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ABSTRACT

LEADERSHIP STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINING MISSION-  
FOCUSED VISION IN YEARS SEVEN TO TEN OF  
CROSSWALK FELLOWSHIP

by

Boyan Levterov

Adviser: Tom Evans

## ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Professional Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: LEADERSHIP STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINING MISSION-FOCUSED VISION  
IN YEARS SEVEN TO TEN OF CROSSWALK FELLOWSHIP

Name of researcher: Boyan N. Levterov

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Tom Evans, DMin

Date completed: May 2022

### Problem

In January 2007, my wife and I led a core team of passionate Christian believers to start Crosswalk Fellowship as a parachute church plant. The plant was a part of the local Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventist church planting initiative. The project had a successful start and reached the high standards to qualify for church status in the Texas Conference in less than one and a half years. Crosswalk continued to experience steady growth during the first five years of existence; However, in year five, people escaping crises happening simultaneously in the other two existing English Seventh-day Adventist churches in north Dallas brought a sudden inflow of existing Adventist members to Crosswalk. Average attendance increased from 135 to more than 180 in less

than two months. There were three red flags that warned the Crosswalk leadership team that this rapid growth was going to be temporary one.

1. More than 95% of the inflow of members were long-baptized Seventh-day Adventist members from the two English churches experiencing leadership challenges.
2. As attendance at Crosswalk increased notably, for the next four months there was an increase in the tithe giving of the church, but no additional increase in local giving, which indicated no financial support from the transferring members for local Crosswalk ministries.
3. Many of these new members lived farther than 40 minutes away from our Crosswalk location

Although the Crosswalk church's leadership team anticipated that the attendance increase was going to be temporary and that the majority of those same Adventists would go back to their churches once pastoral changes were completed there, what the team did not anticipate was the impact a drop in attendance of 30-40 Crosswalk people would have on our relatively young, growing church. A group of the members who joined Crosswalk Fellowship as part of this influx of people expressed a desire to remain at Crosswalk, if some of their demands were met. Those demands included that the style of the worship service and our approach to "missional" ministry be changed to their liking, which was not in alignment with what our demographic studies of Frisco found, nor what those who are not part of a church community relate to. The leadership team had to make a difficult decision. It could choose to remain faithful to our existing mission focused vision and remain relevant to the unchurched, surrounding community but run the risk of losing these non-committed to our vision, the recently-transplanted Adventist members. The other option was to compromise on our missional vision, acquiescing to the transplanted Adventist demands by reshaping the church to fit the traditional style preferences of this particular group of believers who would consider officially transferring their membership from the other English Adventist churches to Crosswalk. This way Crosswalk could

retain the increase in attendance numbers. The decision was easier than the consequences that followed. The leadership team chose to remain focused on our mission to share the gospel of Jesus with the unchurched rather than to grow by changing the church to attract existent believers whose values did not fit the Crosswalk missional culture.

At the beginning of 2016, pastoral transitions were completed in the two churches from where most of the Adventists who had joined Crosswalk during the attendance surge came from. The outflow of people happened as suddenly as the unexpected inflow did. Most of the people who came from those churches returned to their churches. At that same time three of our original core team leaders and their families had to move away because of job transitions. Both above events created a sudden drop in the average attendance of the church to the low 110s and created a feeling that the church was in decline. The outcome was a loss of momentum and a crisis of how the church could recapture growth again.

### Method

A few of the key ministry leaders of the church and I developed a new leadership strategy to sustain the mission-focused vision and regain the growth momentum. As the visioning strategy was completed it had to be shared and adopted initially by the larger team of church leaders. The strategy included this first step: redesigning the yearly visioning leadership retreat so it would solely focus on recapturing the passion of God for lost people, realigning all our ministry efforts with the outreach focused vision. Secondly, we wanted to redesign the way we set our church's yearly financial budget so it reflected the mission-based culture of the church. Third, we had to create a communication strategy that would help us promote the vision so it was adopted in all aspects of our

church ministry. A fourth emphasis was to develop an intentional process focused on engaging, empowering and multiplying a greater number of leaders that could help execute the vision. A fifth step within the strategy was to raise the leadership parameters of our church elders so they could function as stronger spiritual counselors while at the same time engage them to coach and develop other ministry leaders. The sixth step in the strategy was to implement a personal, informal interview with every new person expressing an interest in joining the church via transfer, baptism, or profession of faith, using those interviews as vision-casting opportunities to explain what is expected of them if they chose to become members of Crosswalk Fellowship. The final element of the strategy was to initiate quarterly visioning town-hall conversations, open to the entire congregation.

## Results

The full strategy was developed during two and a half years, starting in the middle of 2015. The implementation was completed in pieces, starting in the fall of 2016. Crosswalk saw positive results immediately. The average attendance grew from 103 in October of 2016, to 120-plus people by mid- 2017, and 127 by the end of 2019. Other numbers indicating positive growth were the regular attendees, (people attending the church at least once a month) which increased from 130 to 170. From 2017 to 2019 the church saw an increase in the average attendance of non-church members, reaching 32 per week. During the same period, baptisms grew from an average of two to five per year prior to 2016, to nine in 2017, seven in 2018 and nine by May of 2019. Other growth was seen in the increase of leaders and members of all ages engaged in active ministry, the addition of two new sabbath school classes, the introduction of four new small groups,

and the forming of two new praise teams. Finally, Crosswalk also experienced a doubling of the number of community businesses that sponsored our annual family friendly kids fair, and more than a 10% increase in local church budget giving.

### Summary

As a church adopts a missional vision it also must adopt a strategy to sustain it, or unexpected factors will derail it. Retaining a missional vision is key to church growth momentum for any church plant or established congregation. It requires multi-aspect strategies to help make God's passion for reaching the unchurched become a part of the passion of all church attendees. Once the outreach-focused vision becomes a shared vision by a majority of the members within a congregation, it naturally allows God to increase the worship community's ministry effectiveness, and results in facilitating more non-churched people finding their way back to God.



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A Professional Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Boyan Levterov

May 2022

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02/23/2022  
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“But whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss because of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish, so that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8).

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## CHAPTER 1

### PROJECT INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I offer a brief description of the ministry context in the creation of the new leadership strategy for sustaining a mission-focused vision at Crosswalk Fellowship in the long-term. In it, I also present the statement of the problem, state the task and delimitation of this dissertation project, provide a brief overview of the project's process, and define key terms used in this dissertation. The development and implementation of this dissertation project took place in years seven to ten after Crosswalk was officially established as a church by the Texas Conference in 2008.

#### **Description of the Ministry Context**

In September 2005, I was hired by the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to plant a new church in Frisco, Texas. At the time my family and I moved there, Frisco was one of the fastest growing areas in north Dallas. According to the city official paper the latest census showed Frisco as the fastest growing city in the United States for the past decade (Wadsack, 2020) with one third of the population being younger than the age of 18. The demographics of this affluent community with an average household income of \$105,000 proved to be a challenging community to reach. According to Percept Group (2019), a demographic database providing churches with data for their areas of ministry, more than 83 % of the Frisco households were highly educated professional families with young children. Despite the fact that the city is a part

of the Bible Belt, the faith preferences of the population of Frisco in 2019 were still equally split with 1/3 of people actively attending church, 1/3 being non-active Christians, and 1/3 claiming to be unchurched (Percept Group, 2019).

In November, 2006, our core team organized Crosswalk Fellowship as a mission group of the Texas Conference. The people who responded to the call to join the church plant core group were families with young kids, a perfect match for the demographic make-up of the focus-area. Our initial core team consisted of 18 adults and 13 children ages 0-10. The group was diverse and included extremely talented and experienced leaders, the majority of them highly trained professionals in many different areas.

I took the core team through 18 visioning sessions in eight months. We started by defining our population target group as unchurched families with young children, and completed a detailed demographic profile of the typical unchurched family living in Frisco and north Plano, which was a part of our extended target area. During the core team visioning sessions, we drafted a statement of our God given mission based on Matthew 28:18-20, and defined Crosswalk's five core values: authenticity to the biblical teachings of the Adventist church, loving relationships, relevance, God-centered families, accepting community.

The vision statement we developed next reflected the mission statement and our leading core values. Our final vision statement read, "To be a mission-centered community church, serving the area of north Dallas, where those who do not have an active relationship with God can find opportunities to experience the love of Jesus and accept Him as their personal friend." Our short vision statement was expressed with, "Connecting People to God and Each Other."

One of the main commitments of the core team was to build our vision, centered on God's mission. It would ensure that our ministry would remain focused on those Jesus cared for the most, the people who are not yet a part of God's family. We selected five key ministries we believed would be essential to have in place at the time of our official launch. We also built systems and an organizational structure that would enable our ministries to fulfill the common vision and the above strategic goals, ensuring that we remained true to our values and relevant to our primary target demographic group: families with young children in Frisco.

Crosswalk Fellowship started as a healthy church plant with a mission focused vision and a skilled leadership team and the excitement among everyone was palpable. Our group was able to grow to full company status within less than a year. By year three our regular weekly worship attendance was in excess of 80 people and we reached the high standards to qualify for church status in the Texas Conference, to have at least 55 members, 60 average attendees, \$50,000 in yearly tithes, have at least 10 baptisms since launch, conduct public evangelistic meetings, and have established our own building fund (Appendix A).

Having our young church minister from a shared missional vision helped us see an average of 10-15 guests at Crosswalk on any given Saturday, the majority of whom were non-believers or people not attending church at all. As I consulted with fellow church planters in the Adventist denomination at that time, the growth at Crosswalk was much faster compared to many other Adventist English-speaking church plants who worked in affluent communities similar to ours. The assumption I made was that the rapid growth at Crosswalk in those initial years was driven by the strong emphasis on

mission. The mission-driven vision we had adopted made our members comfortable inviting their unchurched friends, brought back ex-Adventists who had either left God, or the church, and welcomed other Adventists moving to the area who were introduced to our mission.

In 2008, we secured a lease with The Fellowship of Frisco (referred later in the paper as FOF) church, currently Centennial Bible Church, to use their building for our ministry on Saturdays and Thursday evenings for weekly events. Up to that point, since there were no other available properties to rent, we had based our ministry in east Plano, which was on the edge of the territory we were targeting. Moving to the FOF church facilities allowed us to minister from the center of our target area.

From 2000 onward, Frisco had more than fifty church plant start-ups attempted by different denominations and groups, according to multiple conversations with most senior pastors of the Frisco Ministerial Association. Many of these church plants had failed even though Texas is part of the Bible Belt.

There are nine mega evangelical churches in Frisco alone. Despite the high competition and more than fifty church plant start-ups and despite the strong existing prejudice towards (against?) Adventism among traditional evangelicals in the area, by 2018 Crosswalk had grown to a membership of 109 and an average regular attendance of 130 on a given Saturday, with 170 people attending church at least once a month. When one considers that during the same time the Crosswalk church had sent more than thirty people to join three new church plants in the north Dallas area and more than five other families had job relocations to other parts of the country, Crosswalk Fellowship had achieved a very healthy growth. Consequently, this brought an increased demand in years

five and six to continue adding new ministries and looking for new leaders to head those ministries. The need for human resources and finances to support the expanding ministries' activities grew exponentially.

In November 2014, I also accepted the position to work as the Church Planting Coordinator for the Texas Conference while keeping my position as the full-time Lead Pastor of Crosswalk Fellowship, serving in both positions simultaneously until January, 2019. During that time, I assisted in the planting of 46 new congregations and developed core team training strategies for those congregations. In this experience, I saw how newly founded churches consistently involved a greater percentage of people into hands-on ministry. We wanted to keep as many of our Crosswalk members as possible involved in active ministry.

At the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, six years after Crosswalk had reached church status, the church experienced a sudden and unexpected surge in attendance. Transferring members from the other two English churches, both of which were going through internal leadership crises, flooded our church. It felt good, but soon we recognized that these people were joining us as an escape from conflict rather than an interest in the Crosswalk ministry and vision. After some reflections with the Crosswalk leadership team, we realized we had experienced an unintentional shift in our vision inwardly to minister to those incoming members, seeking to make them feel more welcomed. Our attendance increased, but we also saw we were having more challenges in reaching and sustaining new unchurched people.

The inflow of attendees pushed our Saturday worship attendance to 170 people. We wanted to accommodate these transferring people in order to engage them in our

ministry, but they had little or no interest in investing in our vision. Our ministry leaders noticed that there was no increase in people volunteering within our ministries.

The following are the four observations coming from this time. First, the swell in attendance did not cause a swell in participation. Out of forty-plus transferring members who started attending regularly at that time, only three to four became involved in any ministry in the church. Second, this group had little or no interest in our missional vision, but was just looking for a more comfortable place for Saturday morning worship until the conflicts in their own churches were resolved. As a result, we realized that the rapid growth made it harder more difficult to share the vision consistently with people who had no desire to hear it. Third, we saw a moderate increase in tithe donations, but very little growth on the offering side. Fourth, these incoming Adventists began insisting on changes in the way we worshiped, the music we sang, and the way we dressed, the typical issues most established denominational churches face. Finally, the newly transferring members were middle-aged to elderly and very different demographically than Crosswalk and its surrounding Frisco community.

All these observations led us to believe that many of these people would not stick with us for the long run. In my personal visits with these new members I discovered that most of them were driving more than 40 minutes from other areas of Dallas to come to a church that they had no intentions of getting involved in long-term. The more outspoken newcomers openly started criticizing me and the rest of the leaders, demanding we change the style of worship and the approach to ministry adapting it to what they wanted to experience at church. We also started to experience sabotage of our ministry work, as some people initiated insensitive confrontations with non-members who were very new



attendees at Crosswalk's ministry functions, and had not yet made a decision to become members of the church.

Not long after, pastoral changes happened in the churches from where many of these influx members had come, and the majority of them returned to their previous churches as quickly as they came to Crosswalk. Some did not even let us know they were leaving or say goodbye to us. The sudden outflow came as unexpectedly fast as a wave of a storm. The fast drop in attendance created the impression that something was happening in the church and people were leaving because of it. What made it harder was that in the same period three key leaders and their families had to move away because of job relocations. These factors combined brought an attendance drop to about 110 people on average at the end of year eight. These events caused a crisis at Crosswalk and created the need to make some major decisions and interventions.

What was needed was an improved leadership visioning strategy to bring back the missional vision, bring back the momentum for growth, and to help us sustain the missional vision in the years to come, no matter how many believers or non-believers joined the Crosswalk church. As a response to this challenge, together with our leadership team, I developed and implemented an eight-part missional strategic planning process for sustaining a mission-focused vision for the coming years.

I invested the next two years of my time at Crosswalk to create a strategic planning process that would help us bring back and sustain our missional vision among our leaders and members. We started implementing some elements of the strategic process immediately. It took me two years to have the full strategy in place, do its full implementation in 2017, and see its positive results for the next three years until August

2019, when I transitioned the church to a new pastor and moved to the Potomac Conference to plant a new congregation in the north Washington D.C. area in Rockville, Maryland.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My observation in working with church plants over the past 10 years, including my experience at Crosswalk, is that most new churches in North America show an inability to sustain a mission-focused vision after the first four years of their public launch. As these young congregations experience their initial growth, they begin to feel the pressure for more finances and human resources in order to support the quickly expanding ministry demands. Much of the initial attendance growth comes from established believers who either live in or move to the community. In their desire to keep these established believers for the potential contribution of money and volunteer help, the leaders of young congregations naturally start shifting their initial outreach focused vision centered on connecting with non-believers, to a more inwardly centered one, aiming at catering to the preferences of the established believers.

This leads to a shift where the church begins to invest its resources into more self-centered ministry that soon causes it to lose its relevancy and ability to connect to its initial audience, the non-believers. The church's numerical growth slows dramatically. Research shows that 93% of newly started congregations that do not break the threshold of 200 in attendance in the first two years "run the risk of settling into a possibly crippling average within the first three years of existence, or die altogether" (Gray, 2007, p. 51). Even though the Gray study does not take into account church planting in rural context, does not include planting house churches, or micro churches, his overall

conclusion of the importance that a new congregation must reach a size that allows it to become self-sufficient is valid.

Crosswalk Fellowship had its soft launch in January of 2007 with initial attendance of 30 people and continued to grow steadily for the first five years. In year six the unexpected jump in attendance from the transferring believers from the two main English-speaking Adventist churches in North Dallas caused a challenge. While the growth felt good, the problems started when the preferences and expectations of the inflow of established believers from other churches collided with the vision of the Crosswalk leadership team. The joining believers had no desire to adopt the outreach focused vision of the church. When in six months these believers returned to their churches, the attendance at Crosswalk dipped to 105, which caused a feeling of growth decline. Crosswalk was experiencing a crisis.

### **Statement of the Task**

The task of this project was to develop, implement, and evaluate an effective leadership strategy for sustaining a long-term missional vision at Crosswalk Fellowship that would help guide the leadership team to continually shape its ministry methodology to remain primarily focused on staying relevant in reaching the unchurched population in the target community, rather than pleasing the preferences of the established believers who transferred to the young congregation. The strategy was also aimed to inspire all Crosswalk active attendees to live a lifestyle based on the missional vision that is focused on reaching out to those who are not part of the church, people they meet every day and can help lead them a step closer to accepting Jesus as their personal friend and savior.

## **Delimitation of the Project**

The extent of this project was limited to Crosswalk Fellowship and the leadership strategy implemented within this young church plant congregation in relation to sustaining a strong mission-focused vision. While in the process I did reflect on my observations and experiences with other church plants in Texas and North America and considered the opinions and observations of other church planting colleagues and experts, my primary research was limited to my experience with the leadership team and members at Crosswalk Fellowship. The comparative analysis of the success of the church planting strategic planning process we implemented was done within the historical context of Crosswalk Fellowship and was compared only to the relevant dynamics experienced by Seventh-day Adventist church plants in North America, which grow differently than most non-denominational plants.

## **Description of the Project Process**

The description of the project's process I followed during the creation and implementation of a new leadership strategy for sustaining a long-term missional vision at Crosswalk was divided into five chapters. In this initial chapter, I give an overview of the ministry context, define the problem, the task at hand, and the delimitations of the project, present an overview of the process followed, and define specific terminology used in this paper. In chapter 2, I look at the theological basis for this project, and then in chapter 3, I review past and recent literature on the subject of creating a mission-focused vision. In chapter 4, I describe the strategy I created and implemented in Crosswalk. In chapter 5, I present the results that show the impact of the strategy on the Crosswalk leadership team and the congregation. Finally, I provide my conclusions, the lessons I

have learned and how they have helped me grow in my ministry as a pastor and church planter, and I conclude by offering specific recommendations for further study that could be done in the area of leadership.

### **Evaluation Process**

The successful results of this project were measured through a survey answered by people who had joined the church during the duration of the study. The survey measured the impact a newly implemented mission-focused visioning strategy had on the following areas: (a) the number of baptisms and attendance at the church, (b) the percentage increase of people involved in active ministry within or outside of the church since the strategy started to be implemented, (c) the multiplication of the number of newly developed leaders (2 Tim 2:2), (d) the impact of the visioning process on the expansion of ministries, and (e) the increase in church giving during the implementation of the project.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Base Church* – an established church that sends or adopts a core group to help initiate the launch of a new church plant (Stetzer & Im, 2016).

*Bible Belt* – The Bible Belt is an informal region in the southern United States in which socially conservative evangelical Protestantism plays a strong role in society and politics, and church attendance across the denominations is generally higher than the nation's average (Bible Belt, n.d.).

*Church Status* – In this paper is used to refer to the guidelines of the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Corporation that defines when a church plant has reached a healthy level to function as an independent church.

*Core Team* – A group of key leaders who come together to plan and start a new church.

*Discipleship* – in this paper the term discipleship is used as the action of leading people a step closer to a saving relationship with Jesus.

*Established Believers/Members* – In this paper, the term refers to officially baptized Adventist members.

*Key Ministries for Success* – The important strategic ministries that a new church launches to fulfill their strategic mission and vision.

*Launch Team* – The group of people who are recruited to join the core team and its vision before the launch of a new church plant and help with staffing the ministry needs of the plant.

*Leadership* – The term leadership in this paper is used to refer to “the relational process involving two or more individuals who are freely associated in the pursuit of a common purpose (Patterson, 2013).

*Leadership of the Church Plant (Church Plant Leadership)* – All individuals in the church plant involved in the process of moving forward toward fulfilling the church’s common purpose, vision and goals.

*Leadership Placement Team* – a year-round nominating committee that works to recruit and nominate names of members to lead new ministries to the church membership

*Lead Pastor* – The main, senior pastor of a church

*Missional* – “joining Jesus” in bringing the gospel to all people through acts of service and through sharing the Bible message of God’s love by “learning and adapting to the culture around you while remaining Biblically sound” (Stetzer & Im, 2016).

*Mission Group* – A start up core team of at least three people who begin mission work in a new geographic or demographic community with the purpose of establishing a new church. The group is required to go through an official assessment by the Church Planting department, meet the six mission group guidelines and be recognized as an official church plant of the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Appendix A).

*Mission Statement* – a statement that communicates the purpose for your existence and the “impact you [or in our case God] wants you to leave on the world” (Allisson & Kaye, 2011, p. 12).

*Missional Strategy* – A strategic planning process that aims at fulfilling the mission of Christ

*Missional Vision* – A church vision focused on fulfilling the mission of Jesus

*Official Launch* – The official, public worship service that is open and promoted to the public when a new church is starting

*Parachute Church Plant* – A church plant where the planting pastor is new to the community he is sent to and is tasked to start a new church there by first building a core team of local people with little or no support from a local congregation. In some cases, the planter gets some seed money to cover his initial expenses.

*S.M.A.R.T. Goals* – An acronym developed by George T. Doran to make goal-setting more practical (Doran, 1981). The acronym stands for: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-related goal-setting system for performance outcomes (Rubin, 2006).

*Soft Launch* – The first unofficial, initial public worship service of a new church

*Strategic Goals* – I use the term in this paper to define the long-term goals that need to be taken in order to execute the vision

*Strategic Planning* – I am working with the same definition of strategic planning as Allisson and Kaye, “a systematic process through which an organization agrees on and builds key stakeholder commitment to priorities that are essential to its mission and responsive to the organizational environment” (p. 1). Strategic planning guides “how” the mission will be accomplished and controls the acquisition and allocation of resources to achieve these priorities (Allisson & Kaye, 2011, p. 6).

*Tithe* – A biblical term referring to the one-tenth of an individual’s income given to support God’s ministry. In the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, the tithe collected by the local church is passed on to the next level of the organizational structure with the sole purpose to support mission work and activities throughout the world.

*Offerings* – A biblical term for free will donations given above the tithe amount. In the Seventh-day Adventist church organization, the free will offerings stay to support the ministry of the local church.

*Texas Conference Company Status* – In this paper is used to refer to the guidelines of the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Corporation that defines when a church plant qualifies to be accepted as an official congregation in the conference.

*Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* – The official central organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Churches in most of the territories of the state of Texas.

*Unchurched People* – The people who are not part of a church or have been inactive in attending a church.



*Values (Core Values)* – The underlining principles of “why the organization exists” and define how they want to operate in alignment with those values (Allisson & Kaye, 2011).

*Vision Statement* – describes an image of the organizational success in fulfilling its purpose and “what success will look like” (Allisson & Kaye, 2011, p. 12).

## CHAPTER 2

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The heart of God is set on living in a close relationship with his creation. In the Bible creation story, after sin interrupted the open connection between God and humans, God set himself on a mission to restore that lost connection and save his lost creation. In this chapter I analyze the focus of God's passion for humanity as revealed in the biblical account, and look at the methods Jesus employed to turn God's passion into the vision for his ministry to four different people groups. I finish the chapter with drawing lessons on the strategy Jesus used to build a common mission-focused vision among His disciples.

#### **Foundation of Missional Vision: Salvation Is Never for Private Benefit Alone**

One of the most impressive attributes of the God of Christianity as revealed through the human story in the Bible is his selfless character. The creator God reveals himself as the God of inherent relational nature. God himself is a relational being. The overall Bible narrative presents a strong connection between the three personas of God. God the Father, Jesus Christ as the son of God, and the Holy Spirit working together in perfect harmony and unity (Chandler, 2014).

#### **God Created Humans to Live as a Community**

Genesis 1:26-27 tells the story of God making the first humans, both the male and the female, "in his likeness." As Westermann (1984) comments on this passage, the

creation of human beings was done with specific intentions and great consideration. Theologians view the plural form of “let us make” in the text as describing the trinity or a combination of God and the created heavenly beings (pp. 144-45). Both interpretations reveal the relational attributes of God’s original design for his creation. From the first chapter of the Bible, we find God creating humans to enjoy a life of constant togetherness with each other.

In Genesis 1:26, God said,

‘Let us make man in our image according to our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God made humans to share in the joy of caring for the rest of his creation. The reality that Adam and Eve were made in God’s image, and in the likeness of God to interact and care with the rest of the creation, denotes that they were designed to imitate His relational character. As such, they too were built with the desire to share God’s blessing of life with others and live in a life of community with the rest of humanity (Hoekema, 1986, pp. 13-14). Balswick, King, and Reimer (2005) also conclude that to be made in the image of God “is to live in reciprocating relationships with God and our fellow human beings” (p.107). We find major evidence of this in the fact that the same day that Adam was created, we find him feeling lonely and searching for a companion.

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle and the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So, the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed the flesh at that place. The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which he had taken from the man and brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone

of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man. (Gen 2:18-23)

No activity or responsibility that God commissioned Adam with could subdue the feeling of loneliness in the first human. By design, he longed for companionship not only with God but with a human being like himself. Verse 18 of the same chapter reveals God was not done creating and he had already planned to give Adam a partner with whom he could share life. The text says that it was God who said, “it is not good for man to be alone” and he created Eve as an inseparable partner in Adam’s life (Gen 2:18). Together they were commissioned to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:27) and were placed by God himself to be part of expanding God’s community. God’s passion for relationships was part of his design for the first couple and continues to be for the rest of the human race.

On the seventh day of the creation week, we find God with His creation, enjoying its beauty, most probably alongside the first family. The words “he rested” literally mean he “ceased” his work. This implies “rest of achievement, not inactivity, for He nurtures what he creates. ...God’s rest was pregnant with more than the gift of the sabbath: it is still big with the promise for the believer, who is summoned to share it” (Kidner, 2016, p. 57). Genesis chapters 2 and 3 imply that God intentionally took time to interact together with the first couple. Adam and Eve were an inseparable part in the life of God, hence after the story of sin, God is the one searching for them as if looking for his friends, wanting to restore the broken relationship with them and to save them from death which came because of their sin.

## The Passion of God is to Save as Many as Possible

The plan of salvation that God provided was never meant to be for the private benefit alone of those who have accepted Christ. God's true love for people and his desire to live in a constant relationship with humanity is best expressed in the biblical theme of salvation.

Sometime after creation, both humans exercised their God-given right to free will and disregarded their creator's instructions for life and happiness. As a result, the relationship between God and the whole creation was disrupted to a point that Adam and Eve found the need to hide from God. The destructive effect of their choice to rebel against God, which the Bible refers to as "sin," was not only an action but a disruptive condition in the universe. Berkouwer (1971) describes their action as more than a simple act of choosing their own way over God's. He defines their "sin" as having a disruptive power with "parasitic" effect in the universe (p. 262). The natural consequence of sin was to break the relationship between humanity and God in a way that was not meant to be. It is in this context that rather than scrapping project Earth and all the trouble disobedience was going to bring to the universe and to the Godhead itself, God chose to execute a plan to redeem his creation and to rebuild the broken connection with humanity.

God's passion for retaining his connection with humanity was revealed in His immediate initiative to search for his lost children, Adam and Eve (Gen 3:1-9). Adam's response to God's search call was, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen 3:10). Starting in Genesis chapter 3, God reveals his plan to destroy evil, put an end to sin and restore the eternal life his creation was supposed to experience before sin interrupted it. In the story of the fall of

humanity, God starts promoting his message of salvation and reveals His passion for bringing all people back in a strong relationship with himself once again. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (as cited in Chandler, 2014) implies that the trinitarian Godhead is imprinted in our faith life. “The truth about both God and ourselves is that we were meant to exist as persons in communion in a common household, living as persons from and for others, not persons in isolation, or withdrawal, or self-centeredness” (p. 108)

God cannot live without his creation. True to his nature, he designed humanity to enjoy unity in him and between each other. When the unity broke, God could not let it go. No misstep is to doom a creation of God unworthy to be redeemed. This is the consistent picture the Bible draws about the God of Christianity.

### **God’s Love for the Fallen**

The first account was recorded in Genesis chapter 3. Immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve, God announced to the Devil that he would fight and win the battle of crushing evil’s head through the offspring of humanity (Gen 3:9). Rather than destroying the fallen creation and starting again with a new perfect world, God chose to forgive the sin of humanity and restore the broken relationship with it, knowing that he himself would pay the price for sin. In this plan, God revealed that he loved his creation so much that nothing could force him to give up on it.

The theme of God creating humans to exist in a relational environment of family, friends and community is strongly present throughout the rest of the Bible story. When a person took an action to break relationships, he or she would experience the disapproval of God and his call to restore the broken union. An example of this is found in the feud between Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam and Eve (Gen 4:1-7). After Cain

became angry at his brother Abel and killed him, God appeared to Cain and condemned his action, openly letting him know he would suffer the consequences of taking his brother's life (Gen 4:8-10). When Cain expressed his fear now for his own life, instead of warning Cain that he would die, God placed his protection on Cain so no more lives would be lost (Gen 4:11-16). This action of God revealed he was not after the punishment of Cain, but was more interested in preserving Cain's life and helping him find a way back from the influence of evil that had entered his life. God values life. The life of every person in the human race matters to him. God, the creator of the universe, loves his creation more than he focuses on himself. White (1941) observes that "when the ice of selfishness is melted from [our] hearts, [we] will be in sympathy with God, and will share His joy in the saving of the lost" (p. 210)

## **Noah**

Later through human history, at the time before God sent a flood to take drastic measures against the spread of evil around the world, before God sent the waters of the flood, he commanded Noah to warn all people about the impending disaster, so their lives could be spared. The biblical account implies that God waited years for Noah to finish the ark and invite people to enter it and be saved (Gen 6-7). In fact, a closer look at the Hebrew structure of verses six and seven reveals that Noah's salvation was an "act that took place long before and continues into the present" (Currid, 2003, p. 180). It is in this account again that we find God interested in saving not only the few who were faithful to him, but inviting everybody else to respond to God's call to enter the saving boat. Salvation is not only for the few, but for everyone who is willing to come.

## **Abraham**

Years after the flood, God revealed his plan of saving and restoring humanity through a vision he gave to Abraham. God's promise to Abraham was to make his descendants a great nation and that he would lead him to the special land God promised Abraham. In the verse where we find the promise, we also find God asking Israel to share his blessings and the story of God with other nations around them. In the notion of blessing them to be God's chosen people, God places a great responsibility on his children's shoulders (Grisanti, 1998). Salvation was not only given to Israel, but Israel was chosen to reach out to the nations around it.

When God instructed the Israelites to be the messengers of his love to the rest of the nations, he gave them the Ten Commandments to serve as their moral compass. Each of these commandments was given to protect the relationship between God and humanity, and between the people themselves (Exod 20:1-17). The law of God was an expression of God's vision to people living in a loving community with their God and each other. The theme of God's loving desire to preserve his community and protect relationships is present consistently throughout the rest of the Bible. "By conducting their lives in conformity with the demands of the Law, the nation of Israel would have been able to function as God's servant nation, representing God and His character before the surrounding nations of the world" (Grisanti, 1998, p. 40). In this promise to Abraham, God set the purpose for his people to be a blessing and to bring hope to all nations around them (Gen 12:3).



## **Living With a Vision**

Another major insight related to vision appears in Abraham's story. It is about the power of God's promised vision to sustain Abraham's courage to leave his homeland and carry on life into the future. Starting a nomadic life living in tents and moving from place to place was not an easy or comfortable endeavor, especially for a family that had just been promised that they would be expecting a newborn child.

When an individual or a group of people live a life focused on a clear vision, given by God, they tend to act with greater courage and are able to overcome temporary challenges by pushing forward to the future promise of the vision, until it is reached. Because of the promise of God, Abraham lived for 75 years before he saw his first son. It was the vision of God that must have helped him to deal with the discouragement of Sarah's infertility and not abandon God's promised future. Without that vision, we could argue that they had enough challenges to lose their faith in God's promise. Abraham finished his life only seeing two generations after himself. It is difficult to see that as a great fulfillment of God's big promise, yet it was more or less a sign that God was working to make his vision of the future nation of Israel a reality.

Finally, in this story we discover the power of a vision that sustains people beyond their generation. "The original blessing upon mankind given in the creation account of Gen 1:28 is to be extended through the family of Abraham" (Wolf, 1991, p. 109). The same vision must have helped Abraham's son Isaac to make it through his life, hoping for the promise of God for a great nation to come true, but seeing only two sons being born to him by his wife Rebecca. The reality Isaac observed must not have looked like the great future nation God described to his father. It was not until Jacob's 12 sons,

three generations after Abraham, that the promised vision of God started to become a full reality and the nation of Israel was born. It could be argued that nothing would have come of this promise if either Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob would have failed to believe and follow this God-given vision. A God-given vision often seems impossible to achieve by human power. Yet, when people commit to letting that vision guide them, they experience the amazing reality of God's greatness, even if God's timing is different than our human expectations.

### **David and the Old Testament Prophets**

In the account of king David we once again find multiple occasions where God reveals his people are to make known their God to all people. They were to do this by inviting those foreign nations to surrender to the Creator, and place their trust in the promises of God for Israel to be the voice that will lead the world to salvation at the Day of the Lord (see Ps 22, Ps 96:1-10). Other prophets who followed were commanded to repeat the same call to the people of Israel to remain faithful to God's vision to save Israel and the world (see Isa 2:2, 56:7, 66:17-19). The Old Testament is permeated with God's call to his people to engage other nations as part of the mission.

In the next section, we will look at the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament and a few stories revealing God's plan to ensure that every human being has an opportunity to come to a saving relationship with him. We will also discover how Christ places reaching out to those who are not his followers as a priority over those who are already part of the saved.

## **The Two-fold Call of Jesus to His Disciples**

The vision of God to save the world reached its culmination in the life of Christ. In His ministry, Christ continued the Old Testament command to communicate the message of the coming renewed kingdom of God. Jesus' life and sacrifice on the cross were not aimed to provide salvation, a way out of sin for few faithful disciples or self-righteous religious leaders. Jesus built a movement of disciples that he commissioned to take the message of salvation to the world, especially to those who did not believe in God.

Jesus defined the mission for his disciples at the moment he called them, "Come, follow me." Then he added, "and I will send you out to fish for people" (Mark 1:17 NIV). Two chapters later when he selected his apostles, he reiterates the two-fold call he is extending to them,

He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. So, he appointed the twelve. (Mark 3:13-16)

One could rightly assume that the first responsibilities of those claiming to be disciples of God was to be totally connected and faithful to him. Getting one's life into a saving relationship with God is crucial before a person can invite others to do the same. No one can give to others what they do not themselves have.

The call Christ extended to his followers had another part to it. Jesus followed his invitation to his followers with a very important statement: "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people" (Mark 1:17). This second part of Christ's call to his disciples was as important as the first. God is not inviting the person to be saved only; he challenges that saved person to turn around and be the vehicle that

leads someone else to salvation. God's love is never satisfied unless it is shared with even the least of his creation (Matt 25:45). His call was not that the disciples follow him only, but that they help others to do so and grow the community of followers.

God is on a mission to redeem humanity (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011, p. 104).

The Gospel writer Luke shares a parable with three stories in it that Jesus told to illustrate his passion for saving the sinners whose sins had separated them from the love of God. The first story deals with a shepherd finding the one lost sheep out of his 100-count flock. Jesus finishes the story, “‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:6-7). Then he followed it with another story of a lady who lost one of her five coins and when she found it, she called all her friends and neighbors to share her joy, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).” Jesus closes the sequence of parables with a story of a rebellious son who, after squandering his inheritance, comes back to his father and asks for forgiveness and to work as a servant in his father's house.

In the Jewish culture, to take your inheritance while the father is alive was considered a grave insult and embarrassment for the father. The father's acceptance of the prodigal son and reinstating his sonship status in itself speaks about the missional vision Christ was trying to build for his followers. God never gives up on sinners, and he loves them so much that there is nothing that will prevent him from accepting them, if they want to be reunited with their God in heaven.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus modeled what it means to live the daily mission of helping others. He healed people, met their needs, and shared the good news of the kingdom. The relevance of how much this mission mattered to God is revealed in the fact that in his final days on this earth, Jesus' last commission to his disciples was a command for them to continue sharing the message of salvation with all people.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:18-20)

Even more, in the day he ascended to heaven in front of their own eyes, Jesus repeated the same call to them.

So, when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. (Acts 1:6-9)

Christ's ministry on this earth always reflected God's passion for his lost children and his passion for as many as possible to respond to his invitation to live with him in his father's eternal kingdom. Peter, one of the three closest disciples of Jesus, records that God is delaying even his second return to this earth because he is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet 3:8-9).

As Jesus selected his disciples, he called ordinary people with their faults and weaknesses, but people who were willing to learn how to love, forgive, and care the way God does for their fellow humans (MacArthur, 2006). For Christ, a teachable spirit and humility were more important than interpersonal skills and level of education. The people who are to adopt the missional vision of God should not take pride in their spiritual

perfection or personal qualifications, but be penetrated by a humble spirit of what God has done to forgive their own sins.

### The Focus of Christ's Redemptive Ministry

In his ministry strategy, Jesus invested time in mentoring and developing those willing to follow him and ready to be deployed as missionaries to the world. Christ taught his followers through his everyday life, attitude, and actions. Jesus was intentional in training his disciples in how to have a personal time with God, how to utilize spiritual retreats that would help them discover the vision God has for their lives, and finally how to live a life of service.

### **Modeling Personal Time With God**

First, Jesus made it a priority to teach his disciples how to have a personal time with God. True ministry must start with a commitment to personal growth. Christ used his personal life to model how to stay connected with God daily. He would spend his personal customary time in prayer with His father in heaven before he went out to do mission work among the people (Luke 6:12). He also took time to pray regularly with his team of disciples (Luke 2:39) modeling the importance of the spiritual support of the community of believers. Since the day of creation, human beings were made to accept their image from their creator God by being guided daily by him (Chandler, 2014).

Jesus's call to his disciples was for them to be more like him, just as he was trying to be more like his heavenly father (Matt 5:48). Led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus kept a balance between living faithfully to God while staying 100 percent focused on reaching the lost. He lived a lifestyle of evangelism wherever he was and in whatever he did. He was constantly available to be used by God to make a difference in someone else's life.

## **Spiritual Retreats**

Knowing God's will is key to letting God shape our vision. Jesus not only spent time alone in prayer, but also made sure to take his disciples to isolated places where they could spend time together, seeking the will of God. The garden of Gethsemane was a good example of Jesus trying to get few of his disciples to join him in discovering the will of his father. The idea of spiritual retreat seemed to have been a practice Jesus used with his disciples. Mark 6:31 contains another example of Jesus calling the disciples to an isolated place to rest and to prepare for the next days and weeks of ministry. Crow (2008) suggests that what has been missed is that Matthew 28:19 "implies not just discipling individuals – an approach common to the West – but mentoring *groups* of people – a more collectivistic approach modeled by Jesus in his discipling of his disciples" (p. 89).

It was in those instances, when they had retreated together that Jesus shaped the character of his disciples while they observed him listening to His Father's guidance in shaping his own ministry. In his gospel, John (John 17:6-25) recorded a prayer Jesus offered for his immediate and future disciples. The fact that all these instances are recorded in the scriptures is evidence that the disciples were present on many occasions to pray with Christ. Matthew records that earlier in their journey together they even asked Jesus to walk them through the discipline of prayer (Matt 6 & Luke 11:1-13). In the account in Luke 11:1, the gospel writer emphasizes that the disciples had to wait until Jesus finished his prayer before they requested him to train them how to pray.

Prayer was not the only aspect of the time when Jesus would retreat with the disciples by themselves. Some of the teaching passages in the gospels specifically mention that Jesus was with his disciples when he mentored them about ministry. Mark

chapter 3 and Luke chapter 6 both describe how Jesus called those he wished to join him on a mountainside. “Jesus spent an entire night praying before choosing a smaller group to mentor on personal basis” (Crow, 2008, p. 91). The disciples seemed to be part of that prayer retreat before Jesus appointed his 12 special disciples and then started training them and giving them special directions about their upcoming ministry tasks. Both Mark and Luke’s accounts of this event sound like a combination of a spiritual and visioning retreat the group had together. White (1940) draws a perfect picture of what moments like these might have been like,

In training His disciples, Jesus chose to withdraw from the confusion of the city to the quiet of the fields and hills, as more in harmony with the lessons of self-abnegation He desired to teach them. And during His ministry He loved to gather the people about Him under the blue heavens, on some grassy hillside, or on the beach beside the lake. (p. 291)

The idea of taking leaders to a retreat to pray, seek God’s will and vision, discuss ministry, plan, and strategize seems to have been very common for Christ and his closest disciples as he prepared them for future leadership.

The practice of spiritual visioning retreats was followed by the disciples even after Jesus’ ascension. In Acts 1:8 we find Jesus directing the disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The instructions were clear that vision and ministry are not actions we decide on our own, but they are guided by the Holy Spirit of God. In Acts 2, while they were still “all together in one place” (Acts 2:1), the Holy Spirit manifested himself and directed their ministry. The result of the leadership of the Holy Spirit was that the Christian church exploded and expanded in the next few years. When a faith community lets God reveal his vision for them, the long-term result is always a guaranteed success. No matter if the timing is like



that of Abraham, or of the early church, God's dream and vision does not fail. If a Christian leader is trying to serve God by coming up with their own visions, they "inadvertently try to take on the responsibility of God" (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011, p. 104).

### **Living a Life of Service**

The second important part of Jesus' ministry was to mentor his followers on how to do ministry and communicate God's message of hope for eternal life to the people. Jesus' custom was to first start ministering to the needs of the people and then invite them to consider to become followers of his Father in heaven. White (1942) eloquently describes Christ's strategy of winning people's hearts for God,

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.' (p. 143)

People had to practice what he taught them. Every disciple had to be actively involved in ministry. Every Christ follower who wants to be a part of the true church must be actively engaged in ministry.

### **People Matter More Than Tradition and Polices**

Thirdly, Jesus adapted his methodology to the audience he was addressing. His approach, tone and directness changed depending on who he talked to and how knowledgeable his listeners were of who the God of Israel was.

## **The Four Target Groups Jesus Focused On**

The ministry of Jesus reveals different approaches he used as he communicated the vision of God's plan of salvation. It is notable how his approaches and messaging shifted as he addressed each one of these different segments of the community.

### **The Religious Establishment and the Spiritual Elite**

In the very beginning of his ministry, some of Jesus' major opponents were the Jewish religious leaders, who rejected who he was. They approached him as the ones having the religious leadership authority and superiority. The main charge these leaders had against him was that he was not doing ministry and living up to their teachings, self-imposed norms, and expectations. Jesus' approach to dealing with the Pharisees, Sadducees, the scribes, and the rulers of the law was different from the way he treated the Jewish believers who had lost their hope in their God and religion (McCready & Reinhartz, 2008). Jesus was painfully straight with those who thought they were better than everyone else in the Jewish nation, trying to help them see the reality that the human traditions they had mixed with the faith, grace, and salvation had become more of a barrier for unchurched people to join God's family than help them in their faithfulness (McCready & Reinhartz, 2008). Jesus had to be very open and at times be harsh with them because of their refusal to face the reality of their damaging actions toward the people.

John shares in his gospel a story that took place as Christ was visiting the temple of Jerusalem. The temple was to be a holy place for Jesus (John 2:16). Israel revered it as the place where God dwells (Exod 25:8). Jesus claimed the temple to be "my father's house" (John 2:16). In this story, Jesus strongly condemned the abuse of sellers

overcharging the people coming to make their yearly sacrifices at the temple. This lucrative business was allowed to take place at the temple with the full blessing of the religious priesthood and the leaders that were in charge of the temple and its courtyard (Crow, 2008). Crow also points out that archeological discoveries show how families related to the high priests of Jesus' time were involved in the profit sharing of the unfair and abusive business practices at the temple (p. 93). One could only imagine why this is one of the Bible passages where Jesus was presented to be so upset with the gauging taking place in the temple built to worship and represent his father. Christ, in this story is on the verge of becoming violent. With passion, he overturns the tables, and the seats of the moneychangers and those who sold anything there. Jesus gave the reason for his confrontational behavior in one sentence, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade" (John 2:16). In the parallel passages of the synoptic gospels Christ calls the temple his house, "and he taught, and said to them, 'is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?" But you have made it a den of robbers'" (Mark 11:17). Jesus was confronting the loss of purpose of the temple, the sanctuary rituals, sacrifices and worship.

Jesus stated the temple was supposed to be a meeting place between God and his people, where sinners could connect with God, find forgiveness and help. They were to be reminded there of his love, his constant presence among them and the need to stay away from the damaging behavior of sin. The temple was also to extend God's presence and love beyond Israel. It was to be a "house of prayer *for all the nations* (emphasis added)" (Mark 11:17). The election of Israel as a nation was for them to not live for themselves, but to be a witness to all nations around them and share the good news of

God's invitation to come to Christ and be saved. This is a direct reference to the words God spoke to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3.

The Pharisees, together with the rest of the religious leaders had the understanding that the Jewish people were divided into those who became "holy" like them, by observing the law and therefore deserved God's salvation more than those who were sinners and who were not able to keep the laws of God with the thousands of additional rules these religious leaders had added to it. The Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes had changed the law of God to go well beyond what God's words intended it say (McCready & Reinhartz, 2008, p. 107). The outcome was that the masses of people who did not follow the additional rules were labeled as "sinners" and told that they did not deserve the grace of God.

In multiple instances, Jesus used a confrontation strategy to stand up to and rebuke religious leaders who persistently accused others of wrongdoing while they themselves were not living the righteous lives God had called His followers to live. To other religious leaders who were sincerely trying to live by God's law, Jesus employed a different style of work. He engaged them in discussions aimed at helping them to understand God's vision to save all.

He attempted to communicate to them that God's intent was to invite all people, sinners and religious leaders, to align themselves with God's will and then work on his vision to bring the message of God's saving love and hope to all nations. Everyone should have a chance to be saved, and no one was to sabotage somebody else's access to God. His harsh criticism of these self-righteous leaders was to help turn their hearts truly back to their God.

## The Jewish Leaders Who Were Sincerely Faithful to Their God

In the same gospel of John, in another story following the one of the cleansings of the temple, a pharisee came to Jesus at night trying to avoid the embarrassment of being seen by others. He acknowledged Christ as a “Rabbi” who “came from God” (John 3:2). Nicodemus wanted to know what he must do with his life to experience the power of the real God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus took his time with this sincere and faithful ruler of the law to gently guide him through what it means to be a born-again follower of God. Christ shared with him that “God sent his son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Jesus’s attitude toward Nicodemus was different than the attitude he had toward other pharisees. Jesus explained the experience of the new birth and the way to salvation for any follower of God. He led Nicodemus to discover God’s vision. Jesus explained that to be “born of water and spirit” requires not only personal belief in Jesus as the Savior sent from God to redeem and save the world but demands desire to share the story of Jesus so it will reach all who might choose to believe. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15). The response of Christ to Nicodemus reflected the vision of God that must become a part of the mission of every leader and believer.

This story is another example that the goal of Jesus’ ministry was not to hurt the religious leaders, but to help those of them who claimed to be true followers of God and engage them in active ministry. Those who deterred from God’s purpose and wanted to promote man-made religion and traditions deserved Christ’s open rebuke. To those who were confused about God’s path of salvation yet were sincerely searching to be faithful to

him in their hearts, Jesus kindly helped to understand the loving character of God ready to save every human willing to believe.

#### Those Rejected by the Society

Jesus had a special place in his heart and ministry for those who had been written off by the religious elite as unworthy to be a part of God's people. He took the time to make them feel noticed, loved, and wanted back into God's family.

#### Non-believers and Sinners

The group of people in whom Jesus focused most of his time according to the Gospels were those who the Bible labels as the "lost." This group also included those who had never walked with God, or were believers in God, but somewhere along the way lost their connection with God and the foreign ethnic groups who were not accepted by the Jewish community. Jesus worked with passion to call these people back to his family. Many of the people in this group had been followers of God but because of a life of sin, they had lost their hope that God was interested in them to return to a life of close relationship with him. Jesus modeled how everything he did was to make a difference in the lives of these sinners.

#### Tax-collectors

Two of the very best illustrative stories from the life of Christ are the calling of Levi Matthew and the experience Jesus had with Zacchaeus. Both were tax collectors, which meant that by default they were rejected by society and seen as traitors to the Jewish nation. Jews viewed tax-collectors as enemies who had taken away the freedom of the nation of Israel. The stigma was justified because when Roman rulers needed money to finance their wars or building endeavors, tax-collectors like Zacchaeus came to

pressure their subordinates, like Levi Matthew, to “leverage yet more money from the peasants (Crow, 2008, p. 95). Since these tax-collectors were Jews, serving as agents of the Roman government, tax-collectors in reality had traded their own privilege to be a part of the chosen nation of God, and therefore were treated as they had surrendered their right to be saved as Israelites.

## Matthew

According to Matthew 9:9-13 and the parallel gospel accounts of Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32, Levi, also called Matthew, was well known by the local Galilean people. In fact, Matthew 9:10 suggests that Matthew seems to have been the heart of the company of tax collectors and those who were rejected as “sinners” by the Jewish community. Putting social prejudice aside, we find Jesus showing his respect to Matthew by accepting to eat at his table, in his home. It is the immediate reaction of the scribes and the Pharisees that let us realize how much out of the norm this action of Christ was. The religious leaders had written off the tax-collectors with the rest of the open sinners who had no place among God’s saved people. Christ gave a stunning response to the disapproval they immediately expressed regarding his association with those who were considered unworthy. Jesus gave the example that there is no person who should be written off as unworthy to become part of God’s family or be judged as unworthy to become a disciple. In this story, Christ clearly defined the primary mission that his followers should focus on today. Reaching out to those who are not God followers remains the primary focus of the vision of God (Mark 2:17).

## Zacchaeus

In the story of Zacchaeus, a Jewish tax collector who after experiencing the disappointment of a life with corruption and money was searching once again to find hope for his broken life. So, he decides to check the news about Jesus, the Messiah. With the risk of being publicly embarrassed and humiliated, he climbed up a tree to get a look at Jesus, the Messiah, as he passed by. The Gospel writer, Luke tells us that Jesus reached the spot where Zacchaeus was, “stopped,” “looked up,” “called” on him and willingly accepted to be this “sinner’s” guest for a meal at his house (Luke 19:5-6). The outcome was that once again, Christ received complaints from the religious leaders for his association with sinners like Zacchaeus. Visiting a person’s home and having a meal was an expression of friendship and honor in the Jewish community (Nichol, 1980). The Pharisees would not even talk to those who were labeled sinners unless they had to condemn them (John 8:1-9). Jesus broke the tradition of wrongly understood God-given instructions to not associate with sinners, and he again put the salvation of the sinner above following man-made restriction. Christ does not make a distinction whether the wrongful custom originated with the church or with the secular community. He is always willing to receive the social stigma and deal with the anger of the community leaders but find a way to fulfill God’s vision to meet the sinner where they are and bring them to a saving relationship with his Father in heaven (Luke 19:5-7).

## The Samaritan Woman

We also find Christ fulfilling God’s mission by reaching out to sinners who did not think of themselves as lost. The story that stands out is the biblical account of Christ interacting with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-52). In this context, Jesus



breaks two important Jewish socio-religious traditions. First, he allowed himself to speak to a married lady walking alone, which was an unacceptable behavior according to the Jewish tradition (Nichol, 1980). The second norm he broke was even worse. He allowed himself to talk to a Samaritan. Jews considered Samaritans “unclean” to associate with and disapproved of their claim to have equal right to be called descendants of Abraham and Jacob (Nichol, 1980). Samaritans were not fully blooded Jews and because of that they had a constant conflict with the Israelites regarding rights to salvation and place of worship (John 4:19-20). In this story, Jesus does not seem to care about breaking traditions, while at the same time he is careful to keep the appropriateness of his conversation with this woman. He connected with her by addressing her immediate need, the need for water that she came to get. He helped satisfy her need for hope beyond her Samaritan beliefs in Abraham and Jacob. He wanted to help her realize her forefathers were not going to save her. Jesus gently guided the conversation to help her see the living water he was offering to humanity (John 4:7-10, 13).

In this story very clearly, we see once again that the mission-focused life of Jesus that drove him past human boundaries and religious prejudice and into a meaningful conversation that becomes the turning point of this woman’s life of sin, adultery, and low morals. Even the disciples were surprised to find Christ conversing with the Samaritan woman (John 4:27). The impact of that short encounter by the well of Jacob was so powerful that this woman went home becoming a missionary in her own way, telling everyone that she had found the Messiah (John 4:28-39). The result was the salvation of many Samaritans living in the nearby town (John 4:39). Ministry challenges believers to constantly live on the edge of their comfort zone. At times, this involves taking steps that

are going to break some social norms when it might make an eternal difference in the lives of lost people. Jesus modeled that those social cultural norms or religious traditions should not trump the mission of connecting lost people with the God of heaven. The lesson to be learned by his followers is that every missional community claiming to follow Christ must continually review its practices and established traditions to ensure that none of those come in conflict with carrying out God's outreach vision.

### The Sick

This last group we find Jesus ministering to those who were sick, those who were demon possessed. The common attitude towards those people was that their suffering was justified because of the assumption that it was caused by their grave sins (Nichol, 1980). What Jesus seems to imply is that sinners are as much of a victim of sin as they are proponents of it (Nichol, 1980).

In Matthew chapter 8 there is a story that reveals the passion of Jesus for the rejected in the instance when Christ met a person sick with leprosy. The leper spots Jesus while surrounded by a great multitude, and somehow manages to get to him. For a leper to get to Christ was a serious task. We can speculate that he had to either expose his spots and wounds for people to move away from him/her so he can get close to Jesus, or he had to take a great deal of caution to cover all signs of the disease, disguising himself so he is not chased away by the crowds. As Lawrence (2019) notes, God had given an instruction for those who had leprosy and suffered from a seriously contagious disease to live outside of the common community, so to protect the Israelites from the sickness spreading around and becoming an epidemic. The people would consider lepers as punished by God and would even treat them as dead (Lawrence, 2019, p. 379). In his wisdom, God wanted

to protect the public's wellbeing, while still providing some security for those who suffered the disease (Lev 13:1-7).

Over time, the religious leaders to preserve the health of the community turned into a practice to label all the seriously sick people as grave sinners cursed by God and force those suffering humans to live in isolation from the community. The feeling of guilt created in those who were already crushed by the heartbreaking suffering from a horrible sickness was pushed to an even lower level by adding the stigma of being abandoned not only by the community, but by their own God. Even the disciples believed that people stricken by major life sickness were that way as a punishment for their sins (John 9:1-2). This is also evident from the way this leper addresses Christ in the story recorded by three of the four gospels, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." The real plea behind his request was not only one for healing, but for acceptance. "If you are willing," (Matt 8:2 NIV) or "If you choose" (Matt 8:2 NRSV) was a way of asking God if he has given up on people like him (Gabelein, 1984, p. 198). The response of Jesus was one that communicated that God has never given up on anyone if he or she was willing to connect with him. In his response, Jesus revealed to this leper the most important message he wanted to hear, "I will;" in other words you are not abandoned (Gabelein, 1984). God still cares for people like him and loves him, no matter if he was the unfortunate one to be sick. The responsibility of the church leaders is to create a church environment where anyone willing to connect with God can come and feel welcome.

There is significance in the way the leper asked Jesus to heal him. He said, "you can make me clean." One can assume that besides being cleansed from the leprosy, this man was asking to be cleansed from his sins. As Gabelein (1984) observes, these

statements seemed to be related. In the process of healing him, Christ did something that no one was willing to do. “He stretched out his hand and touched him” (Matt 8:3). God is willing to “touch” the life of a sinner, even when the law said do not touch or one will become unclean as well (Lev 13:1-17). In this story, Christ once again gave the consistent message that God does not reject people because of their sins or sickness. Jesus was always willing to get himself dirty with the sinners, to help them through their mess and to lead them to the hope of his soon-to-come sacrifice that was going to provide forgiveness and salvation not only to a few chosen ones, but to everyone who is willing to put their trust in God (John 3:16). God made himself unclean, so he can help clean humanity.

Today, saved people get in the way rather than getting out of the way so non-church people can reach God. Christ was teaching his disciples that living a missional life requires for them to remove the blocks that get in the way and prevent others to access Jesus. In each one of these stories, we find Jesus’ focus to be on leading lost people to a saving relationship with His Father in heaven.

#### Christ Disciples and Those who Chose to be his Followers

When not ministering to the lost, Jesus spends most of his time teaching his disciples how to develop a loving passion for the lost children of God and for those who had walked away from feeling as part of the people of God. Christ invested himself in modeling how to minister to people’s physical, spiritual, and emotional needs and equipping them for the mission he was leaving for them.

The mission Christ set for his followers was not about telling them about the kingdom, but about helping people experience God’s love and care in the here and now

through acts of kindness. Jesus taught the disciples His method of ministry, first to show loving care for people's needs, to help heal their hearts before any of these people would open their minds to hear the gospel. The accounts of the gospel authors share that Jesus spent most of his time serving those neglected by others and those in need. Jesus daily led His disciples on a real-time training of how to love this overlooked group of people. This was made clear every time Christ reached out to those within and without the Jewish community that had not been given a chance.

### Call to Mission

The disciples were called from the get-go to learn how to be “fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). As we find the first list of the Twelve in Matthew 10, in Mark 3, and in Luke 6, we see the same mission presented to them, “and he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:13-15).

To be a disciple implies to be a missionary. Jesus selected those he chose not to hang around with and do church, but to go and be the church as they would heal, preach, and teach. In Matthew, we find Christ challenging those who were following and listening to him to be “the salt of the earth,” and the “light of the world” that should not be covered up (Matt 5:13-16). In my recent visit to Galilea in August 2019, I observed that the traditional place of Jesus' sermon recorded in Matthew 5 overlooks the city of Magdala where one can see large salt cisterns used to prepare and preserve fish prepared to be sent to Rome. So, Christ's words of salt of the earth are likely aimed at challenging his listeners to go to the world and share His Message (Gabelein, 1984).

The disciples and the listeners to Christ sermon are called to surpass the “righteousness” of their religious leaders (Matt 5:17-20). This challenge in the text is followed by the instructions that being a person of faith requires more than “just keeping the law,” but having a heart that cared to live the attitude of love that was behind the law of God. This attitude was so foundational to the ministry of Christ that he called his disciples to show it even to their enemies (Matt 4:43-48). God’s vision was for the love story of Jesus to reach all people, no matter their past sins, background, or current condition.

#### Life of Sacrifice

The twelve apostles were led to realize that being a follower of God means living a life focused on the need of others and not on one’s own (Matt 10:39). Jesus challenged them to think that the sacrifices made now of comfort, leaving behind houses, careers, money, treasuries on earth, will win a greater reward in the new earth for the disciples themselves and for those they are going to disciple (Matt 19:28). The golden rule Christ taught his disciples to follow is, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12). The manner in which followers of Jesus relate to others reveals if they are true Christians (Nichol, 1980, p. 356). If I can paraphrase these words into missional context, they will sound something like this, “If you want to experience full joy of eternity, you cannot be the only one there but have to go and bring others to it.” A disciple of Christ must stay focused on what will help them connect to other people to be able to lead them to Christ. Salvation was to be shared with others, and not just enjoyed by the saved. Jesus modeled the outreach focus of his mission on this earth every day of his life with the disciples.

As Jesus mentored his disciples, he kept that same emphasis. Talking to them about his upcoming suffering and death, Peter tried to stand up to Jesus and rebuked this death idea. Jesus did not spare his beloved disciple some very harsh words, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Matt 16:23). Yet at another moment of weakness, Christ looked at the same Peter who had just betrayed him, and with tears in his eyes invited him to come back to repentance (Mark 14:66-72). These two experiences with Peter show that Jesus had zero tolerance of us willingly getting in the way of God’s mission. Yet, when our imperfections end up hurting his work, God forgives the hardship we cause him and makes up for our shortcomings, not letting the mission suffer because we fell short. This seems to be an approach for the Christian church community to consider as it deals with people who get in the way of God’s ministry. Before the leaders decide what response to take, they need to consider the intentionality and the nature of the damage caused. Strong reaction is needed at times when members intentionally sabotage God’s mission and threaten to interfere with the redemptive work of God in the life of one of his lost children.

### The Gospel Commission

To emphasize Christ’s passion for lost people, at the end of His ministry, Jesus completed his mission on the cross and spent his last days with his team of disciples and followers, who he gave two important commands. He entrusted his ministry into their hands. His words were a direct command regarding the importance of outreach focused vision in their continuous ministry. The first command is the well-known Great Commission of Jesus.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt 28:18-20)

This call to mission by Jesus emphasizes the importance of taking the gospel to all “nations.” Here Jesus calls for his disciples to take the message of Jesus to all people and ethnic groups around the world.

The second command is found in the last words of Jesus before he assented to heaven in front of the eyes of his disciples as recorded in Acts chapter 1. These words point us to the outreach mission as the key command for all his future disciples. It clearly states God’s vision for his work. The disciples wanted to know when will God’s kingdom be established? The response of Jesus was clear. The new kingdom of God starts with His followers being missionaries to all geographic areas in the world. The progression here moves from Jerusalem, where the temple was, to Judea, the larger area where the Jews resided. Next, Christ expands the call for the Jews to go and witness to Samaria, a place they had sinner-prejudice against and from there to go to “the end of the world.”

Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. (Acts 1:6-9)

### **Jesus’ Strategic Principles to Cast a Mission-focused Vision With His Core Team**

Christ top priority was to serve and save the lost. Yet, his strategy was not for him to build his church, but to train, mentor and empower his disciples to carry that mission.



Jesus invested time, energy and resources into his disciples through some intentional strategic steps to help them adopt the same mission-focused vision and lifestyle.

First, was the need for building strong personal spiritual connection with God and a need for a revival of the heart. Jesus taught his disciples and followers to revive their own passion for God and experience personally his Father's forgiveness and grace. He taught them how to spend alone time with God, he also took them on secluded retreats to pray and seek God's guidance together. Second, he taught them to live a life of sharing God's love through serving the needs of those around them. He bathed them in a daily experience of what it means to live a mission-focused life of serving all those in need. Third, he modeled to them that people matter more than policies. This was revealed in the examples where Christ did not let human tradition to get in the way of bringing people to a saving relationship with God. Fourthly, he showed that all focus must be on making the work of seeking and saving the lost the primary focus of their ministry. Finally, in his ministry, Jesus also modeled different leadership styles depending on who he was dealing with. He taught his disciples how to confront with confidence the arrogant, and when to gently challenge the hearts of those who are sincerely trying to align their heart and life with God's.

He criticized religious leaders and his own disciples when they were stubborn and needed correction. At the same time extended forgiveness when they sincerely messed up. He kept casting the vision he wanted all his disciples to adopt. More than anything, he led his closest leaders to experience the power of living a daily lifestyle of total commitment to God and his mission. He showed them that the only way to be excited about those who are lost is to be serving and ministering to them every day. In all this,

Christ invested in one-on-one teaching, personally mentoring, and training his disciples so they will understand the mission and vision of God and continue that mission after he was gone from them. As he was ascending to heaven, he commanded them to make mission the focus of their ministry on this earth and to keep on making disciples of others so they will continue this ministry. He rebuked them when they let their own selfishness get in the way of the mission. All this, because God's character is one of community, and because God's salvation was never provided for us alone, but to be shared with all people on earth.

It is these principles laid out in the life and ministry of Jesus that should be the foundation for any strategy a church builds in its desire to keep mission in the heart of their ministry.

### **Application to the Local Church Plant**

There is a clear biblical mandate in the very ministry of Christ to be intentional about sustaining an outreach focused vision in every church community.

### **Summary**

The three and a half years of Jesus Christ's life are a model of the importance of having an all-outreaching focused vision for the church in all ages. The mission-focused vision Christ wanted to leave with his followers in these last words reveals God's passion for the lost. He mentored and trained the disciples to keep focused on this missional vision of saving the lost while remaining faithfully led by God and his Spirit.

Jesus worked to correct the religious leaders and the man-made religious tradition and rules they promoted. With those who should have known better, Christ was direct and, at times even harsh. He expected more from them.

The second group Jesus dedicated most of his ministry time were those who were lost. He introduced those who had lost hope to the good news of the Kingdom of God. He helped them see, God had not abandoned them but came to save them. Jesus shared with them the wonderful instructions of Scripture that were designed to help them realize how much better their life could be with God. He tried to bring them to a saving relationship with his heavenly Father and assure them that God forgives their sins and longs to have them with him for eternity.

The third group Jesus invested his time in were his committed disciples. They constantly observed Christ's focus to lead those who do not know God to a saving relationship with him. Jesus challenged his followers to live like servants of God, caring for the people who were outside of God's family. He modeled to them a balance between time in prayer with God in the mountain and caring for the multitudes (White, 1892, p. 101). Even though the gospel clearly shows that Christ took special time to invest in mentoring his disciples we find that the primary focus of his fellowship with them was not to create a closed community, but rather to instill in them the passion for bringing lost people to be saved.

The lesson for the church of today, is that even though caring for each other and growing in our knowledge of the Bible and God is important, we should equally focus all our time together, our activities and our daily living to uncompromisingly live out the vision of God to save lost people.

This command Jesus gave to preach the gospel was not just for His current disciples, but also for those they were going to disciple into the family of God. In fact, Christ was praying for the future leaders and followers that were going to join

Christianity through the future work of his leaders. In one of the most heartfelt prayers recorded from Jesus, he asks God to help his disciples to stay faithful, to hold to the truth, to be protected from the evil while working in the world of non-Christian people. It is in there that we read the words, “I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20). Christ envisioned the great Christian movement we are experiencing today and His call to make God’s mission the focus of our ministry is as important for us as it was important to his disciples.

Christ was driven by God’s passion to save the lost and he dedicated his life to turn that passion be adopted as a common vision among all his disciples. His life and ministry revealed the power of a common vision for the growth of a community long before secular behavioral science began studying and confirming its importance for the success of any organization or movement.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I review the non-biblical sources of the most current and relevant literature on the subjects of visioning and strategic planning. I explore the definition of vision, the difference between how secular and Christian vision is derived, and the impact of shared vision for organizational success and culture. I also look at different strategies in creating a common vision and how strategic planning could be effectively used in the context of starting new mission-focused churches. I conclude this literature review by evaluating the impact a missional-strategic planning process and shared missional vision could have on church organizations, their leadership, and their ministry effectiveness.

#### **Introduction**

In the mid 1990s Bob Logan became a catalyst to revive the intentional church planting movement in the English-speaking communities in the United States. This movement impacted the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and under the leadership of Russel Burrill initiated the SEEDS church planting conferences. The result was the beginning of a movement among pastors, lay members and denominational leaders to refocus back on planting new churches the way the denomination used to do in the early 1900s (Evans, 2013).

Despite the renewed vision for planting, there were very few Seventh-day Adventist church planting resources produced in the 1990s. This was clearly evident in my search to

find current literature on the subject. Resources on church planting vision and leadership strategies for sustaining mission-focused vision in the post launch years of a church plant produced a limited number of available resources. The few materials discovered were primarily concerned with basic steps of “how to” start a new plant, or simply dealt with mission work in general. I expanded my search to include books and papers related to the general subject of vision casting for organizational growth, leadership, and strategic planning, as well as sources that dealt with the topic of vision and its role in creating a missional culture in congregations.

Most of the materials I found were written between late 1996 and 2010, and then I noticed a gap of sources between 2010 and 2014. There was a significant increase in books written on church planting and church growth after 2014, primarily driven by a movement influenced by the Annual Exponential Church Planting Conferences co-led by David Ferguson and Todd Wilson. The resources between 2014-2019 were primarily books written by experienced church planters, but very few of these resources contained credible research about planting since most of them did not deal with the subject of missional visioning. I did not find any dissertations specifically written on vision casting for new churches. The few dissertations available were case studies that dealt with techniques to start a plant but they did not provide much insight into developing or retaining a missional vision in new congregations.

In my review of the current literature, I attempted to divide the sources into three main categories. The first one deals with literature presenting the importance of visioning for the success of new organizations. The next group of literature covers the importance of developing and sustaining a long-term mission-focused vision and missional culture.

In the final section we look into the importance of adopting mission-focused vision across all levels of the church organization and ministries, and its impact on the success of achieving that vision.

### **Definition of Vision**

Virtually, all secular sources that deal with leadership, management, or organizational health emphasize the importance of a clear shared vision in the development, growth, and success of any organization. Church plants and churches are led by similar organizational growth principles as any for-profit or non-profit company, but they differ in the path of how they derive their vision.

### **Secular Definition of Vision**

Vision describes an image of “what success will look like” in fulfilling an organization’s success and purpose (Allisson & Kaye, 2011). Zaccaro and Banks (2001) present vision as an expression of the ideal future the organization aims to achieve. It does not define the state of where things are now, but what it is aiming to become. Vision represents the perfect scenario of the leader’s mental image of what that future could be.

### **Kouzes and Posner**

“The most important role of visions in organizational life” Kouzes and Posner (2007) say, “is to give focus to human energy” (p. 125). Vision, according to these authors, inspires leaders. To be a successful leader one must be able to imagine a picture of the future. People are willing to follow those who can show them something “beyond today’s problems and visualize a brighter tomorrow” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 125).

I find Kouzes and Posner's argument to be critically important, because no organization has a future unless its leaders and members can see tomorrow in a tangible, picture-like way. The success of all secular or spiritual organizations seems to be hidden in the ability of its leaders and people to see, adopt, and follow a clear vision.

### **Zaccaro and Banks**

Accordingly, Zaccaro and Banks (2001) differentiate between vision and strategy by describing vision as "an idealized representation of what the organization should become" not only what it is (p. 183). Bennis and Nanus (as cited in Zaccaro & Banks, 2001) define vision as being a "mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization" (p. 184). Another definition presented is that vision is a mental image the leader conjures up to portray a highly desirable end state for an organization (Gardner & Avolio, 1999, as cited in Zaccaro & Banks, 2001, p. 184). It is like a picture of the future and is such a powerful driver that it can help build the right values and help set a culture "reflecting long-term aspiration and organizational change" (Zaccaro & Banks, p. 188). In other words, if used effectively a clear vision is the key ingredient in influencing positive change that will help transform the current culture and climate in an organization and help it become what it needs to be in order for the ideal pursued future to take place. Zaccaro and Banks (2001) also say that vision and values is what should define any successful strategy. Strategies are the specific statements and steps that, when followed, will help an organization align itself with the intended change it is pursuing. Success is closely tied to a clear vision.



## **Senge**

Senge (1990) compares vision to a “force in people’s hearts, a force of impressive power.” “Vision is not an idea,” nor is it an “important idea such as freedom” (p. 206). When adopted by the leaders and community, it creates an unstoppable momentum, because everyone starts accepting it as if it is real. As Senge (1990) puts it, “Few forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision” (p. 206).

### Christian Definition of Vision

The church is an organization just as any other for-profit or not-for-profit one. As such, the role vision plays for its success is just as important as in any other business. Vision is derived where differences are observed.

## **Blackaby**

Arguably some of the foremost Christian authors on the subject of Christian leadership are Henry and Michael Blackaby. In their book, *Spiritual Leadership* (2011), they present the secular definition of vision as “an image of something that is both desirable and attainable.” Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) explain how Christian vision is different from the secular one. They place visioning neither in the hands of the leader nor the follower, but rather in the revelation of God to both. His definition of vision is “moving people on to God’s agenda” (p. 36). They further argue that acquiring a vision from a Christian perspective is a spiritual process that allows God to reveal his custom will, appropriate to the context as well as the leader, and the following community. The difference between the Blackabys’ view of how vision is acquired compared to the view of secular writers is that they place the origin of a vision with God and state that Jesus’s life is an example of which God preordains the vision. Christ’s vision “came from his

father” (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011, p. 42). When faith is factored in the picture, Christian leaders are there to adjust their lives to God’s purpose and lead others to do the same. God does not ask a leader to dream big, but to adopt his big vision. So even after the leader is gone, the vision of the church continues. Spiritual leadership is different than any secular leadership theory. Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) write, “The world can offer its best theories on leadership and provide the most extensive training possible, but unless God sets the agenda for a leader’s life, that person, though thoroughly educated, will not be an effective spiritual leader” (p. 71).

They later even connect leadership and vision with character. Christian leadership development is driven by character development, because “leadership is a character issue” (p. 84).

The Blackabys’ view is in harmony with the biblical view of visioning and leadership. The vision for every church leader is given to them by God and is always based on the passion and vision of God. The passion of God is saving “that which is lost” (Luke 19:10). Therefore, the vision of the church must express God’s passion for mission. Thus, the vision of any healthy Christian ministry or group has to be all about saving lost people. The success of anything that a church does is measured by how well it manages to fulfill God’s purpose to disciple people into a saving relationship with him.

The Blackabys’ (2001) look at what is probably the most well-known vision related passage in the Bible, the words of King Solomon recorded in Proverbs 29:18 which the King James Version translates, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The Blackabys’ (2001) present a more correct translation of the original Hebrew text reading more like the newer New International Version where the word “vision” is

translated as “revelation.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “revelation” as a “disclosure of something not previously known or realized,” meaning the vision God reveals is not a creation of a person. It is “revealed” by God to the leader and the community God calls them to lead.

## **Barna**

George Barna (1992), a researcher on faith and contemporary religious issues, has a similar definition to that of the Blackabys. “Vision for ministry is a reflection of what God wants to accomplish through the church to build his Kingdom” (p. 29). In the same paragraph he continues to describe vision in the following way,

Vision is a picture held in your mind’s eye of the way things could or should be in the days ahead. Vision denotes a visual reality, a portrait of conditions that do not exist currently. This picture is internalized and personal. It is not somebody else’s view of the future, but one that uniquely belongs to you. (p. 29)

When it comes to the importance vision plays for the success of any organization, churches included, Barna (1992) agrees with the secular researchers that “unless God’s people have a clear understanding of where they are headed, the probability of a successful journey is severely limited” (p. 11). He further suggests that lack of direction in ministry will result only in “confusion, weariness, dissipation and impotence” (p. 11).

Yet, Barna (1992), like the Blackabys, makes it clear that what is needed is not simply the existence of a vision, but also the “widespread ownership of God’s vision for ministry by the leaders and participants of the church” (Barna, p. 12). As he goes on to describe how vision originates, and how it is derived, his view is directly aligned with that of Blackaby. Only when a congregation has adopted God’s vision to assist people in starting a relationship with God will it be healthy and growing.

On this point the Bible view of vision does not contradict secular theories today. Unless a leader, a community or an organization such as a church, knows where they are headed, they will most probably never get there. In a similar point to the Blackabys, Barna (1992) explains how according to the philosophy of Christ, a vision should not even be about meeting the needs of the communities a church works in, even though Christ's followers should serve the needs of the people around them. The vision of every church must be focused on fulfilling God's passion to bring people to himself, rather than pursuing human dreams, opportunities, personal benefits and success for the leader or the community.

My 20 years of experience as a pastor and 12 as a full-time church planter agrees with the conclusions of Blackaby and Barna that Christian vision originates with God. I find the secular scholarship to also be right in the importance of working with a clear vision and the role it plays for the success of any organization, including the church. In my 20 years of experience working with churches and Christian organizations, vision based on God's mission is key for the effectiveness of any Christian ministry. Having a God inspired missional vision is the only way a church body could claim to be truly a church of God. Therefore, before clearly defining their vision; churches must first clearly understand their mission. All successful for-profit businesses have a clear purpose, to maximize the profits for their owners. All successful churches must live with the purpose to maximize their effectiveness for the sake of God's desire expressed in 1 Timothy 2:4, "God wants everyone to be saved."

## **Stetzer**

Ed Stetzer (2016) like the Blackabys, Zaccaro, and Banks, points out that all true Christian church organizations should have a clear mission to bring as many people as possible into a saving relationship with their creator God, or they cannot claim to be real Christian organizations (p. 25). The vision of a church must be based on the clear mission of God expressed and fulfilled in their current ministry context.

## **Andy Stanley**

In a very similar way Andy Stanley (2005), a young Christian leader and a church planter, defines vision as “a clear mental picture of what could be, fueled by the conviction it should be. Vision is a preferred future. Stanley uses the word “destination” as a synonym to vision (p. 18).

Visioning, according to all four Christian authors, is not in the hands of either the leader or the follower, but rather in the revelation of God to both. Visioning is a spiritual process that allows God to reveal His vision of the future, appropriate to the respective context as well as the leader and the followers in the community. In this paper the term “vision” is used from a Christian perspective, i.e., as the preferred picture that describes God’s dream of what the organization should be as it fulfills his mission in a relevant way to the current cultural context, the leader, and the community of followers.

## **Covey**

Stephen Covey (2013) looks at the importance of vision to be derived from the greater purpose of the organization.

To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction. (p. 105)

## **Weems**

Lovett H. Weems (2010) takes the definition of vision and explains its role in leading. “Leadership is about change,” he says and then expands on the vision as a source which ensures that a renewal and regeneration take place in a church. He points out that a clear direction brings accountability to the process and is a key way to preserve any organization, its values, and mission. In short, he argues that for a church to remain vibrant and relevant it has to constantly be working on being aligned with its mission independently of what changes take place outside of it (p. 22). Weems (2010) writes,

Ongoing visioning becomes the means for this renewal. If a compelling vision is not present or if the organization is not seeking a vision, then a vacuum is created. The result will be either no vision or, more likely, the presence of many small competing visions. In either case, the result is decline. (p. 23)

Weems then quotes Rueben P. Job’s (as cited in Weems, 2010) who gives a similar description of what we earlier stated as Barna and Blackaby’s view of what is vision.

Vision is a gift from God. It is the reward of disciplined, faithful, and patient listening to God. Vision allows us to see beyond the visible, beyond the barriers and obstacles to our mission. Vision “catches us up,” captivates and compels us to act. Vision is the gift of eyes of faith to see the invisible, to know the unknowable, to think the unthinkable, to experience the not yet. Vision allows us to see signs of the kingdom now, in our midst. Vision gives us focus, energy, the willingness to risk. It is our vision that draws us forward. (p. 23)

### **Importance of Shared Vision for Organizational Success**

Having a clear vision is key for the success of any organization, business, or group. Having a clear path to share vision among all levels of the organizational life is as important as the vision itself, because it ensures that all parties on all organizational levels will work for a common purpose, with a common focus driving all decisions made and actions taken. Thus, a common vision must reflect the organizational mission, and

must incorporate its core values by expressing the picture of the future the organization is working to build.

## **Weems**

Weems (2010) provides ten characteristics of a focused vision, presented as being derived from the mission, rooted in the past, and providing a clear picture of where God wants the congregation to go. He also describes it as focused on the future and unique to the current context, time, and culture of the organization. It is realistic, lofty, and inviting, and is shared by the whole group. He describes vision as good because it provides a focus, and at the same time creates frictions and discomfort for the few who do not want to join in it. Finally, he shares that vision provides hope (pp. 26-32). He suggests that as the church derives its vision from its purpose, it must consider all these factors within and outside the organization, and how the vision addresses and relates to each of them.

Another interesting insight Weems shares about shaping organization vision comes from Robert C. Worley's idea (as cited in Weems, 2010) that "Leaders cannot impose a vision. They can initiate the processes and participate actively to contribute to the vision" (p. 39). Worley (as cited in Weems, 2010) challenges the concept that leaders provide the vision and argues that leaders help the organization come to a shared vision. Leaders are the first ones to spot the forming common vision as they lead that organization through the visioning process. Worley's (as cited in Weems, 2010) view of the role of leadership in shaping the visioning process make it clear that the vision ultimately must have a shared purpose that benefits the whole community (p. 40).

## **Blackaby**

Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) present a similar understanding that even though the leader is instrumental to the vision casting, she or he is not the only channel to receive it. They go a step further, suggesting that leaders in the Bible do not receive the vision alone. They add that a vision cannot be forced, but most often is derived in a collective process of the leader and the community that see God's leading, which makes it a common vision. Weems (2010) on the other hand, takes the view that God gives the vision to the leader first based on few Bible passages: Genesis 12: 1- 3; Genesis 41: 25; Exodus 3: 3-9; and Isaiah 1: 1-31.

Both points are seen in Scripture. Christian leaders often have visions they carry in them that have been inspired by God. Yet it is true no Bible leader ever forces God's vision on the people. They simply work alongside God as he brings his convincing power through his spirit to the community, influencing them to adopt the same vision. This understanding is important since leaders are imperfect beings and are often not capable of seeing the full vision of God. God helps shape the leader's understanding of the vision through the input of other Godly people, and at times causes adjustments to the same vision based on the response of the community. A clear, strong vision held only by the leader is not enough. A true leader does not force the community to accept his or her personal vision, but leads the community to build a common vision that could be adopted by the people.

## **Herrington, Bonem, and Furr**

Herrington, Bonem, and Furr (2000) also emphasize the importance of a common vision, "If it does not become shared, disunity and misdirected actions will deplete the



church's energy" (Herrington, Bonem, & Furr, 2000, p. 50). Vision is key to mobilizing the members to mission. Wilson (2017) agrees with them when he states,

Vision activates your church's 'sending' impulse. In a church that has a strong multiplication vision, multiplication spreads spontaneously and exponentially. People know they are called to make disciples. They know that they're part of a church that releases and sends them out to carry the gospel to every nook and cranny of society. (p. 132)

The reason God uses leaders seems to be because people have a hard time defining what they want, much more pursuing it without a leader pushing for change. Weems (2010) shares that allowing people to participate and be a part of the vision does not automatically translate into giving people what they like or desire. Most participants in the visioning process cannot articulate the future well. As Weems (2010) says visioning is "to [try to] give people what they want and need, though it is so new that they may not yet articulate it for themselves" (p. 42).

### **Leonard Sweet**

In one of his early books, Sweet (1999) makes an interesting observation about casting a vision:

'Visionaries' are not people whose eyesight can peek into the future. Visionaries are those who can peer around them, who can see life for what it is, who can see God for who God is. They are people who can read the 'signs of the times,' and not just the 'signs of the future.' Visionaries are also those who can heal the wounds of the past by offering new metaphors around which we can shape a new focus for the future. (p. 130)

If a person accepts the biblical view that God already has the vision, and that he is the one that grants it to the leader while simultaneously helping the community to see the benefit of that vision for their future, then the role of the leader in the vision casting process shifts. A visionary leader in the biblical context of leadership, who is looking at a desired outcome for the future of the church community but discovers that the rest of the

church membership will not allow for that outcome to be accomplished, then the leader should not feel personal responsibility for the failure. The ultimate responsibility about the fulfillment of the vision lies with the vision giver, which in the Christian context is God. People play a role in accomplishing God's plans by exercising their free will and by choosing to reject those plans, they can fail the plans of God for their lives. The story of sin in Genesis 3:1-5 is a good example of that.

### Shared Vision Leads to Shared Leadership

Adopting the vision among all levels of the organization is key to its impact and successful implementation.

An organization is not run by a single leader (O'Reilly et al., 2010). The executive leader does play a key role in the overall process of defining the vision, casting it in creative and inspiring ways so the leaders down the organizational chart will buy into it as shared vision. Yet, the effectiveness of the implementation of the vision at the end depends on the collective collaborative work of the whole leadership team.

O'Reilly et al. (2010) summarize it well, that "it is not the effectiveness of a leader in isolation that affects organizational performance, but the alignment of leaders across hierarchical levels that is associated with the successful implementation of a strategic change" (p. 111).

Creating and implementing a strategy for sustaining a vision in an organization requires time. To succeed in making a vision common, an organization must rely on a comprehensive communication strategy involving both, tangible and intangible tools and systems (Ray, Barney, & Muhanna, 2004). The point that Ray et al. (2004) make is very valid. A strategy for casting a shared vision requires a comprehensive approach,

affecting a wide spectrum of the organizational agents and systems. To accomplish this task the church planter and leadership team must develop a specific strategic, step by step process to convey the vision to win the confidence and trust of core leaders, and members so they buy into it. As Ruvio, Rosenblatt, and Hertz-Lazarowitz, (2010) observe, for a vision to impact change successfully it has to be adopted as the driving motivator behind all other actions a group does.

Collins and Porras (1991) emphasize that a shared vision statement helps an organization engage more the creativity of its people, from management to the person on the production line, to the volunteer who does the most unnoticed, behind-the-scene tasks. The authors' research rightly defends the idea that common vision helps organizations today to decentralize in order to empower their people with freedom of creativity and stimulate their direct input into productivity. Developed organizational vision ensures that workers on any level collaborate together towards a coordinated overall outcome.

Christenson and Walker (2004) research agrees with Collins and Porras about the positive impact vision has on collaboration. When an inspiring vision communicates with clarity what the final result of a project will look like, and is combined with effective communication, it has a greater impact on the completion of that vision. Slack, Orife, and Anderson (2010) add that commitment to the corporate vision of the organization positively impacts the satisfaction experienced by leaders and volunteers. Herman (2004) adds that identifying the organization's purpose not only builds unity, but helps avoid unnecessary conflict in the organization and instead directs energy toward productivity.

## **Vision and Culture**

Denham Grierson (as cited by Weems, 2010) points out that vision influences organizational culture. He defines culture as “the unique shape, flow, and style of a congregation” (p. 34). Weems (2010) agrees with Grierson’s view and observes that culture influences how newcomers perceive the organization. Weems (2010) also says the majority of people often make their “objective judgment” regarding joining the vision on the basis of their perception “communicated through the images and symbols of the organizational culture” (p. 84). Next argument he presents is that an organizational culture is as good as people’s perception of it.

Culture impacts the implementation of the vision (Weems, 2010). Organizations can do everything strategically right, but if there is a discrepancy between the image they try to communicate and the perception of that image, their vision and their greatness might go unnoticed or be misunderstood.

Both above assessments can be strongly supported on culture. Every church needs to give special attention to what the images and symbols of its organizational culture communicates since it has a direct impact on people’s perception and response to the vision. As the picture of the future is communicated it can never be separated from the current culture. In fact, the vision usually reflects the organizational culture. I strongly support Weems analysis in that it explains why if culture and tradition are left unchecked, they may drive the vision into the ground. Vision can help change culture, but culture, when left unchecked can kill the vision (p. 34).

Most church planters I have worked with are entrepreneurs by nature and had either started their own business, ministry, or have been leading in some new venture.

This explains why it is these types of leaders who start new churches and why these churches are more innovative in their approach to ministry. Ruvio et al. (2010), in an overview of research on entrepreneurial leadership, favor the idea that entrepreneurial leaders see the vision of the future naturally easier. The authors (Ruvio et al. 2010) also share how non-profit entrepreneurs “will convey their entrepreneurial vision in more inspirational and communicative terms” that will move people to follow ideals and values that are the center of a non-profit vision (p. 146).

Yet, in my experience working with over 90 church start-ups, often, once the original planter transitions into something else, the missional vision of the plant tends to be lost or die completely. According to Ruvio et al. (2010) research for the vision to be effective requires it to be derived and communicated through an intentional strategy. The challenge for these non-profit leaders or “social entrepreneurs” (Ruvio et al., 2010) as the researchers call them, is to move beyond their natural ability to see the vision before others can and manage to create a systematic strategy that will help the team around them share in the vision and continue to pursue it as their own. The same research (Ruvio et al., 2010) establishes evidence that this transition from the entrepreneurial vision to a shared vision-driven leadership is key for the long-term survival of the non-profit. Non-profit leaders build and convey their vision differently than for-profit business leaders do. In agreement with Ruvio et al. (2010), I completely see the great need for church planters as non-profit social entrepreneurs to develop an intentional strategy to create a common vision that is sustained by their leadership team and church for the long run.

## **Using Spiritual Visioning Retreats to Build A Shared Vision and Mission Driven Culture**

A visioning retreat is a special time when all or some leaders come together to help shape the future of the organization and to create a strategy of how that vision of the future will become reality. To build a shared vision, it is key to take time to process it with all key leaders in the church organization. Kouzes and Posner (2007) emphasize that “leadership is not a solo act, it’s a team effort” (p. 223). Working together with the other leaders and people they are leading allows them to accomplish more than working alone.

The importance of vision for organizational success has been adopted by most of the business world in the 21st century. Cady, Wheeler, DeWolf, and Brodke (2011) reveal in a study, that since 1990 to 2000 the number of United States businesses that have some kind of mission or vision statements has doubled. The reason this is emphasized is because those organizational statements help keep the companies on course. They use a good illustration to describe the importance of a clearly written organizational statement defining their purpose, values, and vision for the future.

Just as a buoy marks a shipping lane and keeps a ship heading in the chosen direction, formalized organization statement provides the benchmarks to keep an organization, work groups, and individuals on the right path. Personal experience has taught us that individuals in organizations can get so caught up in the race that they forget why they are running. (p. 65)

While the vision for a church or church plant fits all the characteristics of vision shared by Kouzes and Posner, Zaccaro and Banks, Senge, the group of the Blackabys, Barna, Stetzer and Stanley, it presents a compelling difference between secular and Christian vision by differentiating where that vision, and the mission behind it originate. So, for an organization to remain Christian, its vision must satisfy the mission of God, i.e., to be focused on those God is trying to bring into a saving relationship with himself.

The general process to build a shared vision must be accomplished by allowing time for the leaders of the faith community to seek together the guidance of God and the direction He is leading them to take.

A spiritual retreat is an intentional activity of moving away from our busyness and normal routines of life, finding time to be quiet and still, to reflect, and to reconnect with God through reading, silence, meditation, and prayer. Secular research (Wintering et al., 2021) confirms that a spiritual retreat that includes “meditation, silence, prayer, self-reflection, and personal spiritual guidance” have a positive effect on brain functions. Christian spiritual retreat “improves a number of physical and mental health related measures” (p. 7). Having leaders in a retreat setting, away from their responsibilities of life and church creates an asthenosphere for them to focus on God and discern His voice.

Stout (2011) looks at case studies of different communities and organizations that tried to build a common vision together. She uses the term “collective visioning” and describes it as, “A group of people, with guidance, envision a future together” (pp. 13–14). The premise of Stout’s writings is that visioning together empowers all participants to help shape the vision they want to achieve together and keeps them united as they focused on getting there.

Jesus used times for spiritual retreats and did collective visioning with those he was discipling. White (1948), in her descriptions of what leaders God longs for writes,

Those who bear responsibilities must be men trained for the work, men whom God can teach and whom He can honor with wisdom and understanding, as He did Daniel. They must be thinking men, men who bear God’s impress and who are steadily progressing in holiness, in moral dignity, and in an understanding of their work. They must be praying men, men who will come up into the mount and view the glory of God and the dignity of the heavenly beings whom He has ordained to have charge of His work. Then, like Moses, they will follow the pattern given them in the mount; and they will be on the alert to secure and bring into connection with the work the very

best talent that can be obtained. If they are growing men, possessing sanctified intelligence; if they listen to the voice of God and seek to catch every ray of light from heaven, they will, like the sun, pursue an undeviating course, and they will grow in wisdom and in favor with God. (p. 549)

She also describes the time Jesus was choosing his twelve disciples in whom he invested the majority of his time to train, mentor, and equip to be the leaders of his future followers. Jesus did not train the disciples in oratory skills, or in conflict resolution, or even in strategic planning. White (1940) describes that what he cared for was that they knew how to retreat alone and together and through time in prayer seek the guidance of God, by being able to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit of God, the Counselor who will guide them after Jesus is no longer with them.

It was beneath the sheltering trees of the mountainside, but a little distance from the Sea of Galilee, that the twelve were called to the apostolate, and the Sermon on the Mount was given. The fields and hills were the favorite resorts of Jesus, and much of His teaching was given under the open sky, rather than in the temple or the synagogues. No synagogue could have received the throngs that followed Him; but not for this reason only did He choose to teach in the fields and groves. Jesus loved the scenes of nature. To Him each quiet retreat was a sacred temple. (p. 290)

She (White, 1940) continues to describe how it was in a spiritual retreat, outdoors in nature that Adam and Eve had their time with God, Abraham received his promise from God, Jacob saw a vision from God, Moses and the Israelites received God's guidance, David learned to hear the voice of heaven, and Jesus would commune in the presence of God the Father (p. 290).

### **Importance of a Mission-driven Vision in Churches**

This section looks at three stands a church plant needs to take. First is the importance of protecting the missional aspect of its vision and staying aligned with it. Second is to keep the courage to let go of leaders and volunteers who are not aligned with



the organizational vision. Third, a church needs to develop strategic systems to sustain a long-term mission-focused vision and culture.

### Why Keep the Vision Missional

It is crucial for a church plant to stay aligned with its vision if it is to remain successful in reaching its mission to lead disciples to Christ. Ed Stetzer (2016) addresses the need for every newly started church plant to develop and adopt a vision that is strongly mission oriented. He introduces the predominant misconceptions of church planting that have hindered the positive reception of the church planting movement among existing congregations and their leaders. The two relevant misconceptions to our discussion are that church planting is a squandering of valuable resources that can be used instead to revive dying congregations. The next one is the belief that new churches are simply there to attract believers from other congregations around. Stetzer (2016) shows that even though these issues can be a real distraction for many starting congregations, the goal of missional church plants is glorifying God, growing his kingdom, and to continue to birth new churches that will disciple new people into the church family (pp. 18-19).

My recent experience as a full-time church planting pastor, and my work as a church planting coach have shown me that the above misconceptions are a very real challenge church planters face in their work. Stetzer is correct that most church plants start with a strong mission mindset in place, but with time lose their outreach focus as they attempt to expand their volunteer pool. The church today relies mostly on volunteers. The way volunteers join the cause of the church plant is through a compelling vision (Malphurs & Penfold, 2014). Balser and McClusky (2005) say that “the tasks of

stakeholder management is interpreting the nature of stakeholder’s expectations and weighing the appropriateness of the expectations against the value and mission of the organization” (pp. 295–296). Every plant needs to know its constituency and understand how to connect the vision to appeal and attract more existing believers who can help physically and financially in the fast-growing ministry needs of the new congregation. The focus often unintentionally shifts to accommodate the expectations and demands of these volunteers who contribute resources.

### Dealing With Leaders Who Are Not Aligned With the Vision

One of the key factors in moving an organization forward is to get the wrong people off the leadership team (Collins, 2001). The pressure for many churches and plants are to keep people not aligned with the vision of their organization because of their money, influence, position in the society, or power. Leading towards a vision requires leaders willing to send people not interested in adopting the vision out of leadership positions.

In his extensive research on the characteristics of the fastest growing church plants in North America, Stephen Gray (2007) tells us that the two key factors for achieving fast growth are that by year two a church plant must break the 200-attendance barrier and become financially independent (p. 39). Gray’s benchmark applies to larger non-denominational plants and might be significantly lower in the context of planters in smaller population areas. As Crittenden, Crittenden, Stone, and Robertson (2003) note, nonprofits attract “considerable resources in terms of time, talent, and dollars. Yet, these resources are limited, and the competition is great (pp. 81–84). It is natural and necessary

for young church plants to desire to grow in attendance and gain financial and human resources.

Non-profit organizations encounter a variety of stakeholders who all have their expectations of the organization. As previously mentioned Blaster and McClusky (2005) state, “stakeholders may want things that the nonprofit cannot provide or that it believes should not provide” as it might be contrary to its vision and values. Herman and Rentz (as cited in Balsler & McClusky, 2005) make it clear that the success of a non-profit is determined by how well it can address “the stakeholder’s concerns” without compromising its vision, values, and mission (p. 297). Peter Drucker (cited in Weems 2010) also notes that in a non-profit organization there is not a single group that can say “yes” by themselves, but lots of groups that can oppose the vision with a “no” (p. 62).

Managing the resources among the scrutiny that comes from those who contributed them adds to the already complex relationships with all stakeholders. Balancing between the contributors and those who receive the benefit of the not-for-profit activity requires a balance that often proves difficult to achieve. Basler and McClusky (2005) get to the heart of this challenge:

Responsiveness may be problematic when multiple stakeholder groups have varying, and sometimes conflicting, expectations of the nonprofit organization. In addition, stakeholders may want things that the nonprofit cannot provide or that it believes it should not provide. (p. 296)

Once again, my observations as a church planting director for the Texas Conference confirm Herman and Rentz, Zamumuto and Balsler and McClusky conclusions about this complex relationship between not-for-profit organizations and those involved in their work and life. Church plants fight battles as they address the expectations of their members and volunteers. As they unintentionally begin to cater

more and more to the needs of established believers who are joining the church, young church plants start compromising on their outreach focused vision. The danger of this shift is that the plant become less relevant to the unchurched it has set out to reach.

Granet (2016) gives very wise advice that church plants must adhere to the question if they want to achieve success. He proposes that anyone who does not have the current organizational vision in mind should be eliminated from the working ranks.

Garnet is correct about the destructive influence of these people but taking them out of the church volunteer structure is a complex process. The main purpose of churches is not to have a greater number of committed leaders and volunteers, but to increase the number of disciples growing closer to Christ. Chasing people away is contrary to that purpose. Christians are to be patient and loving even to those who disagree with them and patiently work to help them understand the love of God.

The other side of this argument is that sustaining the missional vision and staying relevant is especially important in our postmodern culture where church and Christianity are already losing its ability to connect with unchurched people. It is the common vision focused on those God loves the most that helps the church stay relevant to them. Thus, Stetzer's et al. (2016) emphases on the necessity of staying mission-focused remains key to every planting team that desires to experience long-term kingdom growth. Leonard Sweet (1999) describes working with a wrong vision as "imprisonment" and true vision as "empowerment that helps a church retain relevance and connect with people (p. 164).

Leighton Holley, the president of the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventist during the time we started Crosswalk in 2006, is one of the most passionate mission-focused leaders I have ever encountered. In one of the conversations surrounding our

church plant, Holley (personal communication, March 2010) said, “A new church plant is all about reaching new souls for Christ, and not playing musical chairs with the members of other existing churches in the area.” This principle guided our Crosswalk team in our discussions about how to grow the church.

Stuart Murray (2001) addresses a prevailing problem of decline in the membership of established churches. He describes the problem: “Churches have been leaking hundreds of members each week for many years. Planting new kinds of churches may be a key to effective missions and a catalyst for the renewal of existing churches” (p. 18-19). Ed Stetzer (2016) in his book, *Planting Missional Churches*, analyzes Murray’s statement in the light of the facts that navigating through change is an almost impossible task for most existing congregations. This is where planting new churches will allow Christianity to shift back to be a movement driven by Christ’s mission (p. 11).

There are pastors who are very skilled in revitalizing existing stagnant congregations. As a college professor used to say, the truth is that it is still easier to make babies than it is to raise the dead, and it is more fun. I believe Murray and Stetzer are right in taking the stand that the only way to reverse the leaking church syndrome is to ensure that we plant different, new congregations where the issues causing the decline are resolved and where the primary focus is the mission of Christ. As Stetzer (2016) rightly points out, any church that does not truly hold and live by a missional vision is not a Christian church (pp. 18–19).

#### Impact of Missional Vision on the Church Planting Movement

Planting churches with a missional vision helps keep the Christian movement aligned with its mission to make disciples of all nations to the end of the world. Bob

Roberts (2008) sees the church planting movement as a way for the Christian church to remain active, relevant, and current in connecting people with God in today's post-Christian society. He accurately points that starting new congregations with passionate, fresh, missional vision, new expressions of worship, and new creative styles of doing ministry is the only way for the church to ensure it communicates the Christian gospel to a world who is losing touch with Christianity. Roberts (2008) also emphasizes that there is always a demand for church plants that have a better feel for the needs of their communities and can come up with new ways to do ministry that connects new people with the gospel. Every true Bible church starts with the desire to teach the gospel of Christ, but as they get past the maturity stage in their lifecycle most churches reach a point when they need a jumpstart (p. 30). Roberts (2008) writes,

Every church has a lifecycle—and that isn't bad, contrary to what some people think. The fact that some local churches eventually die is not always negative; it can actually be a positive thing. The question is, Are you planting more churches than are dying because of a shifting population, a new focus, and other factors? Starting churches roots you firmly in the future; you're a part of what God is going to do in a future generation. As a church becomes more effective at church planting, it is able to plant churches in other cities, states, and even nations. The result is the extension of a local church far beyond its own boundaries. (p. 30)

The problem with Roberts (2008) is that in his view the church planting should be a movement where all churches work as if they are all one church with the mission of God in mind. He challenges all denominations to join into a single global church planting movement.

Church planting is the best way for the Christian church to keep its relevancy and retain its edge in reaching the post-modern community. His argument that it is more important to get non-believers to God than to the right Christian denomination is biblical. Yet, I believe that the argument that denominationalism is the real reason for the lack of

effective world mission falls short of reality. While Robert is right that larger denominations are more likely over time to become stagnant and inflexible, slow to adapt to the rapidly changing ministry environment, the fact is that Christian mission work is as successful as it is today because of the large resources these very denominations have poured in the mission field by planting churches around the globe. Roberts seems to derive his perspective from a congregational point of view.

### Impact of Denominational Structures on Missional Vision

One can easily argue the opposite position, that non-denominational churches run the danger of becoming self-focused and not participate in the world mission. The other aspect of Robert's (2008) impractical and hard to achieve position is the idea of all churches and denominations coming together. Some denominations and churches hold different fundamental beliefs. While capable of joining forces together in certain mission projects, it is unrealistic to think that they will abandon their creed and create one global church. The reality is that each church has its own goals, traditions, and set of beliefs and values that do not always harmonize with those of others. This is a great and a very appealing idea, but unfortunately is quite utopic.

Finally, creating one big denomination or a non-denomination is not going to change things that much. This will require an even bigger effort to coordinate and run such a vast organization. In reality it is a matter of time before the new organization will run into all the issues of denominationalism from which it is trying to escape. No movement can be sustained without organizational structure. Leaving the criticism aside, Roberts plows a good missional challenge for all churches to look beyond themselves and

consider ways of collaboration when it comes to planting new churches and reaching the world with the gospel.

The Adventist denomination has been a great example of how to do mission beyond itself. In fact, at Crosswalk Fellowship we made an intentional decision to join the Seventh-day Adventist sisterhood of churches not just because of us identifying with the core beliefs of the denomination, but also because of the way the denominational financial system is set up. It uses the collective tithe from all congregations to support the work of pastors, church planters, missionaries in the United States, and around the world. It can be argued that as a denomination we have failed at times to keep a balanced, culturally sensitive approach to doing church in other countries. There has been much improvement that has been done regarding doing mission work more effectively, but that is a different issue to be addressed by another study. In Matthew 24:14 Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

What Roberts (2008) fails to recognize in his book is the fact that many churches and denominations have already been planting churches and missions around the world for the past two centuries and have been able to do more in reaching millions of people for Christ than any non-denominational church today. There may be a more legitimate argument that can be made. New groups and churches at home or abroad, independently of if they are a part of a denomination or not, should become more aligned with God’s passion for mission and connect more people with the gospel of Christ around the globe.

Roberts (2008) says that being a mission-driven church is not about doing evangelism and argues that outreach work is not done to build a mega-church with



thousands of members. I find this argument valid, because for a church to be mission driven it must be focused on one thing, to lead people a step closer to Christ every day and help them become fully devoted followers of God. In other words, churches are not to start churches, but create environments for making disciples (p. 30). Numeric growth happens when churches living in the mission of Christ lead people to experience spiritual transformation in Christ which naturally makes them become missionaries and church planters themselves.

The observation Roberts (2008) makes is that even though there are so many new churches that have been started during the past 10 years, the statistics show that the Christian church in the west and in the United States is still in decline during the same period (p. 29). Roberts concludes that it is not enough to only have a vision to start a new church, but to have the right missional vision implanted in the DNA of the new congregation and develop a culture of discipleship which will naturally lead to a culture of multiplication. Even though more and more church plants are truly living with the mission in mind, there is more to be desired in creating true missional planting cultures in them.

Stuart Murray (2010) on the other hand notes that part of the problem of missional ineffectiveness for church plants in the post-modern era is that the planting pastors and leaders have been associated for too long with existing churches in the traditional model of authoritarian leadership. Murray suggests that it is church planting that allows for this model to be challenged. Starting new congregations helps the church to return from the pastoral driven to the mission driven leadership model. The faith community thus is led in a more democratic way with a leadership that empowers, by using a team-based

approach to carry the vision and mission of the church. As a result, more spiritual gifts are utilized in the leadership of the church (p. 67). Murray (2010) describes a mission-oriented church plant in the following way,

A mission-oriented church will be concerned to appoint staff who will assist them to move forward in mission, rather than maintaining the status quo. If the missionary task of the church is recovered, the leadership required to assist churches to fulfill this mission must also be recovered. Some pastors clearly have such a mission mentality, and some evangelists are also effective pastors. What is needed is not arbitrary division, or unhelpful stereotyping, but an understanding of leadership that is defined in relation to mission, and which recognizes the need for different gifts in different leadership roles. (p. 112)

### A Return to the Vision of Jesus

New pastors must be committed to the original mission of Christ and His outreach-focused mission. Granet (2017) illustrates this point by comparing it to the architecture one can enjoy today around the communities of the Aegean Sea. None of it would be here today if the people who followed the founders of the original settlements did not strongly hold to the belief that these communities should preserve the style of architecture and lifestyle. The truth is that many new churches lose their original missional identity when the leaders who join the ministry teams in the years after the launch are not solidly committed to the original vision. Granet's (2017) point can also hold the church back in stagnation. While true that if a leader is not committed to the mission behind the vision, they should not be given a leadership role, it is also crucially important for a church to separate faithfulness to beliefs and values from the cultural traditions built. Granet clearly is not supporting stagnation but points that to preserve the "mission" in the vision a church plant should not be stuck on old methodologies.

Churches with missional visions grow. In his analysis of unchurched people who decide to join and stay long-term in a Christian faith community, Thom Rainer et al.

(2009) shares that seven out of ten people say that they stayed because they know and are excited about the mission and direction of the church they are attending (p. 121). I can testify to the truth of that statistic. It is not only non-church people that are attracted by a clear vision. I have seen time after time church members who joined our new church plant after their first visit, because they loved the vision and mission we had adopted. Herrington et al. (2000) also emphasize the importance of every church's vision to be "clear," "shared," and "compelling." They argue that a vision must bring "excitement and enthusiasm" for people to follow it, as God is an exciting God (p. 132). A clearly stated vision helps people know what to expect and understand better the purpose of existence of the new community of faith they are committing to. It is the vision that initially attracts newcomers and how well it is practiced is what makes them stay or leave the church.

### **Developing Strategic Systems to Sustain a Long-term Mission-focused Vision and Culture**

According to Roberts (2008), a significant number of people who join new church plants are usually "frustrated with their existing churches" and choose the church plant expecting it to be the new congregation for which they have been looking. The frustration most often comes because the churches have lost their purpose and mission. Sometimes the frustration with the church organization forces people to start independent faith communities where they can re-focus on nothing but the mission (pp. 31-32).

### **Church Leaders Model Missional Vision**

Roberts (2008) points that a missional vision must be present first in the leaders of the faith community before it will spread to the members. Every leader must experience a life-changing encounter with God and truly live as a Christ-follower. The impact of the

leader's personal experiences with Jesus is noticed first by families and close friends and then by the whole community. As Roberts notes in the biblical account of the book of Acts we find the clear evidence that when people were converted in the early Christian church the whole household was affected. The author gives as example the apostolic church community as one being focused on personal impact, rather than large meetings or huge numbers of converts, even though there is room for both. Those come as a natural result of reaching the un-churched and leading them to a life-transforming encounter with the God of heaven (p. 31).

Building a strong missional vision among church leaders is a key step in setting the right foundation for sustaining a healthy Christian faith community. The focus of the apostles and their followers in the early church was not on building massive churches. They tried to turn seekers into fully devoted disciples by living the caring life Jesus lived.

#### Living Missional Lives Best Represents Christ

Mission must drive the existence of every Christian church. To live a more Christ-like life means to live daily for reaching those who are not part of God's faith family, and this is best expressed through evangelism and starting new churches (Stetzer & Im, 2016, p. 26). Mission-driven vision is the only reason a church plant or any church should ever keep its doors open. Roberts (2008) challenges all newly starting congregations to think about thousands of ways to impact the community, rather than dream about growing attendance in the thousands. Rather than encouraging the purchase of hundreds of acres and building big worship centers, he challenges those new congregations to do more by thinking of reaching hundreds of smaller communities around the world. Instead of expecting all the people to come to the church, the church is challenged to be always

living among the people (p. 72). Roberts (2008) states it very eloquently in the following statement,

There is absolutely nothing wrong in dreaming any of those things. But the question is, where do you start in your dreaming—the church or the world outside the church? That determines everything. It determines how you organize, where you engage, and how you prioritize. The reality is that we’ve been starting with the “church” stuff and have done very little to engage the community and society as we always say we plan to do. What if someone started with transformation first? (p. 72)

### Helping Leaders Focus on Mission Rather Than Attendance

Malphurs (2000) presents the passion of Jesus “to seek and save what was lost” to be the center of the vision of a church plant. It is the biblical mandate and the greatest responsibility for God’s church (p. 123).

Stetzer (2016) also confirms the need for new congregations to focus on growing through reaching those outside the church. He emphasizes the correlation between building a missional vision and the growth of church plants. He notes that as church plants gain members, their tendency is to get a false sense of security because they confuse the increased attendance from their trendy techniques verses the real mission of the church to grow true Christ-following disciples in the biblical way (p. 24).

Stetzer (2016) and Malphurs’ (2000) assessments are correct. It is important for a new church not to confuse growing attendance with growing disciples. Healthy churches realize that increased attendance, though good, is not their biblical mission. Some churches fail to grow because they interpret the surge in attendance from existing believers coming to experience a new style of worship and a fresh approach to church as kingdom growth. The bigger vision must be to aim to help existing believers be transformed by Christ and buy into the missional vision.

Another aspect I feel should be addressed in this conversation is that those non-committed attendees should not be written off. Many of them have a reason to look for a new faith community they can belong to. My own experience shows that a large number of non-committed church members are where they are because of a bitter disappointment by an event or a person they knew at the church they use to attend. Kenneth J. McFayden (2009) says that other people are not at church because they are going through a moment of transition in their lives and God can use this moment as a starting point to captivate them with a new vision. McFayden (2009) says, “Vision is a key factor in how congregations embrace change, move beyond the intense pain of loss, and rediscover their capacity to hope” (p. 57).

#### Importance of Vision Casting and Aligning All Ministry Activities With It

True biblical vision is God given, God directed, and mission-focused. It is focused on sharing the good news of the gospel all the time, every day. The role of the church is to live out that vision. Stetzer (2016) says, “God’s people are to participate in the divine mission to manifest and advance God’s kingdom on earth through the means of sharing and showing the gospel of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ” (p. 19).

Roberts (2008) describes mission, evangelism, and why people joined the early church movement in the following way, “The gospel [in the early church],” he says “spread out in social networks not only because of the observable change in the lives of its followers, but also because of the attractive nature of a Christian philosophy of life” (p. 32). This is consistent with my experience as pastor. Living God’s way means to let my life show Jesus to those around me. A God-centered vision of the church attracts people to experience something better and more hopeful to their future. Evangelism is all

about sharing God's vision for a better life with people who might not know the teachings of Jesus. Same is true with vision. To be effective it must be shared.

Paroby and White's (2010) research establishes that shared vision has strong influence on the organizational culture and daily decision making. They demonstrate that when "ethics" for example, "is a part of a shared vision, an organizational culture will have accountability that will ensure ethical decision making" (p. 1). In other words, the vision would influence the shaping of the culture in a newly planted church.

The next step after having adopted a clear missional vision is to start implementing it in all departments and activities in the organization. Sinclair (2006) speaks about the next step after the vision is created. It is to help people focus on a particular task and be devoted to it, or success for the organization will never happen. My experience in the Texas Conference once again proves that churches with outward-focused vision, who never create an intentional strategic plan of action, never end up fulfilling their vision. Having a clear strategy to execute the vision is in the heart of growing successful church plants.

### **Sharing the Vision With Organizational Members**

George Barna (1992) shares an observation out of his research that says that just because a leader or leadership team has a vision does not mean that the people in the organization will follow them. The members of that organizational community need to see, hear, and adopt the vision as a shared one.

Eventually, you will have to paint that mental portrait for others if you wish the vision to materialize in your church. Just as you have used your imagination to create this view of the future, you will have to lead others to see the vision so that they, too, might share in its implementation and impact. (p. 29)

The vision is a picture, and it needs to be exhibited to the rest of the people in order for them to see it, adopt it and live by it. As the old Chinese proverb goes, “tell me and I will forget. Show me and I will remember. Do it with me, and I will never forget it” (Johnson, 2018, p. 1), so it is with the vision. The leaders must clearly know, adopt, and constantly share the vision with others, so they can hopefully join in and get passionately involved as well.

### Preparing Ministry Teams to Be Vision Driven

A strategy for fulfilling a missional vision requires training leaders and members how to do mission-driven ministry and helping them make needed changes to keep their ministry relevant to the culture.

Martin Robinson (2006) observes that church planters often ignore the need to train their core teams the way one trains a missionary going to a foreign land. A missionary can have the vision, understand the mission clearly, but they also must learn the language and become well versed in the worldview and customs of the people in the new geographical location in which they will be working if they want to be successful. “Mission always seeks to contextualize the gospel in relation to the culture that it seeks to address” (Robinson, 2006, p. 13). Communicating the gospel in a relevant and appropriately understandable way is key to accomplishing God’s mission. We must not be foolish in implementing this approach to mission as we attempt to reach Western communities. Today we are dealing with a fast-paced, rapidly changing world with a vastly diverse cultural mix of multiethnic groups. Reality is that even the generations who have been born and grown up in North America today hold very different worldviews and relate to life in a unique way compared to previous generations. We must approach our



current North American communities as real mission fields like any other place around the world.

Rainer (2009) suggests that special classes could be utilized to help in effectively promoting the vision to leaders and newly joining members in the church. For example, special classes for new members that introduce them to the gospel, the church, and to the vision of the church, tremendously increase the retention rate in a church. Congregations that “expect and require” a new person to go through an orientation class experience 112% retention rate which is a growth rate greater than the number of new members that join the church each year. Rainer notes that in this case the church’s attendance grows more than the number of new members who went through the class. Churches that provide the class but did not require new members to attend it, have a much lower retention rate of 89%. The percentage drops down to 72% for those who have the class, but neither encourage it, nor require it (p. 115). Rainer’s conclusion that even though new member classes are not the same, having one is key to retaining new members. The reasons for the effectiveness of the class is that it prepares each person to know what to expect, takes away the feeling of being an outsider entering a foreign community, and finally allows the new member to begin making acquaintances with others in the new church.

Rainer’s suggestion of having a new member’s class is necessary in every church, but especially in a new church plant. One of aspect I did not catch in Rainer’s research, but experienced as a pastor through the years, is that the new believer’s class also allows me to share the purpose and the vision of the church plant. These conversations could help set the tone for the culture the new church is trying to build.

Once the vision is understood and communicated appropriately, Kotter (1996) says that it becomes feasible and pushes with a force that requires reshaping and change. A credible vision will make people scared, but it will also make them believe in the change that is going to happen. Kotter (1996) says, “Great leaders know how to make ambitious goals look doable” (p. 75). Kotter rightly places the communication of vision and the reality of leading change back in the hands of the leaders.

Herrington et al. (2000) offers another insight into a strategy for how to shape a God-given missional vision to ministry leaders and the congregation. As a result, the three authors suggest first that churches must be run differently than businesses, because of their belief in the element of faith and direct guidance that God has given to his people. The step the trio presents for leading positive change in a congregation is establishing a “vision community” of dedicated leaders respected by the church members who are granted the task to involve different groups of the congregation that can help “discern and implement God’s vision for the congregation” (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 49). The authors say that the group must be a true representation of the diversity of the church, consist of members involved in different aspects of the congregational life, but are people of spiritual maturity, able and willing to openly share and contribute to the visioning process. The three researchers also suggest that any vision statement must be carefully crafted by the vision-community and then be processed back with the people it will lead and then be communicated publicly to the congregation in a comprehensive, intentional, and ongoing set of activities” using all possible means. Herrington et al. (2000, pp. 49–68) also emphasize that the vision must be allowed to guide every area of the rest of the ministry process. In stage six of this process,

Empowering leaders bring up two crucial elements that are key to allowing the vision to shape the organization, 1) establishing a new model for leadership within the congregation and 2) removing the obstacles that would prevent leaders from serving effectively... Too many churches and church leaders attempt implementation without empowerment. (p. 70)

The authors (Herrington Furr et al., 2000) claim that empowering the people will help implement the vision. The implementation involves “the specific and visible actions taken to make the vision a reality,” where “empowerment is the set of enabling tasks that make these actions possible” (p. 70). They emphasize that this empowerment process should include people outside of the leadership team and involves trusting more members to take vital role in the implementation of the vision while continuing to motivate the whole congregation to do the same (p. 70). The wider the participation the easier it will be to accomplish the vision strategic goals.

If leaders desire to take people to greater heights than their members are able to see at the moment, they have to take them along to the summit so everyone can peek at the view of the future. The suggested process by Herrington et al. is that building the vision happens when involving multiple layers of empowered leaders and members. As more people get involved this will generate an even greater participation and buy in by the wider congregation. This research (Herrington et al., 2000) deserves to be given wider attention by leaders implementing a new vision in a starting or existing organization.

### **Creating a Vision Casting Strategy and Allowing Time for Adaptive Change**

Even though starting a new congregation provides a blank slate from which to build something new and being free from dealing with past established traditions, church planting involves more changes and adaptation for the core team leaders and members than they often realize.

Kouzes and Posner's (2007) research of effective leaders show that the success of vision led adaptive change is best when leaders involve others in it. As previously mentioned in this chapter, leaders must inspire a shared vision. Kouzes and Posner (2007) make empowering others in the visioning process a major point of leading others forward. Their argument goes further to suggest that a leader not only should "enlist others in a common vision," but in order for them to get the support of others they need "to know their constituents and speak their language," so the vision is heard in a way that connects with all recipients in the organization and is understood and accepted by all (p. 17).

The last characteristic we will note is one that is a "must have" quality for great leaders. It is something Ronald A. Heifetz (1994) brings up. Adopting the missional vision requires people to go through a change. When leading change, a leader has to understand the dynamics of how to lead others through the adaptive process. This is a skill and must be mastered well if they are to successfully lead any organization through any challenges. According to Heifetz (1994), people want to change, as long as it does not require them to pay too high of a price. The leader takes the blame if the process fails. Even though the people for whose benefit the change is to be made demand that something is done, they have to be protected so their comfort level equilibrium is not pushed to a breakpoint. A key characteristic to the success of leading a community through adaptive change is to know the amount of pressure one needs to apply to the community, and when to let up from the push. This is true even when the community is the one demanding the change. The one leading has to be sure they allow enough balance

between tension and security to convince the community to take a step and accept the change (p. 241).

I strongly believe the skill Heifetz (1994) talks about that helps a leader manage the stress through the transitional time is key for any church plant leader to have in their leadership toolbox. However, Heifetz fails to note that this is a quality that can be learned by every leader. This skill, like any other, requires that it is never used to manipulate people, but to help them manage through the needed change at a place safe for them and by their own choice. I believe this is the single most important skill followers look for in a leader. A vision without the ability to help people manage achieving it will be worthless.

#### Adaptive Change and Vision Barriers

It is Barna (1992) who suggests that there is an important spiritual element that can be overlooked in the leadership visioning process. If a church organization is trying to follow a God-given vision, it will meet the resistance of those who, under the influence of Satan the enemy of God, will resist and try to prevent the vision from succeeding. There are few weapons that those who have not seen God's vision use to sabotage it. Barna calls those "vision killers." He defines the vision killers as tradition, fear, stereotypes, complacency, fatigue, and short-term thinking. These are hidden traps that prevent a vision from emerging or from being widely accepted. Leaders "must think strategically" if and how they wish to counter vision killers. A leader must recognize the obstacles he will encounter and develop a strategy to overcome them" (Barna, 1992, p. 120).

I would go further than Barna (1992) and say that there is one more major vision killer that should be listed. It is hidden in tradition and stereotypes. It is the selfish thinking of members who have a misconstrued view that the church is a place that is all about them, rather than a place where the main focus must be to bring in those who are spiritually “lost.” The church must take the opposite approach. What this means is that the way church people talk, act, do ministry, and behave in society must be understandable and make sense to those who are not believers.

As Rainer (2009) suggests, members should be encouraged to live a life that makes people wonder why anyone would be so caring and generous in a society permeated by selfishness. Rainer continues to define the lost in the following way,

A good definition of the formally unchurched person is one who has not been in church, except sporadically, for at least ten years (most for lifetime) but has recently become active in a church. All of the formerly unchurched have also recently become Christians, not merely church attenders. (p. 19)

Carson (2008) brings up the impossibility of people detaching themselves from their culture. The example he uses is that the only way to understand Christ and Christianity is to look at them embedded in the cultural expression of the story in its time. Without attempting to exhaust the author’s full analysis of the relationship between Christ and culture, he tries to present that both arguments are valid.

The Christian culture is universally guided by the values of Scripture, but part of that Christian culture is bound by the expressions of those values in the social cultural context. Postmodern Christians, the author observes, are challenged to define what their interaction with their culture ought to look like in the light of Scripture. The answer to this question he (Carson, 2008) argues must be “flexible enough to account for the diversity [we find] within Scripture itself” and adds that “it must also be unified enough

to hold the diverse strands together” (p. 87). Carson concludes that the reality is that as human beings we have to admit in accordance with the postmodern challenge that we are bound to our limited knowledge and reality, and that we change our minds so quickly that our understanding constantly develops and grows. The conclusion of Carson (2008) is that culture is comprehensive because it tries to create a worldview of the “whole,” “yet [is] limited because it is bound to express that understanding. . . striving for a worldview that is able to embrace the divinity and vastness of God in a limited human term” (p. 113).

The questions Carson (2008) raises regarding culture are very important to the view the church today holds about mission. He challenges us to keep in mind that we are all influenced by culture, and our religious expressions and values are expressed through that culture. This is why cultural sensitivity as we communicate the truth about God is very important in order for others to grasp the gospel we are trying to communicate.

Cultural contextualization is required in our ministry approaches since we deal today with a vastly unchurched population in North America and even larger number of unbelievers around the globe. Stetzer (2016) looks into the “already-reached myth” and makes a powerful observation,

Evangelicals have been reading Larry Burkett for financial information, listening to James Dobson for advice on raising children, singing along with Third Day, and purchasing fiction by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. But the unchurched person in North America remains generally untouched by this evangelical subculture and could die in darkness because we aren’t drawing them in with a culturally relevant gospel witness. (p. 29)

Stetzer (2016) continues to describe the reality that while there are many Christian resources in North America, unchurched North Americans no longer have a biblical worldview to understand Christianity. Stetzer is spot on when he makes the statement that

the “Unchurched North Americans know that Jesus said not to judge, but they seriously misunderstand biblical teaching on morals. When secular culture goes farther and farther from biblical norms, perceptions develop shadows—even corruptions—of biblical reality” (p. 29).

Stetzer (2016) makes it very clear that leading missional churches and ministries mean that ministry leaders and church planters must start their mission activities “in the community” rather than “in their heads” (p. 29). This is an excellent point to be considered by new congregations working on their initial strategy for ministry and by church ministry teams as they prayerfully strategize their goals and events for the year. Ministry must be based on the reality of the target community rather than on what a ministry leader likes or wants to do. Lee Strobel (1993), who started as an atheist writer for the *Chicago Tribune* with expertise in law and was won to Christianity by the Willow Creek Community Church shares that the church must understand the context in which unchurched people live if it desires to reach them. Understanding the context in which the unchurched population lives must be followed by creating a sensitive environment for those same people to connect with any activity the church offers in and outside its walls.

#### Employing Different Leadership Styles During the Adaptive Change Process

Weems (2010) brings up a very key idea of effective leadership being “never fixed and static but is fluid and dynamic” (p. 57). As he shares his experience of having a medical emergency amidst a clergy leadership conference, he makes a strong case for leaders to work effectively by being willing and “able constantly to shift roles among being leader, peer, and follower” (p. 57). A good leader discerns how to shift leadership roles during different stages of the leadership process.



Joseph Rost (1993), in what is arguably the most extensive study on the definition of leadership, reviews a different approach to the concept of using dynamic styles of leadership. In his review of the situational leadership model that was created in the 1970s argues that the concept that an effective leader will change his or her leadership style depending on the environment one is in is not practically sustainable in the long-term. As Rost mentions the theory survived only about a decade, because the supporters of that theory realized that one cannot learn the skills to be effective in all situations of working with people (pp. 18–19). Rost (1993) suggests that the situational theory of leadership is not an adequate approach to leadership because implied in it is the belief that a leader must use different styles to achieve his/her goal (p. 18).

Weems (2010) suggests using fluid and dynamic leadership is better than the situational leadership model. Weem rightly suggests that no matter how skillful a leader is in adjusting his or her leadership style to different situations, a wise leader will succeed more if he or she allows other leaders to step in and facilitate a situation that requires a different leadership style of work. Leaders are more respected when they are not threatened by allowing others to lead, than when they try to be super leaders and control every situation on their own.

Weems (2010) proposes that there are two essential groups that need to be strategically addressed in adopting and implementing a new vision. Key leaders and important stakeholders (groups whose cooperation is essential) are very crucial not only for the initial adoption of the shared vision, but also for it to be preserved within an organization. He (Weems, 2010) suggests that “during the excitement of the vision implementation, none of the basic of ministry to all groups is [to be] neglected” (p. 62).

Kanter (cited by Weems, 2010) emphasizes that in non-profit organizations it is very important to pay attention to the informal groups that can have more veto power than one might suspect (p. 62).

### **The Importance of Empowering Leaders in Vision Casting**

Jim Collins (2001) makes it clear that what matters in making a company great is first to get the right people on the bus. The three reasons he gives are that by focusing on “who can help me” rather than “what I should be doing,” the leader will contribute to setting the right direction without making people feel uncomfortable if the direction of the organizational vision needs to be adjusted later on. By having the right people on the bus a leader can eliminate the need to invest too much effort in trying to motivate them. Finally, he claims that if we have the wrong people on the bus even if we find the best way to go for the future of the organization, we still will not have great organizational success (p. 42).

Collins is a guru in leadership and organizational development. What churches need to be careful about is how they define “the best.” “The best” in a church setting is not always those people we want to use, unless they are very unselfish. In church work selflessness and values come before skills. It is important to consider the question whether the right people on the bus are also those who believe in the gospel mission, or else they will not be the “right” people. Those with the right mission orientation can unquestionably help shape and refine the vision at any point redirection or change is needed. The thing Collins is right about is who we put on the leadership team is the most crucial factor for success and growth. Even when God is driving, if people do not want to listen, the mission will never be accomplished.

My experience confirms that independent of how talented leaders are, they need to be mentored and helped to grow into the organization. Most challenges come when dealing with older, “experienced church leaders” in a church plant. They have a harder time handling transition. Churches have an especially hard time dealing with leaders who are not able to adapt to the new structure, culture, and vision. The main reason for this seems to be the fact that as time goes by, church leaders start confusing the principles the Bible teaches with the form the principles take when contextually applied at the current community environment. As he addresses the need for young people to be mentored as the future of the Christian church movement Roberts (2008) writes,

Old men and women play a crucial role in the future church; it isn't to hold on to the forms but to hold on to a personal Jesus movement in their hearts so that young people can say of old people, “Oh man, I want to know Jesus like they know Jesus.” It is not, “I want to do church like they do church.” The only way that will work is for old folks to pour themselves into young hearts and mentor and love them so much that they would die for them. When that happens, you become more concerned about our youth than you do your tight grip. (p. 37)

Roberts (2008) is right. Not all leaders are qualified to become a part of the core leadership team during the development years of the plant independent of their qualification and experience. It is only those who are not only able to lead, but who are living the life of Jesus, are able to model it to others, who understand, adopt, and commit to the mission-driven vision of the young and growing plant that need to be given more power and official influence in the new church. Malphurs and Mancini (2004) also agree that leadership development is key in developing healthy organizations. The process the authors (Malphurs & Mancini, 2004) describe involves helping leaders in every level to grow their Christian character, and “acquire, reinforce and refine their ministry knowledge and skills” (p. 146). Mature leaders also realize that they need to develop others and that times change, and ministry methods must be adapted accordingly with

time. The only way for a church plant to continue to be on the cutting edge is to keep enlarging its team of leaders. This is not an age-related issue, even though the problem usually comes from age and culture gap between the leaders and the target community. A church plant develops its core team and as it develops later, expands its leadership structure. It is important that only truly converted, mature leaders, who have a genuine walk with God, and who have a teachable team-spirit are given the responsibilities to teach, train, and disciple others.

Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) say that there are two characteristics key to the effectiveness of any leader; they are integrity and competence. They must come in that order. Integrity means the leader walks in the God-given vision he asks others to follow. Competence is what people expect from their leader before they put their trust in him/her. As the Blackabys (2011) write, “A leader must also have competence. But integrity will gain a leader the benefit of the doubt from followers who do not yet see the vision as clearly as the leader does” (p. 208).

### **Summary**

As we conclude this overview of relevant writings about this research project to build a leadership strategy for sustaining a mission-focused vision at Crosswalk Fellowship, it is important to make a few final remarks. All sources reviewed point to three major factors that emerge as the key ones to be adopted by any new growing church plant.

First, it is imperative to develop a clear, common vision that is adopted by leaders and followers alike. Effective communication through all means, cultural methods, rituals, and visual symbols must happen on an on-going basis. Vision must be always

kept in the sight of leaders and people alike, so it becomes an inseparable part of the culture of the church plant. It has to be clearly visible to those inside and outside of the church organization. The secret to adopting such a vision is not only for it to guide ministry activities, but also to guide the daily lives of the people.

Second, the adopted vision must be a mission-focused vision which Christ had, looking to reach out towards those who do not know God, or are not actively involved in the church. A church plant should continue to accept existing members as long as they join the missional vision and commit to contribute to the life and activities of the church. This will ensure that their primary focus will remain to be to live as Christ did, doing all in his power to always search and reach out to those who are still away from God. Missional vision involves not only reaching out with theological studies, but also living the life of service that Christ lived, attracting others the way Jesus did.

Third, the missional vision must be adopted by all leaders and guide all ministry teams. This involves that ministry activities and people's lifestyle is all reflective of the mission-focused vision. It also means that the success of the church is measured by how well the vision and mission of the church have been fulfilled on both the personal and corporate level.

It is important to note that the church visioning process differs from secular organizations in a key way. The vision of the church, church plant, or church ministry should be guided by the faith that it is not the vision of a leader, but a God-given plan for the future of the congregation that is solidly based on God's purpose for the church. It not only originates with God, but also must contain the belief that the promise of God will

provide the support, resources, and needs that come along the way for the vision to be accomplished.

Finally, I want to note that I did not find any direct research on specific strategies to sustain a missional vision in a church plant, nor was I able to discover research on the major factors detracting the vision of a new church plant from outward to inward focused one. The closest such research was Stetzer and Im's *Planting Missional Churches* book. Most other research deals with general visioning and its purpose importance, and leadership styles. The literature was also very scarce on strategies to help transition established members who join a new growing church plant community in adopting the plant's vision. It is my hope that this dissertation project will provide some insight into that and will lay some foundational work for further studies on the subject.

## CHAPTER 4

### DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION

#### **Introduction**

There are four parts that are covered in this chapter. First, I review some of the principles from previous chapters showing the overall importance of leading with a common mission-focused vision and key points I and the Crosswalk leadership team considered as we started working on our new visioning strategy. Second, I look at the ministry context when the project started at Crosswalk Fellowship. In the third part of this chapter, I describe the steps I took with our Crosswalk team in building the leadership strategy for sustaining a mission-focused vision in our church. I list the long-term objectives, and share the step-by-step intervention plan we prepared. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the intervention strategy.

#### **The Power of Vision for the Success of an Organization**

Working with a clear vision is one of the single most important factors for the success of any organization, business, or group (Ruvio et al., 2010). The vision must reflect the core values held by the people who are a part of the organizational body and should be driven by the defined common purpose of why the organization exists in the first place (Herman & Rentz as cited in Balser & McClusky, 2005). This helps everyone involved to work with a common focus in mind. Solomon clearly spoke on this, “Where

there is no vision, the people are unrestrained” (Prov 29:18 NASV). Vision in this context could be translated as a prophetic revelation by God (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). It is the guidance given by God himself to help lead his people in how he wants to see his will be fulfilled in the local human context. In the same way the vision of every church should be a contextualized expression of God’s mission in terms of the real needs of a clearly defined target group of people with which the congregation is attempting to connect.

Vision also helps clarify and prioritize how decisions are made, so the organization accomplishes its mission in the most effective and productive way (Herman, (2004). No matter how good an idea sounds, the decision to do anything with it must be guided by checking if it will help the church fulfill its vision and achieve its goals while remaining faithful to its values (Herington et al., 2000). In the context of the church, the ultimate purpose is to fulfill God’s great commission to disciple people to him. The vision of the church is the expression of what that mission– to disciple people to Christ– will look like in the local ministry context.

#### Importance of Leadership Driven by a Common Vision

Every leader has a vision. The challenge is for all leaders to align themselves to the vision of the organization and help those they influence to adopt the same vision as their own so it would become “a shared” vision for everyone (O’Reilly et al., 2010).

It is hard for leaders to follow someone else’s dream. Yet, the challenge is that no matter how many great leaders an organization has, it cannot survive with multiple visions. When more than one vision drives the leadership team, people start intrigues, pulling others towards their own ideas, and the unity of the organization is destabilized. The most successful enterprises are those where all the key people, leaders and members



alike, agree and unite behind a common vision and align all their ideas, actions and goals to fulfilling that vision (Barna, 1992).

Some people feel that pursuing a common vision eliminates diversity, limits creativity, and discourages the generating of new ideas. This view reflects a lack of understanding of what a common vision represents. It does not limit creativity or a variety of approaches to achieving the vision; on the contrary, it helps bring together multiple ideas and channel them to have a greater impact by serving the common purpose (Collins & Porras, 1991).

The vision is the overall idea of how the organization wants to be perceived, be described as, and stand for as it goes about fulfilling its purpose. Barna (1992), like Blackaby and Blackaby, says that the vision originates with God. The benefit of Christian churches is that the overall purpose has already been set by God himself and was revealed through Jesus Christ for his church to follow. It is to communicate the gospel in relevant ways and lead the people to surrender their lives to God. The purpose of the vision a church adopts expresses how it will fulfill its God given mission in its particular ministry context. Since God's Mission is about reaching non-believers, a church whose vision is not outreach focused is failing its purpose (Stetzer, 2016).

Once the vision is adopted, the church must create a clear, strategic plan to help that vision be accomplished by all of its leaders, ministry teams, and members (Ruvio et al., 2010). Creativity is greatly encouraged in this process, and is vital to help make the ministry that the church does unique and more effective than the ministry of the next church down the road. In the process, any idea and approach is acceptable as long as it

follows the core values, its God-given mission, and contributes to putting into practice the specific vision.

What this meant for Crosswalk was that we had to not only revive the vision, but develop a full strategy to help communicate that vision to our membership so it would be adopted by every attendee of the church. We also had to ensure that the strategy we developed allowed the church to sustain its missional focus in the future no matter the challenges it faced.

### **The Context of Crosswalk Fellowship Where the Strategy Was Developed**

In September, 2005, my family and I moved to Texas to plant a new church in the affluent city of Frisco, North Dallas. We joined the Richardson Seventh-day Adventist Church, a very missional, church planting congregation that had agreed to be the mother church for the new plant. The city of Frisco was very affluent and had become one of the fastest growing cities in the US, with a population of over 200,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The average income per household in 2006 was \$105,000 and that number has grown to \$120,000 in 2018.

The initial core team recruited had 18 adults and about the same number of kids. The group was very diverse and included extremely talented and experienced leaders, the majority of them highly trained professionals as was the general community. The vision was to build a Seventh-day Adventist community church that was relevant to the style and cultural preferences of the citizens of Frisco and to make it a place where people who do not have an active relationship with God could experience his love and have opportunities to give their lives to following Christ.

I completed the visioning process in eight-months. We studied the population target group and discovered that over 80% were families with young kids. Our target area included Frisco and neighboring city north Plano, part of which was also part of our target area. Our vision was to be a church that would remain relevant to the community and would do everything in ways that would connect us to the next unchurched person from our community who we met. In the core team visioning sessions, we drafted our mission statement and set five core values: Authenticity to the biblical teachings of the Adventist Church, fostering loving relationships, being relevant, having God-centered families, and being an accepting community. These values were chosen by comparing where our gospel values and the felt needs of the Frisco community overlapped. Based on these values we wrote our vision, “To be a mission-centered community church, serving the area of North Dallas, where those who do not have an active relationship with God can find opportunities to experience the love of Jesus and accept Him as their personal friend.” Then we created our succinct version of the statements that we could use on our promotional print and on-line materials, “Connecting People to God and Each Other.”

The initial Crosswalk core team visioning process helped us adopt that as our common vision. The vision was divided into five strategic goals:

Goal One: Relevant creative worship that is Bible based, well-planned and executed, addressing current issues and events, and directing individuals to experience Christ and his life-changing power.

Goal Two: Need-based programs, events and services designed to enrich personal, professional, spiritual, and family values for all-age groups.

Goal Three: Recreational events to provide a social environment fostering building close relationships among the group and providing a venue to connect with the community.

Goal Four: Lifestyle of friendship evangelism—living a life of service and sharing the gospel on individual and corporate levels.

Goal Five: Network of small, safe, relational groups focused on helping people deepen their knowledge of God and the Bible and growing meaningful relationships with God and each other.

Next we developed our ministry structure and systems that would help us fulfill the common vision and strategic goals, while staying true to our mission, values and remain relevant to our primary target demographic group. We chose five key ministries to focus on without which we could not successfully fulfill our strategic goals. These five were: Worship Team, Children’s Ministries, Outreach Team, Social Team, and Administration Team.

As we divided the expanded core team among everyone we had recruited to join our ministry, we were amazed that we had about the same amount of people in each team and each team had a leader that had joined voluntarily with extensive personal experience for years in these areas of ministry. We discovered that we had a very capable leader for each ministry without having to hand twist anyone to join a particular ministry team.

We began Crosswalk’s ministry with the assumption of the abundance mentality principle (Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012), meaning that we looked for the resources we needed after we defined our God-given vision, rather than building our vision based on the resources we had. When God calls us to do mission, he provides the

needed resources and gifts “for the common good” to help the church make his plans a reality (1 Cor 12: 7).

Crosswalk grew fast and fulfilled the requirements of the Texas Conference to be recognized as an official company of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Appendix A) in less than a year. Within the first year we reached an average attendance of 50 people. By year three since the official launch, the church’s average attendance was consistently averaging 80 people and we fulfilled the Texas Conference guidelines for becoming an official church. The encouraging part in this growth was that we had consistently 10 to 15 non-member guests at Crosswalk on any given Saturday, most of which were inactive Christians or totally unchurched. The focus on outreach we adopted created an environment for growth. People who had given up on church and God felt welcomed in our community, and those who visited for the first time felt comfortable enough to come again. Our ministry expanded even more in 2008 when we secured a lease with The Fellowship of Frisco (FOF) Church, currently Centennial Bible Church, which allowed us to move into the center of our target area, on the border between south Frisco and north Plano. Our attendance jumped to 90 plus people within two weeks of moving.

#### The Crisis Year at Crosswalk

The initial growth Crosswalk experienced created positive momentum in the church. People were excited about the ministry activities that were taking place. From years two to six, more than 60% of the regular attendees got involved on a regular basis in some type of ministry. The challenge the leadership at Crosswalk was facing was to sustain the positive momentum and the participation levels as the church continued to grow. As Pareto’s 80/20 principle states, over time organizations see a natural tendency

where 80% of the results come from the input of 20% of the members (Robert, 1992). Stetzer (2009) talks about this principle being the reality in many existing congregations where 20% of the members do 80% of the ministry. The commitment of the Crosswalk leadership team was to work hard to sustain that number in the years to come. Another challenge church growth brought was that as church attendance grew, the demands of all church ministries for human and financial resources grew exponentially.

In late 2012 and 2013 some pastoral transitions and conflicts started developing in the two other North Dallas English speaking Adventist churches. In the second half of 2014 a significant number of members from those two churches started attending Crosswalk. The average weekly attendance of the church drastically increased to 170+ people. It did not take long for the Crosswalk leadership team to realize that people were moving to Crosswalk to escape a conflict rather than because of their he attendance increased drastically, but the church experienced challenges in sustaining new unchurched people. After some reflections and analysis of the situation, the team concluded that in our desire to minister to those incoming members and make them feel more welcome, we had experienced an unintentional shift in our vision inwardly which had started to affect our relevance to the initial target, those outside the church community.

Crosswalk faced four crucial challenges. First, the swell in attendance did not cause a swell in participation. Out of forty plus established members who started attending regularly at that time, only three to four got involved in any ministry in the church. We saw a moderate increase in tithe donations, but not much new income on the offering side which showed lack of commitment by the new members to the Crosswalk

ministry. Second, this group was showing no interest in joining the church's missional vision and would not get involved in anything outside of coming to the Saturday morning worship. Third, the incoming Adventists started demanding changes in the way we worshipped, the style of music we sang, and the way we dressed, the typical issues most established denominational churches face. The more outspoken newcomers openly began criticizing me and the rest of the leaders, demanding we change the style of ministry to what they wanted to experience at church. We even had few instances where these same members would sabotage the ministry work of the church by having insensitive confrontations with non-members who were new attendees at Crosswalk. We wanted to work with everyone who transferred and wanted them to feel comfortable with us. At the same time, if they did not want to become a part of the vision, things would not work out for them or for us. Fourth, newly transferring members were middle aged or elderly, and very different demographically than the Crosswalk and Frisco community. I also discovered they were driving very far to come to a church which was another indication that they had no intention of getting involved.

To address the developing crisis, the ministry leaders had to make some difficult decisions. The team knew that if we shifted away from our missional vision to serve those who were already Adventists but were not showing real desire for mission, we would become irrelevant to the unchurched community. With the risk of experiencing a big drop in attendance numbers, we chose not to let the vision continue to shift to a self-centered ministry, but to remain a church where everything was done to help the next unchurched person who visited us connect with Jesus.

In early 2015, after pastoral changes in the churches from where many of these influx members had come from were finally completed, most of the members that had joined Crosswalk went back to their churches as quickly as they came. The outflow was so sudden that the drop in attendance created the impression that something negative was happening at Crosswalk and that people were leaving because of it. What amplified the crisis was that coincidentally three of our key leaders and their families had to move away at that same time, because of job relocation and family matters. It was discouraging to see the average attendance drop to about 100 plus people by beginning of 2015. Crosswalk entered a difficult time, and it needed an intervention strategy to help us regain the growth momentum and realign the church back with its original missional vision. More than that, the intervention strategy we came up with had to help create a system that would help the church sustain the missional vision in the years to come and no matter how many believers or non-believers joined or left the Crosswalk church, would prevent the same crisis from happening again.

Anticipating the upcoming challenge, I and the Crosswalk leadership team had started to work on an intervention strategy in early 2015. The new strategic process had to facilitate first a return to our original mission-focused vision. A clear vision is the most crucial element of how a congregation can experience true change. As McFayden (2009) says, "Vision is a key factor in how congregations embrace change, move beyond the intense pain of loss, and rediscover their capacity to hope" (p. 57). The new strategy was developed by the fall of 2016, and I started the implementation in October of the same year.



## **Developing a Strategy for Sustaining a Long-term Mission-focused Vision at Crosswalk During Years Seven to Ten**

Sustaining the mission-focused vision within the Crosswalk leadership team was imperative to its long-term success as a growing church. A missional vision will fail to have an effective impact unless it is first adopted as shared vision among all leaders (Roberts, 2008). Therefore, the new leadership strategy started with the engagement of all ministry leaders as agents to promote it to the full membership of the church. Our overall goal was to incorporate the vision in all areas of ministry, small groups, corporate events and activities, worship services, mission at home and abroad, community projects and socials. Finally, we had to ensure that we held each other accountable through creating a system where open feedback would be shared among ministry leaders and the congregation to ensure effective ministry was happening on all levels of our church organization.

My personal focus as the pastor in the intervention process was to address six key issues identified by our leadership team. First, it had to ensure that we would move forward together not only with a common vision, but that the vision would continue to remain missional. Communicating the vision constantly and clearly to all existing and new members joining the church was key to ensuring that everyone was engaged in the process. Second, the strategy had to help our leaders implement the vision on all levels of their ministry activities they did with their teams so they could be more effective in fulfilling the overall vision. Third, since the crisis at Crosswalk revealed spiritual burnout in many of our leaders who were parents of young children, busy professionals, and were often involved in many aspects of church life, I had to clarify our expectations of each one of them and help them create a system for recruiting and mobilizing volunteer

assistance leaders and team members to share the ministry burden. Fourth, I had to address the Crosswalk ministry leaders' desire to create a clear process of accountability to help them along in implementing their strategic plans. The fifth issue we faced was that while we enjoyed a good level of financial support, we needed an intentional stewardship process that would help promote vision-based giving and do better at explaining where and for what we used the money donations we received. Finally, I wanted to create an open forum for input and honest conversations about our vision and ministry plans that would bring together all Crosswalk members and allow us to evaluate how effectively we were implementing the common vision we adopted. The more direct conversations we had about this, the greater the chances were that all Crosswalk attendees would live vision driven missional lives with greater consistency.

To create the strategy, I relied on three major sources: (a) the existing leadership visioning elements I had already developed at Crosswalk in the previous years; (b) my experience from the work I had been doing with all the church plants in the Texas conference; (c) the knowledge I was acquiring from my doctor of ministry leadership classes, other church planters, church planting and leadership books, some of which I share in the Literature Review chapter of this paper, and finally from what I learned at leadership and church planting conferences I attended.

In the final format of this strategy, I included eight major elements that addressed the above issues and were designed to get us back on track to become a missional and growing church once again.

## A Renewed Leadership Visioning Retreat

The strategy had to start with a space that would allow for an open conversation to first re-vision and adopt a shared vision among all ministry leaders. So, the first step I and the ministry leaders took was to redesign our Crosswalk yearly leadership visioning retreat as a place that would allow us to review our vision and ensure all ministry leaders had adopted it and believed in its importance for their ministry success.

Visioning retreats were something we had been doing at Crosswalk since the first year we started the church. The retreat, however, was initially more focused on having a spiritual nurturing time and conversations on key issues we felt the church was facing. As Weems (2010) notes, ongoing visioning had to be a part of our vision sustaining strategy if we were to achieve lasting success. In this new strategy, I made the retreat the central event of the annual revisioning process where we could review, adjust and fine-tune the vision every year and insure it remained fully aligned with the great commission of Jesus. The sessions of the retreat were designed to help unite the support of all leaders for the vision, and to help them lay the strategic direction that would help align each church ministry with it.

Because of its central role in the new strategy, each ministry leader was expected to attend the visioning retreat, unless some major life event had happened. We communicated these expectations with each one of them as part of their job description and asked them to delegate all their other responsibilities at church during the visioning weekend to other members of their ministry teams. To make things less stressful, I made a personal promise to every leader that if they could not find people to cover for them on that weekend I would personally invest the time to help find someone for them. The other

big change we made was to encourage our leaders to invite one or two of the key people on their ministry teams to join the planning sessions in the afternoon hours of the retreat. I also made it a practice to invite potential future leaders to the retreat as well, especially some of our teens and young adults I was planning on getting to join our leadership team. The philosophy I was trying to communicate was that the more people each one of us could get to be present at the retreat and buy into the vision, the faster it would spread to the entire congregation.

### **Time & Location**

The retreat was scheduled for October, inbetween the stress of the start of the school year and before the Thanksgiving holiday season. Our experience in the past had shown us that since most of the church leaders had young kids, they could not afford to be there for a full weekend, so I planned to make it a one full Saturday retreat.

### **Location and Set Up**

Set up was key for the mood, dynamics and quality of work the team would accomplish at the location of the retreat. We looked for a facility with a comfortable meeting room that was no more than a 30-minute drive for everyone, with quiet spaces for reflection time, as well as space for walking outdoors surrounded by nature. During group discussion times, or personal visioning and reflection times each leader or group could choose to meet outside, enjoy nature, sunshine, remain in the room or go to any of the small couch hangout spaces in the foyers of the building, wherever they felt inspired to be more creative.

## **Agenda**

Next, I reworked the retreat agenda. I wanted the retreat to be a great spiritual experience, to help shape the church's vision, to give time to our leaders to offer direct input on the church's strategic goals and allow them plenty of personal time to create the initial strategic plan for their ministries for the upcoming ministry year.

To do all this in one day required a very disciplined agenda that was still flexible enough to let the Spirit lead the discussion. The starting time was set for 10 a.m. to help people not get up too early on a Saturday morning. We planned to finish all activities by 5 p.m. sharp. The agenda included worship, and five visioning parts with 15-minute breaks between them. Here are the details of each session.

## **Worship**

Worship was our first item on the agenda. The purpose of the worship time was to set God's Spirit as the leader of our time together, search for his guidance, open our hearts to confess our selfishness, and take time to listen to his voice directing us in the process. It included two to three songs with personal and group prayer times in between them, followed by a brief devotional in which focused on Bible passages revealing God's passion for his lost children. My goal for the worship was to bring the leaders in tune with God and challenge them to think missional during our visioning time. The worship time was to take about 50 min to an hour.

## **Session One: Re-visioning**

The first work session after worship focused on reviewing our mission and vision statements. We started by establishing the theology behind them. I assigned a few of the following passages to the leaders on which each table reviewed and reflected. Each

passage spoke about God's purpose for his church's existence. The key Bible texts I used were: Genesis 12:1–3; Mark 1:16–18; Mark 3:13–15; Luke 15:8; Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:1–9. The strategic goal here was to ensure that our ministry leaders and church board members saw that the missional posture of Crosswalk's ministry was solidly grounded in God's passion and love for his "lost" children.

Next, in this session, we took time to review our vision statement and decide if it was still relevant to our mission. This was the most important time of the whole visioning retreat agenda because it set the reference point and framework that would guide the rest of our strategic planning process. Even though we did not anticipate the vision to change every year, it was expected that on rare occasions when there was a major change in the community make up, demographic, lifestyle or cultural shift that could significantly transform our target population and our ministry context, it might require us to adjust the vision to ensure we stayed aligned to our mission work. This would not happen often, but changes in the society we live in might require small adjustments to the vision.

A major outcome of this session was to help new leaders understand the deeper purpose behind the vision we had adopted and help them buy into it. This was critical to sustaining the vision for the long term.

### **Evaluation of Past Year's Ministry**

This second session of the retreat was an opportunity for the team to look back at the current ministry year and all the major goals and activities we had executed with the church. Next, we listed every major event, ministry activity, seminar, and program we had run, and asked every leader to vote for the top three ministries they felt were most effective in fulfilling the vision in a most successful way. Then we took time to briefly go

through all events and divide them into “Effective,” “Ineffective,” and “Room to Grow” columns. The outcome of this review time was not to criticize each other, but to evaluate and improve our effectiveness, eliminate what did not work, and help us reallocate our resources to what mattered most and worked best.

Next in this session came the SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and review if anything had changed in the strengths and weaknesses of our team and church (Wheelen et al., 2017). Strengths were the abilities and resources we had and excelled at. Weaknesses were the areas where we were not doing a good job and were not effective. Both strengths and weaknesses were things we could control, change, and improve through training, acquiring additional skills, knowledge, improving our systems, or adding resources to our team. The opportunities and threats, which we analyzed next were those things out of our control. These were things created by changes that took place in our external environment and context.

We completed this session asking the question, “How should what we know about us and the current community around us impact our ministry plans during the upcoming year?” My goal was to challenge every ministry leader to consider the human resources we had, what were the strongest gifts our team and church possessed or lacked, so they could decide how they could work using their team’s strengths to improve how they could minister best to the needs of our church and community.

### **Lunch Break**

The lunch break was intentionally designed to help leaders continue the conversations on personal or church topics and to stimulate on-going interaction. The environment was informal. One could cater or do a potluck type lunch. My preference

was to make this day as easy on my leaders as possible and catering was better if affordable.

### **Presenting the Pastoral Church-wide Goals**

During the afternoon session, I left time to briefly review the five goals I had set for the church for the current year. I asked the whole team to briefly evaluate how well we as a church had accomplished those goals, and what were the areas we needed to do better in for the following year. Next, I shared how I saw our failures and successes and what I considered to be the current challenges in our church and in the outside community. I finished with my recommendations on what adjustments these changes demanded of us as leaders and of our ministries. Then I presented my new tentative goals I had set for the upcoming year. I labeled them tentative, because I could end up adjusting and fine tuning some of them based on the feedback I got from the leaders present at the retreat.

Through this process I tried to model three things. First, I let everyone know what goals I had set for myself in my role as the lead pastor of the church, just as I was asking every ministry leader to set goals for their own area of ministry. Second, by doing this I allowed them to observe that being open to feedback and accountability from the whole team only enhanced our ministry effectiveness.

### **Ministry Leaders/Teams Planning Time**

Next, we moved to the ministry leaders and team planning time. In this section of the agenda, I asked every ministry leader to find a quiet place and take an hour to prayerfully create their ministry plan for the upcoming year. In my experience very few leaders I have worked with know how to do strategic planning. For this reason, I



provided a Ministry Leaders Strategic Planning Worksheet (Appendix B) each leader could follow during this session. The worksheet took each leader step-by-step through the strategic planning process and could be used later to continue the planning with their full ministry teams. Every leader was free to adapt the process as they felt necessary as it would best work for them and their team, as long as they had the following major items on paper by the end of the session.

First, I wanted them to rewrite the church's vision expressed in their own ministry context. Second step I ask them to do was to use Rubin's (2006) approach to define two S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-related) ministry team goals. In the third step, I asked them to come up with one or two specific programs, events, or activities they wanted to plan and execute in order to successfully accomplish their strategic goals and fulfill their ministry vision. In this step, the ministries had to define who the target group would be who their event would focus on to reach. Here I reviewed with them seven types of church events we utilized to categorize any event we did as a church. Each category was designed to allow the Crosswalk members to be aware of who to invite to each event based on that person's spiritual journey and faith receptivity at that point in time. We defined the event types based on the level of religious content that would be introduced at the event and the level of commitment to spiritual decisions the participants would be asked to make.

*Awareness event* was an event where we usually would pass small items out and have minimal direct interaction with people, where people simply would see and hear the name Crosswalk Fellowship and become aware that we were a church in their community. *Entry event* was an event where we would interact with the community, but

with minimum religious elements in it. The purpose of entry events was to engage people and have them come, interact and get to know us while we served their needs. A good example for this was a parenting seminar or a cooking school. There was no religious talk in it, but we would aim to establish a trust relationship with the attendees in hope for future moments when they would be on a search for spiritual meaning in their lives and would approach us for spiritual advice as their friends.

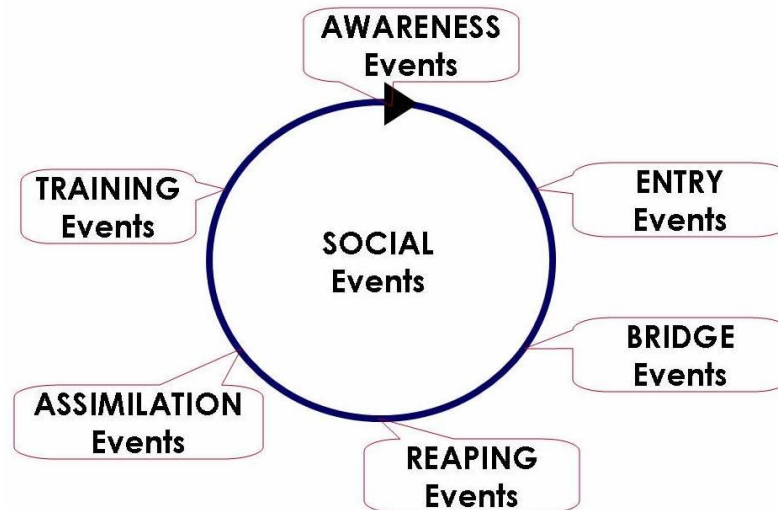
The next type of event we wanted to be sure we provided were the *Bridge events*. As the name shows, these were interactions similar to the entry event, but now we were bringing the Bible perspective on the topic the event presented. This led to another type of event called *Decision Making event*, where people were introduced to some of the deeper doctrinal teachings of the Bible and God and were usually invited to make some type of a decision to give their lives to Christ.

Next type was the *Assimilation events*. These were events where we helped people who had become regular attendees to one of our Crosswalk ministries and we wanted to disciple and grow them to spiritual maturity, help them discover their God-given spiritual gifts, and help teach them how to disciple others.

The last two events were the *Training events*, from leadership training to simply training people how to share their faith with others, give Bible studies, serve, or how to lead an officially organized ministry of the church. Lastly, we had the *Social events*, which could function by nature as any of the other six types of events but were designed to build a relational community among Crosswalk members and friends.

It was important for each ministry team to decide clearly what category type their event would be so the team knew how to promote it to the church and the community.

The type of the event was never announced openly, but was revealed in the language of the promotional description to the congregation.



*Figure 1.* Types of church events.

The fourth step in the Ministry Strategic Planning Worksheet asked the leaders to decide what would be the best dates for their planned activities. These dates later would be adjusted to ensure they fit well in the overall calendar discipleship path of the church. We wanted to ensure that every event either fed people into another event or was a “next step” in the discipleship process so other events could feed into it.

The fifth step was for the leaders to define each major action step that needed to happen for their plans to materialize. The questions to answer here were “who” would be leading the charge, “what” had to be done, and “when” would it need to be accomplished. This step also asked the ministry leader to think of two to three people they would recruit to be a part of their ministry team for the year and come up with a list of names of potential assistant leaders they could ask to assist them with specific events and

programs. For each event to be organized with excellence and to be communicated in a timely manner so people would have an adequate time to complete all the tasks, at the end of this step the leader also had to consider the questions, “Who should know what, and by when?”

The sixth and final step that the ministry leaders had to do as a follow up to this process was to come up with a budget for their ministry team for the upcoming year. The areas they had to consider as they built their financial budgets were how much would they have to spend on materials, facility, if any, promotion, posters, banners, brochures, social media campaign, etc., for every event, or program. Their budget also needed to consider what seminars and training materials they would need to order for their leaders, or the cost of training events they wanted to send their leaders to attend.

### **Common Calendar**

In the last hour of the visioning retreat we would gather all ministry leaders together and ask each one of them to share their ministry’s vision, specific goals, plans and dates for the events and programs they hope to do through the year. As leaders shared, all tentative event dates were written on a calendar that would be shared with all ministry leaders later, so they could see if they had to shift any of their events to create a better flow for the evangelism and discipleship cycle for the church and ensure there were always different entry points for people from all walks in their spiritual journey. At this time, we also would announce a November Saturday afternoon date, usually the second Saturday of the month to meet for about 2 hours after church over food and finalize the ministry calendar. This allowed us to have the general calendar ready and promote it during the upcoming visioning months of December and January.

## Creating a Mission-Based Church Budget

The second element of our strategy was to ensure our budget at Crosswalk was consistent with our missional culture and vision. One of my top beliefs has always been that vision and ministry should not be planned based on our financial resources, but rather the church's giving should be based on our vision and ministry plans. Since the beginning of Crosswalk, we had made a commitment to set the largest portion of our budget (excluding rent) aside for outreach and evangelism. The main goal with this step of the new strategic visioning process was to create a budget that was consistent with the missional culture and vision.

We asked our ministry leaders to submit a proposed budget for their ministry in the coming year. We did not promise we would be able to raise and secure all the money each ministry requested, but that we would do our best to look for ways to fund all the ministry plans. This was based on the agreement among the Crosswalk members that if our dreams were truly aligned with God's, he would provide the resources for anything he had called each ministry to do. So, to create the new mission-based budget we would add all the ministry leader's budget requests to the general church budget. Next, we would start considering ways to fund each activity and bring the full budget to be discussed and voted by all church members at an all-members business meeting. If we felt that some parts of the budget could not realistically be funded, rather than giving up on it, we would present it as a special fundraising projects to our congregation outside of our church budget.

## New Vision Communication Strategy

Sustaining a mission-focused vision requires not only a clear theology of discipleship and mission, but a clear vision casting plan. The next part of our strategy was to create a trickling effect of our vision from those who were a part of the visioning retreat to the rest of our members and regular guests. Constantly promoting the vision before our church was the next crucial step for the success of our strategy. Our plan was to accomplish the vision communication in four primary ways.

### **Weekly Vision Casting**

As part of our strategy, we asked every ministry leader to find ways to promote part or all of the vision statement in some way as they promoted their ministry activities every week.

Our marketing team took charge to start developing graphics and materials that incorporated the Crosswalk vision. The marketing person designed versions of our church logo and graphics incorporating our vision statement to be made available to all ministry departments to use in whatever materials they printed or published online. We improved the communication between our bulletin program coordinator, the on-line newsletter and social media team, and the website team to create weekly video news clips. All announcements and news would come to our Crosswalk administrative assistant, who would review and edit them, disseminate them to everyone and check to be sure the necessary information was submitted to our marketing team at a minimum of two, preferably three weeks prior to any event. We also invested in a large color copy center that allowed us to do most printing in house which provided us with flexibility and reduced the cost of printing, so we could share weekly printed materials to promote the

vision at an affordable cost. All these steps combined ensured that the vision was put before our audiences in as many ways as possible every week.

### **Promoting the Vision During Worship**

Since worship always is one of the most impactful moments in the life of a church, where we have the greatest captive audience, I planned to work with our worship team to make sure we incorporated our vision into as many of the worship elements as possible every week. No matter what our worship theme was for that week, as the pastor I incorporated the missional vision idea in my message. We also gave the same instructions to our praise team leaders, media people, prayer participants, kidz time presenters and even to our hospitality team as they played a crucial role in communicating our vision to all Crosswalk guests with a gift pen or a mug having our vision written on it, or by engaging first time guests into conversations. The goal was to share the church vision with all our attendees at least once or twice a week and have them see or hear it in every element of the weekly worship service, in the hope that we would solidify the messaging of it. We also placed weekly posters all over the church building every Saturday promoting the upcoming events and the vision.

### **Crosswalk Vision Kick-off Month**

Another part of the vision communication strategy was to dedicate the month of December and January for vision casting. While we took time to celebrate what God had done in the past year we hoped to call people's attention to the vision and the new year's ministry plans. It was our tradition to use the first Saturday of December as our vision kick-off service. In the new strategy we added this intentional vision emphasis time to continue through both months. The few important things we did during every worship

service in December and January was to first start promoting the vision in printed and verbal forms, and then to challenge our members to use the holidays as an opportunity to connect with non-church people and connect them to the church by inviting them to any of our Christmas dedicated services or to our guest-friendly social events. Finally, we planned to take 10 minutes during every worship service in December and January to promote two of our Crosswalk ministries. The promotion consisted of introducing the leaders, giving them four minutes each to present their ministry's vision, plans for the following year, and most importantly present why people should join, how they could get involved. If the ministry chose, they could produce and show a short one-minute clip about the ministry. Since our ministries are mission-focused, promoting them promotes the vision and we hoped it would stimulate greater active involvement among our attendees by having them volunteer to help.

During the month of January, we shifted the focus on recruiting volunteers and challenging our Crosswalk members and guests to live a Jesus-like lifestyle of evangelism, by connecting with their family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and people from the community, finding ways to serve them, and using any God-given moments to share the good news of the gospel story with them.

The last Saturday of January we planned a large ministry fair and encouraged every Crosswalk attendee to check the ministries they had an interest in and choose to join at least one of them for the full year, or volunteer to help with just one or two specific events. Driven by our experience that those who get involved are always more likely to make Crosswalk their church home, our goal was to involve everyone who came to our church in some form of service or ministry group. Stetzer and Im (2016) note that



people who participate in a small group involved in mission experience greater spiritual transformation than those who do not (p. 258).

### **Leader to Member Communication**

The third area to assist in communication of the vision was for all leaders to become intentional in sharing our mission focus in every meeting, event, and interaction they had with church members or the non-churched community. This was to remind the people we visited to live missional lives and communicate the Crosswalk vision through their personal lives and acts of kindness. This was a simple step but extremely important as it multiplied the opportunities for all the leaders to encourage missional living among our larger church body. In summary, our goal was to saturate the messaging of the importance for all of us to live mission-centered lives.

### **Selective Approach to Empowering Leaders**

The fourth key component in our Crosswalk visioning strategy was to constantly be looking to discover and develop future leaders while discipling people to Jesus. This applied to all attendees from all ages, from the youngest five- or six-year-old child who wanted to volunteer or help in children's church, with music, greeting or even preaching to our more advanced in years members who could mentor and support our younger leaders.

In this process we started taking leaders through a process called ReFocusing Leaders. This visioning process created by Church Resource Ministries has been used by leaders and churches all over the world (Crow, 208). It proved to be a timely addition to our leadership developing system at Crosswalk. I was introduced to it by our Texas Conference Ministerial Department and went through the full training. I felt the program

was very beneficial, but it was too long to apply in the context of our church plant. I decided to do the first part of the ReFocusing Leaders program in one weekend with the current and potential Crosswalk leaders. During the weekend we covered discovering their Life Purpose, defining their Personal Vision, writing out their personal and professional life roles and clarifying their core values.

Besides improving our leadership development process, we had to do slight adjustments to our denominational practices and the function of our Crosswalk church board. The ministry structure suggested in our *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (2010) designates every ministry leader in the church as a default church board member. In the Seventh-day Adventist governing model the church board and the local congregation remain as the primary and most independent governing unit in the denomination. The church manual however allows flexibility of the local church to select leaders and adapt the governing system to its context, if the board remains subordinate to the local church members as its default constituency and as long as it is elected through a specifically designated nominating process (p. 125).

At Crosswalk we used the small flexibility allowed by the policy of the church to incorporate and test a small change regarding if and when a ministry leader became a board member. This was needed to allow us to engage people who were committed Christians, with full respect for our Adventist traditions and structure, but had not taken the step to be baptized to volunteer for leadership positions that did not endanger or sway our board away from Seventh-day Adventist theology, values, and doctrinal purity. We took the step to designate what were the key leadership positions that would be board members by default, so the church would nominate only baptized members for those

positions. These included the positions of church elders, church treasurer, church clerk, worship team leaders, as well as the main leaders of our Sabbath School classes and study groups. We felt that this ensured that our Adventist theological foundation and principles would not be undermined. Any other ministry position could be held, if the need demanded, by a non-baptized member as long as they were committed to our church ministry vision and were willing to uphold our Christian values and respect our Adventist practices. The second change we implemented was that a person had to serve at least six months in their ministry leaders' role before they become a voting member of the church board. We wanted to be sure our ministry leaders had shown their true commitment to their Crosswalk ministry and the values of the church before we could trust them to sit on the church board. This prevented us from getting people who would accept a ministry position, just to gain access to the board and pursue their political agenda. Every ministry leader was given a clear explanation of the process so that there were no assumptions or surprises.

### Implementing a Leadership Placement Team

The next major part of the new leadership visioning strategy at Crosswalk was to create a year-round Leadership Placement Team. The team was comprised of six people, one of them a church elder, with the pastor being present for input and consulting role. This team functioned as what is known in the Adventist denomination as the nominating committee. Every year we would replace three people with new members nominated and voted by all the baptized members of the church at a church business meeting. This would allow for every member to serve no more than a two-year term which is in harmony with the *Seventh-day Adventist church manual*.

The advantage of this model versus the yearly nominating team were few. First, the team could meet at least two times a year, or on an as-needed bases. They kept track of the membership, the spiritual gifts of the people who have gone through our Spiritual Gifts Assessment, and could search for members who were ready to fill a ministry position at any time of the year. The Leadership Placement Team could also recommend any changes to the church ministry leaders' positions that might be necessary for our ministries to function most effectively. Second, it provided continuity on the nominating team, so it did not try to wipe out the whole ministry leader's team and start with totally new leaders every year. Our experience found that the church felt it was more effective to keep good leaders in place when they were willing to serve, rather than always trying to replace them with people who might have no experience. Third, it allowed the ministry leaders to know that they could step out at any time if they felt they are getting burned out by the ministry itself, or by external life factors.

The Leadership Placement Team developed some guidelines for ministry leaders. Every year the ministry leaders knew that they were elected for one year, but that our goal was not to keep replacing effective leaders, unless they felt they needed a break from ministry. To continue the missional vision of the ministry team, before any leader stepped down, they were asked to write their own job description that included the general Crosswalk job description for their position and share the main plans they had implemented and had worked on in the past years. Finally, we wanted them to also share any suggestions they had about what could be changed to improve the missional effectiveness of the team. The new leader who took their place was empowered to use the current job description and adapt it to their giftedness and personal vision. As an

oversight, they had to share what their updated plans were and present those to the quarterly coaching meetings with the pastor or one of the church elders. This allowed continuity with what was successful in that ministry, while continuing to keep expanding the vision with new missional ideas.

Since all Crosswalk ministry leaders were volunteers, to reduce the time we demanded from them we asked them to commit to attend only the following meetings: (a) the October church visioning retreat; (b) the November joined calendar planning meetings with the board, (c) meeting with all the ministry leaders once a month, and (d) be willing to meet quarterly with either me as the pastor, or one of our elders for a ministry coaching meeting. Our desire was for our leaders to have more time to get together with their ministry teams and plan their ministry activities than attend every administrative meeting of the church.

Lastly, leaders were asked to choose two to three people on their ministry team to intentionally develop and coach to become future leaders. By helping these assistant leaders to learn how the ministry worked and assisting them in developing their skills throughout the year, our current leaders could prepare their future replacement when the time came for them to step down. The ultimate goal in this plan was to help multiply future leaders who could expand our Crosswalk leadership team and develop in them a strong understanding of the missional vision of the church.

### Redefining the Role of Elders in the Leaders Development Process

If Crosswalk was to be a missional church, our key leaders and elders had to be examples of what it meant to live a missional life. As part of the new strategy, we redefined our elders' roles to not be governing, but of being spiritual mentors to the

congregation. This included providing guidance to the pastor, sharing in the spiritual care for the members, coaching the ministry leaders and being vision-casting agents for the church. The elders were asked to also meet once a quarter for an elder's meeting that included time to pray together, reevaluate the Crosswalk ministry effectiveness of the ministry of the church, and talk about needed change, issues, or adjustments we had to make in the spiritual and missional growth of the church.

In the fall of 2018, we implemented a small change to their responsibilities. Since the ministries at Crosswalk were growing, I asked the elders to help with the quarterly meeting with each ministry leader. Crosswalk had only three elders. Between each elder, and me as pastor, we could share the responsibility to meet with one ministry leader a month. The purpose of the coaching meeting was to provide ongoing support and accountability for every leader. I planned training with the elders on how to do a coaching meeting, and designated part of our ministry budget to provide money to pay for a meal with the ministry leader with whom they were going to meet.

The leadership placement team, the visioning retreat and the work of our leaders investing their time to mentor and develop the rest of our leaders help us create a simple leadership pipeline for leadership multiplication.

#### Personal Interviews With Members Joining the Church

The seventh element of the strategy was to incorporate a pastoral interview visit with every person or family that joined the church through transfer, profession of faith, or baptism. In some cases, I would meet with individuals who had become regular attendees even if they had not decided to join the church yet.

These interviews served three major purposes. First, it was a great opportunity for me to do my first pastoral visit with new members joining the church. Second, I could share the missional vision of Crosswalk, communicate the discipleship process of the church, share our outreach philosophy, and explain why we did some things differently when we dealt with issues like dress, the way we greeted, the language we used to communicate, and our desire to be a church ready to receive the next non-church guest that our church community engages with through the activities and events we do. Third, it allowed me to discover the personal passions of the people and what ministry they might be interested in getting involved with.

#### Quarterly Visioning Town Hall Conversations

The final piece of the new leadership strategy was to create a town hall-like environment where the Crosswalk community could have an open conversation about the effectiveness of our ministry at least once a quarter. Our plan was to have a time when all our members and guests who were interested in participating could openly share feedback or ideas that could help us do ministry with excellence. The idea was to use the first Saturday of every month since we had our buffet fellowship potluck lunch and we could get a larger group of people to stay for an extra 1 ½ hours afterwards to participate in these conversations about the vision, the upcoming plans and collect honest feedback that could assist us in future strategic planning sessions.

In this town hall discussion, I and available ministry leaders share the overall ministry goals and plans we had set for the ministry year broken down into quarters. At each session we would present the big picture of the future we felt God had called us to, and then share the details about the upcoming quarter, explaining how every member was

a vital piece of this strategy, and then finish with plenty of time to answer questions, hear ideas, and keep building up the vision. The desire behind the town hall meetings was to re-cast the vision in a tangible way and lay out actionable steps that we wanted every one of us to adopt in the next three months. This helped people understand how the vision translated into their immediate everyday life context. It helped us build up a culture where our attendees were educated on what we meant when we talked about a lifestyle of evangelism. They learned what it meant to share the gospel with others, and ensured they understood what was meant when we discussed discipling people closer to Jesus and how we could help them live a Jesus-like life within their communities. It served as an educational time and a mini-vision-casting moment for our Crosswalk community.

### **Summary**

The crises that Crosswalk experienced in years five to six of its existence as a church brought a great struggle and slowdown of our growth momentum. A sudden inflow of existing believers fleeing conflict in their churches swelled the average worship attendance at Crosswalk to over 170 people each week. The challenges to the vision and missional culture came because these established believers joining Crosswalk asked to change the way we did worship and ministry, so it fit their style preference. Our leadership team began catching an unintentional shift of focus from doing everything we could to connect with the next unchurched person to doing things to connect and please church members who were not passionate about the original Crosswalk missional vision and benefitted from their human and financial resources. As the issues in the other two Adventist English speaking churches were resolved, most of the people went back to their churches in less than a year. The sudden drop in the attendance created a false impression



that the church was shrinking, and this slowed down our growth momentum greatly. At the same time Crosswalk lost three key leaders and families to out of state moves which added to the drop in attendance.

This crisis brought a perfect opportunity for the Crosswalk leadership team and I to create a new, healthier leadership strategy that would not only help the church get back on track with our missional vision, but would also help keep the church stable and faithful to that vision for years to come.

After a year of working through the crisis, I was able to put together an eight-step leadership strategy and start implementing it by the fall of 2016. The strategy included a redesigned visioning retreat, creating a mission-based church budget, new vision communication strategy, selective approach to empowering leaders, implementing a leadership placement team, redefining the role of elders in the leadership development process, implementing a personal interview with new members coming in, and finally started quarterly visioning town hall conversations.

Each of these elements were created with the purpose of helping all our Crosswalk members buy into the missional vision and follow it no matter what leadership changes happened in the future.

The next chapter describes the implementation of this strategy and how it helped to positively impact our young congregation into getting back to mission and start growing again.

## CHAPTER 5

### NARRATIVE OF INTERVENTION IMPLEMENTATION

#### **Introduction**

We started developing the Crosswalk Fellowship new leadership visioning strategy in the beginning of 2015. The whole process took about two years to complete. The strategy I described in chapter 4 consisted of eight elements. The leadership team and I began its implementation incrementally in October of 2016. In this chapter I review the narrative of the implementation steps we took in the following order: Preparation and execution of the Crosswalk Leadership Retreat as the starting point in the new strategy implementation process; creating a mission-based budget; new strategy for promoting the vision; selective approach to empowering leaders; implementing a leadership placement team; redefining the role of elders in the leadership development process; implementing personal interviews with joining new members; quarterly visioning town hall conversations. I conclude this chapter with a brief recap of the highlights of the implementation narrative in our leadership teams, events, and activities.

#### **Redesigning The Crosswalk Leadership Visioning Retreat**

Just as vision is foundational for an organization to be successful, so it is crucial for a vision to be missional if a church is to truly fulfill its true God-given purpose (Stetzer, 2016). The Crosswalk visioning retreat was designed to engage all our key

leaders, to help us to continue together to shape the vision for the future and to allow us to lead to a strategic plan that would empower and motivate our whole Crosswalk community to live a Christlike life of mission.

I sent an email and personally talked to each leader I wanted to have at the retreat. Communicating with them individually helped as I got 17 of the 19 people invited to attend our first redesigned retreat that year. The retreat took place on October 8, 2016. October was the best month for the retreat as it was in-between the stress of the new school year and the busy pre-Thanksgiving holiday season. We discovered that this was the best time that worked for all our ministry leaders, the majority of which had families with young kids. We announced the 2016 retreat six months in advance so people could plan their schedules for that weekend.

The second consideration was the length of the event. We kept the retreat to Saturday only, since staying overnight was not very easy for our younger families. In previous years many leaders ended up skipping the Friday evening session so in the new strategy we eliminated it all together.

One of my goals as the lead pastor was to make all our church meetings and events less stressful for the already busy volunteers we had. So I set up the schedule to start at 10 a.m. to allow leaders and their families to not have to get up early and rush to get to our first session. I personally took time to help those who needed help to find someone to assist with their responsibilities at the church for that day. This added some extra stress on myself as the pastor for the planning of this weekend, but I was willing to do the extra work so the retreat could be the least stressful and most enjoyable for the leaders attending the retreat. I requested church members who did not have leadership

responsibilities to help with the meal planning, shopping, picking up supplies from the church and bringing the food for the lunch, as well as helping me set up the retreat space on the day of the event. I did not ask our leaders to prepare anything for this retreat as my desire was for them to enjoy a day free of responsibilities. The church paid for an external experienced childcare team to do full-day activities for all the kids at the retreat. I found that this additional sacrifice on my part to make the weekend as easy on my leadership team as possible was worth the extra effort because I noticed how the relaxed environment stimulated leadership creativity and inspired leaders to be more passionate about their ministries during the rest of the ministry year.

#### Location and Setup

We were fortunate to find space on the campus of one of the new buildings in our local Colleen County Community College. It was a good sized space with green areas outside, beautiful new foyers with seating spaces, and the facility was only 10 minutes away from the location of our church. The college campus was virtually unoccupied on Saturdays, so this worked perfectly for us. I encouraged the attendees at the retreat to find a good place outside or in the foyer sitting areas where they could go to do their work anytime we had to take a quiet reflection or planning time during the day.

The best part of finding the community college facilities was that the cost was extremely low compared with similar facilities in the area. The college did all a simple room set up for the seminar. We had four round tables with six to eight chairs each, two large white boards, a projector screen and two square tables in the back for the food, drinks, snacks, and supplies. We set each table in the meeting room with water, a variety of snacks, balanced between healthy and not so healthy options. I also provided a nicely

bound color printed workbook with all presentations and worksheets I planned to use during the retreat. We set each table with pens, markers, poster board paper, sticky notes, and every other supply we needed during the retreat sessions.

Since most of our Crosswalk volunteer leaders were professional people, I wanted to create a feel of the retreat that would match and surpass the high-quality training experiences they might have had in their secular job environments. Everything was prepared with excellence that matched the professional meetings my leaders would expect when they attended a similar meeting at their secular workplaces. I put my best effort in to prepare the most effective process, flow, and creative presentations that would help each leader leave the retreat not only more inspired for the ministry they were called to do but feeling better equipped to tackle any leadership role in their job outside of the church.

Through all the presentations my desire was to help leaders and volunteers see that what we did at Crosswalk mattered to me, and as a result my hope was that they would care more, be more committed, and perform better in their volunteer leadership positions at the church. Since leadership, strategic planning, visioning, and team building are my areas of interest, my personal goal was that the leaders would leave the visioning retreat feeling they had learned a new skill and had grown professionally in some way and would feel excited to come to the next event we did. I also wanted them to see that we valued their time and commitment and hoped that they would value God's ministry and the church the same way.

## Agenda

We kept the schedule the same every year with minor variations so all leaders could get used to the format, knew what to expect, and could focus more on reflections, discussions, and creativity. We aimed to start on time and end on time even if this required adjustments as to how much of the agenda we covered. Whatever we could not finish there, I assigned leaders to complete on their own or at their first meeting with their ministry teams and turn it in a week before our November ministry leader's calendar planned meeting.

The agenda had 15-minute breaks between the each of the five sessions, so people could recharge, network, and be able to stay focused in the next session.

## Worship

Every year we began the retreat with a one-hour worship time spent in praise, prayer and focusing our thoughts in God. During this time, I wanted to help everyone clear their minds from the life worries and focus their hearts on God, so we all could be open to listening to the leading of God's Spirit during the day. Our praise time included three video praise songs. People could choose to sing or listen and simply focus on the lyrics and let God's Spirit shape their thoughts. There was no praise team leading the singing. I also requested everyone to silence their phones and not engage in any conversation during this praise and reflection time. I used ProPresenter presentation software so I would have smooth transitions and seamless flow.

Time was taken to ensure the technology would run smoothly so no glitches would disrupt the reflective, quiet, prayerful mood of the worship service at any time. I felt this was a good time to model the excellence I required of every ministry when they

worked on events inside and outside the church. When a glitch happened, I handled it with grace as an example to my leaders, so they themselves would not overly stress when their plans at times did not go as planned. I made it a point to train our teams that we live in an imperfect world where things go wrong. It is when we know we did our best to plan everything with excellence, that we learn to be okay when we make a mistake or when things get out of our control and do not happen as we planned them.

In between the three songs I planned a creative prayer time, and used different ideas for it. In the first year, I asked the leaders to write a personal letter to God. In the second year, we did popcorn prayer where everyone prayed at the same time out loud and in the third year we did a personal quiet time of reflection and prayer.

Next, I did a brief devotional on a Bible passage revealing God's passion for his lost children. I aimed to challenge the leaders to think missionally during our visioning time. I spoke briefly and included personal challenges that asked everyone to reflect on their walk with God, and their call to service and mission. After the Bible passage I gave one or two guiding questions to each leader at each table to reflect on and discuss together. Then we took a brief time to allow people to share their reflections with the whole group. I found it to be appropriate to let people drift away from the questions I gave them, especially when a leader opened up about sharing a painful experience, a struggle, or a personal issue that was in their heart.

This was our time to disciple each other as leaders and pray together. I wanted to be sure this time connected with what was on every leader's heart. We had times when we just listened and empathized with them and other times that required me to answer, clarify, elaborate on an issue, or share an encouraging Bible passage on the subject that

was on their minds, and then I gently managed the conversation back to the theme I wanted us to stay focused on. One of the most important feedback leaders gave about the leadership retreat in 2016 was that the spiritual time when people opened up, shared, encouraged, nurtured, prayed and supported each other spiritually in an utmost safe context and environment was what touched them the most.

Our 2016 retreat, right after the painful crisis the church went through, was one of these times when we had to let many of our leaders share the pain the time of crisis caused them. When frustration came, I always tried to turn it into positive energy. So, I asked everyone to consider, “How has the pain you went through helped shape you for the future God is calling us to build?” I used the discussion to talk about the new strategy I was looking forward to implementing to help us realign with God’s vision for our church. As Blackaby says, God is guiding us to his agenda now, even though the most difficult times as he has guided us in the past (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011).

Worship time was extremely important in my plan. I wanted this time to give a spiritual boost to some of the leaders who were giving so much to our Crosswalk ministry but were not getting much spiritually back to feed them. At the end of our worship time, I asked all leaders at their tables to pair into groups of two and pray specifically for each other’s spiritual health needs, as well as for God’s guidance for each leader during this visioning day.

### Session One: Re-establishing the Theology Behind the Vision

The first work session after worship started with a 15-minute review of our Crosswalk vision. We read our mission and vision statements and talked about the theology behind them. I had the people at each table read a Bible text revealing the



purpose of God for his disciples to become a part of the missional movement. Every year I focused on different passages. I emphasized the theme of salvation was not given by God for one's private use alone, but to be shared with the rest of the lost children of God so they could return to him in their faith.

The texts I used every year for this session of the retreat were the main texts we used when we built the original Crosswalk vision back in 2006: Genesis 12:1–3; Mark 1:16–18; Mark 3:13–15; Luke 15:8; Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:1–9. Taking time to go into God's vision for his church from the Bible reminded us that sustaining a mission minded culture and DNA required a clear understanding that if we stopped being missional, we stopped being a part of the true church of God.

We are to be a church that focuses on reaching the unchurched in our community, and beyond. In this session, I also emphasized that Crosswalk was not the end destination of our missional calling. Even though the time when our church was coming out of crisis was not the time to talk about planting another church, I used this time to talk about multiplication because although Crosswalk had sent people to help support two new church plants in north Dallas, we had not planted a church alone. Mission minded leaders were key to us being able to sustain a missional vision but being missional required us to keep alive the discussion about going beyond our community. Multiplication had to become part of our long-term vision.

Next, we took time to review the current vision and to consider if we needed to keep it as it was, adapt it or change it. The question I posed for the rest of the time in this first session was, "Has our community context changed enough to require adjustments to our vision?" Every year since 2016 we felt that our vision and strategic goals were still

right on target. This was a key discussion of our visioning retreat agenda because it set the reference point for the rest of our strategic planning process. Recommitting ourselves to the vision statement as our shared vision in the coming year allowed the new leaders joining the team to get on board. Reviewing the vision was not to necessarily change it, but to ensure that our current and new leaders understood the deeper purpose behind it and committed to making it a foundational part of our philosophy of leadership. Understanding the vision and recommitting to it among us leaders was critically important for us to keep the church we led missional and ensure that everything we planned and did was in alignment with it.

#### Session Two: Evaluation of Current Year Ministry Activities

Session two was the time to evaluate how our ministry activities helped or failed to fulfill our Crosswalk vision.

This session began with us making a list of every ministry event, program, or activity we ran in the past year followed by an honest assessment of the effectiveness, quality of execution, and how well each one of them aligned with the Crosswalk vision. I asked the group to measure how effective each event or activity was by posing three questions to consider: (a) Considering the management, attendance, and purpose, how well did the event performed? (b) How effective was the ministry event, program, or activity in connecting with new people? (c) How effective was the ministry event, program, or activity in discipling our Crosswalk members to a deeper personal connection with God, building community, and in engaging in mission?

Before we discussed the answers together, I had each ministry leader vote by placing one to three stickers by the top three events on the list they felt did best in all

three areas. Next, we looked at each of them in order, starting with the one that got the most votes and briefly asked for verbal feedback on why they felt it was effective, ineffective, and what should be improved. Before we started with the vote, I explained that this exercise was to keep ourselves honest if we wanted to continue doing what we were doing and why. At the end of this analysis the ministry leaders had the power to decide which of their events, programs, and activities they should keep doing with excellence, which one they should improve or change, and which one they should eliminate so their ministry could best use our human and financial resources to fulfill our vision, mission, and values.

This exercise was the most eye-opening and insightful moment of our visioning retreat for our leaders. They shared in our feedback time that it helped them realize that they were blinded by the “doing” and we missed considering the “effectiveness” of all the work, money, and human resources invested in ministry through the year. Two important lessons emerged from this exercise every year since we started the new format for our vision retreat. Our leaders realized that we often tended to gravitate towards doing things in the way we had seen them being done in the past, not realizing that as good as those activities might have been for their time, they brought no value to the Crosswalk ministry. The next big eye-opening lesson was that there were events we all did that were excellent and very successful, but they are focused only inwardly on ourselves.

One of the good examples of this was our Pathfinder Club ministries for youth ages 10-16. We had a very talented ministry leader who ran it with excellence. We had over 10 amazingly talented, creative parents helping her. Yet everyone felt that the ministry format in which she ran the ministry and the materials used were not engaging

enough for unchurched kids. The program was losing the interest of the families that did not have an Adventist background. It was a good ministry, but irrelevant to the mission unless improved. I talked to the leader about the need for change, but the gravity of the situation was not grasped until this exercise was done and it showed that her ministry did not make it to the final list of effective missional activities. It was an honest conversation among all the leaders, including her, about what had to change. This convinced her she had to do things differently. Though a bit defensive in the beginning, this was a turning moment for her leadership. In 2017 she worked very hard to change the way things were done in the club and made it a more open and engaging ministry for non-churched kids and families. In less than a year the club became a real important part of our mission activities and through it that year we baptized two kids from a community family and one young person from a family that had just recently started attending the church. New families were joining the club because the club activities began to focus on engaging and discipling kids to Jesus. Missional vision leads to true discipleship.

I finished this second ministry evaluation session using Wheelen et al.'s (2017) S.W.O.T. analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) of our team and church. I asked leaders to consider our church's strengths and create their ministry plan based on those strengths. I also asked, what we could do to improve our areas of weaknesses, so they are not a barrier to our ministry success?

In 2016 we found that there were also opportunities for ministry coming to us. A developer was starting a large housing development of 1,500 homes in the field across from the church. We also talked about the news that was announced that two Fortune 500 companies, Toyota Motors Co. and Liberty Mutual Insurance Company were building

their new headquarters in the city of north Plano which meant that over 10,000 new employees would be moving into the area by 2018. These were mission opportunities that I asked our ministry leaders to consider in their future ministry plans. We also had a large independent church with lots of ministry resources. They built a huge building about two miles from our church in that same time. This helped the ministry team initiate the discussion of how we could position our ministry to face the competition. Even though we were all working for God, it was a good moment to think about how we could use the unique Adventist Bible based perspective on Scripture and eschatology, and our Saturday worship as an advantageous niche to connect community people with God in this new context. In many ways, I found out it was more important to start having these discussions and live with the awareness of the changes around us than it was having all the answers to these questions. I was glad to hear and see how my Crosswalk ministry leaders' team engaged in these conversations when planning for ministry.

We concluded this discussion by addressing two questions: "How should what we know about us and the current community around us impact our ministry plans during the upcoming year?" and "How can we work with out of our strengths to ministry best in the current environment?"

#### Lunch Break

We used the 45-minute lunch break to continue the conversations on personal or church topics and to interact and build relationships with each other. I brought outside help, so our ministry leaders did not have to worry about logistics around the preparation for lunch. In our case, however, our Crosswalk leaders were very determined to keep as much of our budget as possible focused on ministry. Because of their insistence we had

everyone bring food for a potluck lunch. At the end of the day as people picked their dishes up, we all helped clean the tables together. The environment was informal, and I made an announcement that everyone was welcome to get snacks, drinks, food, desserts from the tables and eat or walk around during all the work sessions as long as they kept engaged in the process.

### Session Three: Pastoral Church-wide Goals

Session three was the time when I as the pastor presented a review of five goals I set for the church during that current ministry year. I also presented my perspective of the successes and failures we faced in the context of these goals and the changes in the community I perceived we needed to address better. I followed up with an invitation for an open conversation on the evaluation of how well we addressed each of these five goals during the year and how we could do better next year.

Next, I presented five goals I had chosen for us as leaders to focus on during the following ministry year. I wrote the goals with the input of our Crosswalk elders, church board members, and feedback from some of the current ministry leaders. About a month before our retreat, I started to review the overall state of the church, attendance, growth, and missional successes. I also took time to study the demographic and sociographic changes in the community. I looked at social trends and the business plans of the city of Frisco and the surrounding extended target areas of the cities of north Plano, south McKinney, The Colony, and Little Elm. These goals reflected my views on the current changes in our community context, our church's needs, the spiritual growth and discipleship environment at Crosswalk and our level of involvement in mission.

After my presentation, I asked the team for their feedback, recommendations, and critical analysis on the new goals for the upcoming year. I used that feedback to rework the goals later during session four when we all took time to work on our ministry strategic plans.

My goal was for everyone to see that first I was doing the same things I was asking each leader to do. I also wanted them to see the benefit of us working as a team. I attempted to model to them why it was beneficial to be open to hearing the team's feedback about the ministry plan they would be putting together in session four and how keeping each other accountable enhanced our ministry's effectiveness. The hope was that each ministry leader would see the feedback time as a positive part of the strategic planning process and realize that no matter how good and creative they were, we could always improve when we all collaborate as a team. Changing our plans did not mean we had failed, but could mean that God was wanting us to make an adjustment.

#### Session Four: Ministry Leaders/Teams Planning Time

Session four was the time we asked every ministry leader to spend one and a half hours prayerfully creating their overall ministry plan for the upcoming year. Over the years at Crosswalk, I had observed that most volunteer ministry leaders did not take time to create a full plan for their ministry and if they did any planning it was only dealing with the next upcoming event. I wanted us to be more strategic by planning for the full year and centering in on our missional vision. This would allow us to create a full evangelism path for people of all stages in their spiritual receptivity to faith in God.

I also realized that many leaders did not know how to do strategic planning, so I created a step-by-step Ministry Leaders Strategic Planning Worksheet (Appendix B) that

they could follow that would take them through each one of the planning steps. Every ministry leader was free to adapt the process as they felt best worked for them and their team, as long as they had the following major items on paper by the end of the session. We wanted to see their ministry's vision, two ministry goals for the upcoming year, two to three specific ministry events or programs with dates and action steps needed to take for their plans to happen, and give names of who would do what and by when as they moved forward. The last step on the worksheet asked for them to create a tentative budget for their ministry in the upcoming ministry year.

Helping my leaders create a plan for their ministry was a helpful step to be more effective in fulfilling our mission. It helped the leaders learn how to plan, how to lead others to plan and it gave them more credibility as leaders. Most volunteers who would consider joining their ministry teams would want to know what the vision and the general plan was for the upcoming year before they decided to jump in and help in that particular ministry.

The Ministry Strategic Planning Worksheet led the leaders through the following planning steps during this personal planning time session:

First, I asked the leaders to re-write the Crosswalk vision, as it was expressed in the context of their ministry. Our crosswalk vision was, "Connecting people with God and each other." The way that our Children Ministry's team contextualized the statement was: "Helping kids and their families build stronger bonds with each other and with Jesus." This helped our church's vision to become a shared vision for all our ministries.

Second step was to write two S.M.A.R.T. ministry team goals for the new year. They had to be S.M.A.R.T., specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-related goals



(Rubin as quoted by Doran, 1981) to set a specific ministry direction for all events and activities the team planned for the upcoming year. We made it clear that once set, the goals could be adjusted at any time during the year if the ministry context demanded it, as long as the changes still fit the overall church ministry plans and vision.

The third step was for them to come up with one to two specific programs, events, or activities they would do in the upcoming year to successfully accomplish their goals and fulfill their ministry vision. In this step the ministry teams had to define who would be their target group or groups that their event would focus on to reach. I also defined again for all the leaders seven types of church events we had been using at Crosswalk which a mentor of mine shared with me when I was a young pastor starting my ministry in 1997.

In Chapter 4 we went over the detailed definition of each event. They are based on the level of religious content and commitment to spiritual decisions. I explained to our ministry leaders the importance of using these categories when they planned their events, so they could understand how helpful this would be for our members to know who to bring to a church activity and knowing what to expect there. We asked a question in the first survey we did as we were starting Crosswalk Fellowship: “What prevents you from bringing your friends to church?” The number one answer was, “not knowing what to expect at an event or in a worship service.” The most important part of incorporating the seven event types into our ministry planning was that it allowed us to have a full evangelism path with many entry points for anyone who our members wanted to bring into our church community.

The fifth step in the Ministry Planning Worksheet was for the leaders to write three specific names of people they would try to recruit to be a part of their ministry team for the coming year. Next the plan asked to define “who,” “what,” and “by when” for each event, and do the same for each action step that needed to take place for any of the planned events to happen. Even though this might have changed later when leaders meet with their ministry team, we still asked them to define as much of these as possible at this retreat. Ideas we had often died, not because they were not good, but because we could not make them happen. Specifying “who” would be in charge, to do “what,” and by “when” ensured that what we planned was more likely to happen and be done well. Finally, in this section the ministry leaders had to consider what I called the “who, what, by when” of marketing. It made them consider “who” needs to know “what” and by “when” in order to be organized with excellence and for people to have an adequate time to complete all the plans. The “who” here must include all the organizers and all the parties to the event.

Because our retreat time was not enough to plan everything, we asked the ministry leaders to complete step six, the preliminary financial budget, at home and submit it a week before our November calendar planning meeting. We asked our ministry leaders to put a budget together based on the events God led them to plan for, and not plan events based on the money we thought we could give them. Even though we could not always afford to cover 100% of everyone’s proposed budgets, we did our best to fulfill their requests because we wanted every leader to know that we valued them, that we wanted to see them succeed as we tried to provide the best, most excellent ministry to the community inside and outside of Crosswalk. We also included in the budget money

for training events and materials. The philosophy I promoted was that no successful organization would ever hire anyone and not provide training on how to do the job. This was even more important when working with volunteers who we ask to help us to do God's ministry.

#### Session Five: Sharing Ministry Plans and Feedback Time

At 4 p.m. we called every leader to come in for our final session where they all shared their ministry plans they had just developed. Ministry leaders had three minutes to present their vision statement, two goals for their ministry, and the events with their tentative dates they were planning to make them happen. We had someone write all tentative event dates on a big calendar on the white board so ministry leaders could see what others were planning and consider how they could adjust their events to create a better flow from or to another church event. The goal was to never have an event that did not have a follow up. On the contrary, the goal was to have events that opened doors to invite people we had interacted with and have them connect with us again.

We concluded the retreat with a prayer circle where we would either have one or multiple people pray.

It was such a rewarding experience and joy to see the great engagement, enthusiasm, and open conversations that happened among our volunteer leaders at every retreat we did since 2016. As people were leaving almost every one of them expressed an appreciation about the time we spent together and enthusiasm about the upcoming ministry year. The changes we were implementing were showing that they were making a real difference.

## **Creating a Mission-Based Church Budget**

The mission-based church budget approach we used at Crosswalk had to be consistent with our missional culture and vision. One of my top beliefs is that vision and ministry should not be planned based on our giving, but our giving should be based on our vision and ministry plans. We did not promise that we would be able to raise and secure all the money each ministry requested in the proposed budgets. I wanted the ministry leaders to know that as a leadership team we were committed to working hard with the treasurer and the Finance Team of the church to find a way to fund all the ministry plans. So, we based our budget on what our ministries actually needed in order to have a successful ministry year. In 2016 we asked our leaders to give us an estimated budget on the basis of what they felt God was calling them to do. If their dream was aligned with God's, he would provide the resources for anything he had called us to do. The fact was that since the first year of Crosswalk, we never had a shortage of funds for the ministries God called us to do. In a few cases we had ministry leaders who would fundraise part or all of the money they needed, but God always provided. In the three years since we started implementing this process, we discovered that people seemed to give more when they saw specific projects than to just give to an overall posted monthly budget. We had been blessed at Crosswalk to never have to cancel an event because of lack of funding.

Once we received the requests from the ministry leaders, we would create the church budget by taking into consideration the money the ministry team still had in their account, and then add the difference to that balance. Unless they were specifically raised for a particular event, we would zero all the church ministry accounts for the new

ministry years. I was always surprised at how many of the ministries would not use all of the money they had in their accounts which helped with balancing the budget.

We also considered the giving levels of the prior years to get a realistic idea of where was the giving potential of our members. If we needed more money because of higher ministry activities planned, then we decided we would ask for the church to support more of these passionate events they organized. Taking this approach allowed us to work closer to the real numbers we could possibly project. This process helped the church members see where the money they gave went and thus give more, and it also helped our ministry leaders to be more responsible about how they spent the money.

### **Implementing New Vision Communication Strategy**

The next part of our visioning retreat was to create an effective vision communication process that would keep the vision constantly visible to all our members and regular guests. A person could choose not to join the Crosswalk vision, but there was not a single person who did not know the church's vision. Sustaining a missional focus over the years required not only clear theology of discipleship and clear vision, but constant mission casting communication planning. The communication strategy we started had four main channels. First was to challenge all our communications to share all or parts of our Crosswalk vision statement through every communication and marketing channel we used. Second, we wanted to use our weekly worship to include weekly vision casting moments. Next, we wanted to continue our tradition of keeping December and January as our vision kick-off months. Finally, we challenged all our ministry leaders to share the vision at every interaction they had with Crosswalk members and guests.

## Weekly Vision Casting

Implementing the weekly vision casting was quickly adopted by our teams. The marketing team was the one that led this process. The job of the marketing team was to help with creating promotion strategies and campaigns for the church and assist me as a pastor and all our ministry leaders in designing, promotions, and communication of any of our events. Unfortunately, our teams were very inconsistent in communicating their information for upcoming events two weeks in advance, so our marketing was done as an emergency response rather than a well thought out process. In the past years we had a few events that were excellent, but not very successful because of late promotion. With the new strategy our marketing team leader became a lot more intentional and pro-active in soliciting information from our ministry leaders in marketing their activities and events.

The early planning we implemented at the October leadership retreat and the November calendar planning session helped ministry leaders to submit their event information early so the promotion process would start on time.

Other ministry leaders such as our bulletin program coordinator, our online newsletter team, and the Crosswalk media team started to incorporate the vision not only by placing either full or part of the vision statement to incorporate elements of it in the different announcements as well. These also allowed a better coordination to get new graphics from the marketing team that also included elements of the vision as often as possible. The final piece that helped our communication strategy to work well was adding a centralized flow of information through the volunteer administrative assistant, so all news and announcements were checked and edited and submitted in a timely manner.

## Promoting the Vision During Worship

Since worship is still one of the most impactful weekly moments in the life of a church where we arguably have the greatest captive audience, I worked hard with our worship team to make sure we did vision casting every week. No matter what theme we selected as the worship focus for that particular week, I did my best to creatively incorporate an element of Jesus' passion for mission in my message. In our pre-worship meeting, we challenged all participants to think of how they could incorporate the vision in their worship element. This included our musicians, prayer team, Kidz Time, or anyone doing a creative element for worship. Our marketing team created posters with messages that incorporated the full or abbreviated visions of "Connecting people with God and each other" that we would post at multiple locations in the church during the weekend. In fact, the word "connect" became the most often used word at Crosswalk. Even our general church email address was [connect@crosswalkfellowship.net](mailto:connect@crosswalkfellowship.net) and was intentionally selected to help remind people of our vision statement. Even our first-time guests received a pen or a mug as a gift that had the "Connecting people with God and each other" statement near the Crosswalk name.

## Crosswalk Vision Kick-off Month

December was the month we usually used as a church to kick-off a vision casting campaign. We selected the first week of December the kick-off Sabbath for our vision for the new year. What we changed now was that our vision casting was going to extend for two months. During December and January, we promoted the vision statement, emphasized the importance of mission, called people to join a ministry team, and challenged them to live a lifestyle of evangelism. We also focused more in the month of

December to celebrate the good things God had done through Crosswalk in the past year by showing video highlights of our ministry and interviews with people whose lives had been impacted through our ministry during the past year.

While our main theme remained focused on the Christmas holidays and we prepared our Christmas program as usual, we reminded people to use this time as an opportunity to engage family and friends with our church by inviting them to our special Christmas worship, and the friendly and fun socials we designed.

With the promotion of our church's vision, we also designated weekly time to start drawing attention to the role of our ministries to becoming channels in helping us fulfill the church's vision through their impact on our community. We emphasized the need for every member to be involved in ministry inside or outside the church. We gave 10 minutes every week to promote two of the church ministries during our worship service in the months of December and January. The promotion consisted of us introducing the leaders of two ministries, giving them three to four minutes each to present their ministry's vision, plans for the next year, and most importantly share why people should join and how they could get involved. We encouraged each ministry to prepare and play a short one and-a-half minute video clip promoting their ministry.

Starting with the month of January, no matter what our new worship theme was, we kept our focus on challenging our members to build a stronger personal connection with Jesus, teaching what a Christ-like missional lifestyle looks like and asking them to dedicate themselves to living a lifestyle of outreach during the new year. We closed the month of January with one of the most fun events, our churchwide ministry fair. We talked about how our church was all about making a difference in the communities we



live in, serving others and creating environments where those who did not know Jesus and those who do not have an active relationship with him have an opportunity to start a personal walk with God.

We left time at the end of the service to invite everyone to go and check all ministry booths that were set up in the back of the auditorium with a tri-fold poster board explaining what each ministry was about. We gave a volunteer form to every attendee and encouraged all members and friends alike to pick a ministry of their passion and sign up and join it for the full year, or volunteer to help for just one or two specific events. Once the form was filled out, they could leave it with any ministry leader standing by the ministry booths ready to answer any questions people might have.

#### Leader to Members Communication

The third push was for me, our elders and leaders to become intentional in sharing our mission focus in every meeting, every interaction we had with church members, and the community. The elders and I would use our visitations with people to remind them to live missional lives that communicated our vision through our actions. We also asked our leaders to use the vision language as often as possible in everything they did as a team or with Crosswalk members. Our marketing leader made a purposeful campaign to be sure we communicated the vision constantly in our on-line newsletter, website, bulletin program and in the last two years in all our social media channels. Since this was one of our most neglected areas for a while, we recruited a team of high-school teens to help with the social media posting and it worked well and engaged a few kids who were not a part of any ministry team.

## **Adopting A Selective Approach to Granting Board Positions to Leader**

The fourth part in my Crosswalk visioning strategy was to start developing a leadership pipeline for multiplying leaders. As we disciplined people to God to also look for and develop future missional ministry leaders, my focus was intentionally on including all ages in Crosswalk leadership. I believed that God has called everyone to be a leader, from the youngest five- or six-year-old kid who wants to volunteer or help in children's church, media, music, greeting, or even preaching to our more advanced in years members who can mentor and support our younger leaders. Empowering young people has been part of our Crosswalk DNA and leadership culture since our beginning. We have seen so many manifestations of the benefits of it. One example of how this philosophy was impacting Crosswalk was a Saturday when I walked out to the foyer after the worship service when a sudden storm with heavy rain started to pour down. I witnessed a great act of kindness by six to seven young 10-year-old boys who on their own initiative found some umbrellas and were escorting people from the church building to their cars in the parking lot. Because we adopted this leader-development culture, we started witnessing ideas being empowered from the grass roots up.

Empowering leaders had been a focus of our ministry since the start of Crosswalk. Yet we needed a process to sift through those who wanted a leadership position so they could have a say in controlling the church. To solve this issue, we changed our church practice to not have every volunteer who becomes an official ministry leader automatically become a member of the church board. This change also allowed us to engage in leadership, people who were committed Christians respected our Adventist doctrines and traditions, but had not yet made the full decision to be baptized. In fact, we

found that involving them in active ministry often sped up their decision process. An example was our set-up team leader, who was a husband of a member of Crosswalk, and was already helping on the set-up team as well as serving with his wife in children's church. He was a gifted leader, so we made him organize and lead the set-up team. He served as the best set up coordinator we ever had. The second benefit of this change was that it eliminated the possibility which we had experienced twice in the past years of someone volunteering to run a ministry just to get to vote and have influence on the church board.

### **Implementing a Leadership Placement Team**

Another part that played a key role in making our church leadership structure more missional was the implementation of a leadership placement team ("LPT") to help us find and plug new leaders into ministry teams throughout the year. The team was comprised of six people with the pastor being present for input and consultation. The team met at least two times a year, or on an as-needed bases. This team functioned as what is known in the Adventist denomination as the nominating committee. Every year we would replace three people with members nominated by the church and voted at a business meeting. This would allow for every member to serve no more than a two-year term which is in harmony with the Seventh-day Adventist church manual.

The advantage of this model was that the LPT looked for potential leaders year-round and could replace leaders right away if the need arose. The idea was that the team over time could start an inventory of the spiritual gifts of our members and keep updating the ministry leader's job descriptions as the needs of the church changed. Second, it

provided continuity on the nominating team, so it did not try to wipe the whole ministry leader's slate and start with totally new leaders every year.

At Crosswalk we had a long-standing practice to ask leaders to commit to a full year of ministry, with the understanding that if things went well and the leader was willing to serve again, they could serve multiple terms. Part of that commitment also included the understanding that if a ministry leader was feeling burned out and felt the need of a break; he or she could step down at any time during the year. The feedback from our leaders in the past years was that the LPT allowed them to feel less pressure that they were stuck in their ministry position and thus ended up serving longer than what some of them had done in other churches in the past under the regular nominating committee system.

Lastly, we implemented an idea that originated from one of our leadership placement team members to encourage each ministry leader to invest extra time in one or two people on their ministry team and work with and develop them as leaders who would come up as the next ministry leader of Crosswalk. As part of this leadership multiplication strategy, we requested that anytime we had a leader stepping down from their ministry role to write out and pass on their job description to the new leader taking their role. We requested that the exiting leader would include suggestions of how the new leader creatively could improve and develop the ministry to the next level. Once the new leader took over the position, we would ask them to rewrite their ministry job description to reflect their passion, dreams, and expectations. This description was supposed to be turned in to me and presented to the board for review. This ensured that leadership

transitions were aligned with our church's vision, and that the process involved empowerment and accountability at the same time.

### **Redefining the Role of Elders in the Leaders Development Process**

The fifth element in the new leadership strategy dealt with the elders' role and responsibilities. The elders at Crosswalk had never had a governing role in the decision-making process of the church. We had decided that the Crosswalk elders' team would have a more board advisory role and serve as spiritual mentors and accountability partners to the pastor, board, ministry leaders, and congregation. This function allowed the elders to be effective vision-casting agents for the church. As part of the new visioning strategy, we moved our elders' meetings to once a quarter. This still allowed us to pray, reevaluate the ministry effectiveness of the church, talk about observed needs, changes that were taking place, or address issues related to the spiritual and missional growth of the church. Since all elders were a part of the Crosswalk church board their input always had influence on the church direction. Yet, their biggest role was to work as spiritual mentors for the church which gave them powerful influence over the membership.

The new strategy we were implementing required more coaching support for our ministry leaders. My desire was for the elders to have direct personal involvement in the coaching process. I asked them to meet once a month with one of the ministry leaders in our church. This was to cover the quarterly coaching meeting we required every ministry leader to attend. With the elders helping to share in the monthly coaching meetings, I was able to have time to support the ministry leaders every week in other ways. As part

of the support project I would text two ministry leaders a week and let them know I was praying for them, asked them to send me specific prayer requests, and would send them an inspiring text to encourage them and reinforce communicating our missional vision. Between the coaching meeting with the elders and me and the brief pastoral texts, we discovered that the Crosswalk ministry leaders felt better supported and empowered to press on even through the most difficult times.

### **Implementing A Personal Interview With Every Member Who Comes In**

The next key step to sustaining a missional vision for the years to come was to be sure every new member who joined was clear on what Crosswalk and its vision were all about. The personal interviews I implemented with every person or family who wanted to become part of our church family through membership transfer, baptism, or profession of faith seemed to be one of the best changes I made for our long-term ministry.

Each time an existing Adventist member from another church expressed a desire to become part of our church I would schedule a personal visit with them that I would use to have an informal interview with them. This interview served three major purposes. First, it was a great opportunity for me to get to know the person and his or her family in a pastoral visit setting. I wanted to hear their life story and the story of their spiritual journey, get to know them better, and try to discover what their discipleship experience had been. Secondly, it gave me an opportunity to share the vision of Crosswalk, communicate our commitment to discipleship and outreach, and explain to them what they would see and experience and why we did some things differently at Crosswalk such as the way we dressed, greeted, and talked. Finally, I would explain the meaning behind our philosophy of ministry to always be ready to receive the next non-church guest that

would walk in the church or would connect with us at the next event we did. In the conversation I also took time to answer any questions they had. Having shared all this, at the end I always asked what part of our church's ministry they had a passion to join, and invited them to do so. I knew it could be a risk and I might scare them off, but when it came down to believers, I was interested in people who were passionate about mission. If they chose to just be there and not get engaged, that was okay because I was always hoping to ignite the passion for mission in people. If they chose not to stay, that was okay, too. I was too busy to invest too much in self-centered Christians. Since we implemented this membership entry interview, we hardly had any conflicts related to church traditions, even with members who had a totally different, more traditional worship style preference. It was interesting how in the past four years we had had only one family that wanted to talk to me before they transferred and decided that Crosswalk was not a church for them. We are still in a great relationship with them as they attend one of the churches in the area.

Implementing the entry interviews with transferring people joining the church resulted in almost eliminating all the irrelevant criticisms regarding secondary issues in our worship, and church life that have nothing to do with our church's mission and vision. It was one of the best new ideas that made such a positive and long-lasting impact on our long-term ministry.

### **Quarterly Visioning Town Hall Conversations**

The final piece of the new vision leadership strategy to sustain a long-term missional vision at Crosswalk was to build a culture of an open conversation between pastor, ministry leaders and the Crosswalk community. So, we created a platform to

accomplish this through quarterly town hall lunch meetings on Saturday after our worship service was over.

Since we wanted to attract people excited in getting involved in mission, if they were not engaging in our plans, we wanted to know where we were becoming disconnected from them. I wanted people to know that I as the pastor and our leaders would share plans we thought would be the best way to move forward in connecting with people and leading them to God, but we were looking for an open and honest conversation where we could hear what we were missing, and how to improve our overall ministry together as a church.

The format was simple. We would take about twenty minutes to remind everyone of our Crosswalk vision, share what we had planned for the current quarter, and then just listen and discuss. This was not a time to convince those attending about why we knew better, but to be sure we selected the best possible way forward as a church body. Any questions and criticisms were welcome, as long as it was constructively moving us forward to accomplishing the mission of the church. If it was not, I would leave it for a personal visit with the person. If it dealt with complaints that were not relevant, we would invite the person to talk to the board or the elders. The questions we wanted to invite were those related to how we could do better in reaching the unchurched, how we could disciple everyone at church to be committed to God, Christians that lived a life of evangelism, and how we could equip and empower the members to be Jesus to their families, friends, and neighbors.

Even though the attendance initially was not as numerous as we wanted it to be, we felt the positive impact of these meetings. We used each of these quarterly meetings



to cast vision, educate on how that vision translated in our daily lives and learn from the wisdom of our church community on how we could more effectively reach those who did not have an active walk with Jesus in our larger community through our everyday lives.

### **Summary**

Implementing the new strategy to realign ourselves with our initial mission-focused vision and retain it for the long run was a learning experience. It involved changes in eight different areas of our church's life. We started the implementation process in the fall of 2016 by calling all our board members and current and newly elected ministry leaders and a few potential future leaders, especially from among our youth and young adults, to the first redesigned Crosswalk Visioning Retreat.

The first retreat from the new strategy proved to be a great success and brought many positive feedbacks which was a very affirming experience. The crises that Crosswalk experienced in years 5–6 had impacted many of our leaders. Starting a new strategy proved to bring hope and revive the excitement on our leadership team. I started seeing that excitement translate into action as we implemented the vision communication strategy, redesigned the function of our Leadership Placement Team, and redefined the way we did our budget. I experienced the best support and positive momentum from the support of our Crosswalk elders who were intentional in support of their enthusiasm verbally and visually for the new way forward in their active participation of every session of the leadership retreat and in the rest of the strategic process through the year. The elders became more engaged in their interaction with the congregation and were stepping up every day, despite their busy family and professional lives to assist me with the support system we were building for our ministry leaders through our monthly

coaching meetings with them. The new leadership development pipeline also was starting to show its effects through the work of the Leadership Placement Team and the leadership development program we asked all our ministry leaders to help develop. Finally, we reduced the unnecessary conflict with people joining Crosswalk and trying to make it what they wanted, rather than join its vision. This and the regular open conversations we started having with our members at the quarterly town hall meetings created a system of unity, openness and started rebuilding the momentum for growth at our young and growing congregation at Crosswalk Fellowship.

As a result of implementing this strategy, Crosswalk momentum growth returned. It also helped realign the church with its initial missional vision and helped all members old and new join in it. The church continued to grow consistently for the next three years until August 2019 when I transitioned the church to pastor Marc Lien and moved to the Potomac Conference to plant a new congregation in the north Washington, D.C. in the city of Rockville, Maryland.

## CHAPTER 6

### EVALUATION AND LEARNINGS

#### **Introduction**

In this final chapter, I look at the description of methods used to evaluate the intervention visioning strategy implemented at Crosswalk Fellowship that dealt with the crisis of loss of growth momentum, decline of attendance, and crisis in sustaining the missional vision the church experienced during years seven to ten of its existence as an official church. I also examine the outcomes of the implementation of the new strategy and then present a summary of the conclusions that can be drawn from this doctoral project. The chapter concludes with a brief list of recommendations to be considered for future research around missional visioning and strategic planning for missional leaders.

#### **Summary**

In 2015, the church leadership team and I began a one-year process to create the new visioning strategy for Crosswalk Fellowship. Six years after being accepted as an officially organized Adventist church, enjoying a healthy number of non-members attending our weekly services, and experiencing steady growth, some external circumstances caused our young church to experience a big loss of growth momentum. As a result, the congregation unintentionally started drifting away from its original outreach focused vision. The crisis was caused by three factors. First, Crosswalk experienced a big and unexpected surge in worship attendance caused by an inflow of

Adventist members escaping conflicts in two of the main English-speaking churches in north Dallas. The second challenge came when these same members attempted bold actions to change the church's worship and ministry to a more traditional "everything is about us" approach.

Finally, as the conflicts in their original churches were resolved, a fast outflow of these same members back to their existing churches caused a major drop in attendance and an impression that people were leaving the church. Discovering the best way to regain the growth momentum and to help our church realign itself with being missional again took many hours of reflection, collecting feedback from our ministry leaders, and conversations with our team of elders and board members, learning from church planters from around the country, and reading much literature on leadership and church planting.

The resilience on the part of the Crosswalk leaders and their commitment to rebuild our church back to a healthy missional congregation provided tremendous strength in the process. What also helped us get through the difficult time of recovery was the safe environment we had built among our leadership team for transparent and honest conversations over the years. It was with their help that we started working on a revisioning solution to regain the growing momentum.

The new strategy we created was built on some strategic principles I had developed for visioning with our initial church planting core team. We also added some new ideas and elements to make the church systems, ministry structures and discipleship process even better than what it was before the crisis hit. With the input of the whole team we created, added, improved, and eliminated different elements of the revisioning strategy until we got to its current version presented in this dissertation project. In

October 2016 we kicked off the implementation of the new intervention strategy with a renewed Crosswalk visioning retreat. There we took time to review and reclaim our vision, went through our improved mission based strategic planning process, and as a result came out with specific plans to lead the church back to missional living. At the retreat, I took time to briefly explain the eight elements we wanted to put in place to get us back to health and mission.

The full leadership team reviewed, adapted, and recommitted to a common missional vision. We also had every ministry leader start a very focused vision-driven strategic plan for their area of ministry that led us to create a balanced church evangelism calendar and a mission-based ministry budget for 2017. We also set a mid-year visioning meeting where all the church's ministry leaders would talk together about where we were and what we needed to realign. We started communicating the vision on a weekly basis to challenge our regular members and attendees to get involved in our ministries and live an active lifestyle of evangelism.

We created a selective approach to how a person becomes a board member and put a leadership placement team in place to help spot and recruit potential ministry leaders and volunteers. We redefined the role of the elders and started coaching meetings where each elder and I as the pastor would meet with every ministry leader monthly to encourage them spiritually and provide support and accountability for moving forward with their ministry plans. I implemented an entry interview with every new or transferring member that joined the church to facilitate the communication of the vision with them. By 2017, we also added a bi-annual town hall meeting between the leadership

team and Crosswalk members where we presented our vision plans and facilitated an open conversation about the next step in our ministry plans during that year.

Within a few months we started feeling the immediate positive impact of the changes. We experienced greater excitement in our leaders as well as a growing excitement in our members and active attendees.

### **Methods Used to Evaluate the New Crosswalk Leadership Vision Strategy Implementation**

We chose to use the following methodology to evaluate the impact of the new Crosswalk strategy for sustaining a mission-focused vision. We measured the results by comparing five areas during the next three years: attendance, number of baptisms, volunteer involvement in ministry, leadership multiplication, levels of giving. All five of the above areas saw significant improvements from their 2016 levels when we had initiated the intervention to 2019, to transitioning the church to a new pastor as I accepted a call to move to the Washington D.C. area and become part of the Potomac Conference church planting team.

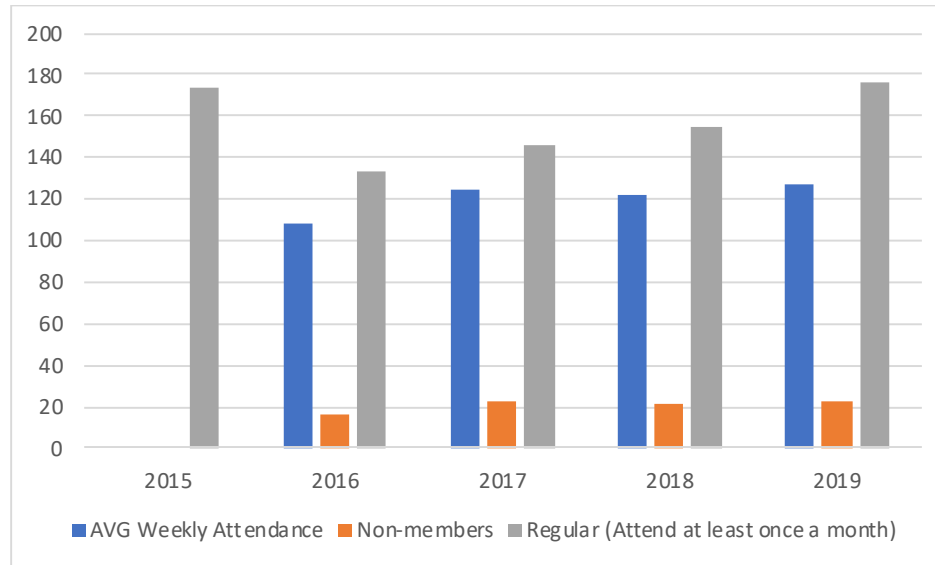
#### **Attendance**

To compare the attendance data, we used our internal Crosswalk weekly record keeping numbers collected by our church hospitality team and recorded by our church clerk and administrative assistant starting in 2016.

The passion to be missional once again translated into new excitement in our ministry leaders was being spread to the whole church. The vision to look out for those who were un-churched and those who did not have an active relationship with Jesus was translating into a steady increase in attendance. By April of 2016 when the final wave of

the members from other churches left, the weekly church attendance would barely reach over 100. During the rest of 2016 our weekly attendance averaged 108. We began implementing the new visioning strategy in the fall of 2016 and attendance started to increase steadily.

In the year 2017 we regained the growth momentum from the 2013 pre-crisis time. Less than six months after we started implementing our new visioning strategy, our weekly attendance bounced back to 120 plus people once again. In 2019 average attendance rose to 127. In fact, in the summer months of June, July and August, before we left Texas to move to Washington, D.C., the average weekly attendance ranged between 125 to 156. Another matrix showing quick improvement was the regular attendees, who we defined as people attending church at least once a month. That number grew from 130 in 2016 to over 170 by August 2019. What was even more encouraging was that we kept seeing an increase in non-members attending the church from an average of 16 in 2016 to 23 guests every week in 2019, many of them attending church on regular basis, which we defined as being at church at least once a month.



*Figure 2: Crosswalk weekly worship attendance record. Note: The records used are between February 2016 at the beginning of the crisis and August 2019 when we left Texas for Washington, D. C.*

### Baptisms

The membership data and baptism numbers were sent by our church clerk every year and recorded in the conference archives.

The year 2015 was a very low year on baptisms, with us having only one baptism that year. Dealing with the crisis distracted my attention as a pastor, and I had only three active Bible studies going on at that time. In 2016 I had already pushed hard to refocus on mission myself, and by the end of that year we had already seven people in our Baptism and Discipleship class. Even though our new strategy was not implemented fully yet, we had started to get back to where we would have over fifteen non-church guests every week out of our 100–110 people average attendance. That was 15 % of new people coming to church every week. Out of those 15 non-member guests, five to seven were non-baptized Christians and the rest were either nonactive Christians or Adventists who did not have a regular church family.



In 2017 we had nine baptisms, in 2018 we dropped to seven, and by June 2019 we already had eight baptisms which was above the percentage average healthy growing Adventist churches of 5% and above the 5.3 average baptism per church in North America for 2018 (General Conference Office of Archives, Annual Statistics Report, 2019). The rate of growth we experienced was above the North American Division acquisition rate of less than 3 % which reflects the number of members added for every hundred members in the North American Division (Medley, 2020).

Even though we did not reach our goal to grow every year by 10%, the results were encouraging and considering the increasing numbers of non-members regularly attending church, we believe Crosswalk will get there in the next year.

We also noticed that the personal interviews with every newly baptized or transferring member allowed us to communicate the vision of the church more effectively. The new members who attended these new members' interviews expressed on multiple occasions how much this class had helped them feel comfortable with the church. It also had helped create an environment of open communication and transparency about what they can expect and communicating the Crosswalk's core values.

### Volunteer Involvement in Active Ministry

Crosswalk also experienced an increase in regular attendees actively involved in ministry since we started being intentional, once again in promoting the missional vision on a regular basis. Percentages of how many people were actively involved in ministry were calculated by our leadership team going name by name at the end of each ministry year through the membership and attendance lists and cross-referencing each person who

had actively participated in church ministry through the year, or by how many had run their own ministry project and had communicated it to the elders or to me during our personal visits with them. We were interested in measuring the regular attendees' involvement in ministry rather than members who were on the church books, as in most churches some members on the books are inactive. This allowed us to get a more accurate count of how our strategy was impacting those who were relatively new to the church and were not obligated to respond to the vision as members.

In 2016, we had about 21 different ministry leadership positions and approximately 56% of our regular attendees were involved in ministry. In the middle of 2019, our number of volunteers grew to 61% of the regular attendance. The involvement was across the board in all areas of existing ministries. In 2019, we added seven new ministry leaders' positions. Some of these areas were Sabbath School classes. We also added additional volunteer leaders to our Children's Ministries Annual Summer Kick-off Festival team.

At the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017, we added two new adult Sabbath school classes. Our Sabbath School coordinator, who happened to also be our head elder, was able to create a full schedule of teachers, two to three regular teachers per class, and also recruited four extra volunteers who were willing to be substitute teachers whenever help was needed. The involvement of people in church ministries was a sign that things were moving forward towards health and growth once again. The fact that we saw a consistent increase in youth and young adults (under 25 years of age) volunteering to lead or participate in the growing ministry needs of the church was also encouraging.

Another group where attendance doubled was the high school group. The efforts of a newly recruited youth class leader helped the high school group average 15–17 young people every week, a third of who had not ever been baptized, some of them coming from families where the parents were not active church attendees. The young adult group at Crosswalk was almost non-existent in 2016 until a young single nurse and a young couple with no kids volunteered to head the ministry. By early 2017 we had a group of 12 young adults getting together on Saturdays for the regular post-worship study group time and attending social and spiritual activities and outreach events together two to three times a month. We had five baptisms that came from that group within the first year, with two of those being kids whose families had attended the church for less than a year.

A major focus of our leadership team was to find and develop young leaders and engage our young people in our Crosswalk ministry. In 2015 our media ministry started an on-line live broadcast. By the end of 2016 the media team lost two of its four members. We received a donation and added two more cameras and a new more powerful computer with special broadcasting software. The media ministry leader, who was great working with young people noticed the interest of our early teens in media and started asking them to help with the broadcast. Within two months we had a team of 12 young volunteers ages 10 to 14, very excited to help with the media ministry. With some training in video framing and understanding the basics of broadcasting and design, those young kids started doing all the video broadcasting and adding graphics to the broadcasting scenes. Overall, these young people were so self-driven that soon our media ministry person started sharing with me that the kids were using functions in our Wirecast

software that even we did not know how to use. It was rewarding to see the Crosswalk vision help recruit and empower people to get involved in ministry and capture the attention of even our younger kids.

This mission-minded volunteering was becoming contagious. Two instances will always stick in my memory as a pastor. First was the time when we had just started to use the YouVersion, a popular Bible app, to encourage people to have daily devotional and read regularly through the Bible. I was surprised that soon some of our adult leaders and I started getting four to five invitations every month to read along Bible plans with these same 10–14-year-old kids. They had started a Bible reading friends group and were reading regular daily Bible based devotional plans together under the name “church peeps.” Our “church peeps” team engaged more than forty people in their reading plans, and some of them are still part of the reading teams four years later. Our vision was becoming contagious even to our younger kids.

On another occasion right at church there was a sudden Texas storm with heavy rain that had started to pour down. As I walked out into the foyer visiting with people, I was so pleasantly surprised to see some of the same 8- to 12-year-old boys and girls walking people out to their cars with umbrellas they got from the church. Our greeters who were keeping an eye on them for safety told me that they found the umbrellas and did this on their own initiative. When we saw even our younger people do self-driven ministry, we knew that our efforts to recast the missional vision were starting to work.

### Leadership Multiplication

We used the same process to count the number of leaders at the end of each ministry year as we did with the volunteer involvement. We reviewed the attendance

records and marked all people who were involved in any type of leadership position as an official ministry leader of a Crosswalk ministry or functioning in a leadership role of running a small group, special team, or taking the responsibility to lead in coordinating a specific part of an event. In the total number I also included leaders who moved away to another church plant or location where we have confirmed they are still involved in a ministry leadership position.

The first noticeable positive outcome of the new leadership visioning strategy implementation was the overwhelmingly positive feedback from those who attended our redesigned annual visioning leadership retreats. Starting with the first one in 2016 and every subsequent retreat, we got extremely positive feedback at the verbal feedback sessions we did at the end of the day. Every year, the leadership team would come out filled with excitement and God sized dreams for the new ministry year. The vision was adopted across all our ministry activities.

The next major areas showing positive outcomes as a result of implementing the new visioning strategy at Crosswalk was the renewed passion of existing and new leaders to serve in ministry. We had 13 key leaders, most of whom joined the leadership team in 2016 and continued to volunteer to run the same ministries for three consecutive years even after the Leadership Placement Team offered them the opportunity to step out. Our practice was to never force a leader to remain in a ministry if he or she felt burned out or needed a break or a change. The leadership culture of believing in God's call for us to stay focused in mission resulted in seeing many other people being willing to step up and help with the expanding leadership and volunteer needs of our expanding Crosswalk

ministries. In summary, we added five new leaders in 2017, four in 2018, and three new leaders and six new co-leaders in 2019, five of which were youth under 21.

An area of leadership that saw a big boost was the area of adult sabbath school study group teachers. A class that I started as a friendly Bible study for people who are just starting to get into the Bible as new believers grew to over 25 people with most people becoming regular attendees. I passed its leadership on to two very capable teachers, and let them form a separate study group class. The new teachers were excited, and their new sabbath school group grew to more than 25 regular attendees, as they started building strong relationships between each other outside of our worship time. They would gather at least twice a month on Saturday afternoons after church and after a meal, would carry special discussions on different topics of interest engaging practical Christianity. I asked five of the members of the class to remain with me and help me restart the New Believers class. We grew it again to about 15 people over less than a year. The momentum of volunteers and discipleship was increasing.

We had struggled for about two years to find a capable leader for the Crosswalk Kids Adventurer Club for children ages four to ten. Within three months after we began the promotion of the vision and implementing our new strategy, we had a leader and a group of families, some members and some non-members, but regular attendees volunteered to start the regular activities of the club. Within a year they had over twelve children in the club with another four to five who were going to turn age four by the end of 2017.

As we mentioned in Chapter 4, one of the major initiatives our new leadership visioning strategy involved was engaging leadership development among all ages. My

personal belief has been that the youth are not the future of the church, they are the church. Our practice at Crosswalk had been to start the leadership development of these young people while they are growing as young kids. As Power, Mudler, and Griffin (2016) note, “young people that adults believe in and entrust with leadership responsibilities tend to develop as strong future leaders” (p. 51).

Our Crosswalk team had been blessed with singers and some skillful musicians and we were running four praise teams, one for each week of the month with different praise leaders for each team. One of our praise team leaders, a nurse that also worked with our young adult group at church had invested in few of our growing teenage girls and got them to help with her praise team. In early 2017 she finished her nursing degree and ended up accepting traveling nursing jobs. Before she left, I approached two of the young ladies who were excelling at their singing and music skills to help organize a new praise team. These two young ladies, had also grown to understand how to lead worship, build praise sets, but most of all had developed good leadership skills as well. A worship leader and I took these two teenage girls and helped coach them as they started taking the responsibilities to be in charge of running a team. My goal was to help them grow as leaders, help them understand team dynamics, and most of all to continue to involve the rest of their peers into ministry. At the beginning of 2017, one of the girls’ moms, a praise team singer in one of our other adult praise teams who had just volunteered to be the High School ministry leader for 2017 became the young ladies’ praise team music coach. She helped them organize the practices and kept them accountable.

It was amazing to see what became one of our best praise teams. It was an all-girls team at first. These girls were so great at leading the team that they had developed

not only their own skills but were mentoring and empowering the other young ladies in their team to help co-lead. When two leaders left for college in 2019, two of the girls on that praise team took over and did a great job to keep carrying the praise team forward. A third teenaged girl joined another church plant to help them with leading praise music.

By the end of 2018 these girls started involving some of the teen guys to help play instruments for them from time to time. In October of 2018 one high school boy approached me and the girl's praise coach and requested that they create an all-guys teen praise team. By December 2018, we had two new teen praise team groups that engaged over 15 teenagers and brought back to church youth that had started to drift away, and a totally unchurched young person who was now regularly attending church and singing at Crosswalk.

Another positive outcome we observed was the impact of the new leadership visioning retreat on the confidence and abilities of each of our ministry leaders to create a vision-based ministry plan for the upcoming year. In my follow up conversations with each leader who attended the redesigned leadership retreat, I discovered a renewed excitement about the vision of Crosswalk and the ministry each of these leaders was planning to do. This investment seemed to have contributed to the increase in the desire of many of our current leaders to stay and serve longer terms in their ministry positions.

The positive momentum of the missional leaders was spreading very fast. The largest outreach community event at Crosswalk was our annual signature Summer Kick-off Family festival that started with a crazy idea from our children's ministries and expanded to a largely sponsored community family event. We started the event in the summer of 2010. Summer Kick-off was three hours of fun for the whole family held in



one of the city parks in the heart of the city of Frisco. It included games, activities, food, face-painting, bounce-houses, many prizes and a special character-building show with a magician or a ventriloquist and a short story done by me. The first five years the event was bringing about 200–250 families out and about 10–12 community sponsors who helped with the cost. In 2016, right after our December visioning retreat and our push to promote the vision, a young adult lady that had started coming to church with her sister and her parents after over seven years of being unchurched volunteered to join the summer kick-off team. As a trained salesperson and business recruiter, within two years she raised our sponsors from 10 to over 25 who pretty much covered the cost of the \$16,000 event and donated over \$3,000 in prizes. Her husband also volunteered to recruit and lead the set-up team which was becoming a big job. Our young adults stepped in to help with the marketing of the event. With the increased volunteer team, the attendance kept growing, reaching 400 in 2016 and 2017 and over 800 people in 2019, many of whom were not Christians. This event was an awareness event where we wanted to give something to the families in the community to kick-off their summer and give us an opportunity to collect contact information from people who would tell us what kind of events they would be interested in for us to provide. The amazing jump we saw in the number of volunteers, the attendance and the success of the Summer Kick-off event, as in all other areas of ministry at Crosswalk was an affirmation that the vision was capturing the hearts of our faith community and was helping us to get back to be a growing church that connects to the community in relevant ways and consequently, connecting people back to God.

## Levels of Giving

We finished the 2016 year with relatively regular giving levels. Yet, within less than six months we started observing significant increases in tithes and offerings.

The records of our finances I use in this paper are the records kept and submitted by our church treasurer and audited by the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventist churches. In the end of 2015, our year end tithe giving levels were at \$219,950, which included the giving of some of the people who had started to attend Crosswalk during the issues in their churches. Since they stayed during the first four months of the 2015 year before transferring back to their churches their giving is reflected in this number. For comparison, our giving in 2013 and 2014 was \$198,000 per year. After the drop in attendance in 2016 we dropped to the 2014 levels of giving. By the end of 2018, our tithe was at \$219,835. Tithe and giving increases are dependent on many variables, and it is not my intention to present these numbers as a scientific proof for increased giving. My intention is to present how in both years, 2017 and 2018 we met our budget and covered all our ministry expenses, except for the Worthy Student Fund, which was not subsidized by the church, but was funded by personal private commitments.

What we saw to be more significant was that the giving matched the budget we put before the church, which shows that the missional mindset of our regular members were connecting with the plans we laid before the congregation.

## **Conclusion and Lessons Learned**

In 2006 the Crosswalk Fellowship core team started a church with a vision to be a place where people who were unchurched or did not have an active relationship with God could experience His love and find an environment where they could choose to start an

active friendship with Him. For the first three years the group grew, launched, and grew to become an official church of the Seventh-day Adventist church. In the fifth year of being an officially organized church, Crosswalk experienced a vision crisis under the pressure caused from the influx of members from the other two English-speaking churches in the area moving to Crosswalk to avoid conflict situations in their congregations. The leadership at Crosswalk started dealing with many internal issues related to legalistic demands of the incoming members for the church to change its worship style and the way ministry was done. The increased attendance created a false sense that the church was growing fast, but the people joining were members transferring from other churches rather than people who were interested in joining the Crosswalk vision. Soon after as the same members left to go back to their churches the young Crosswalk congregation had to deal with the perception that it was losing people. During that same time the life transitions of a few key leaders and their families moving away added to the reducing attendance. This time caused the Crosswalk ministry leaders team to reevaluate its commitment to its original outreach vision, find a way to revive the growth momentum, and set a system in place to protect a similar crisis from happening again.

Despite the challenges and the difficult time this crisis caused, it also produced a few positive outcomes. It reaffirmed the realization in its leader of how important it is to keep a clear missional vision set before the leadership team and all the members at all times. It also showed the importance of being sure the vision is shared by most if not all the attendees of the church. It solidified the commitment of the leadership to put God's calling and mission before pleasing those who are already saved members of the

Adventist church. Lastly, this crisis mobilized me as a pastor and the leadership team to work on creating a new, improved plan on how to help prevent a similar vision shifting crisis from happening again in the future of the church.

The main realization for all of us leaders was that we either needed to keep Crosswalk as a missional church, or there was no point of us being a part of a place that plays a game of musical chairs and focuses on serving existing members who drive from afar. The leadership team was all in harmony on this point.

As a pastor I realized that the people who joined the core team were people who signed up to be a part of a missional vision, and if our vision changed, we would end up losing all these people who were the major engine behind Crosswalk's growth. We either kept on working to find ways to lead unchurched people into God's kingdom, or the key people on my team would not waste their time simply babysitting those who were already saved. I realized that this might be the biggest problem of many new churches that start and do not make it. Unless they retain their focus on mission, all the initial leaders will bail out on the project, the pastor would be forced to take on board non-missional leaders, and the focus of the congregation's ministry will change to be focused on entertaining those who are already church goers. While this does not mean that we do not need to keep on discipling each other in the church, it does reveal that if we are not growing people to go beyond being spiritual infants for a long period of time, we need to reconsider our discipleship plans. Another major reason the members of our Crosswalk leadership team decided was that we were to remain missional in our methodology no matter how much Adventist members who came to visit end up criticizing us, is the reality that if an existing believer comes and does not like how we do church, they will

find another church to worship on Saturday, but if an unchurched person came to experience our community and we did not connect the gospel in a relevant way to them, they will end up going away and staying unchurched. It is for this reason we wanted to do church for the next unchurched person who anyone would bring to Crosswalk.

Just as important as the vision was, we also learned that it was crucially important for us to have a clear intentional strategy in place to take that vision and translate it constantly to our new attendees and regular members. A clear vision would help the first group be clear on why they should become a part of our faith community and keep the enthusiasm of the latter group up so they could stay engaged in our daily church ministry. If we were to lead others to God, we had to keep in the forefront the great commission of God for all our members to live a Christ-like lifestyle of mission wherever they were, in whatever they did, twenty-four hours a day. For a vision to bring results and remain a driving force of the lives of all members, it had to become a shared vision by everyone. For this to happen the vision must be communicated every week in multiple ways, in everything the church and its leaders do. It must permeate the leadership team members, become the central point of all leadership and church meetings, be the center of conversations when leaders interact with the church's members, be part of every worship service or event we offer and be communicated with every member in some significant way on a regular basis.

### **My Personal and Professional Growth Through the DMin Project Experience**

The DMin project implementation experience contributed to my professional and personal growth. Here are some of the areas of growth I would like to highlight.

## Professional Growth

1. Learning a different set of challenges church plants go through as young churches, a few years after they are established.

In October of 2014 I accepted to work as the Church Planting coordinator for the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. I was doing this while I still worked as the lead pastor at Crosswalk. With God's grace, under my leadership, we planted over 45 churches in four years in Texas. My experience of planting Crosswalk Fellowship from the beginning of the plant helped me learn a lot about how to start a church, gather and develop a core team, and do a successful launch of a new church. I was able to observe the challenges of the growth years as well as how hard it is to stay focused on the mission while we see how we can gain money and people if we start catering towards established believers. At the end of the day, it is all about what one feels God has called one to do.

2. A church vision must be mission oriented for the church to remain healthy.

My core team leaders and I felt a strong calling to stay focused on leading people to Jesus, rather than taking care of the saved. We were committed to do that no matter how long it took us to become larger and acquire our own building. What I learned more than anything is that the future success was all driven by our vision. If we stay focused on what God calls us to do, and we keep doing everything in our power to do the things that depend on us, and invest in the areas God has equipped us to excel in, he will do the rest. Throughout the existence of Crosswalk, the years when we experienced our growth and saw most lives being changed by God were the years when we stayed focused on reaching the unchurched and discipling those God brought to us.

In the time of crises, we felt stuck, or plateaued. Those were the times when we unintentionally lost our outreach focus and derailed off the initial missional vision. There

are churches that aim at attracting everyone they can because their goal is to grow as large as possible. It is okay if that is their goal. We believed that our calling was to grow large by attracting those who did not know Jesus. The second is harder to accomplish, because it takes longer, but in the words of Jesus, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7 NASB) and few verses later, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10 NASB). I know that what still excites me to be involved in the church planting movement is my conviction that my calling is to live my life like Jesus did, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17 NASB).

3. The experience of creating a new leadership strategy to sustain the mission-focused vision during the later years of Crosswalk’s existence gave me insights of how to help stuck church plants become missional and grow again.

Church planting is not easy and there are many unknown challenges that a young church might face. The revisioning process we established in some ways is as simple as applying the basic strategic planning elements true for any organization. Yet, being able to adapt these parts to the context of a new church was an extremely enriching experience for me as I presently work with church plants and churches in the role of a pastor, church planter, church planting coordinator, coach or trainer, or any other church role.

One of the key lessons for me through this dissertation project is that church plants and churches get stuck for three main reasons. First, because they do not have a clear missional vision that is shared by all their ministry leaders. This is where redefining the vision at Crosswalk was so important. Second is the reality that a clear vision that is not shared does not impact the ministry of the church. So, making our strategy focus on

promoting the vision and constantly challenging the leaders and members to get involved in our ministry was a key factor in leading us to see positive outcomes relatively quickly. Finally, the vision will not happen if the strategy is not fully broken into action steps, and an accountability processes that will ensure that the plans we set in place are not only vision driven, but they get done. This is where the part of our Crosswalk strategy involved coaching and an accountability meetings to ensure that all ministries acted on their plans.

These three observations have become a key part in my work to help church plants that are in their post-launch phase not to get stuck, and when they do, it is the way to lead them out of being stuck. I see now that the Crosswalk visioning strategic planning process could benefit long-established existing churches as well, if their leadership teams are willing to let God revive their vision for their congregations through following the Crosswalk process.

4. A focus on retaining a healthy missional vision helps a church see a continuous, positive change in the numerical growth.

Understanding its purpose, vision, and having a clear strategic part to fulfill that vision is the key to growing healthy and successful churches and church plants. Once a church has a clear vision, then it stops being driven by numbers, but by how healthy it is. It is churches that are healthy that see a long-term increase in numbers. Even though numbers ultimately reveal the health of an organization, the numbers can never take place of the vision that will drive it to create systems, teams, and actions that will lead to a positive change in the numbers.

Our focus in 2016 was not to increase tithe or attendance. The focus of our leadership team was to assure we stayed focused on the mission. The increase of tithe and



attendance we experienced in 2017 and 2018 were the result of that realignment with God's mission. Our focus was God's passion to lead unchurched people and those who do not have an active relationship with Jesus back to him and disciple them to grow close to their Creator God. We uplifted the vision God called our leadership team to have at Crosswalk. We prayerfully followed the strategic plan God brought to us through our visioning process and tried to keep each other accountable in being committed and faithful followers of Jesus and to create healthy systems and environment among our church family. Once we had the mission set right, everything else started coming into place.

5. Developing skills in understanding and implementing strategic planning.

This research has helped me build a very deep understanding and appreciation for the strategic planning process and has helped me adapt it especially to the context of planting new churches.

6. Developing skills in taking a church organization through a context-based process to discover its God defined vision

During the development of the new Crosswalk visioning strategy, I was able to develop an effective vision discovery process that I take new church planting core teams through to help them discover their God-given vision.

7. Gaining better understanding and becoming a more effective leader

Leadership has always been a discipline of passion for me. I love to study, learn, and grow in how to be a better leader. What I love about this project is that it has helped me grow from using natural abilities to lead to understanding a wide variety of leadership competences and learn how to lead with intentionality. This research helped me understand why some things I do as a leader work, why some things do not, and has

challenged me to grow in my ability to not only be an effective leader but become a multiplying leader. I can truly say that this process has taught me that success is not about me helping build another leader but developing leaders who will build other leaders. Gaining a clearer understanding of the power of multiplication, as well as acquiring skills to help me be a better equipped leader maker has been one of the most important benefits I have seen as a result of this project.

### Personal Growth

There were six major growth areas I experienced in my personal life.

1. Learning to rely on God through hard life challenges I experienced during this dissertation project.
2. One of the major growth areas for me was to learn better time management skills to keep a balanced life between God, ministry, personal and family time, and the work on the DMin project.
3. Learning how to use the strategic planning steps in my marriage, life, without making it feel like my wife and I were running a business. I also implemented this in my work with counseling other couples.
4. Researching on and striving to develop good emotional health
5. Becoming a better husband, father, and a leader to my family as well as looking for opportunities to mentor, coach, and develop leadership skills in my own kids.
6. Finally, the best benefit for me during the process of writing the DMin project was to discover, accept, and address the growth areas in my own personal life.

### **Recommendations for Further Studies and Research**

The process of creating the leadership strategy for sustaining a mission-focused vision for the long run at Crosswalk brought tangible results, bringing excitement among the leadership team in the areas of growing attendance, the number of non-members attending our worship service every week, and the revived momentum for growth. The quantitative growth and positive results we saw in the church statistically and in numbers reflected the effectiveness of the new visioning strategy and its implementation. There

are four recommendations I would like to make for further research as a result of my observation during the implementation process.

1. There is a great need to develop a good matrix for measuring the success of church plants that is based on measuring leadership development, disciple making, multiplication, and membership involvement in ministry. Instead of the traditional approach of looking at the number of baptisms, and tithe increases.

This all came as a result of trying to decide on what were the right measuring factors that showed success or decline in the growth of the church after the implementation of the new visioning strategy. Such a matrix would measure better the health and qualitative development for church plants versus looking at the end result. The challenge is that by the time a church plant detects a decline in numbers of baptisms, offerings and tithes, it is too late to do a timely intervention. The Natural Church Development (NCD) process works, young churches do have relatively high scores, and yet many of them end up plateauing while trying to address the eight NCD factors. Another big challenge with the Natural Church Development surveys is that it does not measure multiplication of disciples, leaders, ministry groups, and starting other congregations.

The next two recommendations I would like to make for future research studies came out of conversation with other church planters as we discussed strategies that can help Crosswalk become more effective in reaching the unchurched.

2. We need to discover the factors that bring the initial easy, fast attendance growth spurt in the Adventist church plants in the first six to twelve months and why do we see a steady slowdown in the growth rate after the first year.

During my conversations in building the new strategic plan for our vision casting, I spent many hours talking to Adventist and non-Adventist church planters, and we all have a similar experience. Most church plants grow fast in the first six months to a year

and then slow down after that initial growth spur. I observed this phenomenon at Crosswalk and in almost every single one of the 46 Seventh-day Adventist church plants we started in the Texas Conference under my role as a church planting coordinator there. A typical Adventist church will grow fast for the first two years after its official launch. The plants led by full-time, or half-time church planters will hit 50 to 100 people quickly. Some lay led plants where the lay leader is not as knowledgeable, or where they cannot give their plant more than half-time the hours a full planter can, would reach about 30-50 people in the first six to 12 months and then the growth slows down dramatically.

From talking to non-denominational church planters in the North Dallas area of some of the more successful church plants there, their planting pastors observe a similar spike in the initial growth, and then the rate of unchurched people added to the church drastically decreases. Our unscientific observations seem to be that the size of the initial growth spurt depends on the number of ex-members of that particular denomination present in the immediate community and the relatives or family members connected to them. In other words, the initial and largest growth spurt comes from those who have stepped away from their churches and now find their way back to God through encountering the new, fresh, more relevant, and welcoming Christ-centered environment the new church plant generally presents to the community. There seems to be a commonality in the experiences of church plants when it comes down to the initial growth rate and which ones of these churches survive or fail. The benefit of a research project on this topic will be that it can help church plants find solutions for how to keep that spurt going.

3. Another research project that would have been helpful to have in the process of creating our leadership strategy would have been to see effective vision casting strategies for using social media.

Even though one can find single organization examples, bloggers, vloggers, YouTube influencers and consultants that can give ideas on effective use of social media for marketing, we did not find much credible research on how to use social media for vision casting in church planting. Churches and church plants are in desperate need of guidance on effective use of social media for ministry, marketing, and as part of their vision strategies. Despite the largely used social media channels, there are very few specialists that can give a comprehensive strategy on social media usage and understanding how to use the ai-algorithms social media companies follow.

4. The last idea for research came when our Crosswalk ministry team tried to compare what was the most effective way to spend our evangelism funds at Crosswalk. Was it more effective putting it into community outreach events or to continue to invest large amounts of money into promoting and running public evangelistic meetings?

The amount of money we would spend on average on evangelistic meetings was about \$11-15,000 per series, every one to two years. The results from our traditional public evangelistic meetings, no matter if I as a local pastor led them, or if we brought in a professional evangelist, seemed to bring a very low return on the dollar at the end. So, for the last four years we shifted our use of our evangelism funds and seemed to get similar and even better results when it came down to soul winning, and especially when we considered the long-term retention of those who joined the church. Investing the same amount of money in our local community ministry and events almost eliminated the need for having an evangelistic meeting. It would be beneficial to have focused research that would compare the growth of an equivalent amount of money being spent on evangelistic meetings verses investing the same amount in local outreach ministry events. In fact,

there is a need for a study to further compare if public evangelism or church planting brings a greater percentage of new believers in the Adventist church, if an equal amount of money is invested into both of them. It seems that this could help the Seventh-day Adventist denomination be more efficient with the money it invests in mission and how that money is used. This recommendation is not for a study to determine if public evangelism should be conducted, but to compare the long-term retention rates between newly baptized people between existing churches holding public evangelistic meetings and people baptized through incarnational work of new church plants which do low budget evangelistic reaping events.

The ultimate goal of this suggested study will be to compare if the huge amount of money invested by conferences in random evangelistic meetings every year could not be used more effectively if invested instead in starting healthy new church plants, while letting existing churches and new church plants run low-budget reaping events working with church friends that they have already established. There is a great need to discover lower cost reaping events that will reduce the cost per baptism ratio. There is also a great shortage of money to invest in supporting other church growth strategies, such as church planting, community relational building events, etc., and determining if those other events might have greater potential to bring greater harvest results and do a better job at discipling and long-term retention of new people.

## APPENDIX A

### A. CHURCH PLANT REQUIREMENTS FOR GROUP, COMPANY, AND CHURCH IN THE TEXAS CONFERENCE (2006 - 2010)

#### Recommendations for becoming a CHURCH PLANT GROUP in the Texas Conference of Seventh-day Adventists:

1. Demographic viability is confirmed by the Texas Conference church planting department.
2. Mother church or conference administration has voted support for the group to meet weekly and begin planning toward a plant.
3. Weekly meeting for the purpose of spiritual fellowship and strategic church plant planning. The “incubation” period should continue for a minimum of six months before group begins Sabbath worship services.
4. Recommended study for group: Rekindling a Lost Passion and ABC’s of Natural Church Development by Russell Burrill, and the book of Acts. Order by calling NADEI at 269-471-8303.
5. Financial giving is run through the mother church. A separate line item is set up for donations made by group members toward their planting project. The funds are available to the group as needs arise.

#### Requirements for obtaining COMPANY STATUS in the Texas Conference:

1. 30 baptized members.
2. 30+ average attendance for the previous 3 months.
3. \$25,000 in projected annual tithe.
4. Local Church Finances:  
Once company status is voted, the group is to set up a bank account in consultation with the Conference Under treasurer. The Conference auditor should also be contacted to receive accounting software to set it up.  
The group agrees to establish a line item in their budget for a building fund. This fund will receive a monthly allocation from the combined budget.
5. Date set to complete the Natural Church Development survey. The Conference will cover the cost of the first survey.

6. Assigned pastor or pastor-coach if group is lay led.

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## Requirements for obtaining CHURCH STATUS in the Texas Conference:

1. 55 baptized members.
2. 60+ average attendance for previous 3 months.
3. 10+ individuals have joined by baptism or profession of faith since the company was organized.
4. Company has held at least one public evangelistic series.
5. \$50,000 in projected annual tithe.
6. A strategy and timeline have been established for fund raising and the eventual acquisition of a church facility.
7. Treasurer has completed certification process with the Texas Conference treasury department. Treasurer and pastor cannot be from the same household.
8. Completion of the Natural Church Development survey with minimum average score of 50.
9. Voted commitment to support Adventist education:  
Option #1 - A monthly subsidy for members' children to attend an Adventist church school.  
Option #2 - A constituent relationship with an Adventist church school. Once the subsidy reaches an acceptable level, voting representation on the school board is to be expected.
10. Completion of a review with the Conference church planting director or another designated individual.
11. Assigned pastor or pastor-coach if the church is lay led.



APPENDIX B

B: MINISTRY LEADERS STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHEET

## MISSION & VISION

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Each step should be done in sequence.

### MISSION & VISION STATEMENTS

Write your church's Mission & Vision Statements:

Why do we exist?

**Mission:** Answers the question why do we exist?

**Vision:** A word picture of what we want to be

### TEAM/DEPARTMENT VISION STATEMENT:

Write separately in one sentence your **Ministry Vision Statement** (rewriting the Church's vision to apply to your ministry)

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### CORE VALUES OF THE CHURCH

As you plan your ministry goals and activities, please keep in mind the core values of the church.

**Our MISSION:**  
*Matthew 28:18-20*

**OUR CHURCH'S VISION:**  
*Connecting People with God  
and Each Other*

**My Department's VISION**

**Our Church's CORE VALUES**

# SETTING STRATEGIC GOALS

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## KEY STRATEGIC GOALS:

Set 3-4 overall strategic goals that you want to focus on during the upcoming year: *(Those should be driven by the Ministry Team vision and core values.)*

STRATEGIC GOAL 1:

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STRATEGIC GOAL 2:

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STRATEGIC GOAL 3:

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## NEXT DO A “SWOT” ANALYSIS:

Consider your Strengths and Weaknesses within your team and the church, as well as the Opportunities and Threats from the outside. Review your key objectives so they reflect your strengths and opportunities.

**Strengths** – what your team is good at

**Weaknesses** – what are your growth areas

**Opportunities** – events, social developments, or relationships outside of the control of your organization that provide potential opportunities that help our mission

**Threats** – what are the organizations or elements of the environment that will be complete with you, or work against our vision

**STRATEGIC GOAL ONE:**

**STRATEGIC GOAL TWO:**

**STRATEGIC GOAL THREE:**

**OUR STRENGTH:**

**OUR WEAKNESSES:**

**OPPORTUNITIES:**

**THREATS:**

# SETTING SMART GOALS

## SMART GOALS (Objectives)

Write 1-3 specific SMART\* goals for each Strategic Goal you set on the previous page. Think of specific goals you need to set in order to fulfill each of your Strategic Goals (use the worksheet guide in the right column). At the end **choose** one of the SMART goals you listed for each strategic objective that you will start with during the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the new year:

Smart GOAL 1:

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Smart GOAL 2:

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Smart GOAL 3:

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\* Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Real, Time specific

### STRATEGIC GOAL ONE:

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SMART Goal 1:

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SMART Goal 2:

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### STRATEGIC GOAL TWO:

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SMART Goal 1:

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SMART Goal 2:

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### STRATEGIC GOAL THREE:

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SMART Goal 1:

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SMART Goal 2:

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## Making It Happen/Action Steps

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Now consider the specific action steps that have to take place to accomplish each goal. Use the format to the right to specify what each action steps is, who will help make it happen and by what date/time. You as a Ministry Team Leader should overlook all Strategic Goals. Choose a team member to manage each strategic goal and help them delegate responsibilities for each action step to different people. (You can have a team member manage more than one strategic goal). Their role is to call the follow up meetings with everyone working on that strategic goal, to check on progress, bring up to you needs and issues that come up, and redistribute tasks and resources as needed. Regular check-in meetings are key to the success of the strategic plan. Each time the team gets together (virtually or in person) new action steps can be added, eliminated, or reassigned.

### EXPENDING THE TEAM/LEADERSHIP:

Each task/action step should be delegated to a specific person. The person should solicit help and recruit their own volunteers to help them accomplish the action step. The key to this process is expanding the team by recruiting more volunteers to be engaged in ministry and use this process to train others how to be future managers and team leaders.

Write names of potential people who can be added to the team. Choose one or two of them you will invest in to train them as the next team leader?

\_\_\_\_\_

STRATEGIC GOAL 1: \_\_\_\_\_

SMART GOAL 2: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Action Steps Required What?

#### Who? By when?

Action Step 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

By when? \_\_\_\_\_

Action Step 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

By when? \_\_\_\_\_

Action Step 3: \_\_\_\_\_

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

By when? \_\_\_\_\_

Leader: \_\_\_\_\_

Follow up team meeting time:

\_\_\_\_\_

**CREATE A BUDGET (see Budget Worksheet):**

A budget must be created for each goal and action steps listing money and other resources needed

# Common Calendar & Evaluation

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## CREATING A COMMON CALENDAR:

Create a common calendar of all goals and their deadlines of all teams to consider and eliminate potential conflicts and workload balance to avoid overload and burnout.

*NOTE: Some goals and action steps might have to be adjusted in order for the team to work most efficiently, use resources in the best possible way.*

## EVALUATION:

We will have at least two strategic planning meetings a year to review the ministry progress and check:

Has anything changed/shifted in the overall organizational mission, vision, environment?

Has anything changed in the external environment (out of the organization)?

What is going well?

What should be changed?

What should be eliminated?

What should be added?

## CHURCH CALENDAR:

Common calendar must be regularly reviewed in the context of the overall organization

Consider if any of your or other ministry teams dates must be adjusted to create a better flow in connecting with new people and plugging them into the discipleship path of the church.

**Be sure you plan to be ready with your dates and be present for our church Calendar**

**Planning Meeting on:**

## BUDGET WORKSHEET

Consider each goal and each required action step and use the worksheet below to calculate a proposed budget (how much money you will need) for reaching your goals. Consider also any programs, events, activities, etc. throughout the year those will require.

NOTE: Start with your best estimate; Your team can adjust the numbers as they get more concrete numbers for each action step. Once the budget is set, then your team will have to consider whatever budget they will apply from your organization, money they have to raise above that, or cut down on the objectives and goals they will take on.

<b><u>General Department expenses:</u></b>	\$	_____
<b><u>Goal 1:</u></b>		
<i>Meeting Costs</i>	\$	_____
<i>Training Events/Seminars</i>		_____
<i>Materials</i>		_____
<i>Facility Costs (if required for an event)</i>		_____
<i>Refreshments</i>		_____
<i>Staffing/Presenters</i>		_____
<i>Promotions</i>		_____
<i>Security</i>		_____
<i>Travel</i>		_____
<i>Other</i>		_____
TOTAL		_____

**Goal 2:**

*Repeat for every goal*

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