

Continuing the Journey of Evangelism: From Fr. David

This article, although written from a Bishop in Atlanta, can give us perspective about our purpose as a parish and faith community. Please read and digest Rt. Rev. Bishop Wright's message, as it rings about who we are at Resurrection

Purpose is the fire that warms the heart, gives light for vision, and generates energy to sustain work.

Fire First!

By Robert Wright

What is the purpose of our church?

Why lift up a question about purpose? Some months back, I told [then] Presiding Bishop-elect Michael Curry about our purpose-focused conversations in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta and this is what he said: "Purpose, huh? Wow! That's visceral. That's deeper down than mission." I smiled. He gets it.

Purpose is first and foremost about fire. In fact, the root of the word purpose is the Indo-European word for fire. Makes sense. At the beginning of the cosmos, at the genesis of Moses' new life with God, at the beginning of the church 2,000 years ago, it was fire first!

As for our common life, think of it this way: Purpose is the fire that warms the heart, gives light for vision, and generates energy to sustain work.

Years ago, preaching at our cathedral, Bishop Mdimi Mhogolo of Central Tanganyika asked the clergy of the diocese a thrilling and haunting question: "What is the Diocese of Atlanta believing for?" Think about that for a minute. His question implies our diocese can be one in purpose, one in prayer, and one in work toward a preferred future in Middle and North Georgia. I believe that.

Some are skeptical about this approach, understandably so. We've never done it this way before. Some wonder if "purpose talk" is an invader from the business world and has no place in church. Others say, "Just placate this process and we'll go back to business as usual."

But, remember, Jesus was a man of purpose. At his conception, his mother was clear she existed for the purposes of the Almighty, "Let it be unto me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) From Jesus' preadolescent mouth we hear, "I am about my Father's business." (Luke 2:49) At the beginning of his public ministry, he gathers people based on a purpose, "I will make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:19) Even in the agony of Gethsemane, despite betrayal and suffering, his purpose remained primary: "Not my will but God's will be done." (Luke 22:42)

Jesus lived on purpose and his church must follow his pattern if we're to be effective lay and ordained ministers of his grace.

Making explicit our fire – our common purpose – and keeping it in front of us will bless our common life in three exciting ways. First, it will move us toward increased authenticity. Purpose is a journey to what's real and immediate. Ministry has many tasks, but until those tasks find meaning and coherence in what is real and immediate, individually and collectively, those tasks – no matter how noble – will sap life. Authenticity is an inexhaustible energy form.

New and deeper partnerships are a direct result of clear purpose. Organizations and individuals with a clear sense of purpose become positively charged magnets drawing people together from their separate interest groups. Maybe the best feature of purposeful partnerships is the momentum they create for innovation.

Finally, to claim a common purpose will give us the ability to talk in terms of ministry results going forward. A congregation in deep touch with its purpose can invest, measure, learn, and course correct when necessary based on that purpose.

In the end, a purpose statement is a prayer. A prayer we co-create that is authentic and immediate for us – all of us. A prayer that this is our pledge to each other, to God, and to the people in our congregation.

Whatever the final version of your purpose statement is, make this prayer of purpose together remembering Jesus' words, "Whatever you ask in my name, that will I do, so that God may be glorified in the Son." (John 14:13)

Try This:

In touch with purpose, we can be courageous evangelists. You are called to be just that for Jesus. All around you, there are people who wonder if God loves them. They wonder if church is a closed, cold club - or a wide, welcoming circle of acceptance, purpose, and love. Jesus wants to meet these seekers. Do just one thing this week: Invite a friend to faith. Invite them to worship, to a parish social activity, or to join you for a service project. Invite them into our wide circle of acceptance and welcome. Love God? Love church? Enough to share, include, and invite?(Of course, you can always tell Jesus you're too busy.)

Robert C. Wright is the [10th bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta](#).

This article has been adapted from Bishop Wright's article, "[Fire First!](#)" published in the Fall 2015 issue of Pathways, the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta's online magazine. It has been reprinted and lightly edited with permission.