

Andrews University
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THE PASTOR'S ROLE IN DEVELOPING VISION AND
THE EFFECT IT HAS ON THE CONGREGATION

A Research Paper
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
CHMN747 Leadership and Church Management

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Spring 2006

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INTRODUCTION AND OBSERVATION OF THE NEED

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church today many of our 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 maintenance mentality sustaining church programs and facilities,
- pastoral dependency limiting lay members participation,
- apathy and complacency about the “lost” in the community around the church
- 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 address in this research. 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. 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.

The Challenge of Finding Vision in the Local Congregation

There is a great need for understanding 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 limitations of this research will not allow the entire process to be explored, nor as a result, described. The goal of this research would be to place the responsibility for the source of the vision process. In other words, does this vision discernment, formulation and articulation come primarily from the pastor, or from the congregation or a committee of the congregation? This study will be limited to a survey of the thinking and experience among key church and business leaders on this issue of the source of vision.

To shed light on the best source for the origin of vision could be significant for pastors and churches. From my observation the common understanding today is that vision must be 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 seems to arrive 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. This is the personal observation that draws me into this study.

To define responsibility for the vision could by itself open up the potential for those who own it to find a way to accomplish the rest of the task. 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.

My Personal Challenge to Lead with Vision in Ministry

I could describe my current understanding of vision best in the context of personal experience. At the end of the 1980's I moved to pastor a church in need of a church

building. They had for many years shared a school gymnasium for Sabbath services with about one hundred in attendance. The project of building a church facility of their own seemed insurmountable for them. As I came to understand the seriousness of the need I began to talk with them about making the dream into reality. The more we talked the dream together the more they sacrificed to make the dream real. Within four years we celebrated the grand opening of a new church capable of seating 325 worshipers. To me the vision was obvious, the congregation was overwhelmed by the task ahead, but repeating the vision kept them moving forward to success.

My next pastoral assignment required a completely different answer. It was a congregation with a long and sometimes difficult history. This church had a mission statement that they considered sacred, but it was seldom consulted for direction. They were a congregation with deep roots that was often divided about the focus of their ministry. Commitment was never a problem. Sometimes the commitment seemed so strong toward what had been, they could not see what they could be. While I was there they began to see the church as more about building people and less about programs. The phrase “Home for the Heart” became descriptive for members about their church. “Home for the Heart’s Praise, Belonging, Meaning, Service and Sharing” captured the direction and purpose for their ministry. During my last couple of months with them thirty city blocks around the church were identified as the “neighborhood” of the church. Plans were being made to creatively connect to each of the residents in that neighborhood. This happened when I, as the pastor, found the courage to challenge them with a vision.

Now that I work in a conference ministerial role I see the difference between churches with a vision to draw them forward and those who 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 survival.

So what is the difference? How does one church have vision with all of its benefits and another is just missing it? What would it take for every church to have a clear picture of the future God intends for them? Could every church be blessed with such a vision? If so, how?

CHAPTER I

ADDRESSING THE SOURCE OF VISION IN THE CHURCH

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.

Leadership literature is filled with ideas on this topic. With such lack of clarity at the church level about this question, one might expect to find wide opinions in the literature on the subject. This is not the case. The majority of trusted sources on this subject are in agreement. To understand we need to examine a sample of these views.

The Genesis of Vision

Where does vision originate? Though the business world may have their unique answers to this question, 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, "For the vision to have power in the life of the congregation, it must first and foremost come from the heart of God."¹ We may seek it, we may receive it, but we do not create it — it comes from God.²

¹ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 56.

² Mary K. Sellon, Daniel P. Smith and Gail F. Grossman, *Redeveloping the Congregation*, (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2002), 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 their 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. Organizations require leaders. Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem and James H. Furr 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."¹

An observer across many denominations as a church transformation consultant, Thomas Bandy is more direct about his view. "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."²

Even those who see the process as more extensive and complicated by a formal gathering of individual perspectives of the vision, see the essential role of a leader enabling the process. Aubrey Malphurs 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

¹ Herrington, 52.

² Thomas Bandy, *Do You Really Want to Catch a Biblical Vision?*, (Port Aransas, TX: Easum, Bandy and Associates, Inc. Web site on-line. Available <http://www.easumbandy.com/>, accessed March 19, 2006.

vision. He develops the vision initially but solicits the input of others to the extent that it becomes everyone's vision."¹

Could the placement of responsibility be much clearer? The pastor as the leader appointed both by God in his calling and by the conference through committee, is the leader of the local church. George Barna 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 churches key leaders regarding future activity by the church. Reality – Vision is not the result *of* consensus; it should result *in* consensus."²

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 their own 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. 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 observed and asking God to

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Developing a Vision for Ministry in the 21st Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 51.

² George Barna, *The Power of Vision*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 45.

clarify His purpose for that local church are essential steps. Out of this awareness, God will reveal a need and a vision in answer to that need.

James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner in writing about leadership from the secular business perspective describe the reflective heart search for vision. “Finding your vision, like finding your voice, is a process of self-exploration and self-creation. It’s an intuitive, emotional process.”¹ Bill Hybels is on 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.”²

What should happen when the church 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 members. 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 emphasizes the articulation of the vision he has discovered.³

¹ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed., (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002) 115.

² Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 36.

³ Thom S. Rainer, *Eating the Elephant*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 44.

A 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.”¹ 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.”² 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 individuals own set of values, concerns, and aspirations. This is why genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in personal visions.”³ 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.”⁴

However, those who will take the time to listen well and understand the heart of those they lead will be able to shape the vision so that it resonates with their people.

¹ Kouzes, 112.

² Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990), 214.

³ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴ Herrington, 57.

Sustaining the Vision

Finding a shared vision worth expending 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. “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, 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 visioneering. 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.”¹

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.”² Rick Warren 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

¹ Andy Stanley, *Visioneering*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1999), 259.

² Andy Stanley, “Vision Leaks,” (Leadership, Winter 2004), 68.

sure you communicate your purpose at least monthly. It is amazing how quickly human beings—and churches—lose their sense of purpose.”¹

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 proposes. “How does a leader best communicate vision? By embodying it. By personifying it. By living it out.”²

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 38.

² Hybels, 38.

CHAPTER II

WHAT THE BUSINESS WORLD KNOWS ABOUT VISION

One might assume the church has understood the meaning of being lead by values and vision all along, but it has not always been true. It has largely been a revival of these methods in the business environment that has brought the church back to their use.¹ So what have business educators learned about the power of vision that has made it so desirable to them?

Motivated by the Heart (Values and Leadership)

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.”² Because they make an effort to understand and rally people around “core values” and

¹ Ibid., 13.

² Ryan Underwood, “Built to Last: Visionary Exam” (Fast Company, November 2004), Web Extra.

“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. “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?”¹ 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.

Transformational Outcome (Leadership Impacts Everyone)

Another significant reason business leaders are taking hold of the vision process is the result it brings to efficiency and productivity. John P. Kotter, considered the 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.”² 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

¹ Kouzes, 111.

² John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996) 70.

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.”¹

¹ Barna, 39.

CHAPTER III
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.”¹ As a Christian pastor there are 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 a leader’s 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.”² 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. That higher goal is pictured in a vision of the future that is worth setting aside many smaller issues to reach. “People claimed by a compelling vision describe the future

¹ Kouzes, 125.

² Sellon, 42.

with a longing and passion in their voices.”¹ It is this passion that gives 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, and whom they believe has listened well to God for direction, they will make tremendous personal sacrifices to support making the vision into 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.² “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.”³

Even in the business world Peter M. Senge knows, “Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision.”⁴ 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 comes from God. As leaders in the church, every reason to have great vision has been placed in our hands. So what keeps us from having a great vision in every church?

¹ Ibid., 46.

² Kouzes, 131.

³ Barna, 52.

⁴ Senge, 206.

Courage to Challenge the Status Quo

It is possible we just are not clear about the potential God would have us see for the church. It is also possible 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 and challenge others to do the same, for worthy causes. The gospel is the worthiest of causes. What the church is today is not what it could be. The church where you are could be more. If it were what God designed the church to be in the world today, what would it be like? If you can answer this question, you know what it means to challenge the status quo. A shared vision has the potential to move us much closer to that ideal. Leadership is aware of the cost, but willing to take a risk for the chance to experience the fulfillment of the dream in the future.

As a pastor and son of a pastor, Andy Stanley 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.”¹

¹ Stanley, *Visioneering*, 18.

CHAPTER IV
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 images He has created and provided to His appointed leaders.

God Calls Leaders

It is not a new idea to expect a leader to lead with vision. The Bible provides multiple 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.”¹ 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 (called) by God to take the lead. Usually that person was given a description to help them capture the vision for their task. Abraham was told that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. (Gen 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. . .” (Exod 3:8) Matthew’s gospel tells the account of Jesus

¹ Herrington, 52.

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.” (Matt 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. Aubrey Malphurs 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.”¹

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.”² 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.”³ In Matt 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. . .” (Matt 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

¹ Malphurs, 44.

² Bill Easum, *Clarifying Our Mission, Vision and Values*, (Port Aransas, TX: Easum, Bandy and Associates, Inc. Web site on-line. Available <http://www.easumbandy.com/>, accessed March 19, 2006.

³ Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the *New International Version (NIV)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1973.

their culture and geography. God is calling leaders to lead His people to venture something significant for His kingdom today.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

One of the greatest needs in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America 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 calling is dependent on visionary leaders who will call us to rise to a new level together.

This study has explored the source of vision. It has established that vision clearly must come from a leader. That leader may start alone seeking God for guidance, or they 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 towards the compelling, transformational power of a God honoring vision.

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