

Who Sets the Vision for the Congregation?"

Does vision for leadership in the local church come through the pastor or through the congregation? Or is there some other third, fourth, or even fifth option?

At ECF we believe discerning what God is calling a congregation to do is an essential aspect of ministry. In a recent conversation, a colleague shared this blog post, "[Vision from the leader and the whole](https://www.faithandleadership.com/john-ed-mathison-vision-leader-and-whole)" (<https://www.faithandleadership.com/john-ed-mathison-vision-leader-and-whole>) in which Methodist pastor John Ed Mathison responds to a [question, posed by a new pastor](https://www.faithandleadership.com/tom-arthur-does-vision-come-leader-or-people): "Does vision for leadership in the local church come through the pastor or through the congregation? Or is there some other third, fourth, or even fifth option?" (<https://www.faithandleadership.com/tom-arthur-does-vision-come-leader-or-people>).

After reading and talking about both posts, we decided to invite a few congregational leaders to respond to this question, with the goal of sharing their responses with our Vital Practices readers in the form of a Vestry Papers article. Most of the respondents sent the requested paragraph. One, [Steve Muncie](#), rector at Grace Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, New York, sent us a longer response, which we share with you here:

Here are some initial responses to the John Ed Mathison article. These comments are informal and not at all comprehensive.

Mathison proposes a "Joel Committee" composed of "about twenty lay persons representing leadership positions" to dream dreams and see visions, as is mentioned in the book of Joel. But who selects the committee itself? These 20 people make a visionary ministry proposal to the Board of Stewards, which "has always adopted it enthusiastically." The selection of the Joel Committee is itself a determinative act. If the pastor plays a primary role in this selection process, is there room for a dissenting voice? A minority opinion? A prophetic challenge to the status quo? Mathison argues that vision must be shared - and I certainly agree - but I have little sense from this article how this particular methodology makes space for those on the margins to be heard.

His goal seems to be to maximize the ownership of the vision. But what if the Church is not called to speak with one voice but to speak with many voices? I wonder if the Church is not enriched and empowered by a multivocal rather than a univocal approach to mission and ministry?

Mathison wants to raise up "the vision" but he is vague about the contours of vision itself. What is the difference between "ministry goals" and "godly vision?" Is vision simply another word for long-term congregational goals or is it biblically and theologically grounded in what the living God is calling the Church to be and to do? As I read the article I kept asking myself, "Whose vision?" For me, the challenge is not only to embrace a proposed vision of a group of parish leaders (the Joel

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Committee/Board of Stewards) but to continually seek God's vision for God's people. I believe we are able to easily lose sight of God's vision as we become enthralled by our own.

Our vision may be ministry development, increased membership, and enhanced programs, but God's vision may be justice for the poor, racial reconciliation, non-violence and peacemaking, establishing God's reign of Love in every place. God's vision will shatter our own certitudes and our own comfort. God's vision will always extend the margins of grace to make room for those we find it difficult to love. This godly vision will be less programmatic than prophetic - and it very well may cost us deeply held assumptions and cherished comforts.

Mathison's article assumes that congregants and congregational leaders know the best way forward to embrace the "vision." But this is not always the case. The gift of an outside consultant is always the gift of a new set of eyes, someone from the outside who can see things that the insider cannot. It is possible that one person or a small group of people, either from inside or outside the congregation, may see things that others cannot. Denominational or judicatory leadership often have gifts of discernment that may benefit a congregation incapable of or reluctant to see new options for mission and ministry in their community. "Vision" - how we see God's mission among us - cannot be limited to any particular methodology.

One of the less satisfactory observations in the article is Mathison's suggestion that "a corrupt pastor can put people on a terrible path that might include immorality, mismanagement of funds etc. When the pastor is a person of integrity and operates from pure motives [the pastor as sole authority] model works well...." But it is not the spiritual and moral integrity of the pastor alone but of the entire congregation that will determine the effectiveness of a vibrant, shared vision for the Church. Clergy and congregations can be "corrupted" by complacency, conformity, status seeking, and fear. Spiritual integrity is expected of the whole people of God.

After I had been at my current parish for one year I invited the entire congregation to a "Share the Vision" process. A questionnaire was developed, which included many open-ended questions ("I was most proud of our congregation when we...." "I was disappointed in our congregation when we...." "In the next five years I think our congregation should concentrate on...." "I would like to commend the following ministries and/or people for...." and so on). Questionnaires were distributed to the entire mailing list and made available for several months at church. Many small neighborhood groups were organized to discuss our "Share the Vision" exercise. Results were tabulated and shared with the entire congregation, including all comments (unless a particular comment was deemed offensive to an individual), and the parish Vestry used the "Share the Vision" results to develop a five and ten-year plan, including an intentional review and revision process.

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Mathison is right in arguing that a congregational vision must be shared and implemented. Church must be an accountable community, always measuring its mission and ministry against Jesus's vision for his new community of love in the world.

In the end, the primary task of clergy and laity is to stay attentive to God's vision and to see that our local mission is advancing the reign of God.

God is inviting - challenging - us to see the world with all of its brokenness through the eyes of divine love and mercy. We are called to a broader vision for the loveless, a deeper look at the plight of the powerless. The danger for the Church is to remain blind to God's great vision while we busy ourselves with our own limited sight, reducing God's Mission in the world to our maintenance of the local church.

The local church and its ministries are vitally important to building up the people of God. We need to make plans and establish priorities for strengthening congregational ministry. We need structure and accountability. We need to maximize participation in sharing the vision.

However, God's great vision is still waiting to be seen by those who have eyes to see.