

Vision Discernment

Spiritual Formation Process

Vision discernment is a fundamental, first step in the founding or transformation of any organization. However, it is experienced somewhat differently in churches because Christians believe that visions are *revealed* rather than created. Vision expresses God's will for the church, rather than personal preferences members or strategic plans of boards. Vision is part of a spiritual formation process, and leads to a strategic planning process. It is about "heartburst" rather than "brainstorm".

The spiritual formation process builds clarity and consensus about four things:

"Core Values" are the positive, Christian, behavioral expectations that congregational members have for one another. This consensus makes the congregation a "safe place" for seekers because there is common commitment about how people treat each other in this community, and how members are expected to behave in the world.

"Bedrock Beliefs" are the deeply held faith convictions to which members predictably turn for strength in times of trouble. This consensus makes the congregation a "people of integrity" for seekers because there is common commitment about how members encourage each other in this community, and how seekers are blessed with hope.

"Motivating Vision" is the overarching purpose toward which every member dedicates 100% of their church resources and personal lifestyles. This consensus makes the congregation a "people of destiny". They are motivated by the same ultimate concern that can only partially be captured in words. Motivating visions are captured best in a symbol, image, or "song in the heart" that members share on the journey toward a holy destination.

"Strategic Mission" is the specific goal to bless strangers to grace with a special blessing. This consensus represents the specific "heartburst" of members to reach out to real people, in specific ways, with a core message of hope.

There are three reasons vision the vision discernment process is so fundamental to church growth.

Unity and Purpose

Visioning establishes the identity and destiny of the congregation. It establishes the behavioral norms and source of integrity that binds the community together. It distinguishes this particular congregation from that particular congregation ... not better or worse, but simply unique. This consensus is the basis for all dialogue with seekers, other faiths, and the secular world. It is how you formulate "answers" for their "questions"; and how you articulate "questions" for the world beyond the church. A church without unity and purpose becomes a mere heritage society or social club.

If the church were compared to a sailing ship, this consensus can be compared to the rudder, bowsprit, and flag. Vision directs the overall course of the ship. It orients the church toward the North Star. It reveals the identity of the vessel to friend or foe.

Foundation of Trust

Visioning establishes the foundation of trust that undergirds organizational life. It is the unique culture in which members interact, initiate creative ideas, and welcome newcomers. Trust is what gives people confidence to be themselves, express their ideas, and make group decisions with reasonable confidence. This consensus is the foundation on which all institutional constitutions or polities depend. It is the reason why the congregation deserves the respect of newcomers or onlookers. A church without trust becomes a hierarchy, oligarchy, or power struggle.

If the church were compared to a sailing ship, this consensus can be compared to the keel, ballast, and rigging. Vision counterbalances the church against the pressure of cultural currents. It carries the content of faith to any destination. It maintains the creative tension that holds up the masts and sails, and allows the who church to work together in harmony.

Prioritization and Planning

Visioning establishes the objectivity behind all strategic and tactical decision-making. It allows spiritual leaders to count the cost of discipleship (initiating new programs, perfecting ongoing programs, and terminating ineffective programs) without undue stress or prolonged debate. Vision allows leaders to align staff, programs, and resources to deliver the mission; deploy teams for effective action; and hold members accountable to God's will and mutual expectations. A church without prioritization and planning becomes a museum, a clique, or a retirement home.

If the church were compared to a sailing ship, this consensus can be compared to the compass, sextant, and sails. Vision allows the ship's officers to discern their relative position in God's plan of redemption for the world. It allows them to alter course. It empowers them to deploy the crew to lengthen and shorten, mend and replace, the various sails (programs) that fill with the winds of God.

The Basic Process of Discernment

Clarity of purpose emerges through a dialogue between the congregational heart and community sensitivity. On the one hand, the church surrenders itself to God's will; and on the other hand, the church surrenders membership privileges to the needs of strangers to grace.

Congregational Heart

(See my book *Moving Off the Map* (Abingdon Press or www.Amazon.com).

The Biblical model for such spiritual formation is to begin with core values, and proceed to bedrock beliefs. Out of this greater clarity of identity, people can then prayerfully wait for God's vision and focus organizational mission. Finally, this greater consensus allows the faith community to target the publics they yearn to bless and formulate their core message of hope for the world. There are numerous Biblical stories that illustrate this process.

Building consensus around core values and bedrock beliefs is primarily the "work of the people". This is accomplished through a variety of small and large group conversations, including active and inactive members, facilitated by leaders who can encourage participation and listening. Leaders can synthesize the "work of the people" into a normative list of values and beliefs.

Building consensus around motivating vision is primarily the "work of the Holy Spirit". This is accomplished through disciplines of personal and corporate prayer, preaching and Bible study, and intentional listening to the spiritual yearnings of the public. This may take longer, and is necessarily beyond the control of leaders. Eventually, however, leaders can focus God's will for the congregation into a picture or song that is worth a thousand words. Whenever it is repeated, viewed, or celebrated it moves people to joy, fires their imaginations, and motivates creativity and generosity.

Building consensus around strategic mission is primarily the "work of the leaders". This is accomplished through annual retreats, constant research and evaluation, dialogue with other churches and sectors, and regular discussion of long term goals. Leaders formulate a mission statement and a core message for the congregation, and entrust action to gifted, called, and trained teams to do what it takes to participate appropriately in God's mission to redeem the world.

Community Sensitivity

(See my book *Ministry Applications for Lifestyle Segments* (www.MissionInsite.com).

The mission model for seeker sensitivity is based on progressive layers of research. Imagine the progressive magnifications of a microscope. Church leaders examine the needs of the community in ever greater detail.

- *Demographic Research*: Diversity of age, family status, phase of life, occupation, cultural background, primary language, education, mobility, income, ownership, generosity, and debt.
- *Lifestyle Segment Research*: Diversity of attitude, worldview, lifestyle choices, social values, and urgent concerns.
- *Spiritual Needs Research*: Diversity of the broken (looking for healing), the lost (looking for guidance), the lonely (looking for real friendship), the anxious (looking for hope), the victimized (looking for justice), and the trapped (looking for liberation).

The first two filters of research are accomplished using demographic search engines (like *Experien* or *Prizm* in the US and Canada). The third filter of research is accomplished through various tactics of intentional listening to the various publics of any given mission field, and dialogue with community leaders).

Key Steps to Put the Vision to Use

Visions gain power when they are actually used to shape and guide organizational life. Use it or lose it. If a congregation develops clarity and consensus for core values, beliefs, vision, and mission ... but ignores it ... then as soon as emergencies arise the organization will revert to micro-management and the protection of comfort zones. These are the key steps to put the vision to use:

Celebrate Constantly

Regularly define, refine, and celebrate the core values, beliefs, vision, and mission of the church. This is the primary purpose of any congregational annual meeting, but also a necessary component to every worship service and other gathering. The words of the values and beliefs; stories that illustrate their meaning; images and songs that reveal vision; and reiteration of mission statement and core message should be an intentional part of every routine community gathering. Consider this a kind of “internal marketing”. This is the first thing every member is taught; and the one thing every seeker or visitor should take away.

Train Everyone

Every leader, volunteer, and team must be deliberately trained to model and share the vision. They must be trained to spontaneously or daringly model the core values (positive Christian behavioral patterns) in daily living and service; and readily articulate the bedrock beliefs (convictions of hope) among friends and strangers. They must be able to share the picture or sing the song that reveals the vision. They must be able to repeat the mission statement or proclaim the core message immediately and from memory.

This training is particularly important for volunteers and teams who represent the “front line” of interaction with seekers and the general public. This includes hospitality teams (greeters, ushers, refreshment servers); worship teams (musicians, liturgists, dramatists); and administration teams (secretaries, custodians, paid staff). Once these “front line” teams show the way, extend the training to education teams and small groups (Sunday and midweek); and resource teams (financial and property managers).

Reference all Planning

Every decision to initiate, improve, or terminate a program or budget line should be tied directly to alignment with the overarching vision and mission of the church. Nothing should sidetrack the church in even minor ways from delivering mission results. Similarly, every decision to innovate, reform, or close a program or budget line should intentionally refer to the core values and beliefs that define the identity of the church. Nothing should compromise the essential integrity of the church.

All planning processes should begin with a review of the core values and beliefs of the church; and build on demographic research and community dialogue that refines vision and mission for the evolving lifestyles and spiritual yearnings of the mission field. Begin tactical planning to use the resources of the church only after focusing the needs of people *beyond the church*. That is the essence of faithfulness to God's purpose to redeem the world.

Hold Members and Leaders Accountable

Once you have celebrated vision, trained teams, and referenced all planning, you can (and must) hold every member and leader accountable to the core values, beliefs, vision, and mission of the church. These are the basic boundaries of church life and mission beyond which no leader or member can go ... but within which they can be as creative as possible. Paid staff and volunteers are acquired, evaluated, and (if necessary) dismissed based on their commitment to live and work according to these standards.

Since we are all sinners and frequently fall short, the church can use the consensus around vision to forgive, encourage, and grow members and leaders in faithfulness. Team participants can evaluate one another to deepen spiritual life and improve mission impact. Following the Biblical model of intervention, two or three spiritual leaders can speak "heart to heart" with wayward individuals or teams. They can provide helpful resources and reasonable timeframes for positive change, but also protect the integrity and focus of the church from compromise.

Market to the World

The church can advertise itself to the world. Marketing can be done in any number of ways, through any conceivable media, to reach any particular public. This marketing will be authentic and not artificial, because it is rooted in the celebration, training, planning, and accountability of the church. The church will be much less vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, and the increasingly skeptical public will approach with the church with more confidence.

Partner with Compatible Organizations

Finally, the church can form alliances and partner with other agencies to maximize its mission impact on the world. Lasting and effective partnerships can include other churches, para-churches, social service, business, government, educational, and other agencies whose core values, beliefs, vision and mission are compatible with those of the church. "Compatibility" means that the purposefulness, trust, and priorities of each alliance partner are not contradictory or mutually exclusive; and that cooperation enhances the mission impact of each organization.

Future Strategic Planning

Vision discernment prepares the church for short- and long-term strategic planning. Churches that have lost vision, or which have failed to use vision once it is discerned, quickly become unmanageable. Paid staff change the vision as they come and go; boards and volunteer leaders are chosen simply because they have disposable time and secular skills. Contributors lose confidence that resources are being used wisely and faithfully. These are the basic steps for high-integrity, mission-driven strategic planning:

Preparation

Church leaders renew their relationship with Christ, reenergize around the vision God has revealed, and review the foundation of trust. They research the changing mission field, and sensitize themselves to the evolving spiritual needs of the public.

Prioritization

Church leaders evaluate new ideas and existing programs in two stages. Leaders answer the following key questions in each stage:

- *Why* are we doing this?
- *Who* will lead it and be blessed by it?
- *What blessings* should result?

- *When* will we do it?
- *How* will we do it?
- *Where* will we do it?
- *How much* will it cost?

Leaders can evaluate every new idea and ongoing program to accelerate church growth and maximize mission impact. (See my book *Accelerate Your Church* from www.MissionInsite.com).