committed themselves to pursuing specific, describable goals.

Specific goals can feel threatening. As soon as you begin to develop them, your stomach can tighten up with the realization that you may not achieve them. This is why many church leaders play it safe by keeping the focus on activities and saying it would be presumptuous to commit themselves to specific results.

But no athlete ever made it to the Olympic podium with this attitude. Nor has any accomplished pianist performed in Carnegie Hall by focusing only on activity.

Those who achieve the most in this world have set their hearts and minds on particular goals. They devote themselves body and soul to achieving those objectives. And if they do not make it, they at least know they "left nothing on the field" as they pressed on toward their goals ([Phil. 3:13-14](#)).

Of course you cannot presume that you will achieve all that you aspire to ([James 4:13-15](#)). But just because you cannot guarantee specific results does not mean you should not pursue those things with all your strength ([Eccl. 9:10](#)). As Jesus teaches in [Matthew 25:14-21](#), do all you can to maximize the return on whatever gifts, resources, and opportunities God has entrusted to you for the building of his kingdom, always realizing that the ultimate outcome rests securely in his hands ([Prov. 16:9](#)).

Therefore, as you develop a plan, make sure it includes specific *action steps* (that move you closer to your defined goals) as well as *describable results* (which show how well you've actually achieved your goals). These end results may involve either quantifiable or qualitative results, such as:

- We will raise \$20,000 for our mission project in Peru
- We will devote 15% of our financial resources to ministry outside our own walls
- Our members view our elders as caring and wise shepherds and come to them for advice or to offer suggestions
- Our teenagers are bringing other young people to church
- Our members report that our sermons consistently inspire them to love God more and provide practical guidance on how to love and serve other people
- Our members are sharing the gospel with unchurched friends
- We are adding more unchurched than church members to our congregation

- Our children continue to worship with us as long as they live in this area rather than migrating to other churches or dropping out of church altogether

Setting these types of goals doesn't guarantee that you'll reach them, but it does give you something specific to shoot for ... and the opportunity to praise God when he enables you to succeed.

## Evaluation

Defining results sets the stage for the fourth key element of effective planning, *evaluation*, which is the key to greater fruitfulness. In many cases you can measure your progress quantitatively (e.g., "Last year, 20% of our teenagers brought another young person to church"). You then have a basis to ask, "What are we doing well to achieve this result, and what improvements can we make to bump that number to 25% in the coming year?"

As you identify the factors that contribute to progress, as well as those that hinder it, you can gain valuable information, such as:

- Which kind of preaching and worship inspires members to grow in their faith and invite other people to church
- What hurdles keep members from sharing the gospel with unchurched friends, relatives and coworkers
- What activities motivate teens to bring friends to youth group
- Why people have left your church to go elsewhere (and how to "close your backdoor")
- What missions projects inspire the most involvement and investment by members
- What Sunday morning practices make visitors feel welcomed ... or uncomfortable

While you should never let the mere preferences of others trigger major course changes, it is both wise and biblical to take others' legitimate interests into account as you seek to discern the most effective way to draw people to your church, introduce them to Jesus, and then disciple them toward maturity ([Phil. 2:1-4](#); [1Cor. 9:19-23](#)).

A diligent evaluation process requires discipline and humility, but the benefits are well worth the cost. First, periodic evaluations can lead to encouraging progress reports to your congregation ([Acts 14:26-28](#)). Second, they can reveal ways to improve the effectiveness of future ministry. Third, intentionally engaging evaluations draw more people into the planning process, take advantage of their insights and wisdom, and build greater enthusiasm and stronger relationships for your next season of ministry.

Now let's see how a real church experiences these benefits as it puts these concepts into practice every year ...

## Strategic Planning at Lake Baldwin Church

Mike Tilley served [Cru](#) for twenty-nine years. As part of its senior leadership team, he participated in strategic planning that impacted thousands of ministry workers and university students around the world. In 2006, Mike and his wife, Molly, helped to plant Lake Baldwin Church (PCA) in Orlando, Florida. Since then, he and his elders have built a culture where leaders and members participate in an annual planning process that is highly relational, inspirational, and fruitful.



### The Initial Planning Cycle

The first year that they developed a strategic plan, the process involved six consecutive steps. They started by establishing their **Direction**, which required that they define their *purpose, mission, vision and values*. Here is what they developed:

Purpose

Our purpose is to glorify God through worship, teaching, fellowship, deeds of mercy, and evangelism

### Mission

- Explore: helping people explore the Christian faith.
- Experience: helping people experience transformational community.
- Extend: helping people extend the hope of the gospel to a broken world.

Vision: A gospel-centered church offers:

- Good news for the lost (evangelism)
- Good news for the found (spiritual growth)
- Good news for the city (seeking the peace of the city; local missions)
- Good news for the world (global missions)
- Church planting/multiplication of communities

### Values

- Creative faith
- Authentic community
- Gospel culture
- Spiritual growth
- Outward face

The second step in their planning process was to face reality by doing a rigorous **Situational Analysis**. This involved what is commonly called a SWOT analysis, which required a detailed assessment of their church's **Strengths** and **Weaknesses**, and also of the **Opportunities** and **Threats** (challenges) they faced as a result of their surrounding circumstances.

Step three involved an assessment of their **Critical Mass** or capacity for ministry. This required that they evaluate the quality of their leaders, finances, and operating systems, as well as the effectiveness with which these resources were being used.

The fourth step was to identify their **Critical Path**, which required that they define the concrete strategies and next steps needed to effectively move their church toward their vision in the coming year.

Step five focused on **Resource Release**, how to efficiently steward and allocate their resources for maximum ministry impact.

Step six involved **Evaluation and Refinement**. By evaluating individual events and their ministry year as a whole, they were able to become progressively wiser in how to do ministry.

### Recurring Annual Planning Process

After their church completed their initial strategic planning process, Mike began a tradition of leading them through an annual evaluation and planning process that enabled their church to become more and more effective in achieving its vision for expanding the kingdom.

Every November, he does four exercises with four groups of people: elders, deacons, staff and emerging leaders.

During his first meeting with each group he asks them to identify “**mile stones, mill stones, and curve balls.**” Using

a whiteboard to record their comments, he asks each group of people to give a candid evaluation of the major *accomplishments, shortfalls, and surprises* they believe the church experienced in the previous year.

To encourage openness and safety, he makes it a point to listen more than talk, to ask open ended questions, and to refrain from commenting on their observations. He repeats this process with each of the groups, taking detailed notes along the way.

Mike then builds a “**Vision Report Card.**” At the next meeting with each group, he displays the church’s vision statement and asks each person in the group to give the church a grade (A-F) on each part of their vision statement (and its related goals) and to explain why they gave that grade. Their current vision statement is: A gospel-centered church offers:

- Good news for the lost (evangelism)
- Good news for the found (spiritual growth)
- Good news for the city (seeking the peace of the city; local missions)
- Good news for the world (global missions)
- Church planting/multiplication of communities

Since each person has to give and explain five separate grades, this process generates a wealth of observations and insights. By letting people talk candidly, Mike helps them to feel “really heard” and therefore truly valued. This process also imprints the vision statement more firmly in each person’s mind, which helps them to pursue it more consistently as they move into the next year. Once again, Mike types up detailed notes.

Mike then leads each group through an annual **Situational (SWOT) Analysis**. This allows him to develop an updated and increasingly realistic assessment of the church’s ministry strengths and weaknesses, and of the opportunities and threats (challenges) it faces.

These three different evaluations tend to produce overlapping and reinforcing insights, which enable the leadership team to get an increasingly accurate perspective on the church’s ministry position, effectiveness, and opportunities for improvement.

In the final round of meetings with each group, Mike invites them to **brainstorm vision goals** for the coming year. He asks for specific goals, and after getting a variety of options, he asks each person to pick five top goals and explain why they should be given priority.

Mike progressively delivers all of this information to the elders, who carefully study the feedback, take note of the goals that are most frequently highlighted, and prayerfully use this information to develop an improved and increasingly effective strategic plan for the coming year.

Although he has not yet done so, Mike plans to enhance this evaluation process by including small group leaders, and also by using web-based surveys and congregational meetings to gather additional insights, wisdom, and creative ideas from the congregation as a whole.

### **Key Elements of the Lake Baldwin Process**

When I recently asked Mike to summarize the key elements of their annual planning process, he said this:

*First, in order to lead this kind of process, a pastor must have a great deal of discipline. He must also believe in a culture of feedback and be open-minded and willing to hear criticism and admit the need for change. Without these qualities, he cannot create a safe process that allows people to speak candidly and honestly.*

*If a pastor has not yet created this kind of culture, it would be wise for him to team up with another leader who has these qualities, or to delegate the process to one or two other leaders who could objectively gather and report this information to the elders.*

*Second, the process must be bathed in prayer. Not little ceremonial prayers, but earnest extended prayers that seek the mind of God. We emphasize prayer throughout the process, but the most exciting exercise we do is a month of dedicated prayer every August as we gear up for our evaluation cycle.*

*Third, it is crucial to identify concrete next steps, and then pursue them relentlessly. If you fail to clearly describe what you're seeking to achieve, and then measure your progress toward those outcomes, you'll waste a lot of time, energy and money.*

*Fourth, we usually operate with 1-year goals rather than 3-year or 5-year goals. This tends to create a greater sense of urgency. If something will take 3-5 years, it shows up on our plan on a recurring basis.*

*We are greatly encouraged by the fact that we can look back over the past few years and identify vision goals that really happened. We had something to shoot for and stretch for, and we saw God come through!*

*For example, one year we had a vision goal of establishing a shepherding plan for the church. This was a big change process, but a big win. All of the elders and wives were aligned, and all participated in the execution.*

*Another year, our top priority was our SPLASH children's ministry. This meant that our children's ministry director would have a blank check with funding and volunteer recruitment. We saw the number of volunteers triple, and we held our first Kids' Camp, which now has over 50% attendance from outside our church.*

*Sometimes we establish a vision goal without realizing how God would provide. Last year, we identified the need to pursue what we called the "digital horizon," especially with outreach to Baldwin Park, our part of the city. God brought along a person who built us a new web site, organized video sermons, and implemented a digital media strategy resulting in 1.5 million "impressions" on 60,000 media devices in a three zip code area!*

*We grouped our vision goals for the coming year into three categories: core strategies, critical mass, and critical path. Our four core strategies are always on our strategic plan: worship; small groups, children's ministry, and youth ministry.*

*Here are just a few of our vision goals for critical mass and critical path in 2015:*

*Critical Mass (increasing resources and capacity for ministry)*

- *Hire an assistant/associate pastor*
- *Hire a back-up for our children's ministry director*
- *Launch Financial Peace University*
- *Expand the scope and quality of our communication*

*Critical Path (key strategies and action steps)*

- *Build a Habitat house in Winter Park*
- *Sponsor 2-3 summer mission trips*
- *Establish college ministry partnerships at Rollins College*

- *Launch evangelism equipping and initiatives*
- *Ken Sande teaching RW first weekend in October*

There are many variations your church could make to the strategic planning process being used by Lake Baldwin Church. But as long as your process includes the four essential elements of **P**rayer, **U**nderstanding, **R**esults and **E**valuation, you are more likely to see your church (or your ministry, business, or family) produce significant kingdom fruit and earn that marvelous commendation,

*“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master” (Matt. 25:21).*

– Ken Sande with Mike Tilley

To learn more about relational wisdom and how you can develop skills that can enhance all of your relational interactions, read [Discover RW](#) ... and be sure to [sign up for our weekly RW Blog](#).

### **Reflection Questions**

- Which elements of the PURE process does your church consistently apply? (Prayer, Understanding, Results, Evaluation)
- Which of these elements would you like to see your church use more fully? Why?

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