

# The Spiritual Practice of Visioning

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*So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream....With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together...knowing that we will be free one day. I have a dream today!*

In 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. eloquently shared his vision of the future. His faith-filled dream of freedom, dignity, and justice continues to inspire with courageous hope all who hear his words. The creative force of his vision came not from his realistic talk about jobs, housing, and education, but because his words were filled with future-oriented images and symbols which appealed to the heart and stimulated the imagination.

King's dream illustrates the power and the importance of vision, of language and images which draw their resources from the rich potential of our imaginations to move beyond the limits of past and present experience to new possibilities. The vocabulary of vision—promise, future, hope—does not define reality exactly, but holds our sense of reality open to what can yet come to be. A vision also provides direction and movement. “Vision serves the church like the North Star serves the explorer. When the faith community comes to a turning point, the vision, like the star, gives a sense of direction.”<sup>1</sup>

The expression of a compelling vision is a call to action, to participation in God's “dream” of the reconciliation of humanity and the healing of all creation. We believe in a God who is dynamic and active, always present in the midst of changing circumstances—“Behold, I am doing a new thing” (Isa. 43:19). As the church seeking to discern what God is doing, we want to be responsive to what God is up to, to learn, to grow, to change. Seeking and discovering God's will for our church's ministry and mission, then, is not a quick fix for a problem we may be experiencing but an essential and ongoing spiritual practice.

## A vision for visioning

The opportunity for today's church is to be open to the power and to the promise of God's vision of the future—to dream as King dreamed. Thus what is called for is not simply the creation of a “vision statement” as a planning tool, but a communal process of discernment – a spiritual practice – which inspires hopes, supports hopes, and gives back to the church the capacity for dreaming.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Campbell Johnson and Glenn McDonald, *Imagining A Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 6.

The spiritual practice of visioning invites a congregation to slow down and step back, to take time to listen to one another in a process of exploring and sharing hopes and dreams. It is a process of communal discernment. The goal is not simply to discover the vision of key leaders, or even of the community as a whole, but to discern together God's vision for the church's life and ministry. The usual methods of efficient, rational, and democratic decision making are inadequate. Instead, communal discernment involves movement and passion; it is a process of studying, praying, singing, and dreaming together.

“A vision initiates movement. Unlike writing objective mission statements, a vision involves passion, a deep emotional commitment to new possibilities. Vision energizes the church. A compelling vision will challenge modes of worship and practices of ministry; vision will draw the church toward a new future. ...The vision, like a magnet, draws the congregation into the future.”<sup>2</sup>

**It is helpful to clarify some assumptions about this spiritual practice as you get started:**

1. The church exists because of God's initiative, not ours. The mission of the church is to discern and to participate in God's mission in the world.
2. The church has a unique mission: to be a *people of salt and light* for the sake of God's mission to the world. Each congregation is called to embody in its life and ministry what it means to participate in God's mission of reconciliation and hope for the sake of the world God loves.
3. The church does not invent its own vision of the future, but must discern and express *God's vision*, which sets our agenda, direction, and priorities.
4. The God who is always doing "a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19) calls the church to renew itself in each new generation to meet changing historical and social circumstances.
5. *Discerning God's vision* is central to the life and ministry of the church and must be ongoing and continuous if the church is to be faithful as God's people in this changing world.

For reflection and discussion:

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word “vision” or “visioning?”

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson and McDonald, p. 6.

2. Why is an expression of a compelling vision so important for the church today?  
  
...for your church in particular?

## Goals for Visioning

While the spiritual practice of visioning will take different shape within different contexts, the following six goals are offered as a general outline as you consider a communal discernment process in your church:

1. To stimulate broad participation throughout the church in discerning God's vision for the future.
2. To provide biblical, theological, and liturgical resources to cultivate faithful imaginations—the renewed capacity for hoping and dreaming.
3. To surface, share, and test personal visions in the context of discerning a shared vision for the future of the church.
4. To offer processes which create the space, time, and opportunity for meaningful and honest dialogue among members of the church in a caring and supportive setting.
5. To discover anew and celebrate the giftedness, diversity, and creative potential of the church.
6. To enable members of the church to give substantive input to the expression of a faithful, hopeful, and compelling vision to guide the church into the future.

For reflection and discussion:

1. Take time to discuss the goals for the process – which of these key outcomes do you wish for your church?
2. If helpful, put the goals into your own words. You can share your goals as you communicate about this time of discernment with your congregation.

### Suggested Visioning Practices included in *Discerning God's Call*:

- **Practice #1: Seeing the future with eyes of faith** – Seeing the future with eyes of faith enables leaders and members together to see “what is really real” about the world, the church, and the future that God has in store for us.
  - Download: “Seeing the future with eyes of faith” resources with discussion questions. This is a brief formation process for use among key leaders, groups, and congregation, to introduce, stimulate and orient to the practice of discerning God’s vision together. These resources are also helpful resources for a sermon series.
  
- **Practice #2: Encountering Jesus’ model of community** – As we consider our church’s calling as a community of faith, we interact with Jesus ‘vision’ for community. We share and test our own ideas and hopes for the church in light of Jesus’ teaching.
  - Download: *A People of Salt and Light* 4-session congregational study resource with facilitator’s guide. This is a congregation formation process interacting with Jesus’ vision for the unique and purposeful life of the faith community in the Sermon on the Mount.
  
- **Practice #3: Discerning God’s Vision Together** – We share our imagination, hope, and dreams by coming together in a broad congregational gathering to ask and answer, “What is God calling us to be and do in this time and place?”
  - Download: Detail design and facilitation, including handouts, logistics, invitation for a broad participatory congregation visioning celebration of worship, prayer, sharing, listening and visioning together.
  
- **Practice #4: Harvesting the fruit of our discernment** – Leaders listen and learn through all of the visioning practices, and draw out distinctive elements of God’s vision for our congregation.
  - Download: Design and detail facilitation for the Leadership Team expressing congregation vision and calling, priority areas and goals.
  
- **Practice #5: Sharing the fruits of discernment** – The fruit of our discernment is God’s gift of vision for our church. We receive and begin to pray the vision, interacting with one another as God begins to shape our hearts and minds in new ways.
  - Download: Processes for engaging the congregation and existing groups for praying and interacting with the vision.

For reflection and discussion:

Reflecting on the Vision Practices, what excites you about engaging in a process of discerning God's vision for your church?

*Now, turn to the download, "Designing a Time of Visioning."*