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Reality check: vision and focus

We need to ask ourselves some stark questions: Have we lost our way? Do our churches behave like Jesus? Is the Church heading in the same direction that the Spirit is blowing or are we way off track?

To move from confession and fasting on to the next step of vision and focus, we should first recognize that we have lost focus. We have taken our eyes off that which needs our attention and allowed ourselves to be distracted by secondary things. How often is church attendance, bums on seats, the litmus test for a church's success? We focus on what those outside the Church see as success rather than staying true to the vision of honouring Jesus and living for him.

It could be said that we have become so determined on succeeding in the running of our services to increase attendance that we have failed to come back to Jesus and check in with his plan for the Church. The words of Amos could be truer now than ever:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!
(Amos 5.21–24)

Our vision has become one of church maintenance and the running of programmes rather than fulfilling the call of God to go into the world and make disciples. That has been forgotten. The life of a Christian community should centre on justice and righteousness and less on the practicalities of how worship is done. For many of us, our buildings, programmes and history have become the ball-and-chains to our faith. Long gone is 'simply living for Jesus in the everyday'. Our lives are now filled with meetings, boards and sub-committees.

I'm being a little facetious in a way, but simply want to make the point that we need to shift our focus away from these things and centre it on Jesus, his mission and ministry in the world. Being completely honest, when did you last ask Jesus how you could help? Have you ever offered to partner with him to see his work in the world fulfilled? The vision has to be all about Jesus and nothing else, so we are 'fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith' (Hebrews 12.2a).

Scripture demonstrates the importance of having a clear vision. As it says in Proverbs 29.18, 'Where there is no revelation, people cast off restraint'. The Church has been perishing for a while. We see churches struggling everywhere and it is time to turn things around by having a clear vision and focus.

I was talking with a pastor friend a few years ago about his church. It's a church that has been having difficulties for a while. I cautiously asked him why things had been hard, why he thought that the church was in decline and what he felt needed to happen. His response was interesting. It was the church across the road's fault; it had taken all the best people in the neighbourhood. It was the fault with the building, as it wasn't in good condition. He also blamed the congregation for not liking his teaching because he was too 'truthful'. It was even the assistant pastor's fault for not being more energetic and engaging. We prayed together. We offered love and encouragement for the work that they were doing there.

About a year later, I met a lady who had been a member of my friend's church. She shared how it had once been a fantastic church.

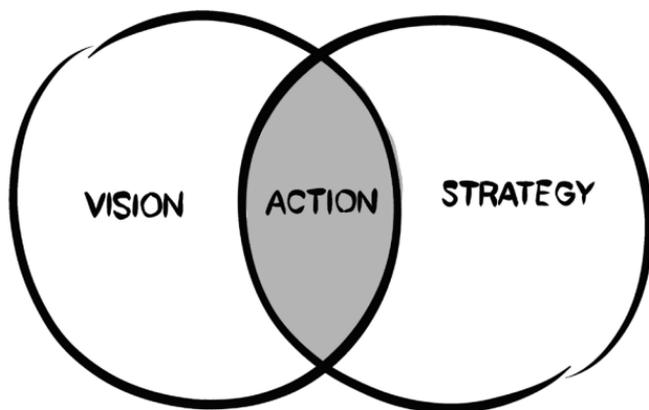
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She expressed how sad she was that it was no longer full and even told me why she had left the church. Funnily enough, she never mentioned the building, the energy of the assistant pastor or even the church across the road. Her answer was simple: there was no vision and purpose for the church. The church lacked identity, drive and direction apart from the Sunday service.

She left the church because of the lack of vision.

Fresh vision and renewed focus on the mission of Jesus are what every church needs. In each of our neighbourhoods, if we want to be a church that exists for Jesus and not ourselves, we must define, plan and implement our vision. If we want our church to be a comfortable place for Christians, then vision isn't necessary because we are already content in our bubble. However, if we want to see our church as the bride of Christ, called to reach the lost, transform lives and restore our communities, well, we must set that as our a vision. Not only must we have a renewed vision, we also need a strategy to turn it into reality. The famous saying often attributed to business management guru Peter Drucker is true: 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast', but the lack of a strategy will do the same. It's the two together, vision and strategy, that are necessary to becoming the vibrant, loving, welcoming, life-giving church we are called to be.

Where strategy and vision intersect, we find action.



Is there a difference between vision and strategy? Absolutely there is!

A clear vision is about where you want to go, what you want to become, what you want to accomplish. A strategy will help you to get there.

Revolution

A revolution is future-facing; it is powered by a vision that can be seen on the horizon. Anything other than a revolution is nothing more than a church day out. If the vision for the Church could be accomplished simply by hard work, maybe we are missing something. If our vision could be financed by our present financial capacity, maybe we are missing something. If our vision could be accomplished in five to ten years if we worked hard enough, then we are certainly missing something. The vision for the future of the Church should scare you. If it doesn't, is it really a revolutionary vision? It should bring us to our knees, wondering how we will ever achieve it.

In the same breath, it should excite us to see how Jesus will deliver it.

Our vision, not your vision

A vision for your church should be a shared vision and not simply the vision of the lead pastor, priest or vicar. This requires that it originate from the leadership but be adopted, owned together and understood by the congregation. Time and time again, we see churches where the leadership team has a fantastic and exciting vision. This might trickle down to the elders or deacons, but then stops there. Hear me now, if the vision isn't embraced and owned by the congregation, it will not become a reality. If it is not going to have an impact on the wider church, if these others are not going

to own it, too, it won't get off the ground. In fact, most likely, it will bring about conflict or be received with apathy at best.

Sadly, many church leaders believe that simply communicating the vision in a sermon will lead to it becoming a shared vision. Note: 'hearing' and 'owning' are two very different things. Just because I hear the words spoken about a vision doesn't mean that I want, or have a desire, to make it a reality.

Your vision is not necessarily my vision.

Our vision, though, is our vision.

Inspiring and challenging

When casting the vision for your church, it needs to inspire people to embrace it. It needs to leave them desperate to play their part and be challenging enough that they can see themselves growing into it. The vision needs to leave people wanting to find out more, get involved and get others involved.

If you are a church leader reading this, you might need to think about how you yourself inspire people. Have you ever been invited on a day trip only to find out that where you're going sounds rubbish and you're not remotely interested? You committed yourself before you knew what the destination was and now you feel obliged to support that friend rather than really want to be on the journey. Well . . . that is how many people in our congregations feel. If you are likeable and inspiring, if you make people feel good, then they might come because of your leadership. If your personality doesn't stand out in the crowd and the destination sounds dull, then don't be surprised if people drift off and find better things to do.

A church leader must lead people into a bigger and better future, provide an inspiring, motivating, challenging, memorable and unique picture of where the church is headed. The best leaders engage their people in the process of creating a shared vision. We have to ask ourselves, 'Is our vision big enough and bold enough?',

while at the same time achievable, with God's help, and relevant enough to engage those in your church?

Before going any further, let me just clarify what we mean by 'achievable'. Our vision needs to be kingdom big but also based in reality. If the vision is to be the first church to plant a congregation on the dark side of the moon, we have to ask, 'Is this going to be a realistic possibility with the resources we have?' Our vision has to make sense and be possible from a practical point of view, while at the same time be big enough that only God could help us pull it off. That said, anyone want to plant a church with me on the dark side of the moon?

If you aren't a church leader or a part of any formal leadership team, you don't get out of any of this work. The challenge to you is, how are you going to help the leadership team in this task? What part can you play? How can you encourage others? How can you bring out the best in your leaders?

Our vision must shape our strategy

Your church's vision must inform all long-term decisions for that church. The vision needs to shape how decisions are made, who is employed, how services are run, as well as who you might partner with. The vision has to influence every level of your church's life. If it doesn't, it is not a vision – it is a strapline. A church can adopt a vision, but if it is not guiding each and every decision in terms of personnel and staffing, programmes and courses, funding and finance, then it's a toothless tiger.

What follows might require difficult, even painful, decisions to be made. Nehemiah shows us that this was true for his vision, too, and means it holds up as an inspirational example for us today. Tough conversations are part and parcel of establishing the church's vision and seeing it through to becoming a reality. To do this we need to be SMART . . .

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S	Specific	Make your goals specific and narrow for more effective planning
M	Measurable	Define what evidence will prove you're making progress and re-evaluate when necessary.
A	Attainable	Make sure your goal is achievable but also bold.
R	Relevant	Your goals should align with your values and vision.
T	Time-bound	Set realistic, ambitious end dates to prioritize each task and maintain motivation.

The process of setting SMART goals is integral to establishing the vision as it will help to:

- establish clear intentions – broad or vague ideas will be weeded out;
- provide a gauge for the direction and establish markers to check progress en route to the goals set;
- offer sensible aims that are realistic and achievable;
- remove unnecessary, unhelpful or irrelevant tasks that often can be distracting;
- establish an achievable timeline.

Clear and focused

In this chapter, we have established how important it is that our church's vision is clear and focused, with a direct, obtainable strategy. How we will get there, in terms of our relationships with one another, is as important as reaching the final goal. Remember, a vision is nothing without people. One without the other will leave members of your church burnt out and frustrated and could have as damaging an effect as a lack of vision.

How can you see if your church has a vision and a strategy? Is it simply about having something up on the wall?

One of the ways in which we can test our vision is by looking to see if there are any fruits from it. These are the proof that there is a vision and plan of action in place and they are working.

Do you see any fruits from your church's vision? If the answer is 'No', then you might need to talk with people to find out why. Does the vision need to be made clearer, easier to understand or act on? If people understand what the vision looks like in reality, they are much more likely to live it out and it is then that you will see it bear fruit.