

Being Businesslike Without Becoming A Business

Written by Steve Marr

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Should churches be run like businesses? Not in every respect, but churches should certainly adopt a biblical and businesslike model for implementing successful ministry. To be effective, churches and the individual ministries within those churches, must establish a clear ministry vision, based on careful, insightful planning held together by a system of accountability.

Developing a church vision is a bit like preparing to paint a masterpiece. The artist first creates the picture mentally and sketches in the rough lines. Only then is he or she ready to apply paint to the canvas. Likewise, your church must envision what the "finished painting" would look like if you accomplished everything the Lord has called you to do. A corporate vision is simply a word picture, written out, of how the leadership and congregation visualize effective ministry. In the words of Dr. Stan Reeder, senior pastor of the 900-member Westminster (Colorado) Church of the Nazarene, "Jesus is the head of the church, and the members are the body. In a healthy church, God will stir the hearts of the people and their leaders with a vision. A vision is critical, because if the leaders and members cannot envision the church's ministry, they will not be able to accomplish that ministry. You can't accomplish what you can't see."

King Solomon writes, "Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained" (Proverbs 29:18). I would add: Without a vision, church members will have no direction, and everyone will just do their own thing, resulting in chaos, conflict, and ineffective ministry, rather than unity. Most churches, large and small, are brimming with ideas-more ideas than can possibly be implemented. The danger is that, no matter how well intentioned a church may be, it can drift off and become ineffective unless every program and ministry is related back to the collective vision.

On the other hand, a well-crafted vision becomes the basis for effective ministry. No longer is there a need to argue over which plan or idea is better. Instead, the question can be rephrased: Which activity best fulfills our church's mission and vision? Decision-making becomes far less contentious, and the resulting ministry efforts are far better focused. The apostle Paul writes, "We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). Likewise, a vision statement is the rudder that keeps every ministry effort on the same course.

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God calls different churches to accomplish different visions. This diversity allows powerful ministry to be achieved-far more than any one church could or should attempt to undertake. This isn't to say we shouldn't think big. A vision, by its nature, should be large. Most churches will not be able to fulfill their vision immediately. However, once a vision has been established, it will guide the church's systematic efforts to add additional ministry outreach over time, until the vision has been fulfilled.

Thirty-five years ago, Warren Woods Church of the Nazarene (Warren, Michigan) was founded with a clear vision to minister to families with children in their community. At first, the few founding members were limited in the amount of ministry they could accomplish. However, over the years, all ministry efforts were focused on executing the vision. Outreach events, such as picnics and community concerts, were targeted to families. Children's church, a well-run nursery, and family facilities became priorities. As the church grew, they added a school and community recreation center. The pastor continually encouraged the church board to evaluate every budget item according to how it would benefit the church's ministry to families. The church's clearly articulated vision kept the congregation focused on their priorities and helped them determine which new ministries should be added and-equally important-which ministries should not be added because they were off-target.

To bring an effective vision to life requires effective ministry planning. "Planning" is simply determining who will do what, by when, and what the expected result will be. Often, however, we resist the discipline of planning, opting instead to just "do our thing." But wise King Solomon writes, "The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage" (Proverbs 21:5). Effective churches establish a ministry plan for the entire church, and then ask each ministry leader to prepare a plan that supports the overall church vision. Without a collective vision, leading a church ministry can be like taking a cross-country trip without a map. We either get lost or end up traveling the long way.

Effective ministry plans start with two questions: (1) What are we trying to accomplish, and (2) how can we best support the church's overall ministry plan? A men's ministry, for example, may decide to schedule events where the gospel can be presented to one hundred men in the coming year. A ministry to single mothers may set a goal to repair the homes of twenty single moms.

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Once the goals have been set, prepare a "road map" to determine who will accomplish which tasks, by when, and the cost of completing those tasks. "For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28). Jesus points out that, in failing to finish, we become subject to ridicule. The more limited our financial and human resources, the more important it is to target those resources effectively on the most important ministry opportunities that fit the church's vision.

Ministry leaders must first realistically calculate the available resources, both human and financial. A major shortcoming in ministry is to try to build a twelve-story tower on a three-story budget. El Camino Baptist Church of Tucson, Arizona, wanted to provide simple automotive repairs to single mothers. Pastor Dave White wanted to offer the car clinic every week, but after assessing the skills and availability of capable volunteers, he decided to scale back the service to twice each month. He understood that it was far better to offer effective and reliable service twice a month than to struggle-and likely fail-to do it every week. "Counting the cost" includes determining the number of people needed, as well as the skill level required. Counting the cost of an auto repair ministry includes budgeting for parts, recruiting volunteers with the necessary skills, and determining what kind of facilities are needed. For example, how will used motor oil be disposed of?

Accountability is required for ultimate success. Key elements include "who will accomplish what by when?" Often, people become over-committed and struggle to meet their commitments. Ministry leaders must establish benchmarks to measure effectiveness. As the Lord instructed Jeremiah, "Set up for yourselves roadmarks, place for yourself guideposts, direct your mind to the highway" (Jeremiah 31:21). For example, if a ministry has a goal to present the gospel to one hundred people next year, events must be planned and relationships established to create opportunities. One church established a monthly outreach using hunting and fishing to build relationships with unchurched parents and children. Before each event starts, a short devotion is held, and each event concludes with a time of prayer. The highlight of the year is the annual game banquet, which also features a gospel presentation. Ministry leaders are accountable to follow through with planning and issuing invitations to each monthly event. The relationships that have been built have culminated in people receiving Christ. "Roadmarks" establish whether key ministry objectives are being accomplished. If invitations are not made, or the monthly events fall through, then the annual banquet will likely become a disaster.

When a leader fails to execute the plan, church leaders must confront the issue. In Luke 13:6-9, Jesus tells of a fig tree that bore no fruit for three years. Finally, the owner ordered it cut down.

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However, the gardener asked for one more year to water and fertilize the tree in an attempt to produce fruit before cutting down the tree. Ministry leaders should be encouraged, equipped, and supported in their ministries, but if they are ultimately unsuccessful, they must be gently moved out of that role. Better to face hard issues head-on than to allow the Lord's ministry to falter. Each of us will stand before the Lord and give an account of our life's work in ministry. Through vision, planning, action, and accountability, we'll be able to give a good report.

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach

All Scripture references are from the NASB, as featured in "The outlook" August 31, 2003.