

# Crafting Your Parish Vision

## *A Toolbox*

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"Who are we and what are we about" is a key

question that needs to be front and center for all parishes with a future. Not every moment in time requires big picture conversations, but *occasionally* it is time to review where we've been and where we're heading. And, since the rear view mirror always seems clearer than the windshield - this isn't easy.

### **Illusive Topic**

In parish development workshops the conversation often turns to the topic of "parish vision". It can be an elusive topic. Many see a "Parish Vision" as a theological, ecclesiastical, high prose description of our journey to the Kingdom of God. Others simply want to express a practical picture of what our parish community is striving to be like/"look like" three, five or ten years from now. (Both have their place.) Still others want to do *anything* but talk about vision. We understand their pain as well.

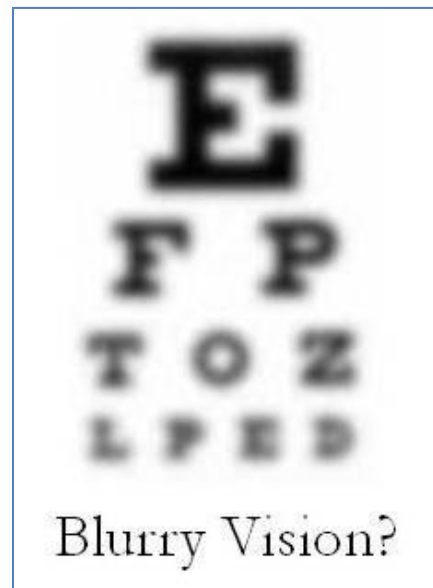
How to do this well? The trick is to get people talking -- respectfully but openly. Replacing politeness with real dialogue. But keeping the "pragmatists" and "dreamers", important contributors to every parish, from driving one another to separate corners of the room takes some effort --and luck!

### **Some Helpful Approaches -- Tools for Your Toolbox**

Here are a few (thirteen actually!) tools and facilitation devices that you might consider in planning a session to talk about the "vision thing". None are perfect but they've all shown applicability in the right situations.

#### **Face Facts/Vital Signs**

Building and implementing a future vision requires a sense of urgency. And, honestly,



*Discussing a parish vision means something different to most everyone.*



most parishes lack urgency.

One approach to getting started is to create an inventory of key facts or vital signs - sometimes, but not always, in the form of numbers. A "Face Facts" list [can be found here](#).

Often dealing with these questions in the beginning can really open the eyes of parishioners and get the group to buckle down. Even in excellent parishes. Is membership down? Donations? Median age increasing? Vespers attendance? On time arrival at liturgy? Church school attendance? Youth retention? What's that -- haven't attracted a new convert in eleven years? Have no idea how to engage change in the parish? If so *face it*. Often the discussion about various categories can provoke helpful discussion about what is important here.

### **Build a Parish Time Line**

Many times vision discussions run aground when some participants get stuck in the rut of nostalgically remembering the *good old days* while 'newbies' act like the parish has no heritage, history or inheritance whatsoever. ("Nothing important happened before I arrived.") One approach to overcoming this is to explicitly include a time line session in your vision efforts. It will force you to look back *in order to* look forward.



- Tape twenty or so feet of butcher paper to a wall (double width) or lay out on a long table. *Use a double width of butcher paper to mark off decades of parish history. Attach to wall or conference table. Use "post-its" to identify significant course changes in parish life.*
- Divide up the horizontal axis into decades of parish existence.
- Ask people to place notes of their recollections of important events, crossroads, changes, pivot point in parish life and identity.

Parish veterans feel appreciated. New members, often the ones agitating for new ideas, are forced to take a breath and consider the whole story of the parish. Having participated, their credibility rises in the eyes of veterans.

People resist change because they fear the unknown. *We have found that people have more confidence in the future when they carry forward parts of the past. But of course the parts we carry should be the best parts!*

As you build the timeline search for more than the obvious. ("Fr. Smith came." "Sold rectory." "Replaced roof." "Purchased bell.") Some parishes note a painful loss or tragedy and an exemplary response, the arrival of new ideas from 1-2 parishioners or the eventual

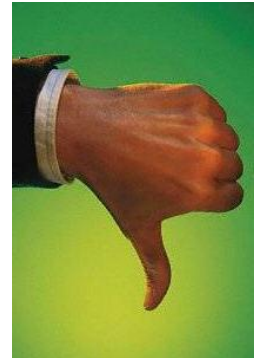
elimination of a painful distraction that had a significant catalytic effect (pro or con) on a new sense of purpose or ministry. Beware looking for a big bang cause or culprit. It's rarely one thing.

The time line need not be created in one session. Leave it on the wall and encourage people to add to it during coffee hour. It becomes a way of building momentum for the vision conversation.

### **Categorize Past/Current/ Emerging Ideas**

As you discuss your timeline reflect upon various ideas that have emerged in past years and add those in play today. Since the level of understanding, commitment and consensus is critical to achieving traction for new things, consider categorizing them as:

- *Ideas that have arrived* -- and taken root in the parish in the past x years.
- *Ideas in progress* -- emerging in various pockets of conversation but not on the most people's radar screen.
- *Ideas in conflict* --those causing gridlock. Ideas which are clear enough and important enough to generate differing opinions. (*Don't mention that!*)
- *Ideas in anticipation* -- future issues not yet begun to be addressed
- *Ideas DOA or rejected?* What caused that? Have conditions changed.



*What caused certain past ideas to be Dead on Arrival?*

### **Propellers and Anchors ("Force Field")**

A favorite tool of facilitators is the "force field"-- a device to help a group to understand the positive and negative factors that affect a particular situation. To pep things up label the opposing forces "Propellers" - factors that are causing us to consider change and growth - and "Anchors" --what is holding us back. *"OK group it's time to play the 'Motor Boat Game'."*

### **Stop/ Start/ Continue**

A bit simpler but an often useful approach is to simply list actions, ministries or behaviors that individuals or the group feels should be continued as is, need to be expanded or should be eliminated. This lacks the transcendent big picture quality of a true vision conversation -- but many in your group just can't operate "up there".

Take three large sheets of paper. Label one *"Things to STOP"*, the next *"Things to START"* and the last *"What to CONTINUE"*. It won't take long to fill the sheets. Steer away from excessive detail.

### **Newspaper Article**

Identifying likes and dislikes (ala "Stop, Start, Continue") is usually easy for a group. However, it may not always produce real insight. A tougher more potent exercise is to ask a small group -4-6 to write (or outline in bullet point fashion) a newspaper article you would

*hope* that could/would be written about your parish at the end of your vision horizon. (3, 5, 10 years.) Or, since it is not hard anymore to find people who have seemingly never actually held a newspaper in their hands, write a descriptive article about your parish for your *website*.

### **Sabbatical Scenario**

A similar exercise is the sabbatical scenario. Posit to your group that they have been transferred to another city for e.g. five years (or whatever the time horizon of your discussion). As part of the transfer they will return "home" at assignment's end. Get them to describe what they hope to find in the parish when they get back. How will it look, feel and behave?

### **Photo Collage**

Generating new images of "possibilities" for a parish is not easy for most. It's well nigh impossible for others. One difficulty is that words -- spoken, and particularly written -- are difficult for some. Images or photos can help. To seed the conversation about what our vision *could be*, use a collage of photos of parish life, behaviors and ministries. These can be from your parish or others. From the collage of 15- 30 photos of parish life ask small groups to discuss what is most important to their version of a future parish. Settle on four to six that best represent that vision. We've collected a good set of photos and can easily share them *if you ask*.



*Sometimes just the right photo can help participants envision a brighter, warmer parish future*

### **Multiple Points of View**

Sometimes it is useful to ask group members to look at the vision idea from multiple points of view. Walk people *up the ladder* from considering "What I want" to >>> "What We Want" to >>> "What Future Generations Need" to >>> "What God Expects from Us". Ask "*How would we like our neighbors to see/understand us?*"

### **Particular Sub-Groups**

Having trouble getting people to participate in your session? In some parishes it may be valuable to earmark a series of separate discussions to focus of the views of disparate parish subcultures like teens, choir, veterans, "recents", parents, converts, ethnic group xyz, singles, the "too often voiceless". Obviously cross pollinating ideas is best --but multiple sessions with a target group for each may increase overall participation and generate sentiments unvoiced in a cross sectional group.

### **Individual Submissions**

Consider inviting parishioners to offer *written views* of important future priorities. You'll need to do a bit of pre-work perhaps to create a starter vision --then ask for comments and

critiques. This approach keeps people from feeling left out and may attract those on the margins. Some folks are more reflective and don't like to talk in groups. (But, honestly, don't expect any award winners from this approach.)

### **Structured Questions Discussion Guide**

Our favorite approach we have used with some success is to walk a group through a set of structured, open ended questions. The questions are designed to engage the group in various aspects of the topic. Email the guide before the session and ask people to consider them -even write a brief answer. This approach also helps generate attendance. If people are giving up an evening or afternoon --they want to know what's in store. Contact us for more details.

### **Good Questions**

Whether you use the structured guide approach above or not, the most important aspect of planning for parish discussions is *good questions*. A discussion is not a presentation or an education class. Communication and feedback, ideas and dreams are being sought. The job is to help develop a converging sense of where to head next as a parish. Here are a some questions we find effective:



- Are we achieving what we set out to achieve?
- What do we do best in our parish? What are our true strengths and assets? How can we build on them? Put them to better use?
- What does true *excellence* look like for this parish in the area of \_\_\_\_\_. (E.g. church school, youth ministry, evangelization etc.) What would we do? What would that take?
- What parish assets/resources are we not using well? (Physical/ Financial? Contacts? Location? Talents/Gifts? Energy?)
- What kind of (e.g.) adult education program could consistently attract 40 adults from our parish, 15 from the neighborhood and 15 from other Orthodox churches in the city? What would that cost? Is that really outside our possibility?
- What things have we said "we can't do that" or "we tried it" that are actually possible if we see ourselves and our talents in a different way?
- Has new technology made something previously impossible now very doable?
- What would we need to be doing in this parish that would turn *you* on to a degree that would actually surprise you? ("If you had asked me if would ever have participated in this or given to this etc. I'd have said 'No'. But here I am!")

OK, we have a few other thoughts on this topic --but we have probably overstayed our welcome for this article!