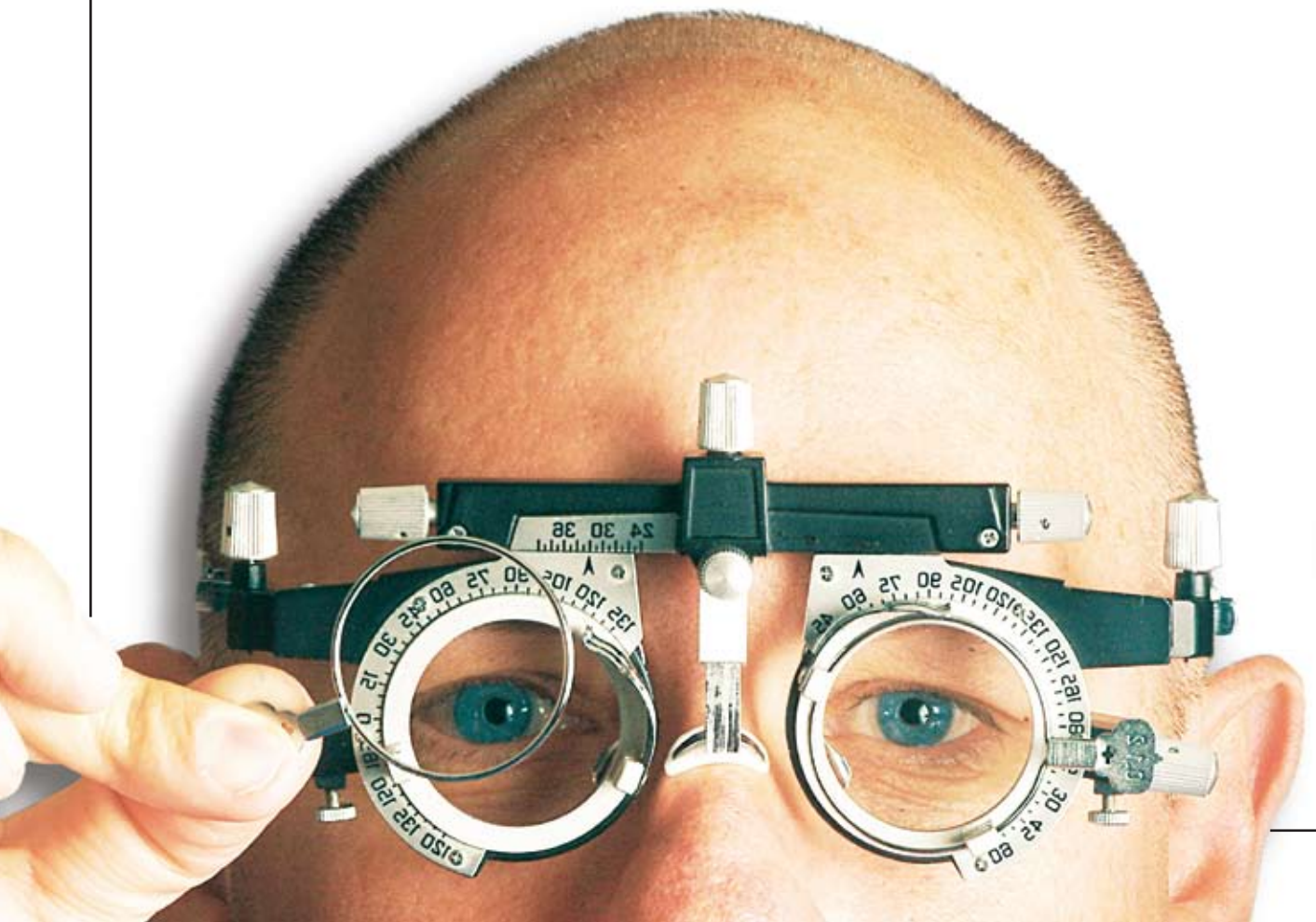


**M E A S U R I N G
Y O U R
M I N I S T R Y
V I S I O N**

BY ALAN NELSON



In the beginning...so starts the dramatic record of God's vision for planet Earth with all its grandeur—mountains, seas, vegetation, animals, and people. For the world to come into being, God spoke what he saw in his mind's eye. The wild and creative imagination of God astounds us all, but being made in his image, we, too, have an ability—to a degree—to see what is yet to be.

New Year's is a new beginning, an artificial yet significant demarcation in time for us to let go of the past and focus on what's ahead. While many are establishing resolutions, joining health clubs, setting goals, and reading money management books, this annual milestone is a prudent time for us as pastors to recalibrate the vision for the ministry God has entrusted to us. As the venerable King James text says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18).

A vision is a mental picture of a preferred future; a destination toward which your church should aim, if it is to fulfill the will of God. The difference between a human vision and a godly one is a matter of source. Graven images lack godly ordination. Divinely inspired ones should be taken seriously. As

congregational leaders, we believe that our visions emanate from God. In Isaiah 43:18-19 the Lord says, "But forget all that; it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?" Notice the word "see," referring here to vision. Just prior, God said, "Bring out

the people who have eyes but are blind" (43:8). Helen Keller was once asked if there was anything worse than being blind. She said, "It is a terrible thing to see and have no vision." The ability to physically see and to have a mental vision are two distinct qualities.

Pastors must have vision if they

are to lead their congregations where God wants to take them. Respected researcher George Barna said, "In evaluating churches that are growing and healthy, as well as those that are stagnant or in decline, one of the key distinctions that emerges between these categories is the existence of true vision for ministry" (*The Power of Vision*, Barna Research).

Here's the challenge: Vision is very difficult to carry out. It's far easier to talk about than do. Vision, like leadership, is one of those things that you recognize when you see it, but to describe it is very messy. It's an intangible. Great leaders just seem to exude vision, but for most pastors and other leaders charged with shepherding flocks, vision is a far more difficult process. We leave the pastor conference enthused, only to return home to mire in our ministry mud. "What happened to our vision?" we ask. "Why isn't mine as clear and robust as those whom I just heard?"

The first question to ask is, "Do you have a vision for your church?"

"LIFE IS EITHER A DARING ADVENTURE OR NOTHING."

—Helen Keller

While teams can hone a vision and brainstorm strategic ideas for capturing one, I've yet to see a group of people conceive a vision. That is the stuff of individuals. I've yet to find a single biblical instance when God gave a group of people a vision. God worked through individuals on behalf of groups. Pastors



who try to gain a vision for their churches by taking congregational surveys, conducting focus groups, or even going on staff retreats, are simply admitting that they lack vision. You can't delegate vision origination. If you do, two things will happen. Pirates will hijack your ship, or you'll drift aimlessly out to sea. We must be realistic about the impact of our vision. We need to measure it.

How do you quantify a vision? Three primary factors make up a vision that has the ability to move people toward action: the intensity of the vision, the clarity of the vision, and the magnitude of the vision. By establishing reasonable, numerical values to these elements, you can actually estimate the weight so that you can better understand whether or not your vision has the potential of moti-

vating your congregation from its current location toward a preferred future.

INTENSITY OF THE VISION

During Hurricane Katrina, news reports showed the results of the category-four winds on signage, boats, roofs, and houses. During the storm, flamboyant reporters sneaked into the streets while being filmed, so that viewers around the country could see how intense the gusts were. Intensity has to do with strength—the impact a vision has on those who hear it.

You can test the intensity of a vision by asking questions such as: Why do we need to pursue this goal? What good will come of it?

Motivation primarily comes by avoiding a pain or obtaining a gain. What might happen if we don't pursue this new direction? What might we lose by staying put? A vision that lacks intensity stands little chance of competing amid the fray of voices clamoring for the attention and resources of our people.

Two elements determine intensity: urgency and importance. Both are vital. If a matter is urgent but trivial, it will be tossed aside for more important matters begging for our attention. If a matter is important but lacks urgency, we're apt to place it on our to-do list and deal with it whenever we can get around to it. Just as an emergency room physician performs triage on incoming patients to determine who receives immediate attention and who waits, people constantly weigh the visions we communicate

“ There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared. ”

—Burt Nanus, *Visionary Leadership*

with any number of other competing messages they receive from their spouses, bosses, kids, and personal interests. The ones with the greater intensity get their attention, energy, and resources.

Importance measures gravity, impact, and horsepower. Don't waste people's time casting visions that are insignificant. They can go to their mailboxes if they want to read junk mail. The Reign of God calls us to the most important quest in life, to know God and be transformed. How does that look in your context?

Urgency considers timing. *Carpe diem*, seize the day. We must do it now! Time is of the essence. Our voices must rise above the countless thousands of Web site banners, auto sale ads, and discount coupons screaming "Now, now, now!" That's why the gospel is not a "you've got plenty of time to buy" product. Today God wants to make changes that will impact your life forever. Why must your ministry seize this opportunity right away?

CLARITY OF THE VISION

"And if the bugler doesn't sound a clear call, how will the soldiers know they are being called to battle?" (1 Corinthians 14:8). Communicating clearly is tough;

always has been, always will be. What makes it even more difficult these days is the amount of ambient noise going on around us, literally thousands of weekly messages competing for our attention.

A few years ago, I was having dinner in a noisy Italian restaurant with a group of people. I sat

across from a physician who smiled and asked, "You're over 40, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, "How did you know?"

"Because," he explained, "after men turn 40, they don't always lose their hearing, but their ability to separate foreground sounds from

VISION METAPHOR

Imagine that you're spelunking, guiding a group of people through the dark, dank passages of a cave. You're in front. You have the flashlight. It's your responsibility to shine the light for the people so they can see where they're going. Darkness surrounds you like a blanket. The people have not been through this cave before. Without the light, they might trip, or take a wrong turn, or become afraid and turn back. It's your responsibility to shine the light. A vision is a light that shows followers where to go. Do your job.

background noise usually diminishes. I could tell the way you are leaning forward and watching my mouth as I talked.”

What happens to middle-aged guys like me is a communication metaphor for our culture. Our

techno capacity has increased the challenge of separating messages from each other. The astute leader must be more effective than ever if he or she is to clearly communicate the vision of the local church in a way that captures

the attention of others. Three strategies make up the gist of this larger one.

1) VARIETY—One size doesn’t fit all. Besides various personalities there are different learning styles. Some people are visual learners and others are audio. Age, gender, background, and temperaments require us to use a diversity of means if we’re to connect with people. Simply preaching a vision sermon isn’t enough. How can you present it graphically, musically, dramatically, experientially, and three-dimensionally? Interview people. Let them provide testimonials. Hand out a take-home reminder.

2) FREQUENCY—How often do you intentionally communicate vision? Vision leaks. An annual clarion call isn’t enough to keep people tuned into the direction the church is headed. Consider at least one monthly letter, email, sermon, teaching, or visual aid that will keep the main thing in front of their attention.

I grew up with Kool-Aid soft drinks. My dad is frugal and he realized that if we put four quarts of water with every packet instead of the recommended two, we’d get twice as much drink for our money. The only problem was that it didn’t taste good so we saved even more because no one would drink it. Time and multiple messages dilute vision. Recharge it frequently.

3) FEEDBACK—Ask people to state their perceptions of your church’s vision. Effective communication is two-way. Poll board members and staff by having them write the primary vision of the church. This will give you an

PERCEIVING VISION

“The difficulty with perceiving vision is that too often the congregation is unable to discern between an authentic calling of Jesus Christ and its abiding addictions to past ideals, forms, and procedures. ‘Addiction’ is the right word. Just as an alcoholic, smoker, or drug abuser chronically denies the destructive impact of certain habitual behavior patterns, so also congregations simply cannot ‘see’ that the demise of their congregational health is directly connected to their dogged and misplaced loyalty to the ‘sacred cows’ of former ideals, forms, or procedures. Just as an addict dimly perceives the truth, but then rationalizes that a ‘gradual’ change in the behavior pattern will ‘eventually’ lead to freedom and health, so do many congregations only pretend to transform their church. They ‘play’ with new mission statements, with restructuring the official board, or with experiments in worship, allowing these exercises in futility to deceive their constituency into thinking a genuinely authentic vision has replaced their destructive addictions. ‘We’ll be really different—next year.’ ”

—Thomas Bandy, *Kicking Habits* (Abingdon)



idea of what people are hearing and thinking. It will also give you a sense of what needs to happen to improve the vision cast. It's not

communicated until it's in the mind of the beholder and he or she can articulate it as such. When we think a vision is clear in our

minds, but others are unable to convey it, clarity is lagging and the overall impact is diminished.

LONG LIVE THE KING

"Your new vision is new. That means something else has passed—namely the old vision. Empower the new vision by creating a passage ritual. Stress the good points of the past and optimism for the future. The English do it. At the funeral for a fallen monarch, the English chant, 'The King is dead. Long live the King!' This ritual marks the passage of the old ruler—'The King is dead.'—and the empowerment of the new ruler—'Long live the King!' "—James Belasco, *Teaching the Elephant to Dance* (Plume Publishing)

MAGNITUDE OF THE VISION

Where does a 1,000-pound guerilla sit? Anywhere it wants to. Big visions are difficult to let go of, to leave alone. They're magnetic. People are drawn to them. Jim Collins refers to these as BHAGs, Big Hairy Audacious Goals. Imagine the shock when Joel Olsteen announced that their church was going to buy the former Compaq Center in Houston, Texas, for their new worship facility. Sure enough, money and resources flowed toward the dream. While few of us are in situations for such audacious endeavors, we all have

“Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams.”—Robert Greenleaf

sizable opportunities that can attract significantly more excitement and commitment than we’re probably experiencing presently.

Robert Schuller once said that was easier to raise \$1,000,000 to build a Crystal Cathedral, than it was to raise \$1,700 to buy a new dishwasher. People want to be a part of things that are significant. Far too often, we as pastors do ourselves a disservice in recruiting when we try to get people to say yes by diminishing the task at hand. Imagine this “want ad” in a church newsletter: “Wanted, Sunday School class teacher. The preparation materials are easy and it won’t take

much effort to prepare. Just show up; please, we’re desperate.”

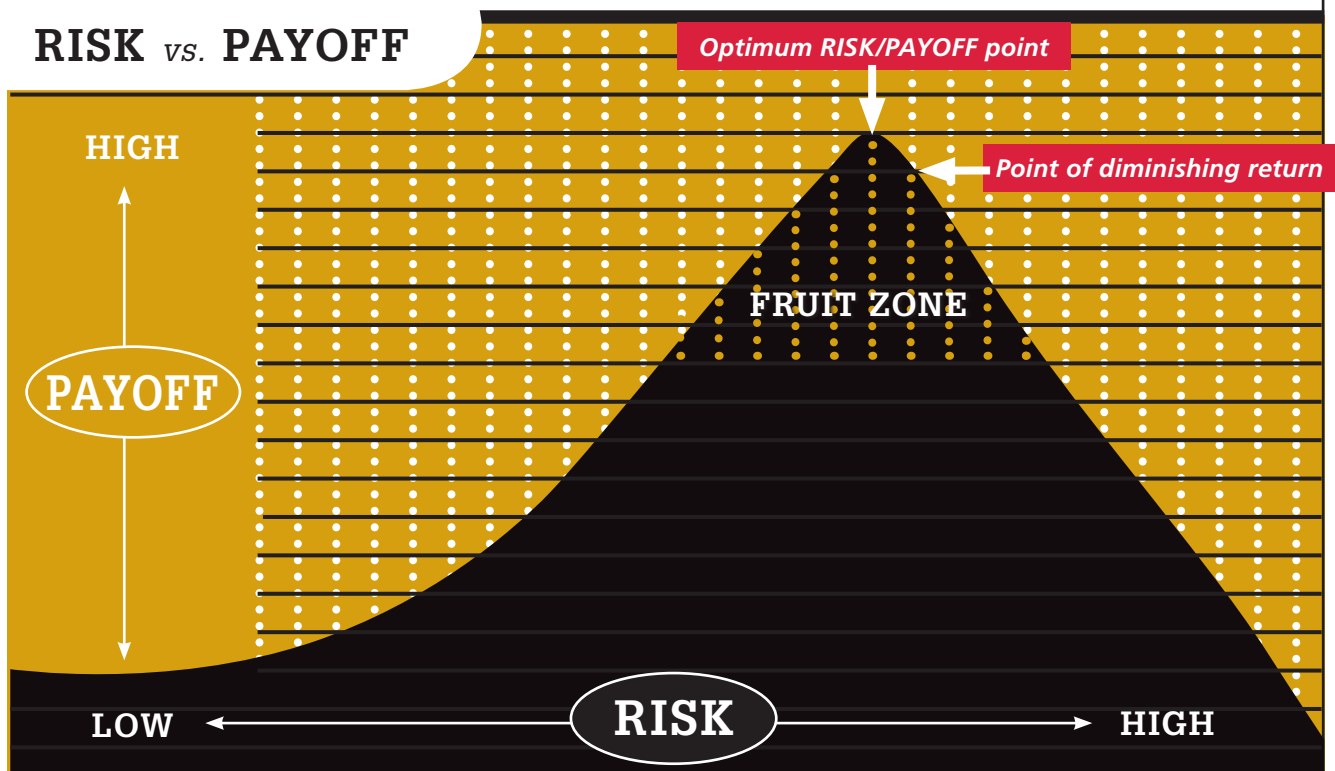
Compare the size of that challenge with this one: “Wanted, life changers. One of the most important roles of this church involves investing in our future leaders. We’re looking for quality role models. We’re confident that the world will forever be changed by your efforts.”

Ironically the higher bar is more apt to attract quality people than the lower one.

The most fruitful zone is when risk and payoff are in the right combination. When you go out of your way to avoid risk, you lessen the payoff. While there’s a point

of diminishing return, when risk outweighs profitability, most people live far below their potential because they exchange what they could have for security.

There’s a fine line between faith and foolishness. When you have significant support on both sides, you’re probably hitting something of a sweet spot. Listen to the “worry warts” and you’ll compromise on God’s leading. Cater to a few risk-takers and you may bankrupt the trust of the majority. However, history suggests that we’re better off to adhere to risking more. Consider the Israelites’ wilderness wandering as a result of



rejecting the vision of a few giant-killers.

Don't think you can measure the weight of a vision? Try the following questionnaire as a means of quantifying the quality of your vision. Start with yourself and then include lay leaders, board members, and staff. If you're really gutsy, extend it to a variety of parishioners. You may find ade-

quate insight to motivate you to develop and articulate your vision, assuming you have one.

"Happy New Year!" We say it dozens of times during this season. But is it really a new year or merely an old one recycled? The difference between the two is vision. Without a vision, this really isn't a new year of ministry, but just one more time around the

block. With a vision, however, the impossible becomes possible.

ALAN NELSON is the executive editor of *Rev! Magazine*, a pastor for almost 25 years, and the author of several books, including *How to Change Your Church Without Killing It* (with Gene Appel; W Publishing Group), from which this article is adapted by permission.



RATE THE VISION OF YOUR CHURCH

INTENSITY

Circle the numerical value that seems right about our church vision.

- 1 People are pretty satisfied with where they are; status quo seems acceptable.
- 2 We certainly have important work to do for God's kingdom, but there are a lot of other things vying for our attention.
- 3 We have a burning mandate to accomplish this task and it has our undivided attention.

CLARITY

Circle the numerical value that seems right about our church vision.

- 1 Clear as mud. It's very foggy, nebulous, or practically nonexistent. Most can't articulate it.
- 2 Some of it makes sense. I see it in black and white, but not in color. Some may have an idea of where we're headed.
- 3 Crystal clear. I see it in full color. Many see it this way as well.

MAGNITUDE

Circle the numerical value that seems right about our church vision:

- 1 This is a small goal; no biggie.

- 2 This is significant and would take some doing to pull off.
- 3 This would be nothing short of a miracle, requiring faith in a big God.

Plug the estimated numbers into this formula:

Intensity ____ + Clarity ____ + Magnitude ____ = ____ (V-factor)

The V-factor will range from 3 to 9. Use the following categories to describe the vision of your church.

3-4: Vision is weak or undetectable. Pray hard and consider selecting a natural leader to convey your vision to your church.

5-7: Vision is mild. See where it's lacking and strengthen it appropriately. Brainstorm ideas with congregational influencers.

8-9: Vision is strong. Go for it! Work out the details and activate the team toward the plan God has for your church.

Resources for Ministry Vision

How to Change Your Church Without Killing It by Gene Appel & Alan Nelson (W Publishing Group)

Casting a Courageous Vision by Bill Hybels & John Maxwell (video/DVD) (Willow Creek Association)

Turning Vision Into Action by George Barna (Regal)

Visionary Leadership by Burt Nanus (Jossey-Bass)

Selling the Invisible by Harry Beckwith (Warner Business Books)