

A QUICK PRIMER ON THE BASICS OF MINISTRY PLANNING

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In the late twentieth century as business management science made its impact upon the lives of church leadership teams, all sorts of terms started appearing in church life - each of which carry agenda from the world of business theory into Christian vocabulary.

Discernment. Mission. Purpose. Values. Vision. Long-Range Planning. Strategic Planning. Strategic Mapping. And so on.

The processes related to producing a coherent document on any one of the above can take months, even years – especially when church leaders have day jobs and ministry responsibilities that limit the time for what can seem like esoteric and tedious work. Further complicating matters is the lack of commonality from one business guru to the next and from one church lead team to the next what they mean by any of these things. I have known these words to be used interchangeably at times.

On the subject of **Discernment**, Beth Ann Estock has developed a separate strategy sheet. So we do not unpack that topic here. Increasingly, we are seeing that churches need a dedicated season for spiritual discernment prior to the commencement of a planning process. It is important that we sharpen our capacity to think prayerfully as a body before diving into lots of data and opinions. This is especially true if the church has been stuck or declining for several years, or if it is located in a markedly post-Christendom community context.

As a pastor who helped develop a large multi-site congregation a few years back, and as a consultant who has worked with hundreds of vital congregations, I like to keep things as simple as possible. So here are a few of my working definitions and approaches to church planning.

First, let's start with Values.

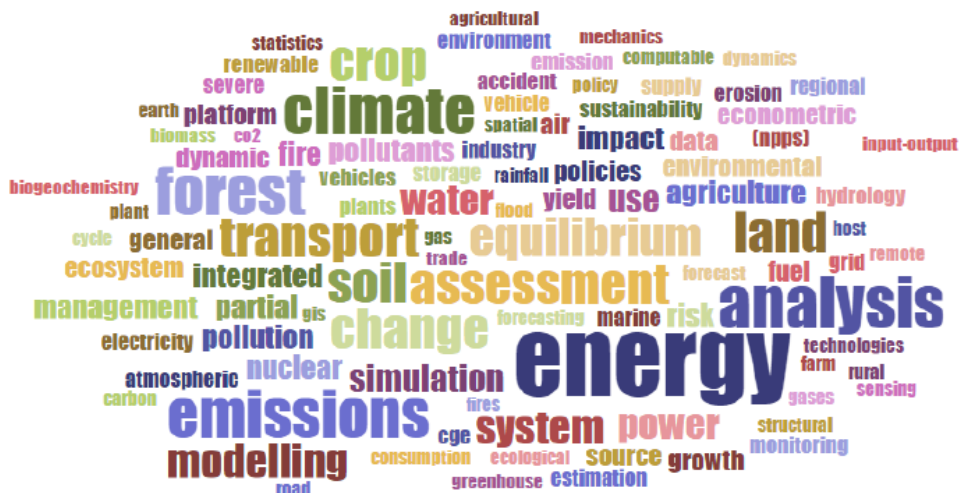
Tom Bandy convinced me years ago that it all starts with values. The Bible is full of values that inform and define us in terms of how we live, how we make choices personally and as groups of faithful people. We could list scores of such values. Some are just assumed in our lives – so that we don't really have to think about them – others may take more work. For example, I may value non-violence to the point that I can go years without thinking about it. If I lived in a war-zone, I would have to rethink this – and a commitment to non-violence would probably move to a more prominent place in my personal consciousness. But in most times and places, I

would not have to continually remind myself of this value. On the other hand, take a practice like tithing. Millions of Christians consistently give away a tenth of their material income each year to support ministries that align with their faith in God. And yet the constant temptation to spend that money on myself is huge. Moreover, the majority of my Christian friends do not give a tenth. Therefore, tithing is more likely to find itself on a short list of my core values, if I were to make such a list. It requires ongoing focus and because it distinguishes us from how we would live if we did not consciously live as persons of faith.

How might we discover what the most prominent values are that really define the place we call church? Here is a very easy way to begin. Make up a list of all the values you can think of. Hospitality to strangers, Deep listening, Loving neighbors, Praying daily, Food security, etc. – try to keep each value to a couple words... and then list 60 or more values on a sheet of paper. Pass out the papers to all the people in worship on a weekend, and tell them, “Circle six.” You can specify, “Circle only the values that you see clearly lived out in our church’s ministry.” Or you could say, “Not every value you circle may be fully lived out in our church, but by circling it, you are saying, this is critically important for us.” The former kind of list would be a list of actual values, and the latter aspirational values.

Another kind of values exercise would focus not on values in the abstract, but rather on the kinds of people that God is calling our church to love and to serve tenderly and intentionally.

Whichever way you choose, you will end up with lists of words. Some will be repeated many times, others a few times, and some not at all. Tally up the words and enter the results into an online software such as www.wordclouds.com that will give you back a **word cloud**. Here is a word cloud developed by a group focused on environmental concerns:



list their values. “In those moments when you see our church living into the spirit of the early church, what values do you see?”

Once we are clear about the values that are driving us as a group, **articulating vision** is quite easy. Again, I would hand a sheet of paper to everyone in the room, ideally no more than 15, but you could do this with a larger group – its just harder to process the information. Ask each person to write a short paragraph about how they would joyfully describe our church five years from now. “Describe the church you believe God is seeking to create here.” Read the statements, and allow conversation. Then hand the sheets to a team of two or three, who will draft a short vision statement, simply documenting God’s good future as our leaders imagine it today.

A **mission statement** is helpful in some cases; it is quite optional in others. Vision and values are often enough! Does your church possess clarity about what business it is in? If a church is clear about where it is seeking to go and about several key values to be lived on that journey, its mission is probably implicit. A broad mission statement may already exist within the church’s bylaws or within the denominational framework. Even if there is little guidance from such foundation documents, the Bible is helpful: Loving God and neighbor is every church’s biblical mandate. Helping folks step into God’s preferred future or to live fully into God’s will for their lives: this also is every church’s mission. Your church’s specific vision statement will help you customize the church’s universal mission in terms of local detail. If you choose to create a brief mission statement for your church, you are simply going to describe (in just a few words) the specifics of the journey toward your church’s vision of a preferred future, and to answer the very simple question, “**Why do we exist?**” Lovett Weems and Tom Berlin would remind us that any mission must point back to the practical implications – the ... “so that... xyz can happen.”¹ And, remember: **If the mission statement takes more than one sentence, no one is going to remember it.**

From here, it is very helpful if we can **do some learning**. The more we can know about our church’s strengths, challenges and current trends, the better! Equally, the more we can understand about the wants and needs of the community people who surround us, the better!

- The *Readiness360* inventory provides an excellent, inexpensive online survey that can be offered to the whole church community. The executive report makes for about four hours of rich conversation for church leaders as they seek to better understand their church’s strengths and challenges. (www.readiness360.org)

¹ Lovett Weems and Tom Berlin, *Bearing Fruit: Ministry with Real Results*, Abingdon Press, 2011.

- For learning about the community that surrounds the church, Epicenter Group prefers to use *Mission Insite*. There are endless tools that can be utilized with *Mission Insite*, but you can start with a basic Executive Insite report that gives a demographic summary of the territory you specify. We encourage you to focus on the *Mosaic* Lifestyle segments that are present in your territory. The *Mission Insite* website offers ministry strategy documents for each Lifestyle segment, authored by Tom Bandy. They are very easy to use. Pull the strategy docs on the largest five Lifestyle segments in your neighborhood. Read them. Compare them. Ask, continually, “What might we do differently around here in order to better connect and relate to the people around us?” (www.missioninsite.com)
- Epicenter Group has a simple audit for documenting levels of church participation and finances over the last ten years. This kind of data is not always available due to sloppy or dishonest recordkeeping – but to the degree that we can look clearly at the numerical trends, we can see what will likely happen in the next ten years if we do nothing new.
- With the above learning in hand, host a few focus groups, both internally (with church participants) and externally (with community allies, friends and neighbors). Test any emerging hypotheses. Better yet, do a series of 1-1 conversations in the community, with an agenda of mostly listening to folks (both outside and inside the church). **Trey Hall offers a separate strategy sheet on how to do 1-1s.**

Finally, getting down to the Work of Planning:

After a few months of the above work, your church leaders will be ready to articulate a few primary ministry questions that they wish to answer as they plan ministry for the months and years ahead. At Epicenter Group, we have a relatively brief **strategic planning** process whereby we build a weekend around a series of powerful conversations focused on these important ministry questions. They vary from church to church.

Examples of strategic ministry questions:

- How can we continue to grow our children’s and youth ministries with our limited facilities?
- How can we move toward financial sustainability in the next three years?
- What is the next staff position that we should add?
- How can we increase foot traffic into our building?
- How can we improve our retention rate for worship visitors?
- When and where do we add our next service?
- How can we create a more fruitful partnership with our church’s award-winning preschool?

From these conversations, our consultants will offer recommendations back to the church. The church’s lead team will wrestle with the recommendations in

conversation with the consultant, and ultimately choose what they intend to recommend to the church. Then it simply a matter of time-lining the various next steps for each key ministry initiative that is contemplated – often staggering the initiatives across time, so that the church is not overwhelmed beyond its capacity at any point.

Very likely, by the time that we get a simple plan of ministry development on paper and agreed to, **about a year** has gone by, including the discernment season, the vision/values work and the learning about our church's assets and the community's needs. We could have just skipped to planning, and done it in six weeks. However, in most cases, plans made without advance preparation are never adequately executed. They go into file cabinets or, even worse, send the church into expensive building projects or staffing acquisitions that are likely to yield little ministry growth. It is more important for the church to take the time to listen to the Holy Spirit and to become aligned in terms of God's vision. It is more important that we slow down to ask the right questions. The planning itself is really not that complicated, once we are ready to come to the table around the right questions.

A ministry plan with a clear 18 month time line (and a vision framework for three years beyond that) can be developed in a few weeks' time if the people in the planning conversation are clear about God's call upon their church, focused in terms of the kinds of people for whom they feel extra compassion, and realistic in terms of the church's assets, the community's particulars and a few critical best practices in ministry.

About twenty years ago, before I entered the work of church leader coaching and strategy consulting, I was an executive pastor in a large church on the northwest Florida Coast. We had a strong sense of our church's values and vision, and a ministry track record of steady growth across two decades. But we had come up against several obstacles that conspired to stop our church in its tracks. We worked with a reputable ministry coach and discovered bold pathways around these obstacles. It took about a year for plans to be fully developed after the initial onsite consultation with the consultant, even as a few simple recommendations were implemented quickly. Then there was a second year focused on fund-raising and facility design. Then the third year involved a major construction project and a staff expansion of six full time people. In the fourth and fifth years, our church's attendance jumped by about 50%, with growth that continued into the years after. My first book, *Fling Open the Doors: Giving the Church Away to the Community* (Abingdon Press, 2002) tells the story of that church's journey to become one of the earliest multi-site congregations in America. But as is often the case with big paradigm shifts and ministry advances, it just took a while to work our plan before we saw the season of ministry harvest.

Thinking about our values, vision and mission should never be divorced from participation in ministry. Everyone who participates in such discernment should be wholeheartedly engaged and committed to the faith community. Further, these are not exercises that should be used to procrastinate the practice of faithfulness. Granted, if certain ministries are struggling, a sabbatical may be in order while we seek to get a fresh grip on how God is calling us to be church in our community context. But it is perfectly fine to try new things all through the planning year. I am always saddened to see a church put a moratorium on innovation, creativity and fresh initiative because of the internal needs and challenges of the leadership. So throughout a year focused on ministry planning, plan to keep doing well what you do!

Worship well, serve faithfully, and don't be afraid to try some new ideas!

If you would like a **free, exploratory conversation with one of The Epicenter Group's team of coach/consultants**, you may contact us at www.epicentergroup.org. The value of working with a seasoned coach/consultant in a planning process is that it should greatly reduce the amount of time required and greatly increase the chances that there will be ministry *bang for all the bucks* that may ultimately be spent in facilities and staffing. **We believe we can save you at least a couple years of tedious meetings, and also help you discern the very best next steps that will take your ministry forward.**