



What do you mean by 'vision'?

TN32 Training Notes series: Planning

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It is one of those biblical words that is commonplace in management planning. But churches are confused. These notes are designed to bring some clarity to the idea of a 'church vision' and the concept of a 'vision statement'. All that is written here applies to Christian mission agencies too.

Here are six suggestions to clarify an understanding of vision (in its planning sense).

1 **Destination**

Vision provides a description of where you want to get to. It pictures a scenery that is different from what you see, hear, smell, taste or feel today. Because it is different it is all about change. So you say, "Today we are here; tomorrow we want to be there". If today is your Sinai Desert, tomorrow will be your Promised Land.

So check that your vision is a description of a recognisable destination rather than a pious hope about activity or something to do with purpose (which is just as important, but different – see point 5 below). If to reach the destination will require a miracle, that is no bad thing.

For example, the statement that 'we want to love God more' does not describe a future destination you can see. Try answering the question, 'What would things look like compared with how we see them today if we really did love God more?'

2 **Changed lives**

Secondly, this destination should include changed lives. Vision has an impact on people. It shows the difference you want to make to others (and no doubt yourselves). Lack of vision means you are seeking to keep the show on the road. With a vision you are seeking to change the world.

So the vision should clearly state the difference you believe God will make to individual lives, to a community or to a country, whether by alleviating suffering, by providing education or by building the Kingdom.

3 **Ends not means**

Avoid the danger of muddling vision with the means to achieve it. For example, a vision should not be a new building (if you have a project for one) for buildings are only spaces for people. The vision needs to be all about the impact that this building will have on people's lives.

To say that your vision is 'to have the new church centre open in five years' time' implies that your horizon is limited to a building. So what? What is this building for? This vision is a genuine destination, but there must be a reason for putting this building up which may relate to serving the community or growing the Kingdom.

4 **One clear vision**

Avoid the danger, too, of muddling a 'visionary' with a 'vision'. In the last few years I have come across a number of churches that have told me they had a vision. In fact, what they had were plenty of visionaries, but sometimes no vision. The leaders regularly believed five impossible things before breakfast. There were scary new ideas round every corner. But there was no one, clear vision that people could buy into. As one vision gained the ascendancy, its place was taken by another. It is exhausting belonging to a church like that!

So what is the one vision that everyone is heading towards? Is the visionary leader seeking to move you all towards it – or has the leader by now got tired of this vision and moved on to another one while you try to catch up? If so, where is God in all this?

5 **God at work**

Fifthly, visions for Christians should be about faith in what God will achieve, rather than what you will manage (hence the comment about miracles in point 1). Your 'purpose' explains why you are here and so what you should be doing. Your 'vision' is what you have faith to believe that God will bring about if you fulfil your purpose faithfully. This saves you from the danger of claiming results (in terms, perhaps, of spiritual outcomes) from your own efforts as though God had no part in it.

I see many so-called visions that are in fact purposes. 'Our vision is to obey the Great Commission' is a purpose. It is our job. Ask 'what do we have faith to believe God might do through us if we did obey the Great Commission?' and that will be your vision.

6 **Leadership**

Visions come from and go with leaders. You need leaders to take people from A to B. Pastors and teachers look after people at A or at B, but you need leaders to take a congregation from one to the other (though leaders will certainly teach, and by doing so they will pastor too). So to move a church towards a vision requires leadership gifting.

Leaders need to keep reminding people of what the vision is, not in mantra-style but by expressing it in all kinds of different ways. People lose sight of visions very quickly because the detail of the immediate is so much more pressing than the long-term journey to the final destination.

Note 1 **Different types of vision**

Article A4 on this website, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, looks at the whole planning process and seeks to avoid all jargon words, including 'vision'! But, as the key at the end of it explains, there are two levels of vision within the twelve items.

The first is the 'big vision' which answers question 1 in that list: 'What do we long to see happen?' It is explained there that this is concerned with:

- an outcome ... (ie. the idea of destination in these notes)
- possibly in the long-term or even eternity
- which you are passionate about.

The second is the more normal idea of 'vision' which answers question 6 in that list: 'What might God do through us?' This is defined as specific achievements in the medium- or longer-term, but not in eternity.

The difference between the two is simply a matter of time-scale. It is no bad idea to keep the 'big vision' always in sight as you define your more normal 'visions'! It is quite in order to have both kinds, or just one. If you have both, the first should put the second in a Kingdom context.

Note 2 **Vision statements**

A so-called 'vision statement' is not a 'vision'. It is simply a memorable way of summarising that vision so that everyone can own it. It is vital to distinguish the two.

'A land flowing with milk and honey' was a pretty good vision statement for the crowd that went with Moses. Intriguing visions are always more powerful than bland ones.

But the real vision would have been rather longer than this. The mistake people make is to construct a vision statement rather than the vision. Determine your vision first, and then put it in a memorable format. The statement is a tool, not the real thing.

These notes have not covered how you might initiate vision*, nor how you communicate it and help people to make it their own with enthusiasm. But they offer a checklist which you now might like to apply to your church's vision. If you do not have one, they may get you thinking about the big picture issue of where you feel God may be leading you.

* I believe that God may speak through anyone, but the leader must then shape the vision.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> and then TN32. See also Article A4 *Twelve questions to help you plan*, DIY Workshop W2, *How to run a church vision day*, plus, on related themes, Training Notes TN48, *Let's get purpose statements right*, TN74, *Understanding values*, TN103, *How to encourage creative thinking*, and TN124, *What's the point of church?*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File TN32 under Planning (with a link to Leadership).

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