

Vision: What's All the Fuss?

By Dr Jerry Graham

There's a lot of talk these days about vision, and the need for vision in the church. Books are appearing in the ministry sections of Christian bookstores extolling the virtues of vision. What is vision anyway? And what is all the fuss over it? Does vision really apply to the church? My church? How about the small, rural church? Do they need a vision, or is this just one of those concepts for that big, mega-church downtown? This article is an attempt to begin to answer some of these questions regarding vision.

Why Be Concerned About Vision?

Probably the first question on the minds of many is, "Why should I spend time on vision?" According to Dr. Owen Weston, formerly Associate Professor of Ministries at Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA, a study done by that university revealed that 80% of the Protestant churches are dying. Weston wrote, "The biblical mandate to have a vision applies not only to individuals but also to churches. Our studies at Regent University have proven vision to be the most fundamental element in a church's growth. We have found that churches that do not have a vision are going absolutely nowhere. These churches seem to flounder around without any direction or purpose."

In a similar fashion, the founder and president of Barna Research Group, Ltd., George Barna, has observed that one of the main differences between healthy churches and stagnant churches is vision. He writes, "In every one of the growing, healthy churches I have studied, a discernible link has been forged between the spiritual and numerical growth of those congregations and the existence, articulation and wide-spread ownership of God's vision for ministry by the leaders and participants of the church. Conversely, visionless congregations fail to experience spiritual and numerical growth."

What Is Vision?

Vision is the blazing campfire around which the people of God gather. It provides light, energy, warmth, and unity. It helps us see through God's eyes, to perceive His purposes and possibilities. It strengthens us with the conviction that "all things are possible through Christ."

George Barna sharpens this idea of vision in this manner, "[Vision is] a comprehensive sense of where you are, where you're going, and how you're going to get there.... [It is] a portrait of all that exists in your sphere of potential influence, and ... a concept of how ... your organization fits within the aggregate environment."

To further understand vision, Weston carefully distinguishes between vision and theological purpose, which can be defined as the theological reason or set of beliefs upon which the church was founded. Weston argues that while a church's vision probably will change over time, the theological purpose cannot change without major conflict within the church. With this as a background, Weston further crystallizes the definition of vision thusly, "Vision is a sub point to the theological purpose.... The main focus of the church (is its) theological purpose.... However, the vision needs to go a step further than that. It needs to get people excited about what the church is doing and who its ministering target audience is."

Where Does Vision Come From?

The answer is simple—God gives the vision. Terry Fullam is quoted as saying, "Vision arises out of our burden to know the will of God, to become whatever it is God wants us to become. [It is also] the product of God working in us. He creates the vision, and we receive it; it becomes a rallying point, a goal toward which we move as His people."

Barna distinguishes between visions and dreams. He describes dreams as "pie-in-the-sky" ideas, i.e., thoughts that cannot be translated into any kind of relevant and reasonable solutions. Visions, on the other hand, are practical thoughts which can be implemented and are likely to find a waiting niche in the marketplace. He points out that for the visionary, prayer is a consistent, foundational reality as he seeks guidance from above.

Vision Uniqueness

Christians everywhere are taught about unique callings and giftings via the body metaphor Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. The same logic should be extended to the church, but all too often the obvious is overlooked. The opening verse of that passage reads, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body.”

It seems reasonable to paraphrase that verse for the church by saying, “The Church (universal) is a unit, though it is made up of many churches (local); and though all its churches (local) are many, they form one Church (universal).”

Just as Paul goes on so eloquently to explain that each member of the body has been placed there by God with a distinct job to do within the body, it is again logical to extend this metaphor to suggest that each local church has been placed by God with a distinct job to do within the universal Church.

In an excellent article on the need for uniqueness between churches, Marshall Shelly has written, “If you look at the official statements of purpose for most churches in North America, you might conclude they are a franchise operation. A religious version of McDonald’s or K-Mart, with each establishment identical except for its function. . . . The similarity of stated goals, however, camouflages the vast differences between churches. Even within denominations, each local body is a unique expression, with different gifts, callings and ministries.”

Most churches, however, don’t like to admit they specialize. We all want to be full-service churches, even when we don’t have the resources. We try to be all things to all people, surrounded by other churches vainly trying the same thing. The result: we’re often bland and mediocre.

Coming to the same conclusion as Shelley, authors Lindgren and Shawchuck refute those who argue against local church vision and/or mission statements by citing the unsuccessful emphasis on mission statements by several major denominations a few years back. They point out that, “Previous emphasis tended to flow from the top down to the local church, and this engendered no small degree of resentment. Much of the content material for the mission statement was also handed down. . . . We are suggesting not a denominational but a local move toward a mission statement. Systems theory suggests that each local church has unique qualities and a unique mission.”

Terry Fullam concurs, “If all the churches in a town were truly open to the Lord and moving in His will, I suspect you would find one church with an outstanding youth program, another as a great teaching center, and so forth. I don’t think every church is called to do everything.”

What About Goals and Objectives?

Goals and objectives are a powerful means to an end. Trite sayings regarding the necessity of goals, both in one’s personal life as well as in organizations abound. In spite of that understanding, very few churches seem to have clear, concise, measurable goals. However, it is important to recognize that there is a difference between goals and vision, (i.e. goals are not a substitute for vision). On the contrary, good goals emerge from a clear vision. One example of the difference lies in the fact that goals are measurable while vision is not. Terry Fullam distinguishes between them by saying, “Vision is something that elicits a response from us, that calls us forth. Goals, on the other hand, are things we project that we want to accomplish.”

In a typical church where each committee is at liberty, or even urged, to set its own goals, if there is not a vision against which the resultant goals are measured, it is very likely that conflicting, mutually exclusive goals will result. When that happens, hard feelings arise and goals can even become counter-productive. In other words, goals should come after vision. As Shelley points out, “A good statement of purpose [vision] not only clarifies what the church does, it sets boundaries. It defines what the church will not do. It helps limit expectations.”

Why Is Vision Important?

Having understood the “what” of vision, we now turn to the “why.” Lindgren and Shawchuck provide three good reasons that a church should have a vision, “[It] focuses on an awareness of direction, purpose, and a reason for being.” Other authors add life and excitement to the list of benefits.

Once the church has a focused understanding of what it is about, it can even be seen that the organizational structure required to most effectively accomplish that vision becomes clearer. This extends to both professional and volunteer personnel. “The type, skills, quality, and relationships between persons required to do the work of the church is essentially determined by what the church is seeking to accomplish.” George Barna goes on to point out that “success in ministry is a result of vision, not a prerequisite for vision.”

Another way to appreciate the importance of vision is to look at the effects of its absence. Lindgren and Shawchuck assert that “the typical church is an activity trap” wherein “activity is confused with effectiveness.” They list several symptoms of a lack of vision. They include programs that are not working, financial deficits, lack of needed workers, poor attendance, difficulty in making decisions, no sense of direction, a feeling of not doing anything important, and low morale.

How many churches suffering from many of these symptoms, diagnose them to be the problem, and try program after program to rectify the situation? Obviously the problem will not go away by treating the symptom.

What Makes An Effective Vision Statement?

One of the qualities of an effective vision statement has already been touched upon, i.e., a good vision statement should be unique (or specific) to a given body of believers.

The second quality arises from that attribute of uniqueness, i.e., the requirement that the vision statement focus on the God-given strengths of a congregation.

It should not be considered an accident that a particular church has an abundance of some gifts and a dearth of others. God, in His infinite wisdom, has arranged it such that “all churches don’t have all the gifts all the time, but each church has all it needs at this time.”

In other words, God has provided the “tools” for a given local church to accomplish the vision God has for that local church within its environment or sphere of influence. The job of the local church is to hear and recognize God’s calling for them.

A third requirement is provided by Weston who feels that an effective vision statement should also define the church’s target audience. The target audience is determined not only by demographics, but also by the history, theological purpose, and strengths of the local body. Many people are reluctant to define a target audience because they do not want to turn anybody away. Weston argues against this when he asserts, “The ‘shotgun’ approach misses everyone. Church growth studies have shown that 30%-40% of a congregation ends up being the target audience. . . . 60%–70% of the church are those who are related and who come in favor of helping to reach that target group. The idea that if you concentrate on one group you drive away all others has not proven to be so. . . . Most churches do not have the resources of money and people to concentrate on too many and too varied ‘catch-all’ programs.”

The fourth requirement for effectiveness arises from the third. Since a church’s target audience is likely to change over time, it only follows that the church’s vision statement is subject to change over time. The attribute that a vision statement can change in contrast to the church’s theological purpose which should not change has already been touched upon.

The fifth and final quality of an effective vision statement is that it should be stated in one fairly short sentence. This is important because the vision of the church must be marketed both within the church and within the community served by the church to be effective. As unspiritual as that may sound to some, it is a truth that no matter how good a product is, it will not make an impact on the consumer unless they know about it. Weston and others propose that as much as 5% of the church’s general budget should be allocated to marketing the church, and its vision, to the community.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this has helped answer some questions posed about vision, and indeed has inspired you to resolve to seek God for His vision for your church. Proverbs 29:18 makes it abundantly clear, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” This but one area, albeit an extremely important area, where an experienced coach can be of significant service to the Pastor and his/her leadership team as they seek God’s will for the church’s



vision. Call us at CoachingPastors.com and schedule yourself for a free Complementary Coaching Call. Try us on for size.