

Transforming Christian Leadership

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Visionary Leadership: *Are the Seers Leading the Blind?*

Can a brief vision statement determine a leader's effectiveness? Why is a vision considered the beacon of transforming leadership? How does a leader's vision affect others?

A vision is an ideal and unique future circumstance or state crystallized as an image or brief declaration. The vision gives a clear—a crystal clear—depiction of what a church wants to become. It shows a glimpse of the future as we would like it to be and as we think it *should* be. As Jonathan Swift wrote, "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible" (*Gulliver's Travels*, 1726).

Kouzes and Posner¹ describe a vision as:

"*Vision* derives from a word literally meaning 'see.' What better word than *vision* to describe the capacity to be forward-*looking* and foresighted?

Vision suggests a *future* orientation.

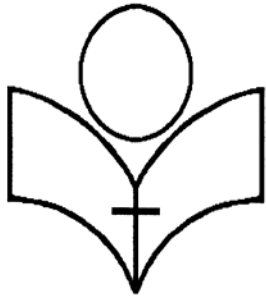
A vision is an *image*—a picture of what could be. Visual metaphors are very common when we're talking about the strategic intent of an organization.

Vision connotes a standard of excellence, an *ideal*. It implies a choice of values.

Vision also has the quality of *uniqueness*. It hints at what makes something special."

¹James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership challenge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, 1995.

The Bukit Timah Evangelical Free Church of Singapore illustrates the nature of a statement of vision:



BTEFC will be a worshiping church, strong in the Preaching of the Word. It will be characterized by mature Care Groups with a firm commitment to Missions and Evangelistic outreach to the community.

This vision statement of BTEFC is directed toward a future, projecting what the church “will be.” It identifies five church distinctives: a worshiping church, preaching the Word, mature care groups, commitment to missions, and commitment to evangelism. It symbolizes these purposes with a visual display that emphasizes the Word, the Cross (missions and evangelism), and the Care Groups. The visual display seems to lift the vision beyond the ordinary into a unique image of a future state of the church.

A vision projects a future condition of uniqueness. It presents a picture of a changed organization and compels action. Our ten transforming leaders did not see the future of their churches as unchanged. They saw their churches reaching more people, winning more souls, influencing a larger community, using spiritual gifts more extensively, being more founded in the Word, and planting more daughter churches. These leaders spoke of transition, not of the status quo. They were energized by the challenge to reach beyond their current grasp.

Is Vision Really Important?

A vision that energizes and directs a church must inspire the entire congregation. Its significance must lift the souls of the body of believers toward a lofty purpose—one worthy of the investment of their lives. A church that sets out to state a vision that merely captures its current state may crystallize its identity but little more. If the church is struggling with a lack of

a sense of identity, the process of defining its vision can be valuable. However, a church that wants to make a major advance in its service to God can greatly benefit from the process of developing a vision statement. The church that truly seeks to grow and to heighten its effectiveness can mobilize the energy and devotion of the entire body toward a noble purpose. To accomplish this, the process of developing the vision must be imbued with dedication, intensity, and excitement.

Visions can transform the minds and hearts of others when they adopt them as their own. Transforming visions are those that capture the imagination of members and inspire them to devotion and action. Once a congregation internalizes a vision into its collective consciousness so it unifies and energizes the church toward a common purpose, the vision assumes the power to spur the attainment of great ends. Then, individual members abandon their search for personal gains and are transformed into a unified force for Christian ministry. Transforming Christian leadership requires this feeling of a *shared* sense of destiny. The other leaders and members of an organization must share the vision for it to have a transforming effect. Followers become transformed when they find a purpose they call their own. A shared vision gives them a realization that they are contributing to God's purpose. Then, they dedicate themselves to work, not for tangible rewards, but out of a sense of ownership.

Members of churches led by transforming leaders identify with the vision of the church. They find the mission of the church to be so compelling that they joyously invest their lives into the work. People want to be a part of something significant for the cause of Christ. They want to fulfill God's calling and to contribute to a purpose that draws them toward Him.

In our study of 249 pastors and their churches, we looked at the effectiveness of visionary leadership. We found that "dreamers" and "visionary goal-setters" were highly effective leaders

in terms of two criteria: the church's outreach to their communities and the satisfaction of their members. So, we have research evidence that visionary leadership is effective in churches today.

Who Develops the Vision of the Church?

For the ten churches that were the focus of our research, the person who took responsibility for the development of the vision was the pastor himself. The contribution of the actual ideas and images of the vision were often primarily from these transforming leaders as well. However, assigning credit was difficult because the vision emerged out of meetings and informal discussions. These leaders played an influential role. Visions rarely, if ever, came from meetings in which these leaders were absent or from individual contemplation of leaders other than these transforming leaders.

Though the vision may emanate from the mind of the leader, groups within the church often serve as sounding boards and stimulants for the leader's ideas. Staff and members may provide vital information and insights. In addition, leaders may judge the worth of their ideas by observing the excitement of others. Typically, the vision emerges as the words of one person stimulate the thoughts of another. For example, one person might say, "We need to have the cross in there somewhere because our main purpose is to spread the gospel." Another adds, "Yes, we need to include evangelism as a key part of our purpose." "Let's not forget missions. We must include foreign missions." "That's right, and we need local missions too." —and the mutual stimulation continues. We can see that the process is interactive. It often involves an informal brainstorming. When it ceases to be creative and fun and regresses into nitpicking over wording and grammar, it is time to recess. At this point, if the core of the vision exists, then the transforming leader (perhaps with one or two others) may work out the exact wording and

visuals for the vision. Groups can hone ideas, make decisions, or solve problems. Nevertheless, pristine images of the future are not the product of diverse contemplations and compromise. No group has ever produced a great symphony.

How Is the Vision Developed?

A church's vision relates closely with its values. We have seen that values, such as truth, worship, growth, unity, and sacrifice are consistent with Scriptures and often spring directly from them. To a lesser degree, visions also emanate from the Scriptures. Visions are less directly stipulated in Scriptures because they are specific to an individual church. None of our ten transforming leaders had precisely the same vision for the churches in which they ministered.

The milieu of community needs and characteristics, the makeup of the congregations, the size of the church, and spiritual maturity of the member are among the factors that influence the vision of a church. A church begins the process of developing a vision by analyzing the experiences of the church and of the key leaders to assess values, characteristics, strengths, weaknesses, and current environments.

Envisioning the Future

A church's challenge is to find God's vision. The Scriptures give the purposes of a church. Yet, the unique destiny of a particular church differs from every other church. The Christian leader begins by reviewing the Scriptural purposes of the church. Developing an innovative vision for a church requires the guidance of our creative God. No substitutes can be found for prayer, meditation, and study.

The vision must have a strong emotional attraction. Because symbols and pictures often arouse feelings that words do not, they may be used to convey visions. The processes of identifying a visual representation of a vision also may add to the tone and feel of the vision.

When words falter, a picture may capture just the right ideas and emotions. The visual images for the vision of The Bukit Timah Evangelical Free Church of Singapore relate meanings that the words cannot fully capture. Yet, the symbols without the words would be inadequate. In combination they present an enlivening vision.

Pastor Wayne Barber explained the visual image of the vision of Woodland Park Baptist



Church as:

- ◆ **Cross**—We relate the cross to ourselves and die daily, living the crucified life.
- ◆ **Dove**—We relate to others through spiritual gifts within the body.
- ◆ **Word**—We are equipped in God's Word and trained in righteousness.

Church leaders who are developing their visions may wish to consider the following questions.

- ◆ What are the strongest ministry gifts within my church?
- ◆ What are the passions of my congregation in service to God?
- ◆ When I talk to church members and leaders, what excites us the most?
- ◆ In what ways are we unique as a body?
- ◆ What do we do best in our service to God?
- ◆ If we were forced to give up every ministry except one, which one would it be?
- ◆ What symbol or picture best represents our destiny? You may want to consider various animals, places, and objects.
- ◆ What is a sentence or brief statement that best embodies our vision?

Simplicity and brevity are crucial attributes of a vision statement. The visual representation should be something you can recall in its entirety. If the visual is cluttered and busy, its impact on the future of the church will be limited. The written statement of vision should be one that everyone can easily remember and quoted in meetings. We soon forget long vision statements and rarely hear them quoted. Leaders often attempt to give every nuance of thought in the

statement. This tendency is a trap. Despite some people's fear, God will not zap us if we leave out one of His favorite words.

Certainly, a statement of vision inspires people—it lifts their spirits and challenges their hearts. The vision attracts people to service. People think, “Now there's something I can live for!” A vision states an ideal that people will embrace and claim as their own. Above all, it clearly reflects a *shared sense of our destiny in Christ*.

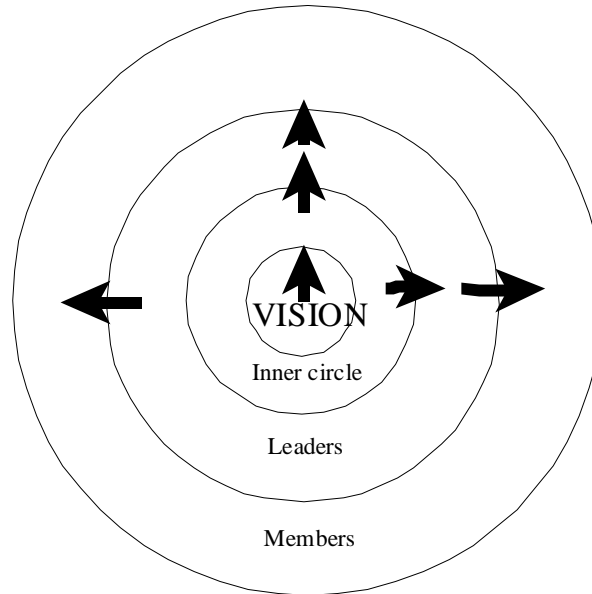
Transforming leadership requires more than for the leader to have a vision. The members of the church must also be committed to the vision.

Forging Commitment to a Shared Vision

How does the transforming Christian leader build commitment to a unified vision? The development process assures that key church leaders and close associates of the leaders are aware of the vision. Yet, building commitment to a vision is far more than communicating information. This commitment inspires the dedication of members to purposes that are greater than themselves. It is difficult to think of an organization with a more captivating purpose than that of furthering the cause of Christ. I cannot conceive of a secular organization with a mission that compares with that of bringing people to Christ, of equipping them for service, of building their knowledge of God's Word, and of exalting our God. No purpose is more worthy; none is more noble. The leader must kindle the fire of passion for these purposes and transform the focus of members' lives to their attainment.

We asked the ten leaders in our research how they conveyed their vision through their churches. It seems that they communicate the vision through groups that can be represented by a series of concentric circles. First, they communicated the vision to their closest inner circle of supporters in the church, next to groups of staff and lay leaders, then to the members, and finally,

to new member classes (depicted by the vertical arrows of the figure below). If the leader's closest supporters do not become excited about the vision, then something is wrong with it. It is time to start over. Once a vision is found that excites the inner circle, they join the effort to "tell" and "sell" their sense of destiny to others (thus, the horizontal arrows of the figure).



Pastor Morley Lee, Chinese Bible Church of Greater Boston, told us that he conveyed the church

vision by (1) "every week we have an inner circle of staff meeting, through which we plan and evaluate the church as a team, (2) by visitation and sharing with the deacons my vision—I try to visit with the deacons twice every year just to share with them my burden and vision, (3) by Christian education -- by teaching members through the adult Sunday School, and (4) by pulpit ministry." Pastor Lee's approach shows the importance of using every avenue available to keep the vision before all segments of the church body.

Pastor Pete Schwalm, Fairhaven Church, said, "The vision is conveyed in a variety of ways. The *Statement of Purpose* was developed with a large group of lay leaders involved in and owning the process and the result. Then banners containing it were placed in the lobby. These purposes are kept in front of the people: in messages, in the bulletin, and so on." A lay leader at Fairhaven added, "He doesn't miss a trick. He adapts to the audience and is astute on what can be absorbed. The typical progress is: staff, board, small group, and Sunday School

leaders, then into sermons. The process is one of rereading and of updating the statement of direction, refining it every year.” Another lay leader said, “He is careful to go over and over it with staff (mostly one-on-one), and with the governing board (mostly through his monthly written reports). Directive consensus building is now a habit.” The personal commitment of Pastor Schwalm is not lost on other leaders at Fairhaven. He models a dedication that is infectious.

Pastor Michael Toby said, “I’m talking about the vision in every circle. I have preached messages from various texts. I look for ways I can point out the need for having a clear-cut identity and vision. I look for texts that emphasize a personal commitment, a direction. In deacons meetings, staff meetings, Sunday School workers’ meetings, there has been detailed discussion of this. I’ve had my staff do the same with people they are working with. In personal conversation, I find myself talking about the matter of mission statement and sharing tidbits out of these various books, etc. When I’m enthused and let it show, it tends to raise the enthusiasm level of our whole congregation.”

Pastor Kevin Butcher² of Grace Community Church, Detroit, MI tells of four approaches of conveying his vision,

“First of all, we pushed toward a big night of communication when our vision first got put together. We did it on a retreat in May. I refined it. We put it together in a visual form and in a handwritten handout, and it was really sharp—very well done we think. We had a night when we really pumped people to come on board. We presented it to them goal-by-goal, objective-by-objective. That was the first thing we did.

Second, we really hit it hard as we preached and taught. We constantly are referring to where we are going as a church and how what we’re teaching fits into where we’re going as a church.

²Kevin Butcher is Pastor of Grace Community Church, Detroit, MI. Bill Brewer, D. Min. conducted in-depth research with Pastor Butcher, three of his lay leaders, and a sample of church members.

Third, we hit it hard in our mini-churches. Our mini-church pastors are tuned into the concepts. They know that our mini-church concept is part of our vision.

Fourth, we hit it diligently in our Pathfinder's Class, which is our new member's class. People in our Pathfinder Class know where the church is going and so they chose to get on board. They get on board because they want to go where we are going. So slowly but surely, over the years, we hope the people who don't want to be on board with this will slowly fade away and we will be accumulating more and more people who are in tune with where we are going as a church."

Butcher's discussion highlights most key points on the forging of commitment: presenting the vision sharply, getting people "pumped up" so they "come on board," using a variety of approaches, reaching every member including new members, and being so dedicated to the vision that having members committed to it is more important than to merely have more people.

An organization must be given wings, then it can soar to the heavens. Visions are those wings. The transforming leader extends the wings so that they stretch to become a great uplifting force. Then the members must climb on board and make those wings move through every form of calm, breeze, and storm.