Congregational Development and Change

Almost inevitably, as a minister moves toward beginning ministry in a new congregation, she or he will be asked the question: “What is your vision for our church?” Sometimes that question is asked in interviews before a call is extended. Other times it surfaces in “town hall meetings” with the congregation or less formally in reception lines or office visits.

However as common and well-intentioned as the question is, it is consciously or subconsciously based upon several dangerous misunderstandings. First of all, the question assumes that a vision for a congregation can be individually discerned by a minister or brought to a congregation from another place. Secondly, lodged in the question is the assumption that a vision for a congregation can be discerned apart from a relationship with the congregation.

We need to explore these ideas in greater detail. A vision for a congregation’s life cannot be individually ascertained by a minister under any circumstances. Particularly in a Baptist understanding of church, vision must be discerned in and by a community. It is not the role of the minister to announce the vision to the congregation, but rather to engage the congregation in a prayerful and intentional process by which vision can be discerned. A minister can be a catalyst for such a process by asking holy questions. A minister can help shape faithful imagination for discernment by preaching and teaching the Biblical texts so that visioning takes place through the lenses of God’s larger story, of which any congregation’s story is but a part. A minister can model openness and foster an empowering climate. A minister can bring convictions and experiences to a vision process, just as any other participant may. But as Baptists who understand the local congregation as a priesthood of all believers, we cannot believe that a real or faithful vision can be individually announced by a minister (or brought from another place) and forced on a congregation.

Furthermore, it is also dangerous to assume that vision can be discerned apart from a relationship with the congregation. The truth of the matter is that a minister’s life takes on a different shape and expression in every congregation where she or he serves. Obviously, we carry basic convictions, personal gifts, and ministry graces with us wherever we serve. But ministry is a relationship, it takes shape in relationship. Different congregations in unique communities will cause a minister’s gifts to find a distinct expression. Beginning in ministry in a new place is very much a new birth toward a new life. And because the coming of a new minister is a significant change in the life of the congregation, it is also a new beginning toward a new season of life for the congregation. So it is important that a new minister establish a personal and ministerial relationship in a congregation before any real vision can be discerned. Therefore, the most important steps a new minister can take toward helping a congregation discern vision are the most basic. We come to a new congregation seeking to learn the story of the congregation. We want to discover its unique personality, most significant gifts, and greatest needs. We have to recognize that a congregation has had a rich history of engagement in God’s mission before we ever arrive, and that if Jesus tarries, that life will continue far after we are gone. We need to make ourselves available for building relationships founded on trust. We need to tell our faith stories but also listen to the faith stories of the congregation and the disciples who participate in it. As ministers preach faithfully, teach well, listen carefully, visit and seek opportunities for deeper conversation, a relationship begins to come to life; a relationship that becomes the stage on which the Spirit dances to call forth vision and foster clarity about mission and identity. We should not be surprised that relationship is so essential to ministry. After all, the Gospel at the heart of our life together is that God entered relationship with humanity through Jesus Christ, and we affirm that we are made in the image of a Triune God, a God who exists eternally in relationship.
What happens, then, if vision is rushed? Or announced apart from relationship? There is obviously a danger that the vision announced will not really fit with the needs or personality of the congregation, or reflect the best possible combination of the gifts of the minister and the congregation. After all, a vision or a ministry strategy that was really faithful and fitting in one congregation or community may not be at all appropriate for another congregation in a different community. No two congregations are identical; they are wondrously unique by God’s design. But when this uniqueness of each congregation is not respected, or when the unique relationship that is forged between minister and congregation is not given time to come to life, there can be conflict and disappointment, and sometimes even a premature severing of the relationship between the minister and congregation, or significant pain for people of faith who end up on different sides of the strife created when congregations and ministers rushed toward vision before they were ready. Also, while new ministers benefit from the gift of the many facets of optimism and new energy, new ministers do not yet have the kind of congregational trust required to help the congregation make significant change, even if such is needed.

In light of all of this, here are some concrete suggestions for ministers beginning a new journey in a congregation. First, recognize the uniqueness of the covenant you are making. Because each minister has unique gifts and a personal story of faith, and each congregation has its own unduplicated story and personality, the coming of a minister to a congregation is the beginning of a new relationship that has never been before and will never be again. Take time to get to know each other. Listen to each other’s stories. Bring open eyes and open spirits to building relationships built on trust. Don’t rush toward major decisions or expect too much dramatic change to come too quickly. While ministers should invest in getting to know as many members of the church as possible, particular time should also be given to forging intentional and collaborative relationships with those in positions of leadership. Set a rhythm of meeting regularly with lay leaders and others staff, both individually and in groups. Listen as much or more than you speak. Allow the conversations to be about major church needs and personal stories.

Secondly, a new minister should give his or her primary attention not to seeking change or announcing a vision prematurely, but rather to the historic tasks of ministry. Preach well. Teach the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith. Be intentional, faithful and collaborative in worship planning and leadership. Visit faithfully. Make time for personal study, reflection and prayer. After all, in preaching, teaching and leading worship we articulate God’s greater story, and that is the story we want to give shape and form to any vision that emerges or change that must be made. There are many other cultural forces and philosophical ideas that can hold sway over the way congregations think and act. Preaching, teaching, praying, celebrating the ordinances; all of these holy actions shape us as God’s people and locate us in God’s story. Even more importantly, they remind us that the life of the church depends on the God who raised Jesus from the dead. That constant reminder forms us into a people of hope in a world where such is desperately needed. Visiting faithfully offers space for real relationships to be forged.

When the time comes for a congregation to be more intentional about vision discernment (and that is probably after several years), a minister should work collaboratively with the lay leadership (and by extension the whole congregation) to shape a process that is thoroughly congregational, prayerful, open, empowering and courageous. Partner together to make key decisions such as, who should facilitate the process and what the objectives and guiding questions should be in the process. Create space for all voices to be heard. Ask questions. Offer answers when asked, but do so in a way that still leaves room for others to speak. That kind of process is not easy; it may not be neat and clean in all ways. But it is thoroughly Baptist.

All along the way, the lay leadership of a congregation should give the new minister support by helping ensure that time is given to the things that matter most, so that when larger vision needs to be
discerned or difficult change needs to be made, such will happen within the larger context of God’s story on a foundation of trust, respect and openness.

What is your vision for our church? When asked that question, I would hope a new minister would have the courage to say: “I do not bring a vision for this church. I pray that we will take time to learn each other’s unique stories and gifts. I pray that, in time, God will show us who he wants us to be, what he wants us to do, and why he has brought us together.” What a holy adventure!
Congregational Development and Change Action Guide

Summary:

Relationship is essential to ministry in and with the congregation. Each minister, as well as each congregation, has a particular set of gifts and a unique faith story. This essay emphasizes the importance of allowing time for this partnership to develop before crafting a vision or implementing changes. Concrete suggestions are offered for minister and congregation to establish a relational foundation to develop the congregation.

Focus:

The focus of this module is to recognize the value in developing and sustaining a ministry relationship with the congregation and identifying ways to support one another in this process.

Introducing the Module: (Approximately 10 Minutes)

- Inform the group that the next meeting will include giving attention to the subject of Congregational Development and Change.
- Provide a copy of the essay for each member of the Minister Support Committee and the new minister.
- Share the Summary Statement and the Focus (listed above) with the group.
- The following assignments should be stated and given to the group members.

Assignment for the individual members of the Minister Support Committee:
The assignment for the members is focused on phase 2 of the session and is detailed on the Minister Support Committee Assignment Handout.

Assignment for the new minister:
The assignment for the new minister is focused on phase 2 of the session and is detailed on the New Minister Assignment Handout.

Engaging the Module: (Approximately 40 Minutes)

Relationship is essential to ministry in and with the congregation. Each minister, as well as each congregation, has a particular set of gifts and a unique faith story. This essay emphasizes the importance of allowing time for this partnership to develop before crafting a vision or implementing changes. Concrete suggestions are offered for minister and congregation to establish a relational foundation to develop the congregation.

Phase 1: What is Your Vision?
The essay recommends against stating, or establishing a vision for a church in the initial months of a minister’s tenure in a church. Use the following questions to lead a conversation with the support committee and the new minister regarding their response to this claim in the essay:
- Is this a surprise?
- Does this present a change of how you thought about ministers and visions and congregations?
- Has this caused you to rethink your approach to have the vision of the church articulated?
- What does this cause you to rethink?
• Have you experienced a poorly announced and executed vision?
• Have you been in a church experience, or know one, where the minister dictated the vision, or announced and set out to lead in one that was not consistent with the identity and gifts of the congregation?

If the opening discussion has not touched on the two “dangerous misunderstandings” stated in the essay, be sure to incorporate these into the discussion. According to the essay the two “dangerous misunderstandings” are implied in the often-asked question of a new or prospective minister, “What is your vision for our church?” These two misunderstandings are:
1. The assumption that a vision can be brought into a congregation from another place.
2. The assumption that a vision for a congregation can be discerned apart from a relationship with the congregation.

Introduce these for discussion by asking one of the following questions:
• Do you understand the reasoning behind why these misunderstandings are considered “dangerous?”
• What value do you see in recognizing these misunderstandings as “dangerous?”

Phase 2: Exploring Our Relationship
Four areas for attention are identified in the latter part of the essay:
1. Covenantal Relationship
2. Attention to Historic Tasks
3. Work Collaboratively
4. Laity Support

Using these four focal areas and the material in the latter part of the essay, use the following questions as a guide for a discussion with support committee and the new minister.

1. Covenantal Relationship
• What is unique about the covenant we (as a church) have made together in this relationship?
• Were there any grand expectations for the new minister when he/she began in this ministry? If so, who were the people or groups that held these? What were these expectations? Are any of these expectations unreasonable or misplaced? How has, or is, this being handled?

2. Attention to Historic Tasks
• How can we help you in paying primary attention to the historical tasks of ministry?
• Which of these do you believe are your strongest? Which ones require more effort for you?
• What priority might the congregation have for these tasks?

3. Work Collaboratively
• When might we be ready to talk about visioning?
• How should this be initiated?

4. Laity Support
• Identify the things that matter most as they apply to your specific role. (If not the pastor, what are the primary functions of your role – while it may include worship leadership, what are the other primary tasks and responsibilities?) How do these translate into the things that matter most for you to give attention to them? (Chances are the list will not be much different.)
• How can we help you give time to the things that matter most?
Additional Comments
If the congregational conflict and communication modules have been used already, there will be some additional understanding of the church’s story.

The questions about vision also apply to ministers of other program and ministry areas of the church. For example, youth search committees may ask candidates about their vision of youth ministry. The same rules apply; visioning is not done individually or in isolation. It is carried out in relationship with the people of the ministry in a collaborative manner. Knowing the church’s story and history are important.

This essay brings something important to the surface. Whereas some average lengths of stay in the church are 2 to 3 years, this essay points to a time of visioning for the congregation, or for a ministry area, to begin not before a period of 2 to 3 years. It speaks to the value of longevity in ministry in a congregation, and of creating a sustaining role of ministry.
Member Support Committee Assignment

The essay identifies four areas for attention that are important in the relationship that the minister and congregation share. These are:

1. Covenantal Relationship
2. Attention to Historic Tasks
3. Work Collaboratively
4. Laity Support

During the meeting when you and the new minister will discuss this topic questions are offered for each of the four areas. The discussion will serve to explore how you and the new minister can establish a foundation for a strong relationship together. As you prepare for this meeting use the guide below for your review and reflection:

1. Covenantal Relationship
   • What is unique about the covenant you and the church have made together in this relationship?
   • Were there any grand expectations for the new minister when he/she began in this ministry? If so, who were the people or groups that held these? What were these expectations? Are any of these expectations unreasonable or misplaced? How has, or is, this being handled?

2. Attention to Historic Tasks
   • How can you help the new minister pay primary attention to the historical tasks of ministry?
   • What priority might the congregation have for these tasks?

3. Work Collaboratively
   • When might you and the new minister be ready to talk about visioning?
   • How should this be initiated?

4. Laity Support
   • Identify the things that matter most as they apply to the specific role of the new minister. (If not the pastor, what are the primary functions of this role – while it may include worship leadership, what are the other primary tasks and responsibilities?) How do these translate into the things that matter most for him or her to give attention to them? (Chances are the list will not be much different.)
   • How can you help the new minister give time to the things that matter most?
New Minister Assignment

The essay identifies four areas for attention that are important in the relationship that the minister and congregation share. These are:

1. Covenantal Relationship
2. Attention to Historic Tasks
3. Work Collaboratively
4. Laity Support

During the meeting when you and the support committee will discuss this topic questions are offered for each of the four areas. The discussion will serve to explore how you and the committee can establish a foundation for a strong relationship together. As you prepare for this meeting use the guide below for your review and reflection:

1. Covenantal Relationship
   - What is unique about the covenant you and the church have made together in this relationship?
   - Were there any grand expectations for you when you began in this ministry? If so, who were the people or groups that held these? What were these expectations? Are any of these expectations unreasonable or misplaced? How has, or is, this being handled?

2. Attention to Historic Tasks
   - How can the committee help you in paying primary attention to the historical tasks of ministry?
   - Which of these do you believe are your strongest? Which ones require more effort for you?
   - What priority might the congregation have for these tasks?

3. Work Collaboratively
   - When might you and the church be ready to talk about visioning?
   - How should this be initiated?

4. Laity Support
   - Identify the things that matter most as they apply to your specific role. (If you are not the pastor, what are the primary functions of your role – while it may include worship leadership, what are the other primary tasks and responsibilities?) How do these translate into the things that matter most for you to give attention to them? (Chances are the list will not be much different.)
   - How can the committee help you give time to the things that matter most?