

So You've Got a Vision — Now What?

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DISCOVERING A VISION IS JOB ONE. THE SECOND JOB IS TO GET PEOPLE TO BUY-IN, SO THEY CAN TIE IN

My wife and I attend a friend's annual Christmas party that always ends with the same tradition of exchanging white elephant gifts. We spend a hilarious hour watching as mostly junk emerges from beautifully wrapped boxes. Each year one couple usually goes home with one white elephant gift that has been circulating at the party for years — the ugliest hen and rooster home decoration made of china that you could imagine. I mean, these two pieces of china are so bad that no one even has the heart to take them to a resale shop. There are usually moans and groans from the couple who gets them because there's not much you can do with them but either throw them away or bring them back to spoof somebody the following year.

What Do I Do With This Thing?

Vision, for some pastors and churches, can be a lot like that pair of china chickens. You own it, then wonder what to do with it next. Perhaps you and your church have been one of thousands which has gone through a vision discovery process. You held your meetings and were delighted and challenged by the visions that God has placed on the minds and hearts of people in your church. You worked hard to coalesce those visions into one statement that would guide your church's ministry in the years to come. And now here you wonder, "What do I do with this thing that our church has created?"

For most churches and organizations, fully two-thirds of the value of the vision process occurs in the journey. The value begins to come through the process of people working together to create a common vision—in dialoguing and hearing how God is moving and leading in the person next to you. The value comes in blending ideas and dreams, and aspirations for your church. Whether your vision was developed largely by yourself with the input of a few people, or it was a real team effort, almost all church leaders end up at the same spot—wondering whether they're holding a pair of china chickens in their hands or a document of dreams that can really redirect their church and take it to the next level of spiritual vitality and impact.

So what's next? Here are some ways to take all of the hard work that you and others in your church have done to craft a common, clear, and compelling statement of your church's preferred future and figure out what to do with it next.

People Need to Buy in to Tie in

The single biggest challenge most churches face once they have a vision and, I might add, the single step that is skipped most often, is that of communication. Most churches and pastors who develop a vision move immediately into turning their vision into action. That's critical, and it must happen, but often visions that are moved too quickly from the idea stage to the action stage die simply because too few people understood the vision and, because they didn't understand it, they don't buy into it. As a result, they don't tie in either. So one of the most fundamental, and critical action steps a pastor, staff, and leadership team must do, once they have a vision in place, is to develop a plan for communicating that vision to the entire church body and keeping it in front of them until it is owned by a broad majority of the church.

Vision teams and pastors who choose to leave out this important step of communicating the vision to the church run the real risk of alienating people, or worse, not seeing those who weren't directly involved in the process shrug their shoulders and say, "That's fine for you, but I don't have anything to do with that." What a disappointment it would be to listen to God and do the vision development work, only to have scores of people in your church say, "What vision? I didn't know our church was working on one" or "You may have a vision, but I have my own" or, worse, "I don't want any part of that."

Vision Grows in Strength and Gains Momentum as it's Shared

Communicating vision is the first and most essential step of turning vision into action. There's no "right" way to do this. Every leader and church has their own chemistry for how ideas are shared. In some churches it's assumed that the pastor will simply announce to the church what will happen. In other churches more laity are involved. You need to understand how your church best accepts new information and fresh ideas. This is about knowing your audience and about communicating on their terms, not yours. Increasingly, people want to have a say in the future of their church. As a pastor, you can get up in your pulpit and share a glorious vision, have the whole church applaud and nod their heads in seeming accord and then see your people continue their church involvement in exactly the same ways they have before.

When people are told what the vision is and have very little chance to participate in shaping it or talking about it, very little compliance occurs. Just as the journey of creating their vision together is valuable, so is communicating it together as well.

When I was young one of the rituals our family would execute from time to time was to look at the family slides together. As a young boy, it was always a great treat when Dad would pull out his slide projector, set up the screen, and then proceed to show family slides of happier times gone by. Today we execute a similar ritual in our own household. When we pick up our photo prints from our local developer, my wife and I will often wait to open the pictures until we can gather the family together to go through the pictures one by one. When we do this we experience together the joy of seeing pictures taken and the memories they prompt.

That joint experience of looking at pictures together is precisely what a local church needs. It needs to have the experience of looking out into the future together and looking at the details of that future as a family might sit and look at slides projected on a screen or prints passed around the table. This shared experience builds community and builds a common appreciation for the images that are either seen or talked about. For vision to take on energy, it must be shared. Shared vision gains momentum as individuals within the church talk about it, discuss it, refine it, and add to it.

John P. Kotter in his book *Leading Change* says, "A great vision can serve a useful purpose even if it is understood by just a few key people. But the real power of a vision is unleashed only when most of those involved in an enterprise or activity have a common understanding of its goals and direction." That shared sense of a desirable future can help motivate and coordinate the kinds of actions that create transformations. The cutting edge on the blade has been dulled over time. What was once a ministry or program that God blessed has now become an albatross, something the church maintains but doesn't know how to get rid of. We need to understand that oftentimes ministries continue to outlive their usefulness in churches because no better idea has come along. The point of your church participating in the 2000 Vision & Celebration planning effort was to help your church identify those ministries that were no longer effective and to dream dreams, with the Lord's leading, of new ministries and new people to reach that would replace those ministries and efforts that were no longer as effective as they once were.

When people see a fresh vision, there is a greater willingness to let go of the old and the comfortable. This isn't to say that simply communicating a fresh vision will make the process of change easy in a church. The fact is, we are at a very difficult seam in local church history today. We have come to the end of one era, which was marked by certain tools and strategies, and have launched into a new era where new tools and strategies to reach the unchurched and to make disciples are now necessary.

Many churches are seeking to blend a little bit of the past era with elements of the new, and finding it very, very difficult. If your church is to have a fighting chance at a better future, it will begin with a clear communication of a vision for the future, in words, pictures, and images that people can understand. This takes hard work.

There's a certain amount of emotional work to be done; that of letting go of used-to-be and taking steps toward what might be. Oftentimes people who participated in the vision development process have done this emotional work already and are prepared to enter into a different or new future for their church. But the rest of the congregation hasn't had the opportunity to do the synthesis of ideas, the hard work of looking at alternatives, the difficult work of letting go of solutions to which people may have deep attachments or fondness. Yet that same "journey" must be extended to the congregation.

So how do you do it? Here are some steps for your consideration.

As the senior pastor, you have to be the primary and chief vision communicator. That means setting aside sufficient time in your life to prepare and deliver a compelling statement of vision for your church. At Willow Creek Community Church, Pastor Bill Hybels conducts a Vision Night twice a year in which he reviews for the church where the church has come from in the previous six months and lays out a vision for the church's fundamental mission, vision, and calling and then the specific details of where the church will be headed in the months following. This approach leaves no mistake in the minds of those who attend that the senior pastor is behind the vision.

The senior pastor must be involved and must be viewed as the primary vision champion. If you cannot champion the vision created for your church, either it's the wrong vision for your church, you're wrong for that church and its vision, or you have not yet completed your journey toward acceptance of the vision that God has given to you and the people for that church. However you get there, as senior pastor you've got to get to the point where you are known and seen as the primary vision champion.

But the senior pastor cannot be the only vision carrier or vision champion. Reconvene the vision planning team and invite them to participate in a process of fanning out across the congregation. Plan for each vision team member to communicate, perhaps over a dessert hour in homes or in Sunday school classes or in a series of small groups, the vision to church members. This team will need to meet prior to fanning out so that they can be sure they're all singing the same song and of one accord.

This will require equipping members with a tool kit. A Power Point presentation is ideal in certain settings or, in larger churches, the production of a video. But if all a vision planning member has is copies of the vision to distribute to the people they will meet with and will then passionately and personally talk the people they meet with through the vision, they help become vision carriers, and the more they share it, the more they themselves own it.

This journey will need to allow for dialogue, for both questions and answers. The vision may not be clear to everyone who reads it or hears it for the first time. You may even have conflict over certain points. What's key here is that more than just the pastor is carrying that vision out to the congregation—that he is not viewed alone, but as one of many people who are committed to a new future for the church.

Vision team members can return from these forays into the congregation to meet and dialogue about what they heard. In some cases what is heard may indeed alter the vision. This is not something to be shied away from, but to be encouraged. It may require that certain points be refined, better communicated.

There is a key difference here between listening and leading, though. The process of listening is critical; that is, listening to the congregation's reaction to the vision developed by a planning team. But at some point the listening and the communication process must come to an end and the actual implementation of the vision must take root and take precedent. Don't get sidetracked by endless of cycles of dialogue with one or two groups of people in the church who simply dialogue because they are finding it difficult to give up something that they have become attached to in the church's ministry. When this happens, send these people to the church pastor and board, where differences can be ironed out in a way that is honoring to God and to everyone involved.

Keep communicating the vision. In the Book of Nehemiah, we see how Nehemiah clearly and frequently articulated the vision. He repeatedly announced to all the people that the wall needed to be rebuilt. From the king to the religious leaders to the workmen, he made it clear what the vision was. Eventually his prayers and proclamations resulted in many people sharing the vision and carrying out the task. That's a key lesson. The vision needs to be communicated regularly, even after the initial communication process.

Use a church newsletter to communicate a certain aspect of the vision and how it's going to be worked out. If your church chose to have a Vision Night, involve more people than just the pastor. Invite several vision team members to prepare a testimony of what parts of the vision they are particularly excited about, what parts look like hard work, what parts of the vision do they struggle with? These clear, personal, and honest testimonies will help communicate authentically the vision through the lips of those who helped shape the vision. Keep the vision in front of the church. Kotter says in his book, *Leading Change*, that some studies show that of all the communication in a typical organization only 0.25 percent is devoted to vision. Fully 99.75 percent of communication is devoted to everything else but vision. These proportions are not healthy even in a local church, which is a very volunteer-intensive organization. If anything, vision communication in the church needs to have a higher priority today simply because none of the people who attend your church have to go there. They have free choice to attend any church they like, and therefore keeping them encouraged with a clear picture of the future in front of them is an important part of the assimilation process of people into the body life of your church.

Church leaders will have the task of turning vision into strategy and action, but that does not change the congregation's need to continue to hear about the vision. Help people continue to sign up for the vision over and over again. In the post-modern world in which we live today, loyalty to institutions and skepticism of institutions is at an all-time low. This includes denominations and local churches. Even in the most loyal, hard-working layperson's heart, there occurs several times a year the struggle: "Is this the church my family needs? Is this the church that meets my needs best? Do I want to keep attending this church?"

It's at moments when loyalty lags or discouragement sets in that vision helps bring people back into focus and into alignment with their local church. But that takes intentionality, scheduling moments in messages to reiterate the vision, and at least one or two times a year recalibrating the entire church through a Vision Night or exposure to the vision. The overwhelming majority of people in your church are not dumb, but they do need to hear fresh ideas repeated over and over again. Run the risk of being too repetitive about the vision of your church rather than assuming everybody got it in one Vision Night. The other key is to keep the ideas simple; not to overwhelm people with big ideas, but to paint the vision in broad strokes so that people can grab hold of it and feel like there's something in it for them.

One other tip, and that is what we might say, "Cut the happy talk." People need to know two kinds of information when it comes to evaluating our church's vision. First, Where is God working that is worth celebrating? Where is there evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit — not just in church services, but outside of services, where people's hearts are bigger, marriages are being preserved, people are avoiding sin and there is evidence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Second, there needs to be candor about what's not going well in the church. Tell the truth about how many people in your church came to faith in Christ last year. If that's a number to rejoice about, rejoice. If it's a number to weep about, weep. The greatest key to vision being adopted by a congregation is when they have had a chance to participate in shaping it, which the vision discovery process gives them, and then they are given an opportunity to embrace it, to see and hear their peers endorse it, and they get an authentic picture of where their church is and where it might go and what it might become.

Don't go through the work of having developed the vision for your church only to let it languish in a file drawer or on a computer for lack of putting a good vision communication plan together. Develop a communication plan that will allow the pastor and key lay leaders to speak to the vision, its strength, value, and impact on the church, the needs in the community and the needs in the church that have precipitated this vision.

As the old Sunday school song says, "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. Hide it under a bushel? No!" It's the same with vision. Your church's vision will light the dark path that we all must travel as God's people in the world in which we live. To hide it from the rest of the congregation is to make the candle useless. Develop a communication process that allows an ever-increasing number of people in your church to understand the vision, to talk about it, to give feedback on it, so that they too may have the privilege of owning it, and by owning that vision, be willing and able to throw their weight against it so that it might be achieved.

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