

# At Work on Purpose

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**ABSTRACT:** Many Christians struggle with how to live out their Christian faith at work. This manuscript presents an organization, At Work on Purpose (AWOP), that has successfully helped Christians do just that. The story explores the history and inner workings of AWOP, allowing the reader to understand how the organization functions to help Christian millennials and Generation Z enter and get established in the workforce. The unfolding story reveals challenges the organization faces related to leadership succession and can be used by management professors to stimulate classroom discussion on this topic.

**KEYWORDS:** faith at work, leadership succession, nonprofit leadership, generational differences

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## INTRODUCTION

How do you get more than 12,000 Christ followers from different denominational backgrounds to be invested in being “faith active” at work? This is the story of At Work on Purpose (AWOP), an organization that helps Christian professionals do just that. As you learn about the organization, you will discover the challenges that arise when an organization tries to bring together Christians from different denominational backgrounds and generations. Additionally, you will be invited into the difficulty of sustaining an organization based on the vision of its founder.

The story that follows chronicles what God accomplished to help Chuck Proudfit and others answer the question of how Christ should impact their work life. Answering that question ultimately led to another crossroads for Chuck: How should he successfully pass the baton of God-oriented work life to the future leaders of the organization he founded, and how should he meaningfully prepare a new group of young professionals joining the organization? Read the story with an eye toward these succession issues. To address the questions about leadership succession, one must understand the founding and inner workings of the organization that would become AWOP. An Implementation Guide for using the story in management classes is provided in Appendix A. Additional Teaching Notes are available upon request from the author.

## THE FOUNDER

Chuck Proudfit’s path as a believer began as a circuitous route to faith. He was born in Colorado to parents with recently minted PhDs and who were starting their professorships at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Both parents, for similar reasons, had walked away from any religious or spiritual involvement. Chuck grew up in the late 1960s and early 70s. His mother had chosen to continue working as a professor (rare at the time for a new mother) and alcohol addiction caused dysfunction in the home.

With high aspirations for their son, Chuck’s parents took on a big financial burden so that Chuck could be educated at Harvard. They dreamed that Chuck would follow in their footsteps into academia. Chuck studied organizational development while at Harvard and soon began to discover the entrepreneurial spirit within him. By the time he finished college, Chuck had been fully “bitten by the [business] bug.”

Instead of continuing in academia, Chuck pursued a business career. As he neared graduation, among several lucrative offers was one from Procter and Gamble (P&G), the world’s largest producer of household goods. Chuck moved from Boston to Cincinnati to work at P&G’s world headquarters. This move disappointed his parents as business did not seem as noble as a profession in academia.

Chuck’s first big assignment created a crisis of individual purpose early in his career (AWOP, n.d.c.). He and his team were asked to figure out how to remove thirty squares

from a roll of toilet paper yet maintain the same circumference in the roll so that the company could charge the same amount of money.

Chuck walked home that day from his downtown office to his uptown apartment overlooking the Ohio River. Overflowing and muddy from recent rains, the Ohio River was the antithesis of the clear mountain streams Chuck had grown up with in Colorado. Chuck's insides mirrored the physical; he was disheartened. "My life is going to be devoted to figuring out how to manipulate toilet paper." He literally felt like his life was going "down the toilet" (Weinstein, 2022).

He arrived at the apartment and went out onto the deck. He saw an open umbrella floating upside down on the river. "That's [the umbrella] your career," a voice said to him. Chuck reflected on his time at Harvard, where spiritually grounded friends managed adversity better than he was doing now.

This incident began a ten-year spiritual search as Chuck traversed the country working for Procter & Gamble and then later for two other large companies. He studied all the major world religions. In November of 1996, Chuck got down on his knees, acknowledged his sin, believed Jesus died to pay the penalty for his sin, and called on Jesus to forgive him and take control of his life. In a nutshell, he surrendered himself to God.

A Christian with an extensive business background took Chuck under his wing for discipleship. He met monthly with Chuck for several years. It was during this time that Chuck realized that the voice in the apartment ten years earlier was the Holy Spirit. Business, in a way, had started his spiritual journey. As he pondered this new life, the thought occurred to him that he spent most of his waking day at work. If Christ was to be the center of his life, how could that focus permeate the hours he spent giving most of his attention and effort? He did not know the answer, but he set out to find it. In January 1997, Chuck began to formulate an idea that would ultimately answer his question.

## **AN ORGANIZATION AND A NAME**

Chuck invited a dozen individuals from various professions and denominations into a "life group for work life" to meet and discuss the question. There are over two million people in the Greater Cincinnati area where he lived and worked, an area that includes three counties in Ohio, three in Northern Kentucky (across the Ohio River), and one in Southeast Indiana. Chuck wanted a central location and "neutral turf" in which to gather and find common ground

for conversation (i.e., a building that did not belong to any of the individuals he was inviting).

The invitees showed up for that first meeting at 7:00 p.m. in January 2002 at a spiritual retreat center called Old St. George. As they discussed the question of what it would look like to bring Christ into their work life, an invigorating conversation resulted, leading the group to meet again and again every couple of weeks.

Others heard about the success of their meeting and started groups of their own. Within six months, there were more than 300 people involved in dozens of small groups meeting across the city to entertain the question, "How should Christ impact my working life?" Chuck realized that God was beginning to do something significant.

After the small groups had been meeting for several months, the participants began to understand that God was doing something significant with their efforts. They talked about if and how to organize. They decided on establishing a 501(c)(3) with a board of directors. At the time, Rick Warren (2002) had written a book titled *The Purpose Driven Life*. The book had been influential among several of the group members, and from it, they gleaned the name of the organization. It was to be called At Work on Purpose (AWOP).

## **CORE TENETS**

### **Mission**

Like many organizations, there are core tenets of AWOP. These principles tend to run through the DNA of the organization. They are best exemplified by the mission, vision, and values statement of AWOP (see Figure 1). Unlike many organizations, however, AWOP strives to live by these tenets versus simply adorning the walls with them.

The mission of AWOP is to "1) mobilize working Christians for vocational and cultural flourishing by reaching working Christians in connected community, 2) prepare to serve through practical skills and tools, and 3) minister for transformational workplace impact." The goal is to truly impact the workplace for Christ so that communities can flourish and thrive.

At Work on Purpose sees itself as a pioneer, exploring new frontiers of what workplace ministry should look like in the 21st Century. For example, the organization strives to incorporate the notion of discipleship into the workplace. Why should the world dictate how business is run? Shouldn't followers of Christ model a better way? One clear example is how employees are treated. Are they treated as if they are image bearers of God (as in Genesis 1, ESV), or are they simply "cogs in the wheel?" The same can be said

for dealing with trauma or other workplace issues. Christ's followers can and should model how to deal with hurting employees. Led by Chuck and the Board, the organization seeks to follow God's will through concentrated prayer, Scriptures, godly counsel, and the voice of the Holy Spirit.

### **Ekklesia**

In some ways, the core tenets as expressed in the mission, vision, and values can all be seen in the picture of *ekklesia*. In Matthew 16 and 18, Jesus describes the Church. Jesus uses the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means "a calling out," and declares the Church to be the one called out. When the Romans conquered a new land, they would move some Roman citizens into the key towns and cities so that these citizens could model for the conquered inhabitants of the land just what it looked like to live in a Roman world as a Roman. In the same way, AWOP feels that Christians are in a foreign land, and they are called to model a genuine Christian life to unbelieving inhabitants of this foreign land (II Corinthians 5:20; Acts 2:46-47) and what it looks like to be a citizen of Heaven (Philippians 3:20). As the AWOP website states, "At Work on Purpose is designed as a 21st Century version of the 1st Century *ekklesia* at work—an agile, decentralized, organic network of spiritual influence that has the capacity to span a city..." (AWOP, n.d.e).

Two quotes illustrate this idea of *ekklesia* at work. "God grew me. It has been more catalytic in my walk with Jesus than any other thing" (J. McCarthy, personal communication, June 22, 2022). "Late in my career it awakened me to the opportunities I have to impact my workplace and my community for Christ. Until I joined, I lived a work life that didn't noticeably involve Christ" (D. Lippert, personal communication, June 14, 2022).

### **THE LEADERSHIP**

At Work on Purpose is governed by a board of directors, currently with seven members. The board members were initially formed out of the life group discussions explained above and instituted when the 501(c)(3) originated. Chuck serves as the president. He and the other board members recommend new board members who are interviewed by the board prior to membership. The board meets once quarterly to set the strategic direction of the organization.

The board appoints an executive leadership team. This team meets twice a month to oversee the tactical implementation of the organization's strategy. Chuck serves on the executive leadership team and is also an organizational consultant and coach. Three other individuals complete

the executive team, including John McCarthy, who owns a management recruiting firm. Ron Touby is a talented facilitator and serves vocationally with an international evangelism and discipleship organization. Laura Jackson is an organizational coach. The team members hail from different denominational backgrounds.

In 2019, the board decided that the leadership of the organization was too much for just one person. Chuck was carrying much of the burden of leadership while also facilitating most of the business roundtable discussions. The board decided to search for an operations director to assist Chuck. While developing the job qualifications, the search team realized that one of their members fit all the requirements. John McCarthy was then selected as the leader of operations.

### **THE OFFERINGS**

#### **Collaboratories**

The centerpiece of AWOP are the business roundtables held monthly, except for July. As of this writing, there are twelve roundtables which meet on a specific day of the month (e.g., second Tuesday) for three hours. Around 2012, a new term was coined for the roundtables to better describe their function. They are "collaborative," and they are learning "laboratories," hence the term "collaboratory." At Work on Purpose mobilizes for its mission by gathering, equipping, and preparing members primarily through these collaboratories.

Each collaboratory generally consists of 10-12 members with one to two facilitators. Early on, the collaboratories were facilitated by Chuck alone. Later, Ron Touby and then John McCarthy and Laura Jackson began to facilitate, relieving Chuck of the monthly responsibility. Members come from all walks of business and professional life—for-profit (publicly held, privately held; small, medium, large), nonprofit, education, and government. The desire is for each collaboratory to have a blend of vocations. The collaboratories' membership is comprised of Christ followers from many different denominations. Members are required to sign a Leadership Collaboratory Commitment Form (YPAWOP, 2023) upon deciding to join one. There are also monthly dues, which are described below.

For the first 15 years, meetings were held in a rented office space 20 minutes north of downtown Cincinnati. The COVID-19 pandemic placed a financial burden on the organization as revenue from membership dues declined. Since 2020, the meetings have been held in a coworking space owned by a local church 30 minutes north of downtown Cincinnati to save on rent. This shift in meeting

location departs from Chuck's original desire to hold the meetings on "neutral turf"; however, the coworking space is housed in an old warehouse on the campus of the church, not within the church itself.

The meetings begin with a quick, "How are you doing?" catch-up period and prayer requests. Then the topic for the month is introduced by the facilitator. Topics have included building creativity, developing innovation, building rest into our lives, pivoting an organization, dealing with change, etc. The facilitator chooses the topic (although members can request a topic). The topic is then discussed by all the collaboratories that month and is sometimes based on books, such as *Faithfully Different* (Crain, 2022) and *Atomic Habits* (Clear, 2018).

The theme for each month often begins with a 15-minute introduction using PowerPoint slides or a dry erase board. Most of the time is devoted to discussion and personal/organizational application. Once a year, each member is allotted an hour of the meeting to share a "Tough Nut" question or scenario. These questions represent a particularly challenging issue the individual is facing in organizational life. The member gives an overview of the problem for 15-20 minutes and then receives input from the group over the next 45 minutes. In essence, the member gets 45 minutes of free consultation from ten business associates.

For example, one member, a new business owner, shared that she had two clients who were delinquent in paying their invoices and wondered how to address the situation. Another member was trying to diagnose why sales were so slow. Overall, collaborative members share that these consultations have been helpful. For example, one member commented, "I have been in several roundtables over the decades. At Work on Purpose has been the one I have enjoyed the most simply due to our focus on spiritual and workplace issues" (M. Sipple Sr., personal communication, June 22, 2022).

### **The Newsletter**

One of the other staples of AWOP is the monthly newsletter, of which Chuck is the editor. There are several columns representing various topics published in the periodical. The electronic newsletter has a distribution roll of more than 12,000. Most recipients are in the local area, but the publication is sent nationally and internationally. An article in Christianity Today (Sherman, 2012) as well as Chuck's speaking engagements at conferences, both nationally and internationally, have attracted interest in AWOP from other cities and individuals.

### **THE RESOURCE ENGINE**

Many 501(c)(3) organizations struggle with finances. Collins (2005) calls it the need for a resource engine. After interviewing multiple nonprofit leaders, Collins realized that there is a difference between an economic engine driving a for-profit business and a resource engine driving a nonprofit. Collins suggested that nonprofits require 1) donated *time* by volunteers or underpaid staff, 2) *money* to pay the utility bills, etc., and 3) a *brand* (or cause) that people want to get behind. Collins calls time, money, and brand, the resource engine (Collins, 2005). Often the most difficult of the three to raise is the money.

Initially, seed money was provided for AWOP by Chuck through his personal consulting business. By 2006, AWOP developed a unique and sustainable dues-based model to serve as a resource engine. In return for enjoying the blessing and benefits of the collaborative, members pay recurring dues as part of their participation. The price ranges from \$150 to \$500 per month based on the size of the organization, with non-profits and individuals paying \$150 per month. Many members' dues are covered by their organizations. These dues supply about 70% of AWOP funding, with the remaining supplied by sponsorships, special events, grants, and donations.

Grants provide the largest percentage of the remaining balance. Grant proposals are written by Chuck and Michael Heckmann. The organization also receives a modest portion of its funding from individual donations. Several long-time members noted that Chuck does not enjoy soliciting these donations, so it is rare when he does.

More recently, AWOP tried a technique that it long resisted—yearly sponsorships. For example, in the 2023 fiscal year, AWOP had seven official sponsors composed of for-profit and nonprofit organizations that believe in the ministry. Sponsors are promoted in AWOP social media including the newsletter, as well as at the annual XL Summit (see Appendix B).

Overall, AWOP is a lean operation. There are no full-time employees. Chuck, Laura, Ron, and John are compensated as individual contractors for certain time and services they provide AWOP. Their rate is set by the board.

### **YOUNG PROFESSIONALS CHALLENGE**

A recent initiative at AWOP has been YP—Young Professionals (AWOP, 2021). To disciple the next generation, AWOP became intentional about starting collaboratories designed for young professionals (20-35 years of age).

The initiative took off in 2021 and was initially led by a talented young professional and the first YP collaboratory of twelve members quickly grew to eight collaboratories and about a hundred members.

Rapid growth brings challenges. The initial YP leader was a charismatic figure, talented in drawing young professionals to be involved. Soon, non-Christians began attending the YP collaboratories and the question was asked, “For whom are the collaboratories designed? Christians, non-Christians, or both?”

The board began to rely too heavily upon the YP leader, failing to provide appropriate support, mentorship, and discipleship. Things seemed to be going so well that additional support did not appear to be needed. Eventually, the size and scope of the group proved overwhelming to the Young Professional leader. As a result, some important responsibilities were disregarded. The board took ownership of their lack of mentoring and support, and the YP leader stepped down as a healthy step for both he and his family.

The question then became, who should lead the YP initiative for the interim? After discussion and prayer, John McCarthy was tapped for the position. This change in leadership, in turn, led to further challenges. John is on the border between Gen X and Millennial. The AWOP Young Professionals have expressed a desire to be led by someone closer to their generation. They shared that they are particularly leery of baby boomers. While respecting their accomplishments, many of these younger members feel that boomers are out of touch with their world. Additionally, the question of how to lead this group and whether to integrate them into the regular collaboratories (referred to as EP—Experienced Professional) has recently surfaced.

Another area of concern is tied to hot-topic cultural issues being debated by some in the Church. As an ecumenical movement, AWOP’s statement of faith (AWOP, n.d.h) does not address certain hot topics within the culture (e.g., marriage, abortion, homosexuality). As Chuck notes, there is some disagreement on some of these hot topic areas among “The Big C Church.” By side-stepping these issues, although it feels right in the moment, one veteran member is concerned that forgoing conversation related to these hot topics will lead to long-term repercussions. Young Professionals are even more divided on some of these issues. Can AWOP afford to remain silent?

Attendance plummeted after the departure of the initial YP leader, and there are now four YP collaboratories. To address the shortfall, a modified approach was tried with a focus on YPs’ desires for community. A Saturday morning breakfast, discussion, and community-building event was held. It was meant to be casual and met in a rented office.

The topic for the day was listening. Only 11 YPs attended. Limited attendance led to discussion among the AWOP leadership as to exactly what approach or programming would be best to reach the YP community. Another challenge moving forward is to determine how leadership can best appeal to and connect with this group.

## LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

At Work on Purpose faces other challenges. A concern expressed by long-time members is that the leadership is spread too thin. The organization has funding for only a few contractors. Leadership is tied to the funding front, and some members feel there is a need to diversify the funding, as the current model limits expansion. One member suggested that AWOP take on a position to address current funding challenges and limitations.

While the collaboratories are a strength of AWOP as both the facilitation and content are of high quality, they are indeed hard to replicate. This difficulty comes back full circle to the question of leadership. The position of facilitator requires a high IQ and EQ. Until the recent assumption of this role by John, with assistance from Laura and Ron, one wondered if only Chuck could “do it.”

Other concerns centered upon overreliance upon Chuck. One member noted, “Is this a personality organization or is there a systematic organization that is self-perpetuating on its own aside from Chuck?” (P. West, personal communication, June 17, 2022). These concerns take on various forms. Members voice concerns like the need for a more robust succession plan. Can we clone Chuck? What happens if Chuck is not here tomorrow? Several acknowledge the situation has changed for the better over the past three years as leaders stepped up with a dedicated passion for the work of AWOP. This development has led to less reliance on Chuck.

## CHUCK’S DILEMMA

Chuck has now been the president and the primary human mover and shaker of AWOP for more than 20 years. He is entering his 60s, and as he moves farther from young professionals in age, he asks, “What to do with the Young Professionals? How do we engage with them, and who should lead them?” He faces the fact that he will likely retire in the next ten years. Who takes the reins to keep the organization on mission when he leaves and how will they both lead the organization and engage the YPs to prepare them, eventually, to carry the baton forward?

As Chuck begins to plan the course of passing on the baton of leadership, in many ways, this effort mirrors the same question he asked about his own life while staring at the muddy waters of the Ohio River. “What will become of the organization that God has enabled me and others to create?” Instead of being disheartened, with hope he leads and anticipates prayerfully the future as a Christ follower.

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Figure 1: AWOP Mission, Vision, and Values



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## APPENDIX A: IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

**5 Minutes**—Students read the AWOP story prior to class. Instructors then provide a brief review of the structure of AWOP to start the class.

**20 Minutes**—Divide the class into groups of three to five individuals. Divide the following topics among the groups (multiple groups may get the same topic)

- How should Chuck and AWOP plan for his succession as president? Who should play a role in the process? How can that new leader be developed? How can AWOP follow its mission statement and plan for succession?<sup>1</sup>
- What qualities would you look for in the future leader(s) of the YPs? Where would you find such a person(s)? How could they be identified? How should they be introduced to the YPs?
- How can AWOP best fulfill their mission with a younger generation?<sup>1</sup> How would you engage the YPs? How would you structure this engagement? Would you recommend integrating the YPs into the EP groups? If they are integrated, what would be the process? If they are separate, should they follow the same agenda as the EPs?

**30 Minutes**—Select one group to cover each question and give the group ten minutes to report to the rest of the class (seven for the report and three for Q&A).

**5 Minutes**—Instructor summarizes class recommendations and provides additional discussion (as necessary).

Note: Alternative suggestions for enhancing student learning can be found in teaching notes available from the author.

## APPENDIX B: OTHER OFFERINGS

1. **The XL Summit**—An annual conference held every July. The purpose of the Summit is to bring members of the AWOP network together for connection and fellowship. Aside from the collaboratories, this annual event is the primary vehicle for equipping members.
2. **The Choices Profile**—A tool designed to help Christians integrate faith and work. An excellent five-minute video can be found on the AWOP website (AWOP, n.d.b) explaining this concept.
3. **BIZNISTRY**—“A self-sustaining enterprise (SSE) that is dedicated to God, that is commissioned for a kingdom purpose, is operating according to Biblical principles, is integrating ministry throughout its operations, and is releasing a sustained flow of funds for further ministry advancement” (AWOP, n.d.a). At Work on Purpose helps individuals develop their ideas into BIZNISTRY.
4. **Mission2Monday**<sup>®</sup>—(AWOP, n.d.f) - This is a small group study series containing six, one-hour video sessions. The interactive discussion materials and matching handouts for the group facilitator help create a launch pad for work-life ministry through the local church.
5. **ROI: Return on Involvement**—This exercise is often accomplished on an annual basis in many of the collaboratories. The AWOP member envisions a group outside of AWOP, of which they are a part, that is not occupied with Christ’s followers. It helps the participants track the impact of their involvement with that group in accordance with Luke 10 (AWOP, n.d.g.).
6. **Purpose Promise**—Helps a Christian to discover their vocational calling. Too many Christians feel like the proverbial “square peg in a round hole” in their vocational choice. This tool helps individuals explore gifting and passion in order to discover a better vocational fit (McCarthy, 2019).
7. **“AWOP in a Box”**—A kit for purchase for cities desiring to start an AWOP organization in their local area. “Citywide Workplace Ministry in a Box includes everything you need for launching and growing citywide workplace ministry in your hometown” (AWOP, n.d.d.).

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.