

THE PASTOR'S ROLE IN VISION-BASED LEADERSHIP

Editor's Note: Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the *New International Version (NIV)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1973.

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Across North America today most churches are experiencing very limited growth or even decline. There are multiple factors that contribute to this systemic problem. These factors include, but are not limited to (a) a maintenance mentality, prioritizing the sustaining of church programs and facilities; (b) pastoral dependency, limiting lay member's participation; (c) apathy and complacency about the lost in the community around the church; and (d) the lack of clear vision, purpose, and direction to unify and inspire the energy and resources of the congregation.

It is this last factor that I would suggest has the potential to change the whole system. The role of vision for a congregation is not the same as a mission statement. Though a mission statement is helpful, the mission of the church is provided in Scripture and though it can be worded in many ways, should largely be the same from congregation to congregation. However, a vision is a descriptive picture of the future for that congregation. A vision should answer the question, “What would it look like here if we were really fulfilling our mission?” By defining the future, the congregation can form plans and priorities to support that future. Without this vision, the congregation will not be able to choose between many positive opportunities, therefore diluting their impact and limiting their success.

There is a great need for churches to understand how this purpose and direction should be determined and by whom. Is this vision for the church's future supposed to just materialize out of the need? Or is there a specific process? Who is responsible for this vision discernment, formulation, and articulation?

The time and space limitation of this article does not allow the entire process to be explored, nor as a result, described. The goal here is to identify the source of the vision process. In other words, should this vision discernment, formulation, and articulation come primarily from the pastor, or from the congregation or a committee of the congregation?

Tim Nichols is the Ministerial Field Representative for the Florida Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Becoming clear about the best source for the origin of vision could be significant for pastors and churches. It seems that in current common practices visioning is thought of as a consensus process. So congregation and pastor seem to be waiting for the vision to just bubble up from the planning they do together. But the vision seldom arrives in a clear recognizable form. The congregational leaders may over time begin to see a pattern or a direction, but it is not well-formed or articulated. There is a significant difference between churches that have a vision to draw them forward and those that do not. Those who do not have a vision always seem to be about maintenance of programs and facilities. Those who have some vision are looking for more. More means trying new ideas, creating more than borrowing. These churches seem to be focused on making a meaningful difference rather than just surviving.

Identifying a leader's role in the process of establishing a vision could by itself create a pathway for realizing the potential of a congregation. I believe the commitment among our pastors and congregational leaders is sufficient; they just don't know the significance this one action could have in the life of the church.

What We Learn From the World of Business

One might assume the church has understood the meaning of being led by values and vision all along, but this has not always been true. It has largely been a revival of visionary leadership in the business environment that has brought the church back to its use (Hybels, 2002, p. 13). So what have business leaders learned about the power of vision that has made it so desirable to them?

Business leaders have found that leading large numbers of people in complex enterprises is not best accomplished through coercion, manipulation, or authoritative controls. They have realized that people respond best to workplaces that offer meaning and purpose to the work being done. Jerry Porras, co-author of *Built To Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, talked about the motivation vision offers in an interview with *Fast Company*:

I would say what's more important in these companies is that they want to live their values, they want to serve their purpose. . . . The visionary companies, they say we will shoot for the target of living our core values and pursuing our purpose. (Underwood, 2004)

Because they make an effort to understand and rally people around

“core values” and “purpose,” they are able to gain loyalty and higher energy levels for the pursuit of the company’s vision.

These businesses have discovered that it is not charisma that defines good leadership; it is the ability to see and lead into the future that makes a good leader. Kouzes and Posner (2002) put it this way:

The message thousands of people are sending is that unless they also believe an aspiring leader is forward-looking, they aren’t likely to follow willingly. Just ask yourself, would you voluntarily enlist in a movement or join an organization in which the leaders have no idea where they’re headed? (p. 111)

This is clearly a lesson the church needs to understand. We need to train and guide our pastor/leaders to be visionary in their leadership.

Another significant reason business leaders are taking hold of the vision process is the result it brings to efficiency and productivity. John P. Kotter (1996), a Harvard Business School expert on business leadership, explains what vision can do:

“Vision helps align individuals, thus coordinating the actions of motivated people in a remarkably efficient way. . . . With clarity of vision, managers and employees can figure out for themselves what to do without constantly checking with a boss or their peers” (p. 70).

This is also one of the practical reasons why functioning with vision in the church is so very important. Vision releases people in the church to contribute in innumerable ways toward the success of the shared dream. “Vision is specific, detailed, customized, distinctive and unique to a given church. It allows a leader to say no to opportunities, it provides direction, it empowers people for service and it facilitates productivity” (Barna, 1992, p. 39).

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES AND VISION

Whatever leaders are hoping to achieve, they need the power of a vision to make it possible in the minds of their followers. There are at least three leadership principles that should be at work while leading people with vision.

Faith-Based Hope

“Visions are about hopes, dreams, and aspirations. They’re about our strong desire to achieve something great. They’re ambitious. They’re expressions of optimism” (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 125). Christian pastors experience times when the challenges seem impossible, but leaders find ways to express hope and reveal faith in God’s unfolding purpose. Establishing a clear, compelling vision will guide leaders’ efforts and keep them moving in a positive direction. “Vision sustains us in hard and troubled times, reminding us of the purpose behind our work” (Sellon, Smith, & Grossman, 2002, p. 42). Disagreements can occur in the church over ministry methodology or programming priorities. A vision can help the church rise above these issues to a higher goal. A congregation is able to set aside many smaller issues when it has a clear picture of a future worthy of their sacrifice. “People claimed by a compelling vision describe the future with a longing and passion in their voices” (Sellon et al., p. 46). A clear vision will give people hope for better ways and better times in the most difficult of circumstances.

God-Given Passion Stirring Shared Vision

When a congregation has found a shared vision through the leadership of a pastor/leader whom they trust, they will make tremendous personal sacrifices to support him/her in making the vision a reality. It is the responsibility of leaders to see the possibilities of the future and to provide a positive climate for members to engage in unfolding, refining, and sharing that vision together. Only then will a distinct and inspiring shared vision emerge (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 131). “Vision has no force, power or impact unless it spreads from the visionary to the visionless. . . . For the vision to have impact, it must be a shared vision” (Barna, 1992, p. 52).

From the perspective of business organization, Peter M. Senge (1990) knows that “few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision” (p. 206). While the business world has great motivation to create shared vision because of what it can do for profit and productivity, leaders in the church should be able to stir so much more passion because we are about transforming lives now and saving them for eternity. Our mission could not be any higher; it comes from God. As leaders in the church, we have every reason to have great vision. So what keeps us from having a powerful vision in every church?

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Courage to Challenge the Status Quo

It is possible we are just not clear about the potential God would have us see for the church. It is also possible that we are uneasy about the consequences of casting a vision that may be a challenge to complete. Do we as leaders really want to take on more than we already have on our shoulders? Leadership requires us to move out of our comfort zone for worthy causes, and challenge others to do the same. The gospel is the worthiest of causes. The church is not today what it could be. The churches we serve could be more. If they were what God designed the church to be in the world today, what would they be like? By answering this question, we have begun to understand what it means to challenge the status quo. A shared vision has the potential to move us much closer to that ideal. Leaders are aware of the cost, but they are also willing to take risks to achieve the vision that is of so much greater value.

As a pastor and son of a pastor, Andy Stanley (1999) understands what this looks like: “Vision requires visionaries, people who have allowed their minds and hearts to wander outside the artificial boundaries imposed by the world as it is. A vision requires an individual who has the courage to act on an idea” (p. 18).

GOD’S CALL TO VISION

The concept of visionary leadership does not have its roots in Harvard Business School or Wall Street. God has called upon His people through all of earth’s history to follow the vision messages He has created and provided to His appointed leaders.

God Calls Leaders

Expecting a leader to lead with vision is not a new idea. The Bible provides many stories where God has sent human leaders with a specific vision to do bold things for Him. “Moses, Samuel, Nehemiah, Paul, Philip, Peter, and many others were directed in important ways by visions from God” (Herrington, Bonem, & Furr, 2000, p. 52). It is difficult to find a place in Scripture where great acts were accomplished for God or His people without identifying a person who was appointed or in some way called by God to take the lead. Usually that person was given a descriptive picture to help them capture the vision for their task. Abraham was told that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens

(Genesis 15:5). Moses was told by God from a burning bush, “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8). Matthew’s gospel tells the account of Jesus finding two fishermen, “Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew.” Jesus casts a vision: “Come, follow me, . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:18-19). In each of these accounts these men were willing to surrender everything to follow the vision, and lead others to do the same. What one does not find in the biblical account are leaders looking for vision to arise out of a group decision.

Any person whom God chooses to speak to is eligible to receive the vision. Once a person receives the vision from God, they hold the responsibility to lead. Neither does God only give the vision to the appointed leader; He gives the vision to the one whom He chooses to become a leader. Aubrey Malphurs (1999) identifies the issue squarely:

Not only is there a problem with finding a biblical foundation for coleadership [*sic*], the greater problem is that people cannot follow a group. It is imperative that there be a single leader or, on a ministry team, a leader of leaders. (p. 44)

God’s Purpose for Vision

Before Jesus left the disciples to continue His ministry, He shared His plan for them. But it was much more than a plan: it was a vision (Easum, 1997). In Acts 1:8 we read where Jesus said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In Matthew 28:19, 20 we find a similar description of the vision and purpose given to the disciples. These two descriptions of the vision defined by Jesus have moved millions of Christian believers to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The vision God has for the church today is captured in these same passages. What He calls churches to do today is to understand a clear vision for how this will be accomplished in their culture and geography. God is calling leaders to lead His people to venture something significant for His kingdom today.

The Genesis of Vision

If the positive influences and benefits of a vision are going to become available to more churches, it is necessary to understand how a vision comes into existence. Where does vision originate? The business community may have their answers to this question, but in the church vision ultimately comes from God. God may use others to capture and communicate His will, but He is the author of the church's purpose and destiny. The authors of *Leading Congregational Change* remind us that "for the vision to have power in the life of the congregation, it must first and foremost come from the heart of God" (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 56). We may seek it, we may receive it, but we do not create it—it comes from God (Sellon et al., 2002, p. 41).

Who then is responsible for hearing God's vision for the church? Of course every believer is responsible for hearing God's purpose in his or her life, but the church is not an individual. The church is to function as a body of believers, so it is by nature an organization of believers, and organizations require leaders. Herrington et al. (2000) describe the process this way: "Initial *input* may come from the vision community or the entire congregation. . . *First drafts* are usually written by an individual, not by committee, and most often by the senior pastor" (p. 52).

As a result of his experience in church transformation, Thomas Bandy (1999) is more direct about his view of how visions occur: "Biblical visions come only to individuals. They don't come to committees, task groups, or official boards on retreat. The [*sic*] come to individuals in the clarity of core values and bedrock beliefs." (¶5)

Even those who see visioning as more of a process that includes an extensive and formal gathering of individual perspectives see the essential role of a leader enabling the process. Aubrey Malphurs (1999), who has written several books on the subject of church strategic planning, visioning, and mission statement formation, carefully places the responsibility on one who is the "cultivator":

The vision cultivator initiates and develops the organization's unique vision, which empowers the vision community for ministry. He initiates the process by challenging the ministry to come up with a clear, challenging vision. He develops the vision initially but solicits the input of others to the extent that it becomes everyone's vision. (p. 51)

Could the placement of responsibility be much clearer? The pastor as the leader appointed both by God in his calling and by the church organization through committee, is the leader of the local church. Since leadership and vision are so closely tied together, the pastor must seek clarity of vision if he/she would lead. George Barna (1992) describes the failure of so many churches to experience a clear vision. He says it is due to a belief in a series of 20 myths about vision. Notice his choice for the number one myth: “Myth 1–Vision should be the result of a consensus among the church’s key leaders regarding future activity by the church. Reality–Vision is not the result *of* consensus; it should result *in* consensus” (p. 45).

The Leader’s Role

So the pastor/leader is responsible to seek, discern, and articulate vision. How does a pastor go about doing this? The pastor/leader should first seek God’s leading in this matter. If the pastor/leader runs ahead of God in this he or she may, even without knowing it, present his or her agenda rather than God’s. It is important for the pastor/leader to take a humble approach at this step, to gain the assurance that God is the source of the vision. Much later in the process this confidence will be needed to courageously defend the heart of the vision. Many of the classic spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, solitude, fasting, and reflection could bring the pastor into the right place to begin hearing God’s desires. The pastor/leader should listen to people’s needs, become familiar with the community around the church, and talk with the members about their values and core beliefs. Praying about the needs he/she observes and asking God to clarify His response to those needs are essential steps. Out of this experience God will reveal a need, and a vision in answer to that need.

James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner (2002), in writing about leadership from the secular business perspective, describe the importance of reflective searching of the heart for vision. “Finding your vision, like finding your voice, is a process of self-exploration and self-creation. It’s an intuitive, emotional process” (p. 115). Bill Hybels (2002) pursues a similar track when he describes the personalization of the vision. “So first, leaders see the vision. Then they feel so deeply about it that they inspire others. The next step in the progression is for leaders to take responsibility for the vision. They have to own it” (p. 36).

What if the church already has a well-established and successful ministry? Should every new pastor bring a new and

separate vision? That probably would not be wise. In these situations, where the church is healthy, the pastor needs to focus on discerning the vision God has already revealed to the congregation. This vision is to be found in observing the direction of ministry revealed in the giftedness and passion of the church members. In such cases the pastor's role as a leader still makes him or her responsible for the clear articulation of the vision he or she has found existing in the life of the congregation (Rainer, 1994, p. 44).

Arriving at Shared Vision

Even the most inspired and prayerfully sought vision will mean nothing to the life of the church, if the pastor/leader does not carefully and seriously approach the congregation with a process for their ownership of the vision. "You can't impose a self-motivating vision on others. It has to be something that has meaning to your constituents, not just you" (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 112). Turning a vision into a shared vision requires more than just "sharing" the vision as in a monologue; it demands a dialogue. "It is not truly a 'shared vision' until it connects with the personal visions of people throughout the organization" (Senge, 1990, p. 214). For the pastor/leader to accomplish this connection, it means he/she has not only listened well to God speaking, but also listened well to the values, passions, and vision of the people. "Shared visions emerge from personal visions. . . . It is rooted in an individual's own set of values, concerns, and aspirations. This is why genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in personal visions" (Senge, 1990, p. 211). This interactive vision dialogue is a step that is often missed or undervalued.

Here is an opportunity for a true expression of our belief in the New Testament out-pouring of the Holy Spirit in the life of every believer. Just as the pastor has prayerfully sought and reflectively listened to God for the passion-stirring vision, it is now his/her responsibility to lead the individuals around him/her through a discovery of personal vision before moving to a corporate vision. This may involve leading a core team of congregational leaders in a process of discovery of personal vision and God's calling in their lives. From this beginning, the process can expand to the full congregation. This can take time. For a pastor/leader to gain the trust of the members enough to be able to hear them sharing their true heart requires patience and a true concern for people. "Making the transition from the pastor's understanding of God's vision to a genuinely shared vision is delicate" (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 57).

Sustaining the Vision

Finding a shared vision worth the time, talent, and resources of our people to accomplish is not simple or quick. Yet too often the writing of a vision statement is treated as if it were just another task to check off a list. Sometimes we hear, “We have done that, so we won’t need to talk about vision for awhile.” The whole point of a “vision” is to create a description of the future for the church so it can be *actively* pursued and become a reality over time. Discerning, capturing, describing, and articulating the vision are not the completion of the vision process; they are only the beginning. “There is no auto pilot in the enterprise of visioning. Sustaining a vision’s forward motion requires the visionary’s constant attention. Preserving the integrity of a vision demands that the navigator be fully engaged” (Stanley, 1999, p. 259).

For the vision to have an effect on the life and ministry of the congregation, it must become a vital part of the planning, decision-making, and communication activities of the church. “If the vision is not communicated in a compelling way, then the organization is going to be unfocused. Wherever focus is lacking, only random activity is left” (Stanley, 2004, p. 68). Rick Warren (1995) has often been quoted for this valuable contribution to understanding the importance of repeating the vision:

Vision and purpose must be restated every twenty-six days to keep the church moving in the right direction. In other words, make sure you communicate your purpose at least monthly. It is amazing how quickly human beings—and churches—lose their sense of purpose. (p. 38)

Repeating the vision does not mean repeating a slogan. The vision may be represented by a slogan, a graphic, or even a metaphor. But the vision is always more than the phrase or image that represents it. It is the heart and passion of the vision that needs to be repeated, so that the people will be moved by its meaning.

We should not think this repetition or communication of the vision can be reduced to a mechanical process. If the vision is going to continue to be “compelling,” it will need to be freshly spoken and described on a regular basis. Maybe even better is what Bill Hybels (2002) proposes: “How does a leader best communicate vision? By embodying it. By personifying it. By living it out” (p. 38).

Conclusion and Summary

One of the greatest needs in the North American church today is to energize a shared ministry between clergy and laity. The work to be done requires more gifts, more ideas, more resources of time and energy than pastors can produce. Every member is needed for who they are and what they can bring to the effort. If we are to impact our portion of the world with the message of Christ, we need to broaden our influence. For this to occur requires leaders who will paint a picture of what can be in the days ahead for the church. Such a vision has the potential to unify and multiply our efforts. We need to believe in a possibility greater than ourselves and our previous accomplishments. The future of the church fulfilling its purpose is dependent on visionary leaders who will call us to rise to a new level together.

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This article has explored the importance of vision in the leadership role of the pastor. It has clarified that pastors have a responsibility to incorporate shared vision into their leadership method. The pastor may start alone seeking God for guidance, or he or she may create urgency for others to join in the visioning quest. Either way, a leader has the choice: lead with vision or manage the status quo. This should never invite the leader to boost his/her ego over the vision. The vision is not a territory to be possessed. The vision must always be subject to God’s leading and open for prayerful reconsideration. The vision is designed to serve God’s purpose, so the leader who delivers the vision should always see himself/herself as a servant.

Therefore we need to train our pastors and other congregational leaders how to seek and clarify a vision for the local church. We need to equip them and mentor them in the process so they can succeed. We need to help them articulate and energize the vision. When we do this, we will truly empower members and clergy to join their lives together in the compelling, transformational power of a God-honoring vision.

Basic leadership steps toward a congregational vision:

1. **The leader seeks to hear God’s heart through spiritual disciplines.**
2. **The leader observes human needs that “cry out” for solutions.**
3. **A vision in response to the need begins to stir in the leader’s heart.**
4. **The leader invites others around him/her to join in the seeking and observing steps.**

5. **The leader creates dialogue around the vision growing in their hearts.**
6. **The leader captures the passion and focus of the expressed vision in words or images.**
7. **The leader guides the formation of strategies to reach the vision.**
8. **The leader continues to articulate the vision in ways that will align people and resources for the accomplishment of the vision.**

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