

# Developing Vision in the Smaller Congregation

By Steven R. Mills

Pastors who want to initiate change and communicate vision need to build solid relationships with the church's primary influencers and lead them to discover God's vision for the church.

Vision is one of the most critical elements in the success and effectiveness of the local church. The Bible is clear, "Without vision people cast off restraint." To keep the church traveling down the right path, it is important for its members to have a clear and shared vision. But how do ministry leaders develop and communicate vision? More important, how do you get your people to embrace the vision God has given you?

Vision is not just for the large church; smaller churches need a vision for ministry as well. Understanding small-church culture is key to developing and communicating vision to its leaders. This article focuses first on the unique culture and characteristics of the smaller congregation, and second, on how to initiate change and communicate your God-given vision within the small-church context.

## UNDERSTANDING SMALL-CHURCH CULTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

Generally, there are two types of small churches: the primary family church and the extended family church. In each type, the organizational cultures are resistant to change. Developing vision must be done with an understanding of how these two church types relate, what they value, and how they make decisions. Developing vision within their cultural paradigm is easier than developing vision that requires a change in the organizational culture itself. The leader who understands and adapts to the organizational culture of the small church is much more likely to succeed.

**Description.** The primary family church is inseparable from family life. Each member knows the others very well. The average attendance is usually 30 to 40, but can run as high as 50. This type of church is generally located in rural areas, some urban centers, and small towns.

The primary focus of this church is building and maintaining relationships. It exists against significant obstacles because of the value members place on the family. The family church is a tight-knit intergenerational group and is laity owned and operated. Resources are limited, as are programs and ministries.

The extended family church (50–150 average attendance) resembles a clan or a family reunion. It is still a family church, but three or four family leaders have emerged. This type of church tends to be very homogenous where people know each other and share similar values.

**Primary Leadership.** In the primary family church, a matriarch or patriarch, not the pastor, is the primary leader. Two or three individuals or families fill the key leadership positions and hold these responsibilities for years or for life. The real leader may not hold an official or elected position, but is the person to whom others look when decisions are being made.

The primary leadership in the extended family church is a small core of dominant members or families. The key leadership positions have been in the hands of the same families for two or three generations. The core leadership group regularly interacts with each other. The church is large enough so no one person can control everything. Procedures and policies are unwritten and informal. They exist in the collective memory of the group. The church board generally makes sure the pastor and church leaders carry out the decisions of the

primary family groups. Although the leaders may change formal positions, the informal roles and power structure remain constant.

**Pastor's Role.** In the primary family church, the pastor is expected to love the people, do visitation, and preach. His or her official duties include baptisms, baby dedications, weddings, funerals, and presiding over the primary activities of the church. Specific responsibilities are determined by the church's traditions. If the pastor's relationship with the primary leader is weak or damaged, his or her ability to lead is weakened. The pastor is viewed as an outsider, but can do almost anything as long as he loves and cares for the people and responds to their primary expectations.

The pastor is the shepherd in the extended family church. He or she is the preacher/pastor for the church. Building and maintaining relationships with members is one of the highest values. In this church, the pastor is likely to have mixed support. Some members like the pastor, others tolerate his leadership, and others do not like him at all.

**Decision Making and Planning.** In the primary family church, decision making and planning are done spontaneously and informally. Decisions are made by the consensus of those in leadership or by direction from the patron/matron. In the absence of the matriarch/patriarch, no action will be taken until everyone is sure what the leader will do.

Decisions are made based on what is best for the "family." The primary family church values persons and relationships more than setting and achieving goals. Enacting change in the primary family church requires first the consensus of the group, then the permission of the patron/matron. This church does not have a written statement of purpose and mission. The church does have informal goals that are very meaningful to the patron/matron who takes his or her role very seriously.

In the extended family church, decision making and planning shifts between the formal and the informal. The decision-making process is flexible and low key. Decisions are made when they have to be made. The process is often spontaneous and may happen when the pastor isn't present. The pastor may be one of the least informed at decision-making time because he or she is outside of the group. Decisions are made when the primary group reaches a consensus and then gives direction to the larger group. Bringing change in this church requires the permission of the dominant coalition.

Planning and organization do not play a big role in church life. The year's events occur in traditional patterns rather than in planned, intentional efforts. Planning usually is done by event or by crisis. Planning will generally be initiated by the governing coalition. The primary source of information for planning and decision making comes from the knowledge and experience of the members. The church's goals are informal and are meaningful to the families in the church. The primary purpose of the church is to serve the needs of the families that attend. Relationships are valued above results. If a pastor leads the people to write a vision statement, it will probably be discarded or disregarded when he leaves.

In the extended family church, the pastor accomplishes his leadership primarily as a mentor and occasionally as a mediator. The dominant coalition maintains control of most of the management functions. The pastor must become part of the dominant coalition if he is to accomplish much in the church or in guiding the growth and development of the members and their ministries.

**Implementation of Plans.** Individuals rather than committees implement plans in the primary family church. Long-term planning is viewed as unnecessary. Rather than leaders being organized into a system of committees, this church may seem to carry out its entire operation like a single committee.

The extended family church implements plans by dividing the workload. Programs are more general in nature. Little training is required for leaders or participants. All members are expected to participate in most programs and activities. Programs are done based on the way things have always been done.

**Communication.** Communication in both church types is by word of mouth, and the telephone is the primary tool for communication. In larger churches, communication can be supplemented with a bulletin or a monthly newsletter.

**New Members.** New members are accepted into the church if they have connections inside the church, marry into the church, or have abilities or resources the church can use. Some may be accepted if the congregation feels sympathy toward them or their personal situation. All others generally discover they really don't fit or belong. In larger churches, new members may come by transfer.

## INITIATING CHANGE

The process of developing mission, values, and vision is a journey, not a destination. It may take a year or more to work through. Pastors who want to initiate change and communicate vision need to build solid relationships with the church's primary influencers and lead them to discover God's vision for the church.

You begin by meeting with your primary influencers to study God's Word and discover Christ's mission and purpose for the church. Do not assume your leaders already know this. This step can help your people develop a personal conviction that this is what God wants their church to be.

After your leaders understand God's purpose for the church, have them clarify their core values. These are statements of belief about a church's mission that governs what it does and how it does it. Value statements describe the things that are most important to believers and their church. They are not doctrinal statements, but they are biblical. Ask your leaders to complete the phrases, "I believe...." and "I value...." This can be done as a group through brainstorming or individually. Compile the list and ask each person to rate each value on a scale of 1 to 5 (low to high). Tabulate the scores. The highest scores probably reflect their values. Write a short biblical statement for each value.

The next step is to have your leaders list the primary needs of their community. Encourage them to survey their unchurched friends by asking, "What are the greatest needs and/or problems people deal with in our community?" Have each person record his or her responses and discuss the results together. Help them think about the people and families in the community. What is the nature of their work? What is their economic status? Do you have different ethnic groups in your community? This will help your core leaders think about their community and how the church can best influence it.

A realistic vision takes into account the strengths, resources, and abilities of the church. If a church has just a few teenagers, it is unlikely to minister effectively to teenagers. If a church has two young couples with five children between them, it has some resources to minister to young families. Brainstorm with your influencers and other leaders about what they see as the church's strengths, resources, and abilities. Help them see the church's possibilities rather than its limitations.

You will need to spend time individually and collectively with your primary influencers. Talk to them about their vision and dreams for the church. Have them write it down.

After your primary leaders have written their responses, bring the church together to discuss them. You should work to seek consensus, not compromise. Identify only the most essential elements for the church. Out of this forum develop a vision statement unique and specific to your church.

Put in the vision statement only what is essential for the church to be the church. The statement can be a single sentence, but not more than a short paragraph. An effective vision statement should be biblical, specific, transferable, motivating, and measurable. It should be stated in terms of results, not activities; stated in a manner that motivates and encourages participation; and arranged in a sequential, logical process.

Share the draft vision statement with the congregation and with key groups in the congregation. Encourage them to give honest feedback. Stress that the vision statement is only a draft and that their input is essential.

With the primary influencers and leaders, synthesize and incorporate feedback into the final vision statement. Each word in the vision statement needs to carry strong imagery and powerful meaning.

Listed below are samples of mission, vision, and value statements:

### **Mission Statement**

To bring people to salvation in Jesus Christ and disciple them in their relationship with Christ (Matthew 28:19,20).

### **Vision Statement**

We believe God has called us to reach the unchurched of our city by providing caring structures for families, diversity in worship, small caring groups, and knowledge of spiritual gifts.

### **Value Statements**

We believe that the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus involves: baptism, prayer, ongoing learning about the Christian life, regular worship, and participation in activities that utilize one's spiritual gifts for ministry.

We value the Bible as the inspired Word of God from which Christians learn about God's truths.

We believe in the importance of stewardship of time, talents, treasures, and the earth's resources as a sign of a mature Christian faith.

We believe that evangelism is the role of every Christian.

In a congregational meeting, communicate the mission, vision, and value statements. The meeting's purpose is to secure formal approval. Summarize the process that was used in developing each statement. Provide practical examples of how the mission, values, and vision will impact the ministry and function of the church. Explain how these statements will provide leadership for decisions about ministry, budget, schedule, and relationships. Make sure everyone is clear about the importance of each value statement. Provide each person a copy of the mission statement; it should be kept in front of him/her at all times. Use the statements to guide all present and future decisions of the church. Your leaders must personally apply the values and vision before the church will adapt and change to reflect the new vision and values of the church.

To develop and transfer vision in the small family-type church, you must focus your efforts on building credible relationship with the primary influencer(s) to the place where they will permit you to come along side them and together discover God's vision for their church.

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## **Mission, Vision, and Values**

The terms "mission, purpose, vision, vision slogan, values, and value statements" are used frequently but not always with the same definition. This often contributes to confusion and passivity in leading a church to identify and develop its vision. Generally, these terms are defined as follows:

- **Mission/Purpose:** The mission or purpose statement is God's universal unchanging plan for His church. It is "what" the Church is about and "why" it is doing it. In essence, it is the Great Commission. The mission statement is a brief biblical statement about what the church is to be doing. It informs us about our reason for being. The mission speaks to and flows out of our head, our intellect.
- **Vision:** The vision is a clear and challenging picture of the future. The mission of the church is to win communities for Christ. The vision statement is what your local church is going to do, and how it will fulfill the mission. The vision considers the needs of the community and the congregational context and values. The vision statement inspires a church to pursue the mission. The vision touches and flows out of the hearts of the church members.
- **Vision Slogan:** A brief memorable and challenging statement of the vision of the local church. The vision slogan takes the longer vision statement and puts it into the battle cry or the cheer. It keeps the vision alive, visible, and memorable.
- **Value Statements:** Core statements of beliefs about the church's mission that govern what the church does and how it does it. Value statements are biblical, but not doctrinal statements. Value statements reveal what is vitally important to the church. They are unchanging, passionate, and drive the ministry of the church. Core values help to solve problems, make critical decisions, develop consensus, and build the team.

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