

“A Vision For The Future”

In the opening chapter of his book, “The Power of Vision,” George Barna, based upon more than 200,000 interviews, draws the following three conclusions (and I quote):

- 1) Although they are all good people and called to service, not 1 out of 10 pastors (of Protestant churches) can articulate God’s vision for their ministry. As a result, most churches have little impact in their community or in the lives of their members.
- 2) Most believers know about the concept of vision, but few understand God’s vision for their own lives. The observable consequences include experiences of frustration and self-doubt, spiritual complacency, a decline in Christian service, increased selfishness, and the acceptance of mediocrity in the church.
- 3) Within the local church, few boards and search committees rely on the church’s vision as the core filter through which pastoral candidates are screened. Similarly, fewer than 1 out of 20 Protestant churches use their vision as the key to the evaluation process for their pastors and staff.

In summary, (he says) if God’s vision were known and emphasized, imagine the difference it would make in the focus and influence of these well-intentioned ministries (end of quote).

If God’s vision were known and emphasized, imagine the difference it would make. The focus of our time today is to share what we believe God has given us as a vision for our future. Based upon who we are, the history we share, the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and where we believe God is leading, the vision we’re sharing today is one that will give direction to all that we do in the months and years to come.

It will guide the hiring (and selection) of staff and the work (each of our staff members) is given. It will drive the ways in which we use our buildings and the emphasis we place in our budgets. It will give direction to our elected leaders and to the Call Committee we’ll be selecting later today. In short, it will shape everything we’re about as a congregation and all we do as a family of believers, until that time when God chooses to give us a new direction and a new vision.

Now, a vision is not the same as a mission. We need to be clear about that up front. The mission of the church is something every Christian congregation has in common. Our mission is based upon nothing other than the calling and commands of Jesus. The Great Commission, “to go into the world and make disciples”, and the Great Commandment, “to love God (above everything else), and to love your neighbor as yourself;” those are the things that drive what every Christian congregation is to be doing, no matter where it is found or what it looks like. The mission is the same.

But the vision (of each congregation) is different. The vision is shaped by the context, the opportunities, and the challenges that are specific to its particular time and history and place.

Let’s start with a few words about where we’ve been and what lies behind this new vision. (There’s an outline in your bulletin, if you want to take notes.) Maybe you’re wondering about the vision we’ve had, and why we think we need a new one? That’s a good question.

We have a vision, or we’ve had a vision. (This is nothing new.) It’s our 2020 Vision. Adopted in 2007, it’s a vision that has given direction to all we’ve been doing ever since. When we adopted it, it was the clearest vision we had (20/20) for our future, and we thought it would continue until the year 2020 and, (if not until then), at least until it was time (and there was reason) for a new vision. We believe it is time and there is reason, and that’s why we’re doing this.

What’s changed since then, (and I don’t want to spend too much time with this), are a number of things that help explain why a new vision is needed. (I’ll mention just three.)

One, the vision we had (our 2020 Vision) was based on a purpose-driven model and program-built approach to ministry. It was purpose-driven: based upon the five purposes Jesus gives us in the Great Commission and Great Commandment. (See if you remember.)

“We are a connected family of believers (membership): worshiping God (magnification), growing in faith (maturity), committed to serving (ministry), with a mission of bringing new believers to Jesus Christ.” That was our vision, and it was based on that purpose-driven model.

It was also based upon a program-built approach to ministry. Like so many other congregations, we had put together a rather lengthy list of programs that we had hoped would attract people and (in attracting them) would lead them to faith in Jesus Christ.

What we found (like so many other churches) was that the programs did attract, and there were (more people), until the programs were no longer needed (by those same people) and the people left. What didn't naturally happen was the “leading to faith in Jesus Christ” part, and that's when we began realizing that something needed to change. That's the first.

The second is that we are (and continue to be) connected to one of the largest Protestant denominations in the country. We are a Lutheran congregation. Our approach to ministry is based upon the theology we share. We're Christians first, but we're Lutheran Christians, and for a long time that worked in our favor.

When this congregation first started (in the early 1960's), there were Lutherans moving into this area every day. It wasn't quite that simple, but (in those days) if you put up a sign on Camden Avenue that said you were Lutheran, people showed up, and more people showed up every week. It wasn't automatic, but it was a plus and (it was recognized) and (in the culture of that day) it worked.

The reality is that it no longer works, at least not like it did. In fact, (I think it's fair to say) that our sign out front that says “St. Timothy's Lutheran Church” is more of a hindrance to our outreach and growth (today) than a help. (I honestly believe that.)

Our culture today doesn't know what Lutheran is? (It doesn't.) We get people who, (even after driving by here for years), ask us what that means. “Lutheran?...Are you guys Christian?” The word “Lutheran” doesn't mean anything, and it certainly doesn't help.

The other thing that (doesn't help) is the fact that the name itself, St. Timothy's Lutheran Church, communicates (to the outside world) that we are part of a denomination, and (right or wrong, good or bad, like it or not) denominational loyalty and attraction is becoming less and less favorable all the time. It's not helping our cause, and yet, we're caught in it, all the way down to our name. (It's not helping.)

The third thing that's changed, (and again), it's tied to our culture, is the fact that we are now living in a day and age when things are changing more rapidly than ever before. Here in Silicon Valley, it's even more so.

I read (not long ago) that a majority of students entering college today will study and become prepared for jobs that (today) do not yet even exist; but by the time they graduate, they will. It's changing every day. Bottom line, if the church doesn't change, it'll be left behind.

Look at the numbers. It's happening all around us, all throughout the country, and we are no exception. We're a Lutheran congregation, part of a denomination that is not working in our favor, especially when it comes to reaching the next generations.

Now, it's not our theology. (Don't miss the point.) It's not what we teach and believe. (It's not Jesus.) It's not the message. It's the way it's packaged. It's the way it's presented and perceived. Our message is good. (That will never change.) But if we don't change (and find new ways to share it), it's only a matter of time. All of that to say that it's not surprising that God is giving us a new vision for our future; a new way to come at and to go after the same mission.

A number of things have played into the vision we've been given. Over the past (three to four years) as you know, we've been laying the foundation for a renewed emphasis on discipleship, on following Jesus and learning to take what he taught and apply it in life. The idea is to become (more and more) “like Christ” every day. That's where we sensed God was leading us even (five and six) years ago.

As a result, we've done a number of things. We've trained leaders, refocused our staffing efforts, restructured our Leadership Teams, and even reworked how we prioritize and allocate our spending. It's been an “across-the-board” emphasis (and transition) that's been taking place. We're now in a place where the Vision (being presented) not only reflects what we've been doing, but (more importantly) where we believe God is leading.

A number of discipleship components were central in the development of the new vision. (I'll lift up just three.) The first was our calling to be and to make disciples. Again, it's that same Great Commission, to “go into the world and make disciples.” Until Jesus returns, that's what we're to be doing. That's our task.

Now, it's important to note that (this commission) is not one Jesus gave only to the elected leaders (or to the clergy) or to those who are on the church staff. We're all part of it. It's for all of us. We are to be disciples and we are to make disciples. It's a calling we all share.

Second, and again, central in the development of a new Vision, is the model Jesus gives us in his own life to make time for relationships with God, with each other, and with the world. (We've talked about this before.) It's the "Up, In, and Out" life that Jesus modeled.

Jesus made time to spend with his Father. If you think you're busy, look at what Jesus was doing. (It never stopped.) But he always made time for that "Up" relationship with God. It was important to him. It needs to be with us as well.

Jesus also made time for those "In" relationships with his disciples. Again, he was pulled in many directions, but he always made time for those who were closest to him in life. (We need to do the same.) If we're going to faithfully follow Jesus, then we cannot neglect spending time with those God has given us. It needs to happen.

In the same way, if we're to be faithful in following, then we cannot forget about the world. Those "Out" relationships we have, even if they're only in passing, are opportunities to have an impact in the lives of others. Wherever we go, whatever we do, and whoever we meet, we are always going and doing and meeting people (in the name of Jesus), as his witnesses to the world. It's essential in our following.

And third, as we considered God's Vision for our future, we also considered how we are, by design, as the church, a gathered and scattered people. We gather together on Sunday, for worship, for fellowship, for prayer, for hearing God's Word. (We meet together.) And then we scatter.

Monday through Saturday, we go our own ways. We live our own lives. If we come together (and we should), it's, most often, in smaller groups, until we gather again the next Sunday. We gather and we scatter, just like the early church. But whether we're gathered or we're scattered, we're still the church. (And that's the point.)

Now, I realize we've been talking about our new Vision and we haven't even yet shared it. We'll get to that in a moment. Let me (first) share with you two other statements that have helped to inform and clarify our vision. The first is an identity statement. (It states who we are.) The second is a mission statement. (It says why we exist.)

Take a look, first, at our identity statement, who we are...

"St. Timothy's is a faith community, committed to worshiping God and working through the power of the Holy Spirit, to transform people into disciples of Jesus Christ." (Say it with me.) "St. Timothy's is a faith community, committed to worshiping God and working through the power of the Holy Spirit to transform people into disciples of Jesus Christ." That's who we are. That's our identity.

Talk it through... We are a faith community. (That's what brings us together, our common faith.) Committed to worshiping God. (That's what we do when we're here. It's one of our top priorities.) Working through the power of the Holy Spirit. (This isn't just on us; it happens only through him. We need to remember that.) To transform people. (This isn't just another club. It's about real life change, the transformation of people's lives.) Into disciples of Jesus Christ. (That's the goal. That's who we are.) It's our identity.

We also have a mission statement that gives clarity to why we exist. Take a look... "Our Mission (why we exist) is to equip and empower people to have an eternal impact in the lives of others, locally and globally, for the Lord Jesus Christ." (Say it with me.) "Our Mission is to equip and empower people to have an eternal impact in the lives of others, locally and globally, for the Lord Jesus Christ."

Now, we could stop right here and spend the rest of our time with this statement of our mission. Just think about what this says and (the scope) of what it means. "Our mission is to equip and empower people... to have an eternal impact... in the lives of others... locally and globally... for the Lord Jesus Christ." That's why we're here. That's the reason we exist. That's quite the statement.

Again, think it through. We're not here for ourselves and for what we might want. We're here for the world and for what Jesus wants to happen in the lives of others.

We're not here for the sake of everything being better (in this life) while we're alive, and hoping we make a difference. We're here to have an impact while we're (still alive) that goes far beyond this life and into eternity.

And we're not here because we think it's a good thing to be here, even as the world does not. (That's not why we're here.) We're here to make a difference for the One who was and who is and who will always be our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we consider a new vision for our future, we cannot lose sight of our identity, (who we are), nor of our mission, (why we exist). They are essential in shaping what we are called to do, and why we do it. We cannot lose sight. And now, let's turn to our Vision.

Based upon who we are (our identity), what we've been called to do (our mission), the history we share, the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and where we believe God is leading, here's our vision:

"Our Vision is to...**Know** the Father, **Grow** as Disciples of Jesus, and **Go** with the Spirit." (Say it with me.) "Our Vision is to Know the Father, Grow as Disciples of Jesus, and Go with the Spirit." (Say it again.) "Our Vision is to Know the Father, Grow as Disciples of Jesus, and Go with the Spirit."

This is a Vision we'll have in front of us for the next several years. In a variety of ways, it's one that will give direction to what we do, and why and how we do it.

You'll notice (in this Vision) that it reflects the Triune Nature of the God we serve: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It incorporates our commitment to the values we hold and the work we are called to do. And it's consistent with where we believe God is leading and what we hope (as a community of believers), in this time and place, to become.

"Know, Grow, and Go." It's not accidental that those words rhyme. It makes it easier (for all of us) to remember. (I won't ask how many had memorized our 2020 Vision.) With this one, there's no excuse: "Know, Grow, & Go." (It's not accidental.)

Nor is it coincidental that all three persons (of the Trinity) are included. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the ones that will take this Vision and turn it into a reality. After all, it's a vision God has given to us. He's the One who will use it for his glory.

And it's not (accidental or coincidental), but fundamental to our Vision that what this Vision holds up for our future is not yet (in the present) a reflection of who we are. "Know the Father, Grow as disciples of Jesus, Go with the Spirit." That's not yet who we are as a faith community. (It's not.) But it is what we hope to become, the vision for what God is calling us to be.

It's always that way. In every vision (by definition) there are "currently reality" and "intended future" dimensions. The currently reality is that we're not yet there. There's work to be done. (It hasn't yet happened.) The intended future is what we are striving to become. It can happen, and it will happen, if we continue to trust (and work) at the vision we've been given.

Take them one at a time: "To Know the Father." We just finished a three-week "Knowing God" series. We emphasized (throughout) the importance of worship, Word, and prayer. Now, each of us (to varying degrees) is already committed to those three things. (We are.) But we are not (as a community) as committed to them as we need to be. We are not.

Again, I won't ask for a show of hands. But if I were to ask you to raise your hands, if you are committed to worshiping each week, reading your Bibles each day, and setting aside (dedicated time) for the sole purpose of not just (talking with God), but getting to know God and to know his heart, would you be able to do it?

For some of us, yes. For many of us, no. It's not where we're at, (not as a whole), but it's where we're hoping (one day) to be. Our currently reality is not consistent with our intended future. Until that happens, it's our Vision.

Move on to the next: "Know the Father...Grow as disciples of Jesus." Now, it's hard to know where to start with this one. There is so much involved with being a disciple that we'd be here all day. That's part of the Vision and the challenge; there's a lot that needs to happen.

Let me start with this and (for now) leave it with only this. Essential to our being disciples is an ongoing commitment to making disciples. You cannot claim to be a disciple if you are not (at the same time) working to disciple someone else, or at least (working at) learning to disciple someone else. (The two go hand in hand.)

The vision is that (as a community), individually and together, we will grow as disciples of Jesus, learning (in our lives) what we need to learn and applying (through our lives) what we've been taught. At the same time, as a community, (individually and together) we're to be growing in our ability to help others become

disciples as well. You cannot separate the two. In the life of a disciple, they are that closely (and essentially) linked.

Now, again, our current reality does not yet match up with our intended future. If it did, we wouldn't be doing what we are, and we wouldn't be having some of the problems (and challenges) we now face. There's a lot of growing (on many levels) still to be done; a lot.

And third, we're to "Know the Father, Grow as disciples, and Go with the Spirit." We're to Go with the Spirit. What that means is that we have a Vision in front of us that will stay in front of us until each of us (and all of us) see (and apply) that calling in our lives.

Do you know how that works? Here's how that works. The moment we walk in here (on Sunday), we are a gathered community of believers, coming together for the purpose of worshiping God and be encouraged and strengthened and challenged in our faith. That's why we're here. That's what our "gathered time" is all about. In the same way, the moment we leave here (when we're finished) is the very moment we become a "scattered community" that has the same mission (when it's scattered) as when it's gathered.

In other words, when you go to work, you're to go with Spirit, because when the Spirit's with you at work, you will see (and seize) those opportunities (that arise) for sharing your faith.

When you go to school, and you go with the Spirit, you won't be afraid of being a follower of Jesus, whether or not you stand out, because you're calling is to (stand out), and so you won't (be afraid) when it happens.

When you hang out with your friends, when you talk with your neighbors, when you shop or you skype or you surf or you sweat, (and you do it with the Spirit), you'll do it for the simple and the sole reason (and purpose) of being available (to the Holy Spirit) and through the Holy Spirit to make an eternal impact, locally and globally, for the Lord Jesus Christ. That's our Vision...to "Know the Father, to Grow as disciples of Jesus, and to Go with the Spirit." To Know, Grow, and Go...and we're not yet there.

What's going to happen over the next several months is that we're going to be putting together, as a staff (and with your leaders), a number of different ways in which these three central elements in our Vision can be supported. We're going to do everything we can (on this end) to support and encourage what needs to happen on your end.

This isn't a program we're rolling out. It's not something you sign-up for (and finish) and then you're done. It's a Vision that requires each one of us to take responsibility for ourselves in order to make it happen.

I can't learn to "Know the Father" for you. It's something you need to do yourself. You can't "Grow as a disciple of Jesus" for me. I'm the only one who can do that. And none of us can "Go with the Spirit" for anyone else. It's on all of us to do it. That's the only way this is going to work.

And that leads to one final comparison I'd like to make, and then I'll close. As I think about the vision we've had (our 2020 Vision) and the Vision we now have, "to "Know, Grow & Go," do you know what I see as the fundamental difference? It's simple.

With our 2020 Vision, we outlined 15 specific components that we believed God was leading us to accomplish, and for the last (almost nine years) have been going after the accomplishment of those tasks. As a result, we've made a number of significant changes, and have seen (growth happen) in a variety of ways. The vision was God-given and it was good. And now we have a new vision, one that we also believe is God-given, and one we trust (and pray) will lead to growth.

The fundamental difference between the two is that the first was a vision designed to build and to grow the church. That's what our 2020 Vision was all about. There was a driving desire to see the church grow. That's what we wanted. That was the Vision.

The Vision we now have, in contrast, is different. It's not that we don't want the church to grow. (Don't mishear.) Of course we do. (So does God.) Growth (in the Church) is good, and it's what we all want. But that's not what drives the Vision. The Vision we now have is driven not by a desire to grow the Church, but by the calling and the commission to make disciples. And that's a fundamental difference.

We could have accomplished our 2020 Vision without growth happening in your life or my life or the lives of many who, (for whatever reasons), ended up on our campus. The accomplishment of those 15 components did not (in any way) require any one of us (or all of us) to change. It could have happened, without any of that.

With our new vision, that's no longer possible. If we are (as a community) to "Know the Father, Grow as disciples, and Go with the Spirit," then no one of us, or any of us, or all of us are off the hook. The call is to all of us, to follow Jesus; and the commission is for all of us, to make disciples. With our new Vision, there's nowhere to hide.

And so, let me close with this. I started by sharing three rather sobering conclusions offered by George Barna.

Not even 1 out of 10 pastors (of Protestant churches) can articulate God's vision for their ministry.

Most believers know about the concept of vision, but few have God's vision in place for their own lives.

And few church boards and search committees rely on their vision as the core filter through which pastoral candidates are screened; and fewer than 1 out of 20 Protestant churches use their vision as the key to evaluating their pastors and staff.

In summary, (Barna says) if God's vision were known and emphasized (in our churches and the lives of its people), imagine the difference it would make...If God's vision were known and emphasized, imagine the difference it would make.

Starting today, let's no longer imagine, but let's work together to see what happens. Our currently reality is not yet our intended future, but our intended future will become our new reality as we take our God-given Vision and learn it and live it and apply it in our lives.

My friends, this world still needs Jesus. (Our mission hasn't changed, and it never will.) But our Vision has, and it's time. Let's go after it: "Know, Grow, and Go" until that time when Jesus returns.