

Elders and Pastors:  
  
Animated Together by a Vision

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Elders: along with the pastor, the spiritual leaders of a congregation

Pastor: one set apart by special training and call to enhance and support the leadership of a congregation

Leadership: the ability to discern what needs to be done and to get people to want to do what needs to be done

Animated: "Full of vigor and spirit, vivacious, lively" (Webster's 7<sup>th</sup>)

Vision: the power of the imagination to see what ought to be but isn't

## An Ichabod Time

Does your family have fall routines, things you do to celebrate the fall? One of our family's fall celebrations is the ritual watching of an old Disney animated short: *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Do you know it? It is the story of a short-sighted schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane. Poor Ichabod can't see what's in front of him because he always has his substantial nose in a book, or focusing in on food to feed his substantial appetite, or being distracted by the lovely Katrina and her father's valuable farm. He is a fearful man. And his fears and his foolishness arise because of his lack of clear vision. I don't know if the symbolism of the name was known to the author, but I bet it was. You see, the name is rooted in Hebrew, and in a story I bet you know.

In the beginning of the book of I Samuel, we are told the story of the birth and call of the prophet Samuel. The author of this scripture describes the time and the place of Samuel's call from the Lord. He says that: "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; it was a time of no frequent vision." Lester Palmer once told a gathering of the Pension Fund Board, that literally, the Hebrew there reads: "It was an ichabod time." And ichabod time: a time of no frequent vision.

I have wondered how often God has looked down on the church and seen an ichabod time. Does God see leaders who are so focused on fears and food and folly that we live in a time of no frequent vision? If so, how can we get beyond our fears about budget and church roofs and parking lots that need repair and pews that are increasingly empty and find, once again, our vision, a vision that animates and enlivens?

## Animated by a Vision:

### Elders and Pastors Working Together

- I. Who We Are here today
  
- II. Understanding our Vision/Mission
  
- III. Critical Choices Facing the Church
  - A. What do we owe our long term members?
  - B. What do we owe our future?
  
- IV. Understanding Worship and Our Vision
  
- V. Understanding Outreach and Our Vision

## I. Who We Are Here Today

First, I'd like us to find out who's here, what our place is in the church, what some of our preferences and values are. I want to do that using what is called open space technology. That is, we're going to get up and move around some. Would you push chairs back against the wall and listen to some questions? Ready?

- An important thing to know about each other: at the breakfast bar, did you (or would you if you weren't behaving yourself) pick chocolate or glazed?
- When did you first join/become active in a Disciples church?
  - Less than two years ago?
  - In the past five years?
  - 5-15 years ago?
  - 15-30 years ago?
  - More than 30 years ago
- How long have you been a member of your current church? (Use divisions above.)
- How long have you been an elder/pastor? (Ibid.)

## II. Understanding Our Mission

- Church Size:

What size would you like your church to be? What is the ideal size for your congregation?

-If you'd like your church to stay about the same size as it is now, stand in this corner.

-If you'd like to see your church grow about 10 percent in the next five years, stand in this corner.

-If you'd like to see your church double in worship attendance over the next five years, stand in this corner.

-If you'd like to see your attendance reach over 200 every Sunday in the next five years, stand in this corner.

Why are you standing where you are?

- Church Mission/Vision:

1) Do you see the primary, the most important part of the mission of the church as:

- primarily taking care of one another; to "love one another as Christ has loved us." -Primarily inward focused-(Stand to one side)
- primarily to reach out to the world and share God's love, as in Christ's Great Commission, Go therefore and spread the news of God's love to all nations. -Primarily outward focused-(Stand to the other side)

Why do you feel that way?

2) When having to decide between two important things to do, do you want your pastor to choose (or if you are a pastor, do you choose):

- calling on a member in the hospital, or, calling on a prospective member?
- more sermon preparation or calling on a shut-in?
- spending time in personal prayer/devotions or attending the women's circle or men's group activity?

What you expect from the pastor will reveal what your primary mission is.

### 3) Role of Pastor and Elders in Mission/Vision

Left or Right:

- Do you want your pastor to primarily respond to the vision that the elders have for your church?
- Do you want the pastor to lead you in thinking about vision? (Not dictate, lead.)

Ask each group where they stand:

- If you want the elders to set the vision, how do you resource yourselves to imagine a faithful vision?
- If you want your pastor to lead you in thinking about your vision, do you, as a Board of Elders, advocate for the pastor to spend time in continuing education events, and in prayer and study in order to help him/her discern a vision for the church? Or do you think he/she ought to do that on his/her own time?

4) Faithfulness to Call: Would you be willing to change the way you've always done it if you think God is calling you to new things or will God pretty much have to take you as you are?

Thanks for your cooperation and honesty. Come sit down for a minute.

## Critical Challenges Facing the Church

1) What Do We Owe Our Long-Term Members?

2) What Do We Owe Our Future?

## What Do We Owe Our Long-term Members?

- In most of our churches, the average worshiping age of the congregation gets older every year. Stewardship experts tell us that 80% of the giving is made by 20% of the givers. In our congregation, that is likely to be our oldest members. In addition, it is our seniors who are our best volunteers. Seniors are keeping our doors open!

xx 4 years ago, the average age of those attending our worship services was 63. What would you guess is the average age of your worship attenders?

- Long term members, on the whole, love the great music and liturgy of the church (or at least the music and liturgy they are accustomed to) and as the world around changes so fast, the church has been for them a haven of stability. So change in worship is hard on them.

xx Do you find change in worship exciting or difficult?

- As bodies age and health declines, seniors will increasingly require more pastoral care and be less able to keep the lawn mowed and the roof repaired and get the newsletter folded and mailed. They deserve to have their turn at receiving pastoral care and an informative newsletter! Is that true in your congregation? How do we best assure that our seniors get the care they deserve?

## WHAT DO WE OWE OUR FUTURE?

- Do you find your congregation declining in worship attendance? Do you find it harder to recruit volunteers? It is often difficult for a church to offer the kind of care to seniors they deserve because the numbers of young people are declining.

There are reasons for the challenges we face:

- The culture has changed to such a degree that unchurched people hear organ music only at the ball game, the pizza parlor, or a funeral. Our favorite hymns are often in foreign style to those who might visit.

xx An attractive and hurting woman, age 43, joined our congregation last Sunday. Prior to a few weeks ago, she had not stepped foot in a church in her life. She was terrified to walk through our doors that first Sunday. (Can you imagine that terror-walking through strange doors to an institution you had only heard about vaguely and didn't understand?) And in worship, there were all kinds of rules she didn't know: when to sit, when to stand, when to look up, when to bow her head. There was music totally unfamiliar to her too: organ music and the great hymns of the church which she had never heard. There was also guitar music and singing that sounded closer to music she listened to in her daily life. It might not seem like a lot, but that guitar was a bridge to something familiar to her. It (and friendly greeting by people) made it possible for her to stay.

- The media increasingly portrays "Christianity" as univocal: fundamentalism. Our gentler style of Christianity is hard to "market," that is, it is hard to communicate to outsiders why we are different.

xx Last Sunday, while driving home from lunch with another prospective member, I heard a news report on NPR. They were reporting on the NOW march on Washington. I didn't even know a march was happening. But they talked about NOW as marching for equality for women and for sexual minorities. Then they described the counter-marchers as Christians who held banners that said: "God hates Fags," and "Kill the Abortionists." I don't know how you feel about homosexuality or abortion, but I found myself chagrined to be named the same name as people who would carry those signs. For the 85-95 percent of Californians who don't know church, how will they know that's not who we are?

- The culture no longer supports church membership in the way that it once did. It is therefore harder to recruit new people to the church.

xx Young mother, going through a spiritual crisis, sought us out in order to find wisdom and support in a tough time. And her extended family, her mother and siblings, don't mind if she comes to church as long as it doesn't interfere with their family's plans. They see her church attendance as similar to a massage or a facial; something it might be nice for her to do for herself but kind of selfish if it gets in their way.

xx Or consider the recent widower who had never before attended church, though it was important to his wife-very important. After her memorial service, he decided to come. His children are a little uncomfortable with this. They think he is very vulnerable and we might take advantage of him.

Both of these folks desperately need to healing of the gospel and of the church. But we have to work extra hard to make it attractive, safe, and meaningful for them.

Is it any wonder that church growth is harder than it's ever been?

Let's go back to the open space technology to think together about some other issues.

## IV. Understanding Worship and Our Vision

- Which of the following choices should the worship committee along with the pastor of your congregation, make?
  - Pick music that pleases the people who come to worship or try to find music that appeals to the unchurched in the community?
  - What kind of music do you like best in worship?
    - If you didn't have to think about anybody else's needs, would you prefer a traditional service with more traditional music?
    - If you again, had no one but yourself to consider, would you prefer a more contemporary style of worship, with a praise band, etc.?
  - Obviously, the Worship Committee of your church and your pastor(s) have to think of a variety of people with a variety of needs. Given that diversity of needs, do you think your church should have a traditional service (even though it will mean maintaining an older worshiping community)?

Or, do you think your congregation needs to offer more contemporary music in order to attract younger and newer people (even if it is hard on your longer-term members)?

- One of the things that sociologists are telling us about younger and unchurched people is that they are very visual, while our worship services are largely oral. (That is, people are used to learning by seeing and we are still trying to teach and preach and worship primarily with words.)
  - If you would be open to things like slides, movie clips, words for songs on a screen at the front of the sanctuary to help illustrate music and sermons in a visual way so that unchurched people and younger generations might be more likely to understand the message, stand to the left.
  - If you would find that concept too disruptive to your worship and you are not open to it, stand to the right.
  - How many of you wish that the hardest choice in front of us were what to choose from the snack table?

## V. Understanding Our Outreach/Vision

- If your finance committee was facing a deficit year ahead, would you vote to recommend:
  - that you cut the outreach giving in order to balance the budget?
  - that you cut the pastor's salary in order to balance the budget?
  - that you cut program in order to balance the budget?
  - that you pass a deficit budget and work to raise more funds throughout the year?
- Is your priority as a congregation, outreach mission to the world; sharing the gospel of *God's* love for all in word and deed or is your priority as a congregation self-care?
- How do your budget, your program, and your actions live out that priority?
- Is it the priority to which *God* is calling you?
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