

Making Our Visions for the Church Real

Congregations frequently derive new energy from reflecting on their unique identities, gifts, aspirations and callings. A vision changes our way of thinking but it does not, in itself, change our way of life. Not everyone enjoys changes. Often, the accepted way of seeing things and doing things gets in the way of transitions from the old to the new. As the visions for our parish communities become clear, our challenge is to successfully put our new insights into practice.

Proverbs 16:3 reminds us, "Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established." To help in God's transformation of our community, we need to:

Focus on a strong sense of shared purpose. We continually draw and inspire people with a significant mission to be accomplished together in a supportive community. As we implement activities to support our purpose, we need to keep our focus on the purpose rather than on the activities. Our activities should bring people to Jesus or serve people for Jesus.

Ask for greater commitment. The attitude with which we approach our church largely makes our church whatever it becomes for us. Everyone benefits from commitment. Committed people contribute more and receive more because their experiences are important to them. We need not accept apathy or resistance. Commitment means being connected, trusting one another and acting together.

Build a team. The mission of the church is the work of all of us. Each of us needs help and support from the people around us. Jesus was careful to make formation of a leadership and support group a priority of his ministry, even though at times it must have seemed a great nuisance. When a single leader is resisted or persecuted, a dozen others will carry on the mission.

Change the way we do things. A new focus calls for a new way of doing things. We will not get a different result by doing the same things we have always done. We need to add new activities to support our vision and eliminate old practices that do not support our vision. Innovation does not mean having to try harder or do more difficult things. A healthy pruning and fertilizing makes growth simpler.

Take risks and accept mistakes. The inertia of the old way of doing things is more crippling than the mistakes we make in trying new things. We cannot be sure of what works until we try it; we will not know where the path leads until we take it. We need to improvise rather than over analyzing and delaying. Learning from mistakes and moving on creates energy and momentum – unless we take ourselves too seriously.

Broadly assign responsibilities. People who spread Christianity are people with initiative and a huge feeling of responsibility to God and one another. We are each critically important to

achieving our purpose and we each need to receive and accept meaningful assignments we can successfully achieve. This means that each of us needs to find tasks for which we are gifted. The body of Christ will be unbalanced or limited in growth unless all of its members grow.

Be passionate as leaders. The pace and tone of the leaders often becomes the pace and tone of the community. Enthusiasm and commitment is highly contagious and inspires others to action. Leaders avoid trouble by acting confidently and purposefully during times of change.

Build momentum. We need a sense of urgency for our mission and we need to avoid making our task seem too overwhelming. By celebrating early achievements, we demonstrate progress and encourage each other to keep pursuing our mission. People begin to enjoy being part of a growing mission-oriented community. Slowing down may give some people a sense of safety, but if our vision is true we are safer moving toward it as quickly as possible.

Share personal experiences. In churches advancing their missions, people talk comfortably and often about the significant role Jesus (rather than the parish) plays in their everyday lives. Communicating helps individuals to understand their spiritual journeys and also strengthens the bonds between people in the congregation.

Pray without ceasing. Our lives and our community need to be centered in God and God will transform them. When things are changing, it is easy to become anxious about the future or to focus too heavily on what has not worked. In prayer, we realize that God is with us.

Encourage confrontations. Most of us are uncomfortable with confrontations. We may avoid dealing with a challenge or problem just because we dislike confronting another person. And yet, confrontations are necessary for moving forward. Confrontation is the opposite of avoiding; confrontation means simply meeting face-to-face, or addressing. Thus, confrontations can and should be positive. When we address a problem or a challenge with another person, we often can reconcile with that person. We can learn and grow together. For that reason, confrontations are required in any successful relationship, especially love.

In a sermon entitled "What is God?", Austin Farrer referred to the story of Jacob wrestling with God to make God declare what God was, and said of the struggle: "God had not revealed what he was, but he had told Jacob what Jacob was, and had blessed him. And so it is practical doctrine that if we wrestle with God's holy will we shall find out what we are, and what we are called to be." We are hesitant to wrestle with God as Jacob did for that seems awfully irreverent. But to be blessed with self-discovery and the discovery of God, we must confront God and one another.