

Developing a Vision

What kind of church would we like to be?

By Aubrey Malphurs

Vision is essential to a church. However, unlike the values, mission, and purpose, the vision is more subject to change. It is dynamic, not static. Over time, the vision must be renewed, adapted, and adjusted to the cultural context in which the congregation lives. The change takes place only at the margins of the vision, not at its core. The core—the Great Commission—does not change. The details of the vision and the words used to convey them will change. The vision provides us with a picture of what the mission will look like as it is realized in the community.

The vision concept is not new to the Scriptures. You will find visions sprinkled throughout the Old and New Testaments. For example, God caught Abraham's attention with his vision for him in Genesis 12:1–3 (the Abrahamic covenant). God used Moses to communicate his vision for his people, Israel, in Exodus 3:7–8 and Deuteronomy 8:7–10. It is possible that the "joy" that Jesus looked forward to while enduring the cross was the vision of his return to the presence of his Father in heaven (Heb. 12:2).

The Importance of a Vision

The limited information that is available indicates that pastors and congregations are struggling with the vision concept. For example, in commenting on pastors and their visions, George Barna writes, "But when we asked these pastors, 'Can you articulate God's vision for the ministry of your church?' we found that roughly 90 percent of them could articulate a basic definition of ministry. But only 2 percent could articulate the vision for their church." David Goetz writes, "In *Leadership's* study, however, pastors indicated that conflicting visions for the church was their greatest source of tension and the top reason they were terminated or forced to resign." Clearly, vision is of utmost importance to leaders and their ministry. Here are seven reasons why.

A Vision Encourages Unity

In a ministry a shared vision changes people's relationship to one another. When a leader casts a vision in a church, it is no longer "their church," it becomes "our church." The ministry's vision encourages and allows people to come together and work together. It creates a common identity in two ways. First, it signals to all where the ministry is going. It says that if you want to go where we are going, then climb on board—let us go together. Second, it fosters the retention of congregants and staff. A common vision says that we are working together toward the same goals. We need each other if anything significant is going to happen for Christ. This, in effect, mirrors such passages as 1 Corinthians 12:20–22 and Ephesians 4:15–16.

A Vision Creates Energy

Not much happens without an inspiring, compelling vision. Not much was happening in Nehemiah's day. The people had no vision. Jerusalem lay in ruins, and no one was motivated to do anything about it (Neh. 1:3). Then along came Nehemiah with a vision from God to rebuild the gates and walls of the city. Visions are exciting and they energize people. They strike a spark—the excitement that lifts a ministry organization out of the mundane. They supply the fuel that lights the fire under a congregation—leaders are able to stop putting out fires and start igniting a few. A vision from God has the potential to turn a maintenance mentality into a ministry

mentality. And when your vision resonates with your values and mission, it generates the energy that fuels the accomplishment of the ministry task.

A Vision Provides Purpose

The right vision creates meaning in people's lives. It gives them a sense of divine purpose in life. They are a part of something great that God is accomplishing at this time and place in history. With a shared vision, people see themselves not just as another congregant or a "pew warmer," but as a vital part of a church that is having a powerful impact on a lost and dying world. They are not simply in a church; they are on a mission. They are part of a revolution that has the potential to change this world, to have a wonderful impact for Christ. For example, a wide gap exists in terms of commitment and dedication to God and a sense of personal significance between one member who, when asked what he or she does, replies, "I am a teacher" and another, who may have the same ministry, but answers, "I am changing the life course of a class of adolescents who will someday accomplish great things for Christ."

A Vision Fosters Risk Taking

A shared vision fosters risk-taking by a congregation. This is especially true in church-planting situations. When the point person or lead pastor casts the vision, everyone knows what needs to be done. That is not the question. The question is, How will we do it? Sometimes we know the answer, but most often we do not. Consequently, ministry for Christ becomes an exciting adventure into the world of the unknown. We attempt something for Christ and it does not work. We attempt something else and it does work. Though much of what we are doing is experimental, it is not ambiguous. It is perfectly clear to all why we are doing it. It is for God and the Savior. People are not asking for guarantees. They all know that no guarantees exist, yet people are committed anyway. The risks are great, but so is the God they serve, and the vision he has given them. How else can we explain the early church and what God accomplished through them or those believers that make up the faith hall of fame in Hebrews 11?

A Vision Enhances Leadership

Developing a vision and then living it vigorously are essential elements of leadership. I define a leader as a godly servant who knows where he or she is going and has followers. That describes not only the Savior, but his disciples and those who ministered in the early church as recorded in Acts. Godly servants are people who display Christ-like character throughout the ministry organization. They exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, given in Galatians 5:22–23. They know where they are going and where they are leading their ministry. They have a dynamic mission and, most important, a clear, energizing vision that paints a picture of the future. The consequence of character and vision is followers. When a congregation has a leader who owns a vision and lives that vision in a Christ-like manner, they will follow that leader to the ends of the earth.

A Vision Promotes Excellence

God desires that his church minister and serve well on his behalf. This calls for ministry excellence. Whatever we do for Christ must be done well, not sloppily or haphazardly. In the Old Testament God required that people give their best when they brought animals for sacrifice (Lev. 22:20–22). This was excellence in worship. In the New Testament Paul explains that God expects us to put forth our best efforts

in our work. He says to perform as if we are working for him (Eph. 6:5–8; Col. 3:23–24). This is excellence in the marketplace.

A shared organizational vision promotes a standard of excellence. Deep down, people want to do a good job, to have a sense that they are effectively and powerfully advancing God's program through their ministry in the church. The vision casts a picture of what that looks like. It provides a visual, mental measure by which staff and congregation can evaluate how well they and the ministry are doing.

A Vision Sustains Ministry

Ministry can be very difficult, even painful. Discouragement and disappointment often lurk in the ministry hallways and boardrooms of the typical church. It is not beyond the enemy to incite persecution against Christ's church (Acts 8:1). Spiritual warfare comes with the ministry territory (Eph. 6:10–18). Many have risked or given their lives for the Savior and the furtherance of the gospel. The list of martyrs for the cause of Christ is extensive. Why? What has sustained Christians from the beginning of the church in the Book of Acts up to today? One answer is a biblical, compelling vision. It encourages people to look beyond the mundane and the pain of ministry. It keeps a picture in front of them that distracts from what is and announces what could be. All the trouble and grief that we experience in this world while serving the Savior are trivial compared to the importance of what we are attempting for him. That picture, carried in our mental billfolds, is one way God sustains us in the worst of times.

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