

Without People My Visions Perish

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Abstract: Ministry failure has taught me more than success ever has. During my early years of pastoring I learned a lot of hard lessons, many of them by scheduling activities that no one attended Without people my visions perished! But in every case the learning that took place was well worth it. This 1995 article summarizes three of my most significant learnings. I believe they apply to pastoral work everywhere.

It was a recurring nightmare. My wife and I sit on the front row as the District Superintendent preaches our Missions Convention. He exhorts us as if we are 1,000. He is off by only 993. As my ministerial life passes before my eyes, I count the seconds until the service ends. Maybe I am still young enough to go to law school.

In another version the nightmare is a teen concert. A perspiring soloist perches on a stool waiting to begin. As the tape deck hisses to life, thumping a canned song through the speakers, she smiles weakly. An audience of five smiles weakly back. The next day at brunch her soundman asks if I am really full-time with the church. My nervous laugh shrugs off the insult. It is not polite to strike guests.

These events were not bad dreams. During my first pastorate in New England they were stark reality. Trained in a thriving urban church, I expected steady attendance growth to be the centerpiece of my success. Apparently my congregation was never informed. At times they seemed determined to defy my expectations and my best efforts. I had a big vision, but without people, it would perish.

As these experiences multiplied, however, I began to see that some of my visions needed to die. Beneath their surface lay some faulty assumptions. Like the submerged rocks on Maine's coast, they became visible only when the tide was out. Rows of empty pews mark low tide for pastors.

As I began to seek answers instead of someone to blame, I realized that absenteeism challenged my thinking for a reason. It opened my eyes to the need for change in a way that numerical success never could have. Here are some examples of what can be learned when a vision dies due to lack of interest.

- *Loving People "As-Is."*

In the 80's our services were a product of the times. The local shipyard was hiring thousands of workers, cash was flowing and people were moving in. Our attendance took on this boomtown atmosphere, growing from around 35 to over 100 in the first two years.

Then came the 90's. Following the economy, our worship attendance slipped back to the level of years before. Even worse, our new average concealed wild swings week-to-week.

We were riding the Sunday morning roller coaster. A full house one week would be followed by a mass defection the next. On up weeks we talked of a new building. On down weeks we retreated to Jesus' promise about gathering only "two or three." Somehow my church had become immune to stability.

These biweekly letdowns shoved a covert assumption into the light: *the congregation owes me success*. My vision was of ever-increasing rolls until, I suppose, the whole earth worshipped in Bath. I was to provide the leadership and the people were to supply unflinching devotion until we achieved my goals.

This aspect of the vision definitely deserved a death sentence. The process began with an investigation. Why did our attendance chart look like an EKG readout? Was it my fault or theirs?

The church was quite homogenous: young baby boomer families with two kids. Not being raised in the faith, most of them had no tradition of regular attendance. Northern New England's informal/secular/individualistic/ culture reinforced this attitude. From their perspective, then, even irregular participation was a major accomplishment.

These boomers also lived at a breathtaking pace. Their lives were a blur, punctuated by crises. Thus, many of them felt the need to rest on the Sabbath--imagine. One smiling young couple even announced that Sunday was now their "family day." I think they expected me to be proud of them.

Instead, the anguish of apparent failure forced me to try to understand them. As my empathy grew, absenteeism did not seem so much like backsliding. It was more like *sidesliding*: substituting wholesome family activities for church. The average person desired to come, but not at any price.

Something had to give. Unable to change their attitudes, I had to turn mine upside down: maybe any participation was close to miraculous for a group like this. I decided that pressuring them to attend was out of bounds. To embrace a theology of unconditional acceptance meant embracing the people who came with it. Those needing pressure were never there anyway. Those who were there gave what they had. Who was I to despise their offering, to demand a lamb when all they had was a dove?

God was calling me to love them "as-is," not as I would like them to be. My vision had to die if I were ever to care for them in the same way Jesus cares for me: without conditions or qualifications.

This approach bore fruit. Worshippers told me they came when they could because we did not condemn them when they could not. Unconditional acceptance brought more growth to the church than any amount of pressure ever could have.

Our dismal summer attendance was the test case. No pastoral plea could compete with the only good beach weather of the year. Instead of blaming, we tried scheduling the service an hour earlier. This simple change made summer an outstanding season for the church. It allowed our families to attend in the morning and still have almost a whole day together. That was all they wanted.

- *To Everything There Is A Season.*

A year after we started our Wednesday night prayer meeting regular attendance consisted of only one man--me. I sat in a circle of chairs apparently treated with parishioner repellent. Things did not improve much when a few others attended. Even one of these diehards had to confess, "I come here to be built up and instead I'm being pulled down."

He was not the only one. My prayer meeting had become a ghost town. All we lacked was tumbleweed blowing down the aisle and a door hinge creaking in the distance. Even those who had urged me to start the ministry were nowhere to be found.

My vision of a robust group of prayer warriors storming the gates of heaven each Wednesday lay in ashes. I could understand no-shows at conventions, movies, etc., but at prayer meetings? What could be more important?

This questioning exposed another of my assumptions: *if I began a ministry it should perpetuate itself forever.* My job, like that of a clock maker, was to put it together, wind it up and let it run. Wrong.

The Wednesday night ghost town proved lethal to this vision. I was even more perplexed by the fact that the meetings had been very successful for the first year or so. What had changed?

Frustration eventually gave way to understanding. The ghost town situation showed me the difference between true perseverance and just allowing problems to linger. I fell into the latter category. Endlessly tinkering with solutions improved nothing except my ability to explain why next time would be different. My vision was on its last legs.

Crucial insight came when a Board member reminded me of another prayer meeting which had thrived for about a year and then died off. We had been praying for land for a new church facility, and when the breakthrough began, the prayer meeting simply ceased to function. Its time came and went.

The same principal applied on Wednesday night: to everything there is a season. It was time to move forward to other mid-week ministry while emphasizing prayer in different ways.

As a result of this experience, I asked my Board to consider a new policy: an unsupported ministry would receive no extraordinary measures to extend its life. Every program would have a "living will," so to speak. Their only question was why I had waited so long.

With that, we pulled the plug on the prayer meeting. Our relief was instantaneous and total: no more classes without teachers or ladies' luncheons without ladies. All these ministries died peacefully. Along with them went a vision that had put far too much pressure on all of us. I was able to spend my energies on what was working instead of trying to resuscitate what was not.

- *Meeting Real Needs Instead of Assumed Needs.*

Our 3 and 1/2 year-old congregation had no Sunday evening service when we arrived. Beginning one seemed important. It might make our embryonic group seem more like a "real" church.

Starting small, evening worship grew into a remarkable success. Like a Hollywood producer, I depended on sequels to my morning messages. However, the key was a popular children's ministry started by one of our families. The night eight people braved a blizzard to hear a guest evangelist I knew we had something special.

Four years later we had another service with 8 people. This time snow had nothing to do with it. Declining attendance had created a Sunday night recession.

We hit bottom the evening I preached on, "The Responsibilities of the Christian Husband." The audience consisted of two women, a single man, a 12 year-old boy and my wife. When I sheepishly referred to the absence of males, one of the women, blurted out, "Where are they?" Good question.

The answer came at an after-church lunch. I remarked to the hosts that our church members knew each other fairly well. Their reply was a silence that said, "We have been talking about this and don't know how to tell you we disagree." I was shocked.

This feedback from a very supportive source was just what I needed. It disputed a cherished assumption of my vision: people need more church, taking every opportunity to be enthralled by my dynamic preaching.

I was mistaken. What they really needed was caring relationships. Small churches, like small towns, can be very lonely places. No amount of hand shaking and hugging in a formal service was ever going to change this.

My vision of "more church is better church" had to meet its demise. A format change was necessary. After careful preparation we replaced our evening worship with three home fellowship groups. The groups flourished because they met a real need instead of an assumed need. Evening participation more than tripled.

Our new goal of a balance between large and small group experiences served the church well. Moreover, it gave me the great pleasure of getting to know and enjoy my people on a face-to-face basis. In many cases they were the same people who had not been attending Sunday night!

It is always painful to watch a cherished vision succumb to an unforgiving reality. But Jesus said, "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24 NIV)

If a lack of participation is proving fatal to your plans, perhaps God is presenting you with a precious opportunity to make changes. Absenteeism is sometimes the only way to get our attention. As we seek God's wisdom to understand it, He can open the way to fruitful ministry!

The death of a vision, then, is not the worst thing that can happen. In fact, it may be the best. As Francis Frangipane has written:

"No matter how true a vision from God may be, it will never be fulfilled as we have imagined. All our expectations are incomplete. In fact, our very ideas can become the most subtle obstacles standing between us and our appointed future. Thus, we must keep our minds soft and submitted to God, for His plans

will be full of many surprises. When God fulfills His word, it is always, 'exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.'" (Ephesians 3: 20)