



Cultivate Mission

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VISION GENERATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Vision Part 1: Generating Vision

Many churches find the exercise of writing a vision statement to be an exasperating endeavor. Failed experiments abound, choking creativity. “What if this becomes a statement that gets filed away and forgotten?” “What if we just produce a run-on sentence with participial phrases up the ying-yang that becomes a mish-mosh representing nothing helpful or real?”

As I dialogue with churches and other consultants, this is a frustrating point for everyone in leading change in a congregation. Yet the literature abounds with admonitions that a clearly articulated vision propels impactful efforts over a sustained period of time.

And so we slog on. Through the rain, sleet, mush, fuzzy thinking, and heated disagreements.

What’s a church to do? First, a church is helped by a definition of what is meant by “vision” statement or “mission” statement, etc. The literature varies here, so I provide churches with definitions in “Creating a Vision Statement,” which includes a sample illustrating these definitions for a fictitious church named Jumpin’4Joy.¹ Then I tell the churches that I intentionally wrote Jumpin4Joy’s statements poorly—to inspire a can-do spirit of “Geez, we can do better than that!” To clarify, a *mission* or *purpose* statement comes first, and is general and universal. A *vision* statement comes second and is time-bound and specific to the congregation. It begins to spell out what it means to live this purpose in this community.

Purpose statement: What is the main purpose/mission for which we are called?

Vision statement: What would it look like if we lived out this purpose in this place?

The purpose statement needs to be short and memorable and get at what is the essence of our calling. Thus, “Creating a Vision Statement” outlines other things churches may need to discuss and put on paper in order to do that. For instance, churches often want that purpose statement to include the practices most important to them, like “worship” or “making disciples” or “caring for each other.” These are all spiritual practices which enable a congregation to live into its purpose/mission. But what is that purpose? How would you put it in one powerful sentence? It is helpful to list the critical spiritual

¹ My definitions in this document are from a class with Dr. Craig Van Gelder in the Luther Seminary’s Congregational Mission and Leadership Doctor of Ministry Program. A helpful example of purpose statement, vision, etc can be found the book by Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008); Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). *Managing the Congregation* presents material in chapter 5 and 6 which offer definitions and examples of the difference between a “mission” statement and a “vision” statement.

practices which enable a congregation to live into their purpose. The example I use here is that of the marathon runner. Their purpose is to run a marathon. Their practices which enable them to do that are running every day, stretching out, eating healthy, getting enough sleep, etc.

Second, a discussion of a church's purpose/vision statement is just that. A conversation. This conversation is best done embedded in a process of rethinking a church's identity in light of several things:

- The church's particular history
- The context of the immediate community and
- The context of the wider place in which the "Church" universal now finds itself.



The conversation is best done embedded in a process of rethinking God's purpose in creating the church, as expressed in Scripture. Why did God create the church? And what does it have to do with the Kingdom of God (that Jesus came preaching)?

Third, the conversation was meant to be frustrating, because it's the needed push and pull of developing a clear AND shared vision amidst the many realities. I think of it as the Spirit of God hovering over the chaos creating new life, like in Genesis. Part of the job of the first humans in this process of bringing order out of chaos was to *name reality*. Animals were brought before Adam and he was asked to name them. In his work of stewardship he—and others—needed common language so they could communicate regarding their work together. When he needed to refer to an elephant, he could just say—"elephant"—instead of saying "that big grey creature with legs like tree trunks, ears like wings, and a tail like a rope."

Thus, the conversation regarding a church's purpose is meant to culminate in a short and pithy statement that gives clarity to the church's discernment process. This pithy statement is meant to be one that "sings," i.e. it inspires people's hearts and common action. It provides clarity regarding who they are and what they are about. The hope is that people can say one short and memorable sentence and all be on the same page, similar to the way I can write the word "elephant" and you have a clear picture in your mind of what animal I'm referring to. This clear picture empowers an ongoing sense of where we are and where we are going.

Last, a discussion of a church's purpose is dependent on leadership, to which we turn next.

Vision Part II: A Shared Main Melody

One of the reasons churches experience futility around creating a vision statement is the challenge of leadership. One of the five leadership practices that emerged from the research of Kouzes and Posner is that leaders inspire a shared vision. Leaders' "clear image of the future pulls them forward. Yet visions seen only by leaders are insufficient to create an organized movement or significant change."²



² James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge, 3d Ed.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 18.

A short and concise purpose statement is like the “head” in an improvised Jazz ensemble which creates that organized movement. Jazz is based on an intro, the head, the solo section, the head out, and possibly a tag ending. The intro establishes the mood; the head is the main melody; the solo section is where the soloists improvise on the melody and/or chord progression of the tune; the head out is a restatement of the theme; and the tag is an ending. The head, or main melody, guides the rest, and forms the direction in which different instrumentalists improvise. Each musician plays variations of this “head,” in their own way; it is a shared main melody.³

Vision Formulation: What is going to be the “Head?” (main melody)

The issue of leadership starts with the conversation—the push and pull of dialogue needed to bring order out of chaos which then results in clearly named purpose. This purpose then directs this congregation’s movement. It is leadership which creates the holding environment needed to have the discussion. John Gardner in his book, *On Leadership* articulates well the leader’s role in vision formulation. He writes that the leader’s task is to seek the common ground that will make concerted action possible.⁴

Likewise, he articulates the leader’s role in vision re-formulation—to “renew and reinterpret values that have been encrusted with hypocrisy, corroded by cynicism or simply abandoned.”⁵ Vision creation might not be inventing something new, but leading this group of people in this place to re-engage their efforts and imaginations, in light of God’s calling.

Jesus took on this leadership role of reinterpreting values that became encrusted with hypocrisy or simply abandoned. When Jesus said-- “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”—Jesus was trying to call Israel back to values that had been encrusted. Like us, Israel tended to crust over ideas critical to what it means to be the people of God. Ideas such as—the people of God are blessed to be a blessing (from the call of God to Abraham). Therefore they should bless even those that curse them.

Creating a shared vision is a *back-forward* process. It calls us *back* to Scripture and God’s purpose for God’s creation. It calls us *forward* to reengaging our hearts and minds with this purpose, because we humans have a tendency to get distracted, forget, or go in another direction. We get cynical.

Thus vision re-formulation is a work of the Spirit. Last week I imaged the process of creating vision as similar to the time the Spirit hovered over the chaos of creation in Genesis. The Spirit also has a role in vision reformulation. It is the Spirit that softens hearts, and breaks through the corrosion of bitterness or discouragement. In the book of Acts Peter quotes the Old Testament prophet Joel to make sense of the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit:

In the last days, God says, “I will pour out my spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” (Acts 2:17f)

³ <http://www.outsideshore.com/primer/primer/ms-primer-3.html>. Accessed 2.24.09

⁴ John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), x.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

I usually focus on the gender or status differences in this passage, of which the Spirit's outpouring is a leveler. But in light of vision formulation, the age difference is significant. As I progress to middle age, I can see how individuals and churches alike can give up dreaming dreams and thinking new thoughts. The Spirit is the one who empowers both old and young to have a vision born of God.

Thus, the leader hovers over this Spirit-inspired chaos. He/she helps people contain the energy and possible conflict in the holding environment where the issues need to be held in conversation. These issues are the various notes, harmonies, and aspects of music we have to work with in creating that "head" or main melody:

How God has spoken in scripture.

How God has acted in bringing this congregation into being and placing it in this context

How God has been at work in the larger world.

What is the main melody that guides your church's ongoing improvisation? How is the Spirit birthing new dreams in your church?

Vision Part III: Living the Shared Main Melody

Leadership takes the pithy and memorable purpose/mission statement and keeps it before the people such that it can propel impactful efforts over a sustained period of time (and therefore doesn't become the statement filed away in a drawer and forgotten). Good implementation of a purpose statement over time depends on good generation of the purpose statement. In other words, it's easier to implement a purpose statement that is shared, and it's easier to have a shared purpose statement if it's been created in a process where everyone has involvement and voice. This was the topic of Vision Part I and II. Now we turn to implementation.

Once you have that shared purpose statement, how does leadership lead in such a way that it comes alive throughout a congregation? Gardner quotes Harlan Cleveland that "planning is improvisation on a sense of direction."⁶

Purpose statements are that sense of direction that could inspire and direct our work together over time. With clarity about main purpose, the congregation then begins to flesh out vision, defined as what it would look like to live out *this purpose at this time in this congregation* embedded in *this community*. General to specific. Purpose is the general mission to which God has called us. Vision is the specific dream/intent/plan of living it out in this place. Using Cleveland's quote, purpose is the sense of direction, and vision is the continuous cycles of planning and spontaneous action in this direction. The Spirit inspires the creation of this purpose statement, and then also the planning and flexible discovery of how it will unfold over time.

Which leads us back to the jazz analogy of the main melody. If the purpose statement is envisioned as the main melody, then ongoing creation and implementation of vision is the improvisation. The main melody (purpose) is decided upon, then how will the group improvise on it...this way...and then that? How will it lift our sights from ourselves and on to the other to whom God has called us?

⁶ Ibid., 124.

This is why it's important that a purpose statement is short and memorable, so that people can keep the conversation about it going. They can bring it up because they remember it. The purpose can take on a life of its own when people besides the pastor/staff are bringing it up and raising the issue of how we live into this purpose statement.

I'll often ask a church when they first bring me in, "Do you have some kind of vision/mission/purpose statement?" The answer's usually the same. People stammer, look at each other... "Yes, somewhere...I think it's written on our weekly bulletin...something about...God/love/reaching-out/Jesus(or is the right answer a squirrel?)..." Once they dig it out, the statement is usually too long, even if it's only one sentence. It's a kind of "kitchen sink" purpose statement, with lots of verbs. Something like, *"Worshipping God together we are a caring community that builds disciples, goes out into the world, heals hurts, helps people, spreads the word, and works for justice."*

On the other hand, there are churches I've worked with where everyone everywhere knows and quotes a concise purpose statement, and they interweave it into the conversation. Short statements like, "Helping the people of Silicon Valley discover the transforming power of God's love."

As an associate pastor, I put the church's purpose statement on every agenda of every meeting I led. At critical moments, I would ask, "What does planning this women's retreat have to do with our purpose statement written here?" I always found that to be a key framing conversation. People stopped planning another event and began dreaming of how this process from start to finish would contribute to the type of ministry our purpose statement dreamed of. People shifted from being simply worker bees to fishers of people. They moved beyond just having a well-planned event that came off smoothly and was well attended, to imagining how everything led to transformation in people's lives through this retreat as a vehicle.

For example, they began to see recruitment for the retreat not as a necessary evil to get the bodies there, but as part of the ministry of changing lives. The conversation of inviting someone to attend was a time where ministry happened, when seen through the eyes of our church's purpose statement.

This is where the improvisation comes into play...the main melody being played this way and that.

How will you improvise together on the purpose statement regarding why your church exists?
For more help on generating a shared purpose/mission statement, see "Creating Vision Statement" download.

Bibliography:

- Gardner, John W. *On Leadership*. New York: The Free Press, 1990.
- Kouzes, James, and Barry Posner. *The Leadership Challenge, 3d Ed*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
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