

The Church's Vision – Problem or Opportunity?

Management theory over the last few years has evolved through numerous 'fads'. I cut my management 'teeth' in my early university years on Management by Objective theory. That soon gave over to various Japanese models with phrases such as 'quality circles' and 'theory x and y' becoming part of management vocabulary. I'm not sure what all the intermediary fads have been but recently there has been much talk about 'strategic planning' and 'positioning'.

There is a common thread however running through all these models which is foundational to all, and that is a clear sense of vision. The corporate world understands the necessity of a clear sense of vision and its impact on market share. In the church however we have yet to learn and appreciate the power of clarity of vision to overall church health.

This is rather paradoxical because in the church of all places we should be concerned about vision, "Why are we here?" "Where are we going?" The Old Testament prophet said it well, "Where there is no vision people perish!"

The truth of this principle has been demonstrated by many churches that have rediscovered their sense of vision, the result being growth, expanded ministry and financial health. They have realized that with the regular occurrence of paradigm shifts in society, it is important to adjust ministry focus to meet current changing needs. Doing what has always been done, but maybe doing it better is not the answer. Surely our post-modern world needs

a new focus, not a change in message but a change in how that message is formed and delivered.

The primary thing that drives the need of such change is clarity of vision consistent with ministry needs today. Every generation needs its own dream. We cannot heed the ubiquitous advice of Yogi Berra, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” Choosing a ‘fork’ and following where that ‘fork’ leads is a deliberate process of choice of direction and how that choice of direction can be accomplished.

For some churches however, ‘vision’ has become a ‘tired’ word. Many have gone through a visioning process, a process that may have had some beneficial analytical aspects to it, but a process that at the end has not resulted in any significant ministry change or growth. This lack of result is usually related to three problems.

The first problem is that visioning is often seen simply as an ‘event’ rather than a continuing process. If churches see visioning only as an ‘event’ it results in the preparation of a ‘vision’ document, perhaps followed by congregational approval, with the document eventually hung on a wall or put in the file so people can say, “We have a vision. Here it is!”

There are however, two questions related to the development of a vision namely: “Where are we going?” “How are we going to get there?”

When churches take the ‘event’ approach, it usually results in a descriptive vision statement as opposed to a prescriptive one, dealing only with the first question, “Where are we going?” It may hang in a nice plaque on the wall but it will not generate any change.

The second problem therefore is that visioning often has no proactive strategic plan which accompanies the vision document. If vision however is seen, not simply as an ‘event’ but as a continuing process of planning, it needs to result, not only in a ‘vision document, hung on the wall, but also in the development of a new philosophy of ministry and a strategic plan to accomplish it. Such a ‘strategic plan’ is often in the ‘document’ but it has not become proactive, meaning that it is not actually resulting in any change of ministry.

The **third problem is that accomplishing a new vision costs** beyond what the church is currently receiving. Vision costs, and the only way that churches can accomplish it is when members move to the concept of sacrificial giving. If churches ‘dare to dream’ therefore, the only way they can accomplish their ‘dream’ is to be committed to a proactive process to generate the necessary dollars to fund it. The truth is that there is nothing that drives giving more and releases more potential than clarity of vision. If there is no commitment therefore to such a proactive process of generating the necessary dollars, vision often does nothing but die ‘on the order table’. When that happens and unfortunately it happens a lot, the Church Elder was right when he said, “Why waste time on dreaming if there is no money available to do it anyway.”

When churches therefore treat vision only as an ‘event’, with no proactive strategic plan to accomplish it, people will probably see it as a problem. When churches however clarify their vision prescriptively, develop and implement a strategic plan to accomplish it and raise the money needed to fund it, the vision process does become a great opportunity to position the church for growth.

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