

If You Don't Know Where You're Going, Anywhere Will Do:

WHY YOUR CHURCH NEEDS A CLEAR AND WRITTEN VISION

J. David Schmidt

BACK IN 1833, A LETTER WAS WRITTEN AND LEFT IN THE PATENT OFFICE IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

It read as follows:

Dear Sir:

*Because everything that can be invented has already been invented,
it is inevitable that this office should go out of business. Inasmuch as
I shall soon lose my position, I hereby resign to look for work elsewhere.*

...

Up to that point less than 500 patents had been applied for in the United States, but by the time World War I was over, more than 60,000 patents had been issued. Today the number runs in the millions.

We read this person's letter and think, "How short-sighted. How could someone possibly believe that all that could be invented had already been invented?"

Whoever wrote that letter clearly struggled with a lack of vision. You might say that their experience was bigger than their dreams. They couldn't see that one invention could spawn another and another.

Vision: Just a Buzzword if You Don't Have One

Vision is an assumption these days among younger potential staff and volunteers who are looking to align their talents with organizations and churches that have a sense of destiny. Donors, volunteers and staff alike get restless when key leadership can't give a good answer to the question, "Where are we headed?"

In our churches today, a clear, commonly held and compelling vision has become an absolutely necessary tool in the arsenal of every local church pastor—no matter what the location, size, or age of your church.

Vision is not what we dream about during a Sunday afternoon nap or what we see in our dreams after spicy chili at 10:00 in the evening. It is very rarely a "burning bush" experience like Moses had. When pastors look for a vision for their church to come to them through these methods they run a very real chance of shipwrecking their church's future.

Vision as modeled in Scripture and throughout church history came as God's people opened their eyes to the needs around them and then sought the mind of God as to what He wanted them to do. Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt...David fighting Goliath...Nehemiah rebuilding the temple wall...Jesus calling His disciples...Paul writing to the church in Corinth...these and hundreds of other stories in Scripture point to the presence of vision in leaders. They saw in their mind's eye a future that was more preferred than the present. And this vision propelled them forward to do courageous things.

My father had a successful ministry as a pastor for 36 years—beginning in 1947—in the Christian and Missionary Alliance. All of his ministry was driven by a personal vision for people coming to and growing in Christ. But rarely was vision a topic in board meetings. He and his lay leadership had an inner common vision

that bound them together. For the most part vision played itself out behind the scenes. Today, people and the times are different. Vision still functions as something of a backdrop for all that churches do. But the difference is that the backdrop of vision now must be more visible than ever, and it must be broadly owned by the church congregation.

Why Must Your Church Have an Articulated Vision?

Here are four good reasons why your church will be strengthened by contemplating its future.

1. VISION GETS YOU ON GOD'S PROGRAM AND OFF YOUR OWN.

God already has a crystal clear plan and a vision for every Assemblies of God church. He's not confused about where your church should go in the next five years. The problem comes when we don't take the time to seek the Lord and go through a process of discovering His mind. Frankly, most pastors, even most Christians, are far too busy maintaining their lives and current church work. Prayer is often the first "extra" to go. Yet it is an obvious and vital component in discovering vision. In Jeremiah 33:3, the Lord says, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."

Prayer alone is not enough, though. It also takes work on our part. James 2:26 says that "faith without deeds is dead." As Christian leaders we are in constant tension on these two points. It's our responsibility to try to see the future as God sees it and let Him reveal that future to us as He sees fit. Churches which fail to listen for God's vision for their church run the very real risk of not experiencing all that God has planned for that church. The tendency is to let the budget process, a crisis, or a pastoral change drive our plans when in fact God wants to reveal a 'future and a hope' that will excite and challenge us. It takes prayerful listening and work.

2. VISION HELPS OUR DREAMS BECOME BIGGER THAN OUR MEMORIES.

One of the reasons many churches fail to reach their full potential is because their memories are bigger than their dreams. More energy is spent on recalling and celebrating the past than on contemplating the future. This happens subtly. More often than not, the church tends to hold on to old ways of "doing church" that are no longer effective. Or the church keeps adding "revivals" to the calendar—hoping some new life will come. But after each revival, people go back to the old patterns...ministries are maintained and the results of hard church work are the same as always.

John R. W. Stott, a well-known English theologian, says that "vision begins with a holy discontent with the way things are." It is possible to become so content with our church that we get complacent. We get busy building homes, families, and careers, while trying to live in a chaotic, change-filled world. Sometimes the last thing church attenders want to see change is their church. They like the stable ground of church being familiar and the same week after week. Unfortunately, that sameness can breed complacency and weak ministry.

Discouragement sets in, maybe even some bitterness. And the lighthouse God called into existence emits only the weakest of light. Yet with a vision, the future begins to grow and become more clear and larger than the past and present. Lay people lift their eyes and, as this happens, discouragement and complacency begin to be replaced with hope.

3. VISION GIVES YOUR CHURCH A TARGET

Aubrey Malphurs, in his book, *Planting Growing Churches for the Twenty-first Century* says, "People can't focus on fog! As someone once said, 'If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time!'" He goes on, "(Vision) is the ministry compass that helps a congregation and the leaders navigate through the ocean of decision." (page 234)

As a consultant for the past 23 years God has given me the unique privilege of a front row seat for His work in churches, denominations, and Christian organizations. The organizations with vision and those without vision readily sort into two categories in my mind's eye—those with vision have a sense of direction and destiny. Those without seem lost and befuddled in our culture. Churches that take the time to develop a vision put a compass in the hands of its people. Now, instead of the pastor pulling and pushing, many people besides the pastor have a common sense of destiny.

Vision Gets People in the Game

What church doesn't need more lay people actively involved, using their gifts and energies to advance God's kingdom agenda in their community? There are scores of reasons why many lay people stay in the stands and watch the church work rather than getting onto the playing field. But one of those reasons is lack of vision. People return from summer vacations or after the Christmas holidays to a church experience that feels a bit too familiar. Simply put, they are bored.

With a clear and compelling vision that lay members help shape, a church is better positioned to invite lay people into the challenges and excitement of kingdom work. Without it, it's just one more class to teach, room to clean, or meeting to attend.

These Days We Almost Always Need a Process to Help us Develop Vision

Scripture says that without vision people perish. Each one of us dies a little when we don't have our eyes on the future. But for most pastors and church leaders, there aren't enough hours in the day to focus on the future. The present is in our face. So we need a way to lift our eyes from the present to the future so that our dreams are bigger than our present experience and memories. That takes a process. The best vision comes out of a process of prayer and dialogue of a cross-section of church leaders, led by the pastor.

Process involves many people in your church. Why go to the trouble? God has implanted in the minds and hearts of your committed attenders a vision for your church. A process is needed to help each church hear what God is saying to these key lay leaders and to release their visions and to blend them with others.

You might ask, "Why involve lay leaders? Isn't it my job as pastor to spell out the vision?" As a culture we no longer are comfortable with a top-down, little or no discussion style of leadership. We resist leaders with a 'command and control' style. Increasingly, we want to participate more in the decisions that affect the future of the organizations we care about. The church is not immune to this cultural shift. In past decades church laity were often content to participate in the direction of the church through an annual meeting. No longer.

Nowadays, more and more people want to have a say in the direction the church is heading. (Pastors can be lulled into thinking this isn't true about their church when apathy is felt about the church's future or attendance is poor at meetings called to discuss an important decision facing the church. In those cases where people don't show much interest, it is often because they feel they have no voice or influence. Trust must be regained 'by offering a participatory process—one that allows people to speak.) The pastor has the lead vision-development role, but involving others is key to their ownership of the vision. Without participation, the pastor is forced into selling his vision.

Thousands of churches have gone to using a process to develop a vision for their church. The process takes more time than a weekend board retreat—but the payback is greater and deeper ownership of the future of your church.

What kind of process? It's as simple as getting people into small groups and getting them to focus on what God is saying to them about the future of your church, combining their ideas with the ideas of others and then leadership synthesizing those ideas into one coherent statement of vision. Armed with such a vision leadership can then move to turning such a vision into a new season of meaningful ministry.

Need help with the process? Go to Consultant in a Box and see Vision Discovery Kit. For a proven and dynamic tool that brings a consultant on vision into your church at a very reasonable cost.

A Slogan is Not a Vision

When was the last time you ready a one phrase vision statement for a church or company that got you out of your chair or made your heart beat faster? Thought so. Few great vision statements are a slogan. To really motivate a potential new attender, staff person, volunteer or giver, takes more than 8 or 10 words. Consulting experience shows that when people work together to create a vision statement of a page or two, that enough great ideas are shared to energize those who worked on it or read it. A summary slogan can come out of a longer statement, but it to make the slogan the point of the exercise is misguided. Commit to writing the ideas down in a succinct way that, when read, will motivate. Just picture yourself in a restaurant interviewing a potential staff person, or motivating a member to hang in there or a giver to give. “Where is our church going?” they ask. And you slide a slogan across the table for them to read. Not cool. But to slide a page or two of vision and to then expand on key points in your own words—now you are positioned to motivate and lift vision. That’s why it makes sense to write a page or two of vision.

Wrap-up

The presence of a vision statement—a word picture of your church’s preferred future—carries no guarantees with it. The greatest vision statement that is not widely owned by the people it impacts goes nowhere. Leadership who fail to align organizational resources to achieve the vision undercut a vision’s power. But one thing is for sure: Just the very process of discovering what God is saying to you and your church about your future, positions your ministry to receive direction from God and to focus your efforts on high value ministry. Once written, communicated and owned by key leaders, a strongly worded vision statement can turn latent energy in your church into active, life-impacting ministry that advances God’s work through your church.

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J. David Schmidt is a management consultant to churches, denominations and parachurch organizations with 23 years experience.

Call 630.682.3122 for more information.