

## The Changing Church: *Where do we go from here?*

The church is changing in many ways. So is the culture in which the church ministers. This series of articles has highlighted some of those changes. Now let's focus on the future. With all the changes, how do we move forward wisely? *Where do we go from here?*

There is no set answer to that question that fits every church. If anyone tries to sell you one, run! There is, however, a good process your church can follow to discover your own answers. The process involves answering six questions as a church family.

1. *Why are we here?* This is the question of *mission*. It is understood that the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) is the mission of the church in general. But what does that mean in your context? What are the large, unchanging outcomes on which your church should be focused? Are they stated in a clear and memorable way? Your mission statement is the "compass" for your church. It provides strategic direction by defining the big outcomes toward which you are always working. It also provides decision-making discipline, helping you determine what to do and what not to do as a church. Without a clear, broadly-owned mission statement, it will be exceedingly difficult to focus your energies as a church in our rapidly changing culture.

2. *Who are we?* This is the question of *values*. What are the strongly held values in your congregation that define who you are? It is important to know these values because attempting something that goes against them will be problematic at best. What are the biblical, cultural, organizational, and relational values that give shape to the church's personality? What are the socio-economic and ethnic characteristics of the church? What traditions and practices are held sacred? Understanding these things will give shape to how you pursue your mission. It is possible for values to change over time and sometimes they need to change. But don't underestimate the power of values and the long-term leadership that is required to influence them.

3. *Where are we?* This is the question of *local mission field*. All churches have an Acts 1:8 responsibility that extends their mission to the ends of the earth. However, your "Jerusalem" is obviously your first responsibility as a church. You are where you are for a reason. What is going on in your local mission field? Who lives there? What are the demographics? What are the changes? What are the needs that your church might be able to meet in carrying out your mission? Where are the bridge-building opportunities between church and community? Often churches think of far-off places as "mission fields" but never look at their own communities that way. Yet this is the primary place where you'll be carrying out your mission as a church. It's a good idea to know it well.

4. *How are we doing?* This is the question of *church health*. Here is where you "look in the mirror" and assess the key indicators of the church's present condition. It's like going to the doctor for your annual check-up. Some of the answers you get might be unwelcome, but it is better to know than to not know. It's better to have facts than to rely on subjective impressions. What are the current

strengths and weaknesses of the church? What opportunities are before you? What barriers to accomplishing your mission do you need to address? Where are the trend lines pointing? You need an accurate assessment of how you are doing now in order to make plans for the future. Self-awareness, though sometimes threatening, is vital information for your long-term health.

5. *Where are we going?* This is the question of *vision*. Given your mission and what you now know about your church and community, what are the main things you want to accomplish in the next two to five years? You are determining how your mission statement will be focused and lived out during the next phase of the church's life. You are setting organizational priorities for a particular period of time. These vision elements should be few in number and objective enough so that you can assess progress. They will be your "standing orders" as a church for the next timeframe.

6. *How are we going to get there?* This is the question of *execution*. Each vision element should be broken down into steps, interim goals, and action plans. Responsibility and accountability should be assigned. Timelines are determined and resources are allocated. Key measures and measuring points are set. You now have a strategic plan for accomplishing your vision and thus furthering your overall mission as a church.

In answering the six questions, process matters a lot. How you arrive at answers is as important as the answers themselves. The process will determine how many people buy-in to the answers and are committed to making them a reality. With that in mind, here are the keys to working through the six questions effectively as a church family.

1. *Follow the process deliberately.* There is a logical order to the process. Unfortunately, what most churches do when they perceive a problem is jump to question six: "If what we're doing now isn't working, let's try something else!" That might be okay for small issues, but for strategic issues it is a recipe for frustration and confusion. The answers to questions one through five are what give you a sound basis for answering question six. It will take most churches at least six months to work through the questions in a thorough way, but it is time well spent in order to achieve understanding and focus as a church family.

2. *Provide opportunities for everyone to participate.* Participation produces ownership. People are much more likely to support and serve a plan they helped create. Throughout the process of working through the six questions, church members should have the opportunity to ask questions, give input, and help create plans. You'll need some kind of guiding coalition (staff, leadership team, vision team, etc.) to direct the process, but make sure church members are engaged regularly with the process. Not all members will avail themselves of the opportunity, but you don't want anyone to be able to say with credibility, "Why are we doing that? No one asked my opinion."

3. *Utilize outside help.* This can be especially helpful when, as is often the case during question four, there are some challenging facts that need to be communicated to the church. These things can stir emotions in some church members. It can be advantageous for the pastor to have an outside

consultant say these things to the congregation, assuming the outsider has credibility and no direct stake in the outcome of the process.

4. *Pray throughout the process.* Working through the six questions is a great time to call the congregation to prayer in a new and focused way. It is a spiritual process that should be Spirit-guided. Make prayer a priority.

5. *Trust the process.* If you are the pastor or a senior leader in the church, you probably already know the strategic issues in the church and have a pretty good idea about what the church needs to do. What you don't have is the ability, all by yourself, to produce congregational ownership of strategic changes. That's what the process can do for you. Trust it. Trust the Lord to work through the process in a way that strengthens his church and produces the results he wants. Discipline yourself to let the answers emerge rather than trying to force them. You don't just want answers to the six questions; you want answers that are broadly-owned in the congregation. That takes trust and patience.

*So, where do we go from here?* The next move is yours. God bless you, brothers and sisters, as you lead your churches to greater focus and fruitfulness.

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*The six questions were designed some years ago by Dr. Minton, our Church Health Consultant, as the framework for the "Vision-Path Strategy Planning Model." This process has been used successfully in BBA churches. If Dr. Minton or I can help you in this regard, please call on us.*