

## Visioning Process

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### **How do I help my Church develop a vision and strategy?**

In this article, I am sharing my experience as a member of a local church that is developing and implementing a vision and a strategy; I have been part of the process and below I reflect on my learning from the experience and perspectives from the pastor. Perhaps it has relevance for you?

#### **Background:**

15 years ago, my local church (situated in a university campus and largely made up of students) was not so diverse. The pastor was able to single-handedly determine the direction he wanted the church to go. However in the last few years, this has changed with many 'ex-university' students becoming 'permanent' members of the congregation. As a result, there are now many members from the working and professional class, together with their children. The church membership has grown, and now cuts across all the age groups, so the congregational needs are very varied. It is no longer feasible for the pastor to determine which 'way to go', let alone influence the members into a particular direction without their participation. Two years ago a new pastor took over with the goal of determining a common vision and strategy. As I write, this process is not yet complete, but we have made some significant steps. When I look back, some key processes stand out in my mind.

**We needed a Nehemiah or an Esther amongst the leaders** - a person who realizes the need to improve a situation or change it and is willing to 'take the plunge' whatever the outcome may be. This person also needs to respect Church structures and use them like Nehemiah and Esther went before the kings at the time. This person is able to convince the 'powers that be' that this is a necessary process that needs to be undertaken. In our case the new pastor was our 'Nehemiah' he took on this role and shared the need with the bishop and fellow clergy and governing council, and he was given the 'blessing' to go ahead and start the process.

**'Nehemiah' knew his congregation well, and made use of the gifts and ambitions they had**, in order to build a support base as well as initiate the process. On realizing that the most influential group of the church was the 'young marrieds group' as they were referred to, the pastor spoke to the coordinators of the group, he was sure they would 'understand the rationale for a church vision and strategy. He 'sold' his idea to them and together they planned a 'get away' retreat for interested couples for 'fun and reflection'. The pastor also knew that one of the members of the group was an OD specialist and practitioner so he approached her for support and asked her to facilitate the process. He was sure that the group would relax and respond positively to a person who was 'one of them'. He was also sure that because she was a member of the church, she was best suited to lead the process.

**Setting the stage for the initial step-** In an 'all expenses paid get away' weekend, at a retreat centre, these couples were ably facilitated; using participatory methods to enhance ownership, and help them realize the need for change. They unanimously agreed that

‘without a vision, people perish’. As a group they agreed on what they wanted their church to work towards until 2020, they also came up with suggestions of how they could get there.

**He let the people own the process-** the getaway retreat set the foundation , and it also agreed to set up a task force to take the process forward, supported by an OD consultant. Their key tasks were to collect more ideas from the other congregational members, synthesize what had been suggested, into a document to be presented to the governing body of the church which would then take on the process from there. Nehemiah knew that it was likely to take long but it was the best way to enhance ownership. Later the task force was introduced to the larger church, the highlights of the retreat were shared, and members of the congregation were asked to share any ideas they had with this particular group by a certain date.

**Breaking down the tasks and sharing them with key people** - As I write now, the process has been brought back to the local church representatives of the governing council which gave the go ahead and blessing at the beginning. The governing council has so far held a business retreat supported by the OD consultant to further reflection on the vision, mission and strategies as suggested by the congregants. Each member of the council is responsible for a particular ministry and they have taken on the task to carry out further consultations with their stakeholders to work more on the strategy. Follow up meetings are scheduled for the bigger group. In the mean time, preparations are underway to present the final versions of the vision and mission of the church to the congregation. We hope it will be agreeable to them after all it came from them!

**In summary, the above experience can be put in 4 steps as follows:**

You need a **champion** for the process, preferably one of the clergy leaders. If the champion is a lay person, they still need to find a way of getting the church leadership to believe it is a process worth taking on. Perhaps you can begin by talking to one by one, and then seek audience with the bigger group later. Their commitment and ‘blessing’ is key in the process because it means that whatever the outcome of the process, including the financial implications, there is assurance of some support.

Secondly, get a **critical support mass** from the congregation- study your congregation and decide how best to get them on board, who to contact in the process and how. It could be the people’s warden if you have one, or key influential leaders but they need to be known and valued or appreciated by the church leadership.

Thirdly, create a **representative task force** from the critical mass to take the process forward, and split the tasks, amongst the members and have an OD practitioner or firm who subscribes to the values of the church or better still is a member of the church, to support them.

Last but not least, establish a mechanism of **continued feedback** and consultations with the larger congregation to enhance ownership.

Concluding note: This has worked for us so far, perhaps because we are still ‘small’ and the bureaucracy in the church is not inhibiting but it should be noted that the process has not been as smooth sailing as the article may sound, there have been pockets of resistance and

negative questions, it has taken unnecessarily long for various reasons..., but that is a story for another time. I hope that much as it is very localized, there may be one or two possibilities that one can adopt to their situation.