The Purpose Driven Church

Rick Warren's case for building a church on Christ's purposes, and what it could offer Pathway

> *"Instead of trying to grow a church with programs, focus on growing people with a process."*
>
> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*

The book in brief

Rick Warren started Saddleback Church in southern California in 1980 and wrote this book fifteen years later, when the church had grown into the thousands. It became one of the most widely used books on church leadership of its generation. Warren insists from the first pages that his subject is church **health** rather than church growth. Living things grow when they're healthy, he argues, so the leader's job is to remove what hinders health and let growth come. He dedicates the book to bivocational pastors of small churches, and he tells readers to treat it "like you'd eat fish: Pick out the meat and throw away the bones."

What drives your church?

Warren opens with a diagnosis. Every church is driven by something, and in many churches it's the wrong thing: **tradition** ("We've always done it this way"), a **personality**, **finances**, **programs**, **buildings**, **events** or even **seekers**, when what unbelievers want becomes the controlling question. Each driver can feel natural from the inside. His alternative is a church driven by the purposes Christ already gave it, which he finds in two passages: the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37–40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20). Saddleback's motto put it this way: "A Great Commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission will grow a Great Church."

The five purposes

From those two passages Warren draws five purposes and insists a healthy church keeps all five in balance. He sees all five in the first church in Acts 2:42–47.

PURPOSE	FROM THE TEXT	SADDLEBACK'S WORD	WHO IT REACHES
Worship	"Love the Lord with all your heart"	Magnify	The crowd
Ministry	"Love your neighbor as yourself"	Ministry	The core
Evangelism	"Go and make disciples"	Mission	The community
Fellowship	"Baptizing them"	Membership	The congregation
Discipleship	"Teaching them to obey"	Maturity	The committed

Saddleback's statement strung the five together as results, in order: "To bring people to Jesus and membership in his family, develop them to Christlike maturity, and equip them for their ministry in the church and life mission in the world, in order to magnify God's name." Warren points out three things about it. It names results rather than activities, so it can be measured. It lets every member see how to take part. And it puts the purposes into a **sequence**, because "every purpose statement needs a process to fulfill it."

How Warren builds a church on purpose

1. Define the purposes by discovery

Warren warns pastors not to announce the purposes in a sermon and move on: "people will give mental and verbal assent to what they are told, but they will hold with conviction what they discover for themselves." He lays out four steps: study what the Bible says about the church (he supplies a long list of passages), look for answers to four questions, write down everything you find, then condense it into one sentence. The four questions are these: Why does the church exist? What are we to be? What are we to do? How are we to do it? A good statement, he says, is biblical, specific, transferable (short enough for everyone to repeat) and measurable.

2. Communicate them constantly

Halfway through rebuilding Jerusalem's wall, Nehemiah's workers lost heart and he had to recast the vision (Nehemiah 4). From this Warren draws what he calls the "Nehemiah Principle": restate vision and purpose at least every twenty-six days, in as many ways as you can find. He uses two pictures to do it, five concentric circles and a baseball diamond.

3. Organize around them

Left alone, churches drift toward whatever their pastor is best at. Warren describes five lopsided "kinds" of churches: the soul-winning church, the experiencing-God church, the family-reunion church, the classroom church and the social-conscience church. He estimates that most American churches are family-reunion churches of under 200 members, where "the gathering is more important than the goals." Such a church, he adds, "is almost indestructible."

To keep balance he uses two tools. The **Circles of Commitment** describe people by how far they've come, from the *community* (the unchurched within driving distance) to the *crowd* (regular attenders), the *congregation* (members), the *committed* (growing believers) and the *core* (those serving in ministry). The **Life Development Process**, drawn as a baseball diamond, moves people inward through four classes: 101 on membership, 201 on spiritual habits, 301 on finding a ministry and 401 on mission. Each class ends with a covenant.

4. Apply them to everything

Warren lists ten places the purposes have to show up: how new members are welcomed, programs, teaching, small groups, staff, structure, preaching, the budget, the calendar and regular evaluation. "The quickest way to discover a church's priorities," he writes, "is to look at its budget and calendar." Saddleback reviewed a monthly "Snapshot" showing how many people were at each base and in each circle, so bottlenecks were easy to spot.

5. Know the people God has given you to reach

Part three teaches a church to define its target **geographically** (a fifteen- to twenty-minute drive from the church), **demographically**, **culturally** and **spiritually**, then to ask whom it can best reach. Warren notes that people in transition or under tension are most open to the gospel: new residents, first-time parents, the recently unemployed, families facing a terminal illness, couples in trouble. Saddleback even drew a composite of its typical unchurched neighbor, "Saddleback Sam." Parts four and five cover worship services designed with unbelievers in mind, preaching to the unchurched, and moving people from attenders to members to mature believers to ministers.

How it could serve The Way Ahead

1. **Borrow the four questions for Session 3.** Warren's questions (Why do we exist? What are we to be? What are we to do? How are we to do it?) fit the mission session almost exactly. His advice to collect everything first and condense later is a good discipline for the writing team in April.
2. **Test our four words against his five purposes.** This may be the book's most useful gift to us. Lay Learn, Love, Live and Lead beside worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship and discipleship. Learn sits close to discipleship, and Lead close to ministry. But where do worship and evangelism live on our path? If the answer is "nowhere in particular," that's worth knowing before we keep, reshape or retire the words.
3. **Ask honestly which kind of church we are.** A church our size is likely to lean toward Warren's family-reunion church. That's a real strength: warm relationships hold a church together through hard seasons, and Pathway has had a few. The Vision Team should ask whether the gathering has become more important than the goals, and the Core Values Audit results can help answer it.
4. **Check every draft statement against his four tests.** Is it biblical, specific, short enough to repeat and measurable? Does it name results instead of activities? Could someone in the back row see how to take part in it?
5. **Put the five towns in front of us.** Warren's fifteen-to-twenty-minute circle matches the 20-minute drive time in our Know Your Community report. His list of people in transition can sharpen Town hall 2 ("Our five towns") and the March 20 prayer drive: who in Saranac, Lake Odessa, Clarksville, Ionia and Lowell is moving, grieving, starting a family or starting over?
6. **Give membership a clear meaning.** His Class 101 and covenant line up with our plans for a new members class at learn.pathwaywes.com. That class is the natural place to teach the path, along with the membership commitments our denomination already asks of members.
7. **Keep it in front of people.** The Nehemiah Principle gives us a working rule for after Vision Sunday: say the mission and path at least once a month, in several channels. His purpose-tagged budget and calendar, and the monthly Snapshot, could become a one-page report for the LBA's quarterly reviews.

Reading with discernment

Context doesn't transfer. Warren says so himself: Saddleback sat in a fast-growing suburb "filled with well-educated young couples," and a clone planted somewhere else will fail. A rural church of around a hundred people on Portland Road will apply his principles very differently, and some of his methods (classes in four levels, five purpose teams with directors) need scaling down to fit our volunteer strength.

Targeting "people like us" has limits. Warren argues that Jesus sent His disciples first to people like themselves, and a church does tend to reach people similar to those already in it. That's a reasonable observation about where to start. But the New Testament church kept crossing lines (Acts 10–11; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14), and our five towns hold farm families, commuters, retirees, young families and people on the edges. A vision that reaches only people like us will be smaller than the one God may have in mind.

Seeker-sensitive worship needs care. Part four, on designing services with unbelievers in mind, is the most dated section and the most debated. In fairness, Warren lists "seekers" among the wrong drivers of a church and argues that purposes, not unbelievers' preferences, should steer. Still, any plan that touches Sunday worship should start from what worship owes to God before it asks what guests will find comfortable.

Wesleyan accents. Warren writes as a Southern Baptist. His picture of maturity is practical and good (daily time with God, tithing, a small group), but a Wesleyan account of maturity goes further, to a heart made perfect in love (1 John 4:16–18). He also reads baptism in the Great Commission mainly as a sign of fellowship; we'd add that it's a sacrament, a means of grace. These are additions to his framework more than objections to it.

Purpose isn't the whole package. The book is strongest on mission and on a process for growing people. It says much less about a church's distinctive values or a picture of its future. For those we lean on Malphurs and *God Dreams*, and on *Simple Church* for turning the path into practice.

TALK IT THROUGH

1. If an outsider watched Pathway for a month, what would they say drives us: tradition, personalities, finances, programs, the building, events or Christ's purposes?
2. Which of the five purposes is strongest at Pathway right now? Which is weakest? What makes you say so?
3. Where do worship and evangelism show up in Learn, Love, Live and Lead? Do they need a clearer place?
4. Who in our five towns is in a season of transition right now, and how might God want Pathway to meet them?

Source: Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). Quotations are from the book.