

LEADERSHIP 101 – DISCERNING DIRECTION

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Discerning Direction

So much has been written on vision and discerning vision over the years that it's probably true to say that there is not much more to say. So let me use this article to put things differently – and in particular, by making three offerings.

1. Process

Firstly, can I suggest that vision discernment must always be a process, rather than a flash of inspiration. It is something that is discerned, perceived and refined under God's hand, rather than something that simply 'appears' at the leadership table from the hand of the senior/point leader.

In practice, this process involves the pursuit of four questions:

- a. What has God said to us?
- b. What is the context in which God has placed us?
- c. What aspirations has God put on our hearts?
- d. What resources has God given us?

A. WHAT HAS GOD SAID TO US?

The first of the four questions is about revelation. And the starting point for the discernment of any local church vision must be prayer and waiting on God. It was God's 'interruption' of Abraham, Moses and Nehemiah that brought vision. It was the work of the Spirit that closed the Bithynian border to Paul and opened the way for Philip to share the gospel with the Ethiopian leader.

Every church leader must work out how to make room



for God to speak through Scripture and the nudge of his Spirit.

B. WHAT IS THE CONTEXT IN WHICH GOD HAS PLACED US?

In terms of context, God calls leaders to serve at particular times and in particular places. And so it is important to understand the time and the place – many vision discernment processes refer to this stage as 'audit'. This is an important phase of the vision process, since it helps to avoid two errors – the agendas of individuals that bear no context to the locality, and the sometimes inability of people to see their own context (how many fish can see the water in which they swim?).

I remember a church member trying to cast a vision for student ministry in a parish where there were no

colleges, universities, and a distinct lack of students. Context cannot be ignored.

C. WHAT ASPIRATIONS HAS GOD PUT ON OUR HEARTS?

One of the things I have noted over the years is that God places his 'vision' on the hearts of many in the local church and not just on the heart of the leader. It is unrefined, raw and without shape, but it is there. And the role of vision discernment is to help the church to read what God has placed on hearts. In my former parish we projected a large image onto a screen of a rabbit dreaming of the world's largest carrot in an attempt to explore the question 'what under God might we dream of?'

D. WHAT RESOURCES HAS GOD GIVEN TO US?

A vision discernment process also needs to assess what God has 'placed in our hands'. It is important that we ask questions about the giftings that God has given to his people in the local church, the resources available to them, their abilities and experiences. This is not to say that God won't provide miraculously for whatever he calls his people to pursue, but he also often equips and enables them for the task to which he calls them.

My observation of a number of churches over the years is that those that do well in seeking God's vision often have explored all of the four above questions – sometimes over a considerable period of time. To short-circuit this process in a 'moment of inspiration' might well be to short-change the vision that God has.

2. Twin Tracks

The second (and well-known) reality is that the pursuit of vision must be done on two 'tracks': strategy and culture. The often quoted 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' still holds true. So, for example, a strategy of growth by church planting can be punctured below the waterline, unless the culture is one of welcome and generosity. Leaders are wise to give half their time, energy and effort to shaping the DNA of church life, as well as to the ABC of strategy.

Enough said... there are plenty of other articles on this important topic.

3. Broken Down Vision

The third contribution I would like to make in this brief assessment is to indicate where 'break down' occurs in some of the matters that have been mentioned above. In particular, I want to offer seven reflections on where the vision 'process' or journey so often breaks down.



A. MATTER OF THE HEART

When speaking to leaders, one of the things it is important to stress is that vision begins as a heart-felt concern. We see this in the story of Nehemiah – whose initial response to his hearing of the broken down status of Jerusalem's walls is one of tears. I don't know at what point a vision for rebuilding entered his heart and mind – but it was clearly born out of his concern and heart-felt response to a defenceless Jerusalem.

I wonder whether as leaders we 'feel' the vision – and if not yet, then I wonder whether we are ready to cast it.

B. OUR MATURING

It is also the case that leaders are sometimes too quick to move from vision to action. The need to plan is there and is real. But it's not just about planning. The vision needs time to mature in us, and we to mature in preparation for the vision. In my former parish we spent (quite literally) years praying, clarifying and refining the vision and fundraising for the new church that we believed God had called us to build. And although the wait seemed endless at the time, it is clear looking back that it was part of what matured us in readiness for the vision. Without the waiting, the praying, the believing, the thinking, we would not have been ready for what God had in mind.

C. NO LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE

Sometimes 'break down' occurs because there is a felt mis-match between the 'asks' of the leader and

what it is appears she/he is willing to give. It is important that leaders don't expect others to make greater risks and sacrifices than they are prepared to make themselves. There is nothing so undermining to a vision than for 'followers' to perceive that 'leaders' are not intending to carry weight/make sacrifices themselves. By contrast, some of the greatest stories of church planting, building projects and other local church visions share a common characteristic in that the leaders proposing the vision were first in the queue to give, to sacrifice, to carry the 'weight' of the vision themselves. Such leadership has both integrity and the ability to inspire many others.

D. STICK OR TWIST?

It sounds obvious to say, but it is important to understand that the pursuit of a God-given vision does not lead to a straightforward delivery – and that our strategy to reach for his vision might well have to be amended or iterated along the way. So when Nehemiah heard of Sanballat and Tobiah's intention to attack Jerusalem, he both organised prayer and provided a guard. In other words, his strategy evolved in response to the struggles/opposition he faced along the way.

Church leaders need to be wise enough to know when to amend, iterate and revise strategy.

E. EMBRACING PUSHBACK

Criticism and opposition come just as much (if not more) in response to a God-given vision than to any other vision. Sometimes, this criticism and opposition must be weathered (like a storm), but at other times it must be embraced. So Nehemiah responded positively to the criticism of his people when they are enslaved in debt by telling the leaders to return to the people payments that they have taken.

Good leadership question – has 'pushback' (of any form) helped refine your vision?

F. DESTRUCTIVE DISUNITY

Leaders need to understand that vision thrives in an environment of unity – and crashes where there is division. Alignment of aspiration, or the lack of it, is the difference between flourishing and despair. That's why Nehemiah took such strong steps to deal with the division amongst the Jewish people created by the enslavement of the poor (Nehemiah chapter 5). He knew that this was not just a justice issue (though it undoubtedly was), that it was not just a rejection of the law (though it was) – it was

also a direct threat to the delivery of a vision for rebuilding Jerusalem.

What it is important to note is that, whilst it is impossible to bring unity between those who are opposed to the vision and those who are for it, it is important to maintain the unity amongst those who have signed up for it. This can be undermined by individuals wishing to control rather than serve the vision, by people furthering their own agendas, by an unwillingness to resolve differences face-to-face, by a refusal to believe the best about others and their role in the vision process, and by a grudging or absent celebration of the contribution of others. Such disuniting behaviours need to be challenged for the sake of unity and the vision.

G. DISTRACTED LEADERSHIP

The final de-railer of vision might be considered to be that of leadership distraction. Nehemiah is invited to a meeting with Sanballat and his colleagues – which might have sounded the courteous and generous thing to do, but was in fact anything but a divine appointment. For local church leaders, distractions can be presented as opportunities – and sometimes we need to say no to the good in order to remain focused on the better.

At other times, distractions can be found in answering public comment and criticism. Sanballat's fifth invitation was an open letter – unsealed, as against the normal custom of sealing a letter – in order that its contents could be advertised as if on the 'social media' of the time. Nehemiah could have spent a lot of time responding to the rumours that this led to – but instead chose to ask God to 'strengthen his hand'.

Fear is a further potential distraction. The 'what ifs' of ministry can derail even the most able and committed individual. What if this fails? What if people change their mind? What if the money doesn't come in?

FOR REFLECTION

- Are people not coming on board because they don't 'get it', or they don't 'like it', or they do get and like it – but don't believe it's possible?
- Have you seen vision 'break down' for a reason other than as suggested above? How did you/others 'recover'?
- What could you do or ask to identify where the vision(s) you are casting are failing to gain support?