

# Some Immediate Reflections On 40 Days Of Purpose

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Ministry Today is keen to encourage ministers to reflect on their experience of pastoral life, and hence the inclusion of this article. Further articles on aspects of pastoral life are always welcome!

Rick Warren, a Southern Baptist and founding pastor of Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, first became a familiar name to many with the publication of *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1995). Although inevitably reflecting North American culture, it's a challenging read for Europeans, not least for its emphasis on church health as being the key to church growth.

*The Purpose Driven Church* has sold well over half a million copies. However, these sales pale into insignificance compared with his second book, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2002). With over 30 million copies in print, if the blurb is to be believed, it is "the bestselling hardback in history"!

I confess that initially I was somewhat unsure of what to make of *The Purpose Driven Life*. It did not challenge me in the way in which *The Purpose Driven Church* had done. Composed of forty chapters, to be read a chapter a day over a forty-day period, it is a fairly basic guide to the Christian life. On the other hand, I recognised that time and again the familiar was put over in a fresh and sometimes original manner. I disliked (and still dislike) the way in which Rick Warren draws upon a wide variety of Bible translations to make his point. At times it seems to me to be an abuse of Scripture. So for a while I put it to one side.

However, eventually I could not ignore the fact that many churches had gained apparently enormous value through working their way together through this book. So with a degree of hesitation, I decided to get on the 'band wagon' and encouraged my church to study *The Purpose Driven Life* in the forty days leading up to Palm Sunday.

A good deal of preparation went into preparing for those '40 days of purpose'. The following letter, sent out to every member and friend of the church, gives a flavour of what we hoped for and how we went about the process:

*"Although the key purpose of this spiritual journey is for us all to grow and develop in our faith, there are in fact five very positive purposes present in this particular growth 'tool', namely:*

*To **renew** the spiritual life of us all*

*To **revitalise** the church's small groups*

*To **release** people's gifts for service*

*To **reach out** to people who have yet to become Christians*

*To **reinforce** an even greater sense of unity in the church as a result of this common focus.*

*Together we can achieve these five purposes if for this period of 40 days:*

- 1. **Every day** we all **read a short chapter** (four pages!) of *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. This bestseller is a guide to a 40 day spiritual journey. Every chapter ends with a point to ponder, a verse to remember, and a question to consider;*
- 2. **Once a week** we all **attend a small group** (specially formed for the occasion), where we will listen to and then discuss a 20 minute DVD presentation by Rick Warren;*
- 3. **For six Sundays** we all are **present at one of the Sunday worship services**, at which we will focus on the following themes: What on earth am I here for? You were planned for God's pleasure; You were formed for God's family; You were created to become like Christ; You were shaped for serving God; You were made for a mission (Ministry Fair); Celebration Sunday.*

*Let me emphasise: we are only asking you to commit yourself for 40 days. True, for some of you, with busy lives, commuting perhaps up to London every day, this is quite a commitment, but we believe it could make an enormous difference to you, as also to our life together.*

*We very much hope that you will attend the launch event on Saturday evening.. (there will be activities for older children), to listen to a DVD presentation by Rick Warren and to get hold of a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life*. The programme will be repeated on the following Tuesday afternoon and Thursday evening.*

*In order to make the most of this opportunity for spiritual growth, we would ask you to clear your diaries now, so that you are not prevented from taking part because of another commitment. Indeed, because we believe that this programme has such potential for you, we would ask you to consider not going away on holiday during this period. The church for its part will reduce its activities to the bare limit (e.g. we are even cancelling a church meeting and a leadership team meeting, plus a host of other events which were in the pipe-line), so that we are all free to focus on this spiritual journey.*

As this quotation may indicate, we used more than 'gentle encouragement' - we actually went 'hell for leather' to sell the '40 Days of Purpose'. And, gratifyingly, the church rose to the vision. Two hundred people attended one or other of the launch events, and, amazingly, over 470 copies of *The Purpose Driven Life* were taken (we gave them away free of charge on the condition that people agreed to read the book). For the six Sundays during the '40 days of purpose' we focussed all our services round the book; and during the week some 21 small groups with over 210 people attending met to discuss the book.

What has been the effect on the church? At this stage it is too early to say. Indeed, it probably will take a year or two before we can look back and make any final assessment of its effectiveness. However, what can be said is that while it may not have brought about a radical spiritual revolution which some of us had perhaps hoped for, it has undoubtedly had a major impact upon the life of the church.

For instance,

- (i) partly as a result of not restricting groups to Wednesday evenings (the traditional time for small groups in our church), many more people have been meeting in small groups;
- (ii) as a result of forming new groups, many people have begun to develop relationships with people they formerly did not really know;
- (iii) in a church where few people read Christian books, many have read *The Purpose Driven Life*;
- (iv) many have been encouraged to discover their SHAPE for Christian service; and
- (v) as a result of a guide written by our children's worker based on *The Purpose Driven Life* a number of families discussed spiritual issues on a daily basis in that period.

All these things are very positive. However, time alone will tell the extent to which these positives have fundamentally affected the church as a whole.

What is clear is that *The Purpose Driven Life* has had a deep effect on a number of individuals in the church. In this respect perhaps the most moving testimony was given by one of our members in the run-up to our '40 Days of Purpose':

*I have read Rick Warren's book. Indeed, I have read it not just once, but time and time again. It has become almost a second Bible to me. As you know, my husband had a major stroke some years ago and overnight our lives were turned upside down. We had been through difficult periods in our life before - he, for instance, had twice been made redundant. But those difficulties were as nothing compared to the difficulties I now faced. I felt as if all purpose had gone out my life. And then a friend gave me a copy of Rick Warren's book. Suddenly everything began to fall into place and I found myself beginning to accept my situation. Rick Warren has helped me realise that our most*

*profound and intimate experiences of worship are likely to happen in our darkest days. There is so much in the book. Indeed, every time I read it I find something new. I find that I gain fresh strength from reading the book - it has also given me the confidence to talk more about my faith. It is more than worth the ten minutes per day it may take to read. It could change one's life. I cannot recommend the book too highly.*

Another of my members, a high-powered English teacher with a Cambridge PhD to boot, gave the following testimony at the end of the '40 days of purpose':

*Through reading and discussing *The Purpose Driven Life*, with the newly-formed group in our house, my wife and I have been challenged - and we've enjoyed meeting and sharing insights with a mixture of new people and other folk who have been at the church for a long time. We are excited by the possibility of the group perhaps continuing, with others joining, maybe.*

*We have all had to get used to Warren's direct-to-camera style - his pointed remarks - his penchant for sharp, memorable epithets - his witticisms - his straightforward Bible-teaching - not to mention his rather memorable succession of large coloured shirts and his distinctive way of chuckling!*

*We gradually began to appreciate the discipline, over the 40 days, of reading an apparently short, but actually very profound (and biblically wise) chapter everyday, with the encouraging thought, too, that large numbers of the congregation were doing the same thing, simultaneously.*

*I particularly appreciated chapter 11, "Becoming Best Friends with God" - with its emphasis on 'practising the presence of God': this was Warren's very positive use of one of my own favourite spiritual classics, Brother Lawrence's seventeenth-century book of the same name. I was very taken with the recommending of short, 'breath prayers', reminding me of other Christian traditions - and of the ancient 'Jesus Prayer', in particular. I was also moved by reading Matt Redman's 'heart of worship' song as a poem:*

*"I'll bring you more than a song*

*For a song in itself*

*Is not what you have required;*

*You search much deeper within*

*Through the way things appear*

*You're looking into my heart"*

*As Rick Warren says - "The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.*

In summary: '40 days of purpose' has been a good experience for us. We look forward to seeing further 'fruit' in the days ahead.

