

Listening for a Vision

A couple of years ago I was asked by my church leader to help develop a five-year vision for the church. While the church was active and membership stable, there was a nagging sense that something was missing. I got together with another OD colleague in the church and thought through how we should respond. We were unsure how much our comfortable, well-off church really wanted to change. We both felt that the traditional approach of having leaders develop a vision statement would be inadequate and would not energise people to change. We knew lots of individuals had strong opinions about how the church could be better, but we felt the church needed more than just human wisdom. We needed a clear sense of God's calling at this particular time in this particular place. We felt we should dedicate a time for the whole church to actively listen for God's voice.

So we went to the PCC (the governing body in Anglican parish churches), explained about the pain of change, explained our ideas for a listening process and asked them to prayerfully think through and write down:

Do you really want to change? If so, why?

When you look ahead, what are your hopes and fears for this process?

There was a clear sense that they felt the church was stagnant and complacent. There was a passion for change at PCC level at least. Their answers to the questions of 'hopes and fears' enabled us to identify core principles for the process:

Be surrendered to God's will

Identify God's vision for us.

Involve our repentance.

Be an inclusive, unifying process.

Be energising and life giving

Integrated with the life and work of the church

Have top leadership fully engaged

Communicate frequently and clearly with the church,

We put together a steering group from the church to guide the listening process, including people from different parts of the church body. We wanted a healthy diversity of gender, of role, of age, but also some people with good links to the leadership.

We felt that wide participation of church members in this listening process was

vital. To overcome our inherent resistance to the discomfort of change, members had to feel that God had spoken to them, not just the vicar. We felt that we should actively listen to:

God - as a whole church, in our existing groups and as individuals.

the 'smallest voice' - those on the margins of the church

those outside our church - people in the parish and other churches in the area.

So over the next six months, people listened to God in their different groups in whatever way they felt was appropriate. This phase tried to clear space, suspend the relentless activity of different groups (even for one meeting) to wait, be still and listen. People also listened individually. We had a special meeting to plan how we could hear from those on the margins of church. Time was given in services for people to walk around the parish and ask God what he was saying. We encouraged people to write down anything they felt they heard. It did not have to be neat and processed or interpreted. There was a post-box at the back of church for people to hand-in feedback. People sent emails and letters. We even tried blogs (though without any success).

At the end of six months, we typed up all the submissions - amounting to over 50 pages. We circulated these raw notes to the steering group and leadership and had a further prayer evening to listen to what God was saying through all these words.

What was remarkable was the coherence of the different responses. Probably 85% of responses said exactly the same thing - about getting ourselves right with God and getting out of church into the community.

We presented these findings to the PCC and all those involved in leadership. They wholeheartedly supported the emerging vision. They planned for how this could be creatively communicated to the whole church.

We also got them to think through what needed to change for this vision to be realised. They set up an 'implementation' task force who developed a process for 'Answering the Call'. This involved putting prayer at the centre of all activities, identifying and developing people's individual vocations, and getting our hands much more dirty in outreach activities with the community. But implementation of change is difficult. We now see the visioning process was the easy bit.

What is also clear is that this discipline of listening is incredibly healthy of a church. People were adamant that this listening should become part and parcel

of how we operate as a church, not something confined to a one-off visioning exercise. Maybe the process was as important as the outcome?