Seeing the Future with Eyes of Faith

What is this resource? This resource introduces foundations for a season of visioning. It creates readiness and interest in the congregation by introducing very basic themes of faith, hope, vision, imagination, and discernment, and relating them to this moment in the life of your church.

Who is this for? Encourage any and all who are open to engage in a brief time of learning and formation. This is a wonderful adult education opportunity especially for leaders but open to as many as possible.

What is included here? There are sections to read together, followed by discussion questions and Scripture references. There are three parts:

- Seeing the future with eyes of faith
- Faithful Imaginations
- Discerning Community

How might we use this resource? The three parts lend themselves well to 3 sessions for small groups, ministry teams, or even the congregation at worship. It is a resource for a series of sermons opening the way to a season of Discerning God’s call.

Introduction

One of the wonderful aspects of human life is that, along with the ability to remember the past and to analyze the present, we have the capacity to project ourselves into the future. Wherever people are marrying and raising a family, learning and teaching fresh ideas, developing and marketing new products, preparing for vacations or retirements, there is an affirmation of the future, a trust in the future, and an investment in the future. Try as we might, we are able neither to live simply in and for the moment, nor to rest comfortably in the accomplishments of the past. To be human is to dream of a future, to hope for it, to plan for it, and to dedicate our energies to the accomplishment of particular goals.

Christians are called to be a people who look to the future with hope. But, what distinguishes Christians is not the mere fact that we hope. Rather, it is the basis, object, and scope of our hope. Over and over again, the biblical narratives declare that the God of Israel and Jesus is a God of promise and of hope. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV). The courage to trust the future comes not from confidence in our own abilities and resources, but from confidence in the faithfulness of God to fulfill God’s promises.
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The way in which we anticipate the future is shaped by our vision of what is really real. Does reality consist only of what we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands in the present? Is our future determined only by what we can achieve today, limited by facts, figures and trends of our current situation? Consider the story of Sarah and Abraham. They believed that God’s promise of descendants as numerous as the stars was trustworthy, even more trustworthy than the empirical evidence of their infertility. They saw their future with eyes of faith. Our Christian community is called to see the future with eyes of faith. And we can because we believe in a “God of hope” (Romans 15:13), a God who considers our future and declares “See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5). Because of God’s promises that are received by faith, we see the future differently. To have hope is to imagine a new state of affairs not yet existing. As a Christian community our vision for the future can be – must be – hope-filled and imaginative, not limited or determined by facts, figures and trends of the current situation.

Seeing with the eyes of faith enables us to think the unthinkable and to imagine the unimaginable. Seeing with the eyes of faith enables us to experience what has not yet come to pass. The Old Testament prophets are well known for seeing the future with eyes of faith in this way – a time when the lion and lamb will lie down together, when swords will be pounded into ploughshares, when war will be no more, when the captives will be freed and the blind will see, when the hungry will be fed and the naked clothed. In other words, when all of creation will be transformed into a new heaven and a new earth. With the eyes of faith we too are given the ability to imagine – to visualize God’s dream for humanity, and God’s dream for our church.

This Christian hope is not naïve or foolish. Indeed, it alone is truly real for it sees reality in light of the possibilities, the promises, and the power of the God who creates and sustains all that exists.

This way of seeing reality does not come naturally. Humanity is blinded to what is really real. Separated and alienated from God, preoccupied with our own desires and plans, we have become barren in our thinking. We live under the illusion that we have life apart from God. Trusting in our own wisdom, we put forth our own visions of the purpose of human life. More often these are visions of success, wealth, power, security and happiness. And we often tie our hopes for the future to these visions.

Hope: The courage to trust the future that comes not from confidence in our own abilities and resources, but from confidence in the faithfulness of God to fulfill God’s promises.
So, as we consider visioning for our church’s future, it is important to renew a faithful vision of what is really real in the first place. That is, seeing the world as it really is: the creation of a loving God who will not leave us to our own rebellious ways, but is faithful to God’s promise of full and abundant life. This is the special vision that God has granted the Christian community, by enlightening the eyes of our hearts (cf. Ephesians 1:17-18), and by the renewing of our minds (cf. Romans 12:2). This is at the very heart of what it means to be Christian.

Visioning in the church, then, involves processes of surfacing, testing, and transforming our vision – the way we see what is really real. This is not a periodic planning effort, but is, rather, central to the ministry and mission of the church. We all too often stress the importance of ideas and actions, while neglecting the power of vision to shape and determine that which we think and do. John Navone underscores the formative and substantive role of vision: “Vision permeates our thoughts, desires, interests, ideals, imagination, feelings and body language; it is our worldview, our sense of life, our basic orientation towards reality. Our vision gives rise to our character, to our style of life, to our tone of being in the world. Vision is the way we grasp the complexity of life; it involves the meaning and value that we attach to the complexity of life as a whole and to the things of life in particular.”

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Read Genesis 3:1-6; and Ephesians 1:3-23. What do these texts say about humanity’s ability to see what is really real?

2. What does it mean to “see with the eyes of faith?”

3. What is the power of vision? Illustrate from your own life experience; from the experience of the church.

Faithful Imaginations

The Power of Imagination

We contemporary people tend to limit our attention to that which can be visualized in space and time. Anything that cannot be experienced by the five senses, anything that might require imagination, is called imaginary and not considered to be really real. We often underestimate the importance of imagination or its power.

Imagination makes present to us that which is not accessible by direct experience. It does so through images. Our imaginations enable us to see more deeply and more clearly – to discover the new in the old, the unexpected in the known, the wonder in the ordinary. Far from being the opposite of reality, imagination is the way to access many forms and levels of reality. By divorcing our intellects from our imaginations, our heads from our hearts, we limit our creativity and restrict the possibilities of insight and discovery. To experience the freedom of a new future, to approach the future with courage and hope, and to have the clarity of vision depends upon imagination.

As a Christian community, we seek to cultivate faith-full imaginations. For we “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith-full imaginations are shaped by the assurance of things we hope for by the possibilities, promises, and power of God (Hebrews 11:1). Faith-full imaginations are formed by “the conviction of things not seen” which have been promised by the grace and goodness of God. For example, if we cannot imagine a time of reconciliation and healing, when God will dwell with God’s people and “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more” (Revelation 21:3), then we are living truly only a broken and limited life.

If we cannot imagine a time when the poor will hear good news, when the captives will be released, when the blind will recover their sight, and the oppressed will go free (cf. Luke 4:18), then we will be overwhelmed by the poverty, suffering, and injustice of our world. If we cannot imagine a time when God’s will is done on earth as in heaven, then to pray the Lord’s Prayer is an exercise in futility. Faithfulness is not only about submitting our wills in obedience, but – and perhaps even more importantly – about opening and trusting our imaginations in delight and wonder.
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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read Isaiah 65:17-25; Romans 12:1-2; and Revelation 21:1-5a. How is your imagination at work when reflecting on these passages?

2. Why is imagination important?

3. What is meant by “faithful imaginations”?

4. Why is the cultivation of faithful imaginations important?

Discerning Community

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” Acts 15: 28

Visioning a faithful and fruitful future for our church is a process of discernment. Discernment is the exercising of practical judgment by the community of faith. It involves leaders and members bringing each their various gifts and experience, together sorting, distinguishing, evaluating, and sifting among competing desires, longings, influences and demands. While many participate, it is the Holy Spirit – God’s personal presence – who is the active player in the church’s process of discernment. It is the Holy Spirit who enables the church’s life in the first place. The Spirit takes the lead – willing and intending and empowering the church to discover and

Discernment: A process through which practical judgment is exercised. It involves sorting, distinguishing, evaluating, and sifting among competing stimuli, demands, longings, desires, and influences. To discern God’s vision together is to discover and test what is God’s will for a particular congregation with its unique gifts, challenges, and opportunities.
“what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:3) for a particular congregation with its particular gifts, challenges, and opportunities for ministry.

The wisdom we are seeking in a process of visioning is not the wisdom of the world seeking to live by its own vision of reality and under its own power. We are seeking God’s wisdom, that which “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived” (1 Corinthians 2:9). God’s wisdom is given by God’s Spirit to those who love God. It is the Holy Spirit – God’s enlightening and empowering presence – who teaches, convinces, and guides the community of believers into all truth (cf. John 16:13). The Spirit’s presence is evidence that God’s promised future has already been set in motion. The Spirit enables the church to abound in hope, to live in joy, to pray without ceasing, and to have insight into God’s will and purposes.2

Thus God’s vision, God’s truth, and God’s will are not legislated by governance boards or congregational meetings characterized by political maneuvering and special interest groups. But only through prayer and conversation that expects to hear, and listens for the Spirit in the midst of the community’s deliberations.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read Acts 2:1-24 and John 16:4b-15. What do you learn about the Holy Spirit from these passages?

2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in congregational visioning?

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Becoming a Discerning Community

Discerning God’s vision takes place within the context of Christian community. Here as the body of Christ we are formed and transformed to live faithfully before God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Visioning is not an individual but a communal endeavor, for the Holy Spirit works through group process—the interaction of the “two or three” gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20).

Christian community is a community of giftedness: all persons baptized in Christ have received gifts of the Holy Spirit to be used for the edification, encouragement, and consolation of the entire body. Thus it is important for the whole community to be involved in the process of discerning God’s future vision.

The Apostle Paul continually insists that every member of the body of Christ has the responsibility to share the particular insights she or he has been given (cf. 1 Corinthians 12-14). All are called “to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14), to speak God’s word “so that all may learn and all be encouraged” (1 Corinthians 14:31), to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16). It is through “speaking the truth in love” that the community is to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

So the characteristic setting in which the church discerns God’s vision is when Christians come together to listen and share, to contribute and to question, each offering their gifts and experience. In the back and forth of conversation, guidance is conveyed through each to all, and through all to each.

The process of visioning assumes that a church is able to dialogue openly with one another, and that they can reflect and learn together.Visioning assumes people genuinely respect each other, trust and cooperate with each other. But also, the process of visioning is intended to develop and strengthen these qualities. In other words, the goal is not simply a “product” — a vision statement — but the experience of Christian community where these qualities are cultivated, where these qualities become more and more characteristic of what it means for us to be church. The intent is not uniformity, but movement toward unity, where a diverse people learn to discern one mind – the mind “which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

As the faith community opens itself to the movement of God’s Spirit and is informed by faith-full imaginations, shared pictures of the future will emerge that foster genuine commitment and enthusiasm. Vision is more often discovered than constructed. Vision is a gift of the Holy Spirit, evoked from within the life of the faith community and confirmed by the community. The power of the resulting vision is often a factor of the
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intentionality and the quality of the discernment process, and is even enriched through the creative use of difference (and even perhaps conflict). Not rushing to judgement, the process invites seeking and waiting upon the Spirit in humble expectation, silence and prayer.

In conclusion, visioning is intended to help people at every level of the congregation to discern the wisdom of the Spirit and to offer their vision of God’s calling for the church. A discerning community which cultivates faithful imaginations will make the space and set aside the time for significant opportunities for listening and hearing, studying and reflecting, sharing and testing.

Let us conclude this exploration of discerning God’s vision together with this biblical prayer for discernment.

> And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why is discernment within the church a communal process?

2. What is required to cultivate a congregation as a discerning community?

3. What are the benefits of discerning God’s call within community?