

## ENABLING ACTION

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No church can do everything, which is why investing time and energy in developing a vision can bring a church clarity of direction and priorities. But evidence suggests that in reality most visions are not realised.

Occasionally this is because of unforeseen external factors; for example, there seems little doubt the coronavirus crisis will invite many churches to, at the least, review their existing visions because of the changed context. But more commonly, other factors, which are within our influence, play a decisive part. So how do we lead in a way that gives the best possible chance of a vision turning into reality? Here are eight thoughts based on commonly recurring themes arising from our work with church leaders.

### 1. ENSURE A COMPELLING VISION

Hang on a minute – isn't this about enacting a vision, not nurturing it? Well yes, but perhaps the biggest single predictor of whether a vision will be realised is whether the vision document itself compellingly answers the implicit 'why' questions that arise from the strategy or plan. For example, the strategy to enact the vision may seek to: share children's ministry and administration resources across the benefice or start a new service for

young people or reorder the church building or put a special focus on evangelism over the coming year. But why? Is it clear from the vision itself why each of these intents is relevant and necessary? Because any serious hurdles which arise in a vision's rollout, will usually, in the first instance, invite the question: 'why are we doing this anyway?!... Quickly followed by a questioning of the vision itself. It's why a good

vision document is not simply a one or two line 'strapline' but rather a well articulated narrative of a discerned future which, when the going gets tough, withstands scrutiny and provokes resolve to press on.

### 2. ESTABLISH A GOOD PROCESS

Dreaming dreams can be great fun and energising. Most people involved in a well run vision





development process, enjoy the experience. But actually getting down to the nitty-gritty of thinking through in detail how vision is going to be realised can be plain hard work, because it means breaking down the overall vision into the key steps and realistic aims of a strategy and plan. This also helps a leader's own motivation through understanding how the seemingly impossible could be made possible. But what should these steps look like? What are the timescales? Who is going to be involved? What could go wrong and how could these risks be mitigated?

A few thrive in this task but not many, and therefore it's helpful to involve those who have the patience and aptitude to work with detail, coupled with an instinctive sense of what can be realistically achieved, and how to make things happen.

### 3. SEIZE THE MOMENT

So we have an exciting vision and have developed a good plan, with lots of realistic smaller steps. It's going to take time and some elements are going to be challenging.

They will need us as a church to practically change the way we do things and, over time, even what really matters to us, our core values. And we simply cannot do everything at once. But, very often small local 'events' or circumstances arise which mean that some things in the plan – low hanging fruit if you like – become much easier to implement.

Prayerful discernment and practical common sense can make us alive to these opportunities and encourage us to seize the moment and nurture momentum. In extremis, the wider picture can change in a way that is so potentially game-changing and disruptive – the pandemic being an obvious example – radical new opportunities open up although these will almost certainly necessitate a serious review of the vision itself. Many church leaders have expressed their sense of a shift in elements of the church's worshipping life and missional priorities that seem to have happened in the months since the pandemic started, rather than years or even decades that preceded it.

### 4. PRAY

Enabling a vision always involves lots of decisions; there is never one clear unambiguous path – that is neither how God has designed his world or empowered his Church – we are free to make choices. Therefore discernment and wisdom are vital; methodically praying through the bigger decisions in particular, both individually and corporately, is imperative. After all, throughout the implementation journey we are aiming to work in concert with what the Holy Spirit is already doing within a church, its wider community and the wider world.

Furthermore, we should not be surprised if enabling a vision stirs up opposition, including spiritual pushback, and prayer is a key weapon in the church's armoury. More generally, is an emerging outcome of the COVID crisis a growing sense that God may be challenging his Church to take prayer more seriously, in a way that it becomes more foundational to all we plan and do?

## 5. COMMUNICATION

Yes, we all know communication matters in leadership but it really matters when trying to keep people, not just on-board, but enthused. This is particularly true of a programme with a likely timescale of years, not months, encountering the inevitable setbacks and in which some changes will usually emerge only very gradually; for example, a marked and positive shift in some aspect of a church's culture.

The leader has to 'tell the story': interpret events in a way that help church members understand – and own for themselves – where the church is in the journey, and how events relate back to the original vision. Acknowledging setbacks as well as successes, and reminding people of all that has been achieved, is part of this ongoing narrative. Sermons/teaching slots, notices, newsletters, ad hoc updates, APCMs, informal conversations and PCC meetings are just some of the vehicles for drip feeding 'our' story; and as ever, good communication is creative.

## 6. COURAGE

Over the years I have encountered churches which have developed a bold vision, endorsed fully by the PCC, and yet it's implementation is

put on permanent hold by the overall leader, knowing that the changes required would stir up opposition from a few. Rolling out a vision means leading in change, and significant change in particular requires courage; very few overall leaders enjoy becoming a focus for dissent. Courageous leadership flows from the inner strength and resources God gives us as we ask him, but also, very practically, the active ongoing support of other leaders to stand alongside.

## 7. STRUCTURE TO SUCCEED

Virtually every factor above implicitly involves people and infers shared leadership. Perhaps this is so obvious it hardly needs saying; nevertheless too many visions stumble because an overall church leader takes on too much themselves. Enabling a vision, even one that is relatively narrow in its scope, almost always requires more energy and sustained commitment than first imagined.

A leadership style that harnesses the gifts and experience which God has given the church – however modest and limited those gifts may apparently be – is vital, and also helps engender the support of the wider church over the long haul. 'It's easier to do it myself' is a beguilingly alluring approach, and is sometimes

both true and necessary. Nevertheless, we need to also understand the longer-term, disempowering impact this approach can do in fostering a collaborative culture, and thereby risking a vision rollout that stalls.

## 8. REVIEWS ARE HEALTHY

What happens when things change in a way that impacts the original strategy, or even the vision itself? Key people leave (or arrive), a radical new and unforeseen ministry opportunity opens up, or something new and unprompted emerges in the life of the church. Even the most prayerfully discerning leader cannot know fully the plans of the purposes of the Holy Spirit. After all, Jesus himself said: 'the wind blows where it chooses' (John 3:8).

It's why establishing review points, perhaps six monthly or annually, makes sense. Factors such as pace, communication and structure may need to be revisited. Or, less commonly, when the wider context significantly changes, the vision itself reviewed. And these review points can be useful in reviewing our own 'pace' and energy as well as sharpening our clarity about the priorities for the next stage of the journey.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. As you reflect on your own experience of vision rollouts, which single factor has been most influential, whether in facilitating or impeding the journey?
2. What difference to the vision of your church may the impact of the Covid-19 crisis make?
3. In your current context, which of the factors above may you have to put more energy into?

