
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Barriers to Turnaround

Turning around a plateaued or declining church starts with a vision; especially one that captures a congregation's imagination of a better future.

It is fun and exciting to develop a vision. Talking to others about future possibilities engenders hope. Writing a vision statement creates ideas for future ministry. Sharing possibilities with the congregation raises energy. So, why is it so difficult to see a vision fulfilled?

One reason is that most leaders do not view vision realistically. Observation shows that pastors and other church leaders assume their new vision will be accomplished in a straight line from beginning to fulfillment. Yet, this rarely happens. The reason? Implementing a vision encounters numerous twists and turns along the way.

Vision usually falls apart in the implementation phase. While the positive force of vision is pushing forward, negative forces arise to divide people, divert energy, discourage leaders, derail initiatives, and demoralize the congregation. Thus, vision must be managed as well as developed.

Managing a vision means that vision must include plans for prayer, budget, board

support, key people's approval, clear communication, staff buy in, overcoming competing ideas, gaining popular acceptance, restarting stalled momentum, dealing with negative reactions, and institutionalizing the vision throughout the entire ministry. No doubt, this is a much more difficult task than most pastors and leaders imagine.

Vision implementation usually stalls after the initial planning phase. Navigating through the twists and turns requires overcoming at least four walls.

The Wall of Opposition

No matter how much support leaders assume they have for a new vision, there are always individuals and groups within the church who rise up in opposition. The primary areas of opposition come from board members, staff members, key ministry leaders, unofficial leaders, and, of course, the congregation.

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Overcoming the wall of opposition requires prayer, continued communication, and formal and information negotiations with people and groups. To keep the vision alive and moving forward, leaders must make phone calls, attend meetings, confront difficult people, and a host of other things they would rather not do but must do. Before initiating a fresh vision, leaders should always consider “Where is opposition likely to arise?”

The Wall of Success

When the implementation of the vision finds quick results, leaders regularly find they are not prepared for it. For example, starting a new small group ministry may result in more people signing up for new groups than are expected. The lack of enough small group leaders may result in people becoming disappointed, discouraged, and derailing what started out as a promising small group ministry. Success will highlight a lack of workers, money, facilities, and policies. Before initiating a fresh vision, leaders should always consider “What if it works?”

The Wall of Diverted Energy

Vision sometimes gets stalled when emotional, spiritual, or physical energy gets diverted into other good things. A church

may discover that it needs to enter into a facility expansion, for instance, with the result that energy needed to complete the vision is channeled into a fund raising campaign. While the new thing may be necessary, it will often stop the momentum toward the completion of the vision. Before initiating a fresh vision, leaders should always consider “What other good things might take energy away from fulfilling the vision?”

The Wall of Crisis

Ministry is full of surprises, and unexpected crises are normal experiences. Staff may resign, key leaders may relocate, or criticism may mount to extreme levels. Pastors and leaders should be ready to move into crisis management mode while implementing a new vision. Before initiating a fresh vision, leaders should always consider “What crisis may take place?”

Vision will always run into walls during implementation, and will die if not managed. If pastors and other church leaders hope to see a new vision succeed, they will not only need to set direction but also steer the vision to break through the four walls of resistance.

Which of the four walls are you facing?

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