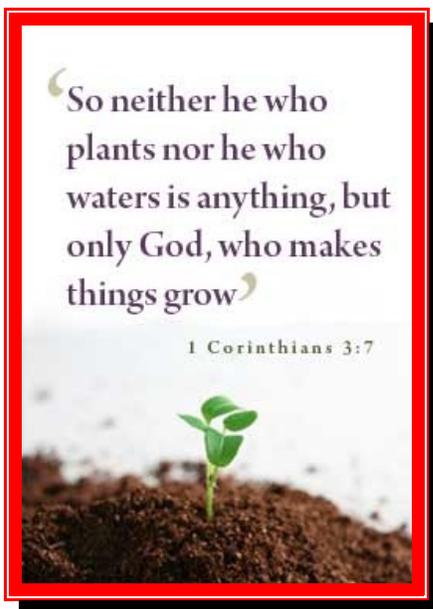




Church Growth: A Plan for Godly Success



I believe that many leaders in general and younger pastors in particular shy away from the term, strategic planning. The problem is that those who've experienced strategic planning in the past are reminded of an antiquated so-called long-range plan that professes to be good for the next five to ten years, but quickly becomes dated - if not obsolete - in a year or less. In addition, it provides reams of research that they'll never read nor use. And those of the emergent generation tend to struggle with planning to begin with much less *doing* strategic planning. It's not

considered authentic. Thus, I could opt to use different terms such as "strategic envisioning" or "strategic thinking and doing," but then no one would know precisely what I'm talking about. The result is, I feel boxed in by the very terms I choose to use. So, if you will indulge me, I'll use all these terms, including strategic planning and ask that you give me a chance to present my case before tuning me out.

STRATEGIC PLANNING IS BIBLICAL

I would argue that those who do strategic envisioning are in good company. Examine the Old and New Testaments. For example in Exodus 18, Jethro encouraged Moses to think and act strategically to solve his burnout problem. And the men of Issachar thought strategically for they "understood their times and knew what Israel should do." (1 Chron. 12:32) In light of all that's transpiring - new technology and the speed of change - it's imperative that we understand our times in order to know best how to lead our churches in the twenty-first century.

Jesus thought strategically as He gave us the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15) along with its geographical and sociological implications (Acts 1:8). All of Paul's missionary journeys were strategically planned as each city where he visited and planted churches was at a strategic location. An illustration is his locating his ministry in Ephesus - the gateway to Asia Minor (Acts 19:1, 10). All who traveled into Asia Minor went through Ephesus. Therefore, if ministry organizations in general, and

churches in particular, desire to have an impact on today's world, it's imperative that they think and act strategically. The days when ministry leaders could merely "fly by the seat of their pants" are gone.

A MORE CULTURALLY RELEVANT, UPDATED APPROACH

A more culturally relevant, updated approach to strategic planning is now available that will help leaders to be a vital part of Christ's church building process in the twenty-first century. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus stated that He will build his church. While this was true in the first century, there's no reason to believe that He's not building His church in the twenty-first century. The question is how? As I've observed and researched spiritually healthy, biblically-based churches across North America several things become apparent. First, pastors and church leaders make a mistake when they copy or mimic one of these church models from some other part of North America and try to implement it in their own culture. Church franchising fails more often than it works. The reason is that it's difficult to "cut and paste" a church ministry from one part of the country to another. What works wonderfully and honors God in Washington, D.C. or Chicago, Illinois may not accomplish the same in Wilson, North Carolina.

Second, these spiritually healthy, biblically-based churches all seem to be following a similar process built on core biblical principles. The biblical principles address the **CHURCH'S PURPOSE**: to glorify God in all that it does (1 Cor. 6:20, 10:31), **ITS MISSION** - to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20) and **ITS FUNCTIONS** - to evangelize, fellowship, serve, worship, and teach the Scriptures (Acts 2:41-47).

Though each church is unique and presents a different model of how to do church (whether purpose-driven, seeker-focused, etc.), my study and research indicates that they're following the same general process that allows them to be authentic and relevant in their own local, unique culture. And, most important, these are the elements that I cover when I as a consultant help churches do strategic planning or envisioning and thus be a part of Christ's church building process in their part of the country. So what are these elements? There are five that I've placed below under the heading **"The Process of Building Christ's Church."** While the primary focus is on process, it requires a time of preparation on the front end and practice on the back end. Let's briefly examine each.

THE PREPARATION FOR BUILDING CHRIST'S CHURCH

First is the preparation phase. Preparation for strategic planning that leads to building Christ's church must precede the process of strategic planning or failure is likely. **The preparation phase involves five steps.**

STEP 1: SECURE THE SUPPORT OF YOUR MINISTRY'S EMPOWERED LEADERSHIP. Every church or parachurch ministry has empowered leaders. (I'm using the term power here in a positive sense.) The key is they must support the strategic planning process. If they don't see the need, go no further. Without their support it won't happen. What people make up the empowered leaders in most churches? They're the senior pastor, clergy leaders, the ministry's governance board (if it has one), its staff, and other key men and women in the ministry. And some churches are led by a patriarch or a matriarch-most often a wiser older person who has been in the church since its inception. **Regardless, the preparation question that you must ask is: Who among these people support the process?** If these people don't generally support the process, it's doomed to failure. So wait for another opportunity when they're ready to move forward.

STEP 2: RECRUIT A STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP TEAM (SLT). The strategic leadership team serves to lead the church through the planning process. This step involves recruiting the key leaders in your ministry - those people who when they speak, others listen. (In a church, they're the senior pastor, clergy leaders, board, staff, and men and women lay leaders with strong circles of influence.) As in the first century, a team is essential to effective ministry in the twenty-first century. **You'll need their input and "buy-in" throughout the process.** To get this, their "fingerprints" must be all over the process - so make sure they're part of what you're doing. The result is that not only will they own the final product, but the rest of the congregation will as well. They'll support what their leaders support. Finally, the team will be making lots of decisions. I advise that when making these decisions, you operate by consensus, not compromise. Simply have them vote when and where it's necessary. This will save you much needless discussion time as well as determine where to land on the various issues you'll address.

STEP 3: COMMUNICATE CONSTANTLY WITH THE CONGREGATION.

Far too many churches communicate poorly. I argue that you must communicate with the congregation constantly as you work through the strategic envisioning process or any other approach to ministry. **The reason is they must trust the process.** Pastor Rick Warren is correct when he says that people are down on what they're not up on! And one of my cliches is: **"If they don't trust you, you can't lead them!"** When most think about communication, they think of communicating formally such as through announcements from the pulpit or in the bulletin. While formal communication is necessary, the most effective communication takes place informally - by word of mouth. And key to good word-of-mouth communication is an excited, involved strategic leadership team. So encourage them to "spread the word" about the process.

STEP 4: EMBRACE A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF CHANGE.

A biblical theology of change serves to guide the process. It also helps the SLT understand that change is biblical and okay. **Such a theology consists of the three Fs: function, form, and freedom.** The functions such as worship, evangelism and so on never change. They were true in the first century church and must be a part of the twenty-first century church. However, the forms they take must change or the church quickly becomes culturally irrelevant. An example would be traditional and contemporary worship forms. Also, we must understand that we have much freedom (the third F) as to how we do church. Scripture doesn't spell out precisely what forms the functions follow but gives us much freedom in light of the various cultures where we minister.

STEP 5: ANALYZE THE MINISTRY.

Ministry analysis serves to inform the planning process. A good analysis will identify what the team believes are the ministry's primary strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. So let the team surface and determine these. **Following are common weaknesses that make the "top five or ten list" in the churches I've worked with:**

a lack of vision, little unity, no evangelism, too few people involved in the ministry, cultural irrelevance, a resistance to change, a lack of spiritual leadership and so on.

STEP 6: WORK THROUGH A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROCESS.

It addresses various spiritual issues in the ministry that will undergird the process. The goal is to help your team establish a spiritual foundation upon which the process will build. **Following are some of the spiritual issues you might address:**

acknowledging our own proclivity to sin rather than pointing to the sins of others, confession of sin, forgiving those who've sinned against us, putting off negativity and pessimism, reconciling broken relationships, speaking the truth in love, being a servant and so on.

THE PROCESS OF BUILDING CHRIST'S CHURCH

Once you've completed the preparation phase, you're ready to begin the actual strategic thinking and acting process. Again, I use the term process intentionally as I don't think it's wise to pursue any one of the many fine church or ministry models that God is blessing all across North America. **Remember, what works in large cities such as New York may not work in the South. My maxim is: Learn from these unique models but don't ape them!** In stead, pursue the following process that should lead to your own unique ministry model that's endemic to who you are as a leader and your ministry community. The process consists of four steps.

STEP 1: DISCOVER YOUR CORE VALUES.

Your core values drive your ministry. They explain why your ministry does what it does or doesn't do what it should do. They're at the very core of your identity and make up your vital ministry DNA. **Your core values are so mission-critical, that you need to discover and evaluate them in light of a biblically functioning, spiritually healthy church.** I would argue that such a church was the Jerusalem Church. And based on Acts 2:41-47, **it displayed five critical core values: evangelism, worship, service, community and biblical instruction.**

STEP 2: DEVELOP A STATEMENT OF MISSION.

A vital directional question is: **Where is your ministry going? What's it supposed to be doing according to the Scriptures?** The answer is your ministry mission. It's the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15. **In short, the church's mission as found in Matthew 28 is to make disciples.** This **involves both evangelism and edification.** It's imperative that you develop and repeatedly communicate a short, clear biblical mission statement that your congregation will never forget. One that I like in particular is **"Exalting the Lord, Equipping the Saints, Expanding the Kingdom."** Regardless, you want Christ's mission for his church to become your mission for your church.

STEP 3: ARTICULATE A CLEAR VISION.

The term "vision" is a key buzzword in today's ministry world. I believe that vision is vital to your people seeing what "could be" - what our great God can accomplish through them (Eph. 3:20) in your ministry community. **Consequently, you need to develop a vision that provides a clear, compelling picture of your ministry's future.** Whereas, the mission statement will be no longer than a sentence (Peter Drucker says it should be "short enough to put on a T-shirt"), **the vision statement could range anywhere from a paragraph to several pages in length.** Regardless of its size, the key isn't writing the vision statement so much as it's speaking the mission statement, whether in a sermon or a conversation.

Once you and the team have formulated your vision statement, you'll need to cast it on a regular basis - at least once a month - primarily from the pulpit.

STEP 4: DEVELOP A STRATEGY.

A strategy is necessary to see your ministry direction (mission and vision) become a reality. Your strategy helps you accomplish several things. **FIRST,** explore your ministry community and identify your focus group (who you're most likely to reach) as well as determine the size of your vision. **My research indicates that you should be able to reach 10 percent of the**

unchurched people in your Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). **SECOND**, design a process that will mold them into Christ's disciples, using a tool called the "Maturity Matrix." The matrix consists of a horizontal line along which you place the characteristics of a spiritually mature disciple such as biblical instruction, fellowship, worship, service, and evangelism. There's also a vertical line beside which you place the primary ministries that are to help implement the characteristics in the lives of your people. Some examples are the worship-preaching time, Sunday school, small groups, etc. **THIRD**, mobilize your congregation along with aligning and developing your staff to maximize your disciple making. **FOURTH**, evaluate your location and facilities in terms of reaching your focus group. A good question to ask your people is why are we located where we are? Another asks is this the most effective location from which to do ministry? Finally, you'll need to address raising the necessary finances to support this strategy. The key is to develop a biblical ministry of stewardship.

THE PRACTICE OF BUILDING CHRIST'S CHURCH

Third is the practice phase. Using the above process, you can develop a relevant, authentic biblical model for your church. However, you must implement it or it will die a quick death for lack of action. **The practice phase will be ongoing and involves two steps:**

STEP 1: MINISTRY EVALUATION.

Author and management expert, Ken Blanchard, wisely calls evaluation the "breakfast of champions." Evaluation is key to incremental change. It provides vital feedback that helps your ministry to change and improve as it serves the Savior. **Evaluation isn't new to the Scriptures, for God evaluated seven churches in Revelation 2-3.** My experience is that evaluation takes place in churches whether they desire it or not. It happens every Sunday at an informal level. My point is why not conduct evaluation at a formal level so you can benefit from it? I encourage you to design and establish a ministry evaluation process that enables you to discover both your strong and soft spots as you think and act strategically. People tend to fear evaluation, so start slowly. For example, you might want to begin by evaluating how well you're accomplishing your mission. If it's to make disciples, then are you making disciples? Next, evaluate the primary ministries in your church. Are they accomplishing what you want them to?

STEP 2: STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION.



This is where your church happens. Implementation closes the gap between your ideas and their execution. It serves to translate your thoughts into action. Most important to the planning process, it links strategic thinking with doing. It will aid you as you address where you begin to accomplish the strategy, when, and with whom. In short, it involves determining what needs to be done (goals), who will do or champion each goal, with what resources, and when.

In conclusion, I must mention that this isn't a one time process for you and your ministry. You'll need to constantly weigh your core values, think in terms of your mission, and cast vision from now on, as well as regularly evaluate and adjust your strategy. Regardless our terminology for it, the strategic planning process becomes an important part of who you are as well as what you do as a leader in your ministry. Be a strategic thinker and doer so that you may be a vital part of what Christ is doing as He builds his church in the twenty-first century.

Established in 1996, the mission of the Center for Clergy and Church Support is to inspire, train, and connect Christians who seek to bear witness to the Kingdom of God, by creating an environment of support and accountability that continuously moves clergy and churches toward excellence. The Center offers a full range of programs and services designed to help the community of faith fulfill its mission today and provides the tools they need to prosper in the future.