

4. The Importance of Leaders Planning for Growth

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Churches that fail to plan actually plan to fail, whether they know it or not. It is amazing how many congregations do not do anything that would be regarded in the secular world as real strategic planning. Most congregations at least have an annual budget and plan how they will spend their money, but most are not at all clear about what they are trying to achieve. Many do not even keep the kind of records that are needed for assessment. Only a small minority of churches have any plans for training the next generation of leaders. Few have any real plans for growth. One of the main causes of this failure to plan is that most church members and many church leaders simply do not understand what they are supposed to be doing.

This, of course, is just the personal perception of one observer. But this perception is based on a lot of experience.¹ I believe that I understand the planning process and that I have heard virtually all of the excuses churches give for their failure to plan seriously. On the following pages, I would ask you to consider what needs to be done and why it is seldom being done.

Three Essential Functions

God's plan for mature congregations is that they should be guided by a plurality of spiritual leaders identified by three titles in the Greek text of the New Testament: *Episkopos*, *Presbuteros* and *Poimen*. These words were translated into

Latin as *Bishop*, *Presbyter* and *Pastor*. Eventually they were translated into common words of Anglo-Saxon origin: *Overseer*, *Elder* and *Shepherd*. These words are used in various denominations today to describe a wide range of church leadership roles. In the New Testament, however, these terms were applied to the same group of leaders. In Acts 20:17, 28 and I Peter 5:1-3 it is clear that these three words refer to the same people.²

A careful study of how these three terms are used in the Bible suggests three essential leadership functions that must be performed in every congregation. There are no specific instructions in the New Testament about how congregations are to function before it selects overseers/elders/shepherds. But, the three titles provide a model of what every congregation needs.

Overseers: An Administrative Function

Congregations need some way of supervising the work of various ministries. The term "overseer" suggests an administrative function. This involves some delegation of authority to people who are held accountable for specific areas of church work. This also suggests providing guidance, training, encouragement-and even correction when needed-for those who are directing particular areas of ministry.

In Acts 6:1-7, the congregation in Jerusalem did not yet have overseers. The apostles provided that leadership function. But the apostles delegated to a group of seven special servants selected by the congregation to do the work of caring for the widows. Although these men were not specifically called "deacons," various forms of the word for deacon are used three times in this text. The words "deacon" and "overseer" are associated in the New Testament. The congregation in Philippi had "overseers and deacons" (Phil 1:1). Qualifications of deacons are presented along with qualifications of overseers (I Tim 3). Throughout the history of the church, deacons have focused on the day-to-day operational management of specific ministry areas while the

overseers have supervised the total program of congregational activity

In congregations that do not have overseers, leaders of various ministries report directly to the whole congregation, the men or some kind of steering committee. The main problem, however, is that in many congregations there is no delegation of authority to leaders of various ministries. All decisions about everything are made by the whole congregation, the men or a steering committee. That also happens in many congregations that have overseers because those overseers make all the decisions about everything and do not delegate any authority to anyone. Perhaps that is why most congregations call these men "elders" and seldom use the term "overseers." When these leaders are just decision-makers who do not delegate anything, they have nothing to supervise.

Elders: A Decision-Making Function

The term presbuteros/presbyter/elder literally means "an older man." The term, however, is used figuratively. Throughout the Old Testament, the elders of the cities, tribes and nations were the policy-makers and decision-makers. Men are not made older by selection and appointment, but in the New Testament men were made elders by selection and appointment (Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5). Since elders are also overseers of the congregation's total program of work, their decision-making should be focused on strategy rather than tactics, issues that have an impact on the whole congregation or issues that cannot be resolved at the ministry level.

As noted in the section above, many elders delegate nothing and as a result, focus virtually all of their decision-making on day-to-day operational management of the congregation's various ministries. They have no time for strategic planning. They are too busy doing the work that deacons should be doing. Some elderships have delegated decision-making authority to deacons, but they have kept their own decision-making work at the level of operational management. They have not shifted their decision-making

focus to strategic planning. As a result, the eldership has become a veto board for the deacons. This criticism is not limited to congregations that have elders/overseers. In many other churches, the congregational meeting, men's meeting or steering committee focuses on operational management rather than strategic planning.

Shepherds: A Spiritual Counseling and Teaching Function

The term *poimen*/pastor/shepherd literally refers to someone who cares for a flock of sheep. Throughout the Old Testament, however, the Hebrew equivalent of this term was used figuratively in reference to the spiritual leaders. Ezekiel 34 shows what the spiritual leaders of the nation were supposed to do: take care of the flock, strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, seek and bring back the lost. In this figure, the reference is to spiritual counseling and teaching.

This important function of spiritual counseling and teaching must be performed – even in congregations that do not have men selected and appointed to serve in the role of overseers/elders/shepherds. In such congregations, the members must shepherd one another. The “one another” passages of the New Testament show the importance of this function. A major problem in many congregations, with or without overseers/elders/shepherds, is that there is very little spiritual counseling and teaching. There is very little disciple-building dialogue. Members come to the church building as strangers and leave as strangers, but their lives never touch.⁴ It is not just the elders who are supposed to shepherd the flock. All Christians need to study and apply the “one another” passages.

All three of the functions discussed above are involved in planning for growth. There must be effective administration. Decision-making at the level of strategic planning must not be neglected. All of the planning must be done with the spiritual needs of the congregation in mind. In the New Testament

model, the most important decisions were made by those who best understood the total program of church work because of their role as overseers and who best understood the spiritual needs of the individual members because of their role as shepherds. These three roles must not be isolated. If church leaders are nothing more than a decision-making body that focuses on day-to-day operational management, the church will never function or grow as it should.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness among church leaders of successful approaches to leadership used in the secular world – in business, industry, education and government. These approaches involve clarifying the organization's purpose by looking at core values, developing a shared vision and writing a mission statement. Successful organizations develop plans for assessing measurable outcomes that indicate the degree to which they are achieving their purpose and fulfilling their mission. They collect and analyze such outcomes assessment data regularly. Based on what they learn from such assessment, they make improvements and provide input to those doing strategic planning. This approach to leadership is not something that is done once and then it is over. It is an on-going process.

Why Congregations Fail to Plan for Growth: Excuses and Responses

There are no valid reasons that justify the failure of churches to plan for growth, but there are many excuses. Some of these excuses are listed below with responses for each.

"A mission statement is the same thing as a creed."

This objection is based on a failure to understand the difference between a denominational creed and a congregational mission statement. Creeds are statements of shared beliefs of congregations that band together to form a denomination. Formal written creeds are used by central

denominational hierarchies to impose conformity on local congregations. Mission statements are not creeds. They are written by and apply to only one local congregation. They do not usually focus on controversial doctrinal issues. Instead, they focus on the unique ways in which one local congregation plans to achieve the objectives it understands to be taught in the Bible. The word "creed" simply means "this I believe." Every individual Christian and every local congregation has things that they believe and that is not wrong. Denominational creeds are not good, but mission statements can be very useful in a congregation.

"Mission statements suggest that some purposes set forth in the Bible are more important than others."

That is true, but it is not wrong. Mission statements are needed in order to keep the first thing the first thing so that the good does not become the enemy of the best. Some things are "of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Some things that the Bible teaches are "milk" and others are "meat" (Hebrews 5:12-14). In Mark 12:28, a teacher of the Law asked Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Jewish rabbis identified 613 statutes in the law and tried to distinguish between the "greater" and "lesser" commands. The Law of Moses commanded Jews to circumcise their sons on the eighth day. It also commanded them to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. What were they to do when the eighth day happened to be a Sabbath? They correctly understood that the law about the eighth day took precedence over the law about the Sabbath (John 7:21-24).

Jesus did not rebuke this teacher by saying that all commandments are of equal importance. Instead, he agreed with those who identified Deuteronomy 6:4, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength," as being the most important. But Jesus then added Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself," as being of equal importance. Jesus

said that all of the law was subordinate to these two greatest commandments

Christians need to understand that the most central mission of the church is to provide disciple-making and disciple-building instruction (Matthew 28:18-20). Worship, helping the needy and fellowship are all important – but they are not as important as the Great Commission

“We wrote a mission statement and it did not do any good ”

When I have heard this excuse, it has usually turned out that the church never really wrote a mission statement. Instead, they just wrote a motto. At Harding University, our motto has just three words. “Developing Christian Servants.” Our mission statement takes about half a page in the catalogue. But in some cases, the people who say that writing a mission statement did not do them any good actually had a rather good mission statement. Their problem was that a good mission statement was all that they had. Writing a mission statement is just a beginning.

There must also be a plan for collecting and analyzing measurable data that indicate the degree to which the mission is being accomplished. The plan must be implemented. Improvements must be made. Assessment should not *drive* strategic planning, but it most certainly should *inform* strategic planning. When churches write mission statements that do not do them any good it is usually because they stopped far too early in this process.

“There is no way to measure the degree to which a congregation is achieving its God-given purpose ”

There is some truth in this objection. We will not know until the Judgment Day how successful we have been achieving our ultimate objective. But we can measure how well we have achieved many intermediate objectives. This objection comes from church leaders who do not know how to

do the assessment that is needed. That is such a major issue that a brief response would not be adequate.

Assessing Church Growth

There are several resources available that suggest ways for assessing church growth.⁵ The approach that I use when I am conducting a church growth study begins with a study of church records to look for patterns and trends. It is best to have data for at least 10 years. Week-to-week figures are too hard to read. It is best to compare averages from year-to-year. Compare such things as.

- *Year-end membership for at least the past decade
- *Average attendance for at least the past decade –
 - totals and as percent of membership or percent of Sunday morning worship assembly attendance
 - Sunday morning worship assembly
 - Sunday morning Bible classes
 - Sunday evening worship assembly
 - Wednesday evening Bible classes
 - Any other significant numbers kept
- *Average contribution with contribution-per-member-per-week (corrected for inflation)
- *Sources of gain in membership
 - Move-in transfer growth
 - Local transfer growth
 - Baptism of member's children
 - Other baptisms
 - Unexplained gain (indication of poor record-keeping)
- *Sources of loss in membership
 - Move-out transfer loss
 - Local transfer loss
 - Deaths
 - Drop-outs

Unexplained loss (how many are "slipping through the cracks")

- *Baptism-to-member ratio for each year and for the past decade
- *Retention rates among those who grew up attending the congregation
- *Current marital status as an indication of how well the church helped to prepare these people for marriage
- *Current involvement in church leadership as an indication of how well the church helped prepare these people for service in the kingdom
- *Retention Rates among other converts

Exit interviews with drop-outs can provide valuable data on why they left

In addition to these things that may be available in church records, we also usually design an anonymous questionnaire that is given to each member. In that questionnaire, the members are asked their subjective evaluation of their own spiritual growth and development. They are asked to evaluate the work of elders, deacons, ministers and teachers. They provide evaluations of each ministry in the congregations. These results provide benchmark data that church leaders can use as they make improvements and set goals for more positive evaluations in the next questionnaire study.

We generally use a Bible Knowledge Test developed at Harding University. We give this test to entering freshman and graduating seniors as one assessment of what we are achieving in our Bible classes. When this test is given in congregations, the members take this test anonymously and get an answer sheet as feedback. We then study the results to identify areas where the congregation's religious education program needs to be improved.⁶

These studies almost always involve demographic data on the community. There are several companies that provide such data. I generally use the Ministry Study

prepared by the Percept Group in California⁶ They use data from the United States Census and from their own religious research on 50 different life style segments

These studies compare rates of growth or decline in the congregation being studied with similar rates in various religious groups throughout the county⁷ If other congregations and other religious groups are growing in the area, that could be an indication of receptivity If the congregation being studied is not growing or is declining, that could be an indication of some problems that need to be addressed

These studies usually involve interviews with leaders of congregations that are growing rapidly in order to find what is working for them. In addition, they involve interviews with community leaders in order to identify major needs in the community – felt needs that could be used by the church for evangelistic outreach The Ministry Area Profile from the Percept Group includes a “Compass” section that is also useful in identifying felt needs in the community These often involve marriage enrichment, parenting or related topics that churches can easily use to establish a point of contact for eventual evangelism

These are just a few of the things that churches can do to assess the degree to which they are achieving their purpose and fulfilling their mission The fact that some spiritual objectives cannot yet be measured directly should not keep a congregation from clarifying its purpose, writing a mission statement and developing an assessment plan

Conclusion

It is not easy to write a mission statement, develop an assessment plan, collect and analyze data and make improvements It is easier to just keep on doing the same things in the same ways while hoping for different results It is not easy to delegate and supervise Many church leaders find it easier to do the work themselves But churches are in the people business ” Several years from now, no one will

remember how well a particular job was done. What will be remembered is how well people were developed. Church leaders function in the equipping ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16). Their task is to help the rest of us discover our gifts and find our ministries in the priesthood of the believers. It is the ministry of the members that builds up the body of Christ. But churches will not grow unless and until they start planning for growth.

5. Justice and Righteousness— Foundations for Ministry

Harold Shank

Many churches and individual Christians work in ministries that serve those in need. Childcare agencies associated with Churches of Christ minister in ninety different locations to the unwanted children and troubled families of American society. In more than 100 cities in the U.S., various congregations have planted inner city churches, opened food kitchens or provided job and life skills training. The Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort is one of several organizations through which Christians respond to natural disasters. In various parts of the country, local churches provide school supplies to needy children. Manna International and the Christian Relief Fund represent efforts to deal with poverty in third world nations.

Foundations for Ministry

This short list, while not exhaustive, reflects Christian ministries to the poor, but also raises the question of the rationale behind such endeavors. The foundations for ministries to the hurting must rest not only on the positive emotions that result from helping others, or on the acclaim offered by society to those who give to the needy, or on inspiring lessons that excite us about reaching out to the downtrodden, but ministries to the vulnerable must be based on God's will as revealed in biblical teaching. Theology must lead practice.

Scripture offers substantial teaching about the poor. The foundational rationale for ministering to the needy might begin with the New Testament examples of service to the vulnerable, which are rooted in the Old Testament teaching about helping the oppressed. In the Old Testament, this kind of service is founded on the concepts of righteousness and justice which arise out of the nature of God.

New Testament Examples of Ministries to the Needy

The Gospels present *Jesus* ministering to the needy. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus centered his ministry on preaching good news to the poor and giving release to the captives, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. In Luke 6:20-36, he addressed the concerns of the vulnerable and the needy. When Jesus summarized his ministry for the messengers from John the Baptist (Luke 7:22), he included his service to the blind, lame, lepers and poor. The Gospel accounts give ample attention to Jesus' ministry of healing, feeding the hungry, and preaching to the troubled.

The *early church* imitated the example of Jesus by immediately attending to the needy (Acts 2:45) and substantially expanding the ministry (Acts 4:32-37) to the point that the apostles passed supervision on to a special leadership group (Acts 6:1-6). Paul later raised funds for Judean disaster relief (2 Cor 8:9, Gal 2:10). James addressed issues of the poor among the early Christians, instructing them to care for orphans and widows (James 1:27), welcome the poor in their assemblies (James 2:1-7), and not to oppress their workers (James 5:1-5).

Imitating the examples found in the New Testament provides a fundamental rationale for ministries of mercy. Christians in the first century imitated the work of Jesus. They served the vulnerable, needy and poor just as Jesus did. Today's Christians seek to follow Jesus in the twenty-first century just as those early Christians followed him in the first century.

Behind the New Testament Examples

Yet, a rationale for serving can go further by asking a series of questions about these New Testament examples. *Why* did Jesus and the early Christians serve the needy? *Why* did Jesus minister among the poor? *Why* did he heal the sick? Beyond imitating Jesus, did the Jerusalem church have a deeper rationale for taking care of human need? What prompted James to say that pure religion was to care for the widows and orphans? What made Paul raise funds for disaster relief?

The ministries to the poor in the New Testament are rooted in the Old Testament. When Jesus announced his mission to preach good news to the poor and outreach to the needy in Luke 4, he quoted the words of Isaiah 61. Paul's efforts at disaster relief seem to have Deuteronomy 15 in the

background (see especially 2 Cor 9 6-8) James' directions about pure religion probably share some link with Psalm 68 5 and similar passages which identify God as the father of the fatherless and protector of widows In his instructions on welcoming needy people into the assembly in chapter 2, James cites Leviticus 19: 18 This scripture includes loving your neighbor in a list of laws that dealt with the treatment of needy and vulnerable people. The early Christians imitated Jesus, but both the first Christians and Jesus found a foundation for ministering to the poor in the Old Testament

Old Testament Ministry to the Poor

In addition to the Old Testament texts already cited, the first testament contains substantial material about the needy in its three major divisions

**Law* The law spoke to the concerns of the orphan and widow (Deut 10 18, 14 29) God provided for the poor who gleaned in the fields (Lev 19 9-10, Deut 24 19-22) Israel had instructions about how to respond to disaster and tragedy (Deut 15 4-11) God assured the vulnerable a place at the feast days (Deut 16 11, 14) Economic relief was structured into the Sabbath and Jubilee years (Deut 15 1-3, Lev 25 1-55)

**Prophets* Isaiah 1-5, 58, and 61, Amos, and Micah represent prophetic material about the poor in which they cite repeated cases of mistreatment

**Writings* Proverbs and Psalms frequently cite the plight of the vulnerable For example, Prov 31 8 (note the NIV) calls for the strong to speak out on behalf of the destitute and Psalm 10 gives attention to the plight of the poor in Israelite society

These examples illustrate the variety of Old Testament material on the vulnerable and hurting However, the first testament goes beyond a call to minister to the oppressed by offering a theological context for that ministry That context involves the concepts of righteousness and justice

The Needy in the Context of Righteousness and Justice

The Old Testament focus on the needy comes in the context of two words *righteousness* and *justice*. Righteousness in its various forms appears more than 270 times, while justice occurs more than 400 times.

Righteousness is a relationship term that describes a broad range of concerns in both the Old and New Testaments. Psalm 1 sets up the agenda for the psalter by categorizing humanity into either the righteous or the wicked. Righteousness includes the salvation process, beginning with Abraham (Gen 15), and climaxing in the theological statement of righteousness in the book of Romans.

Justice involves legal matters, fundamental fairness and is included in the complex of ideas relating to God's judgment of wicked humanity.

While these two concepts are much broader than a concern with the needy, the Old Testament thinking about the oppressed is rooted here. Righteousness and justice appear together in the same context nearly 100 times. Note the bolded forms of the words **righteousness** and **justice** in the context of the needy in these Old Testament texts.

*After citing the neglect of the poor, orphans and widows in Jerusalem society, Isaiah announces: "Zion shall be redeemed by **justice** and those in her who repent, by **righteousness**" (1:27).

*Psalm 103:6 reflects the same foundation: "The LORD works **righteousness** and **justice** for all the oppressed."

*Isaiah 11:4 repeats the substance of the Psalm: "but with **righteousness** he will judge the needy, with **justice** he will give decisions for the poor of the earth."

*Amos 5:7 describes the oppressors as lacking these two qualities: "You who turn **justice** into bitterness and cast **righteousness** to the ground" and, later in the chapter (verse 24), instead of oppression and terror against the poor and needy, Amos calls out: "But let **justice** roll on like a river, **righteousness** like a never-failing stream!"

Concern for the poor appears repeatedly in the context of righteousness and justice because such concern is a quality of

both of these concepts. Attention to the poor is a quality of a righteous person and a trait of a just individual.

A Righteous Person Helps the Poor

Psalm 112 gives an in-depth look at the nature of the *righteous* individual. Among the qualities described are individuals who have "distributed freely," who have "given to the poor" (verse 9, RSV). Proverbs 31 depicts the *virtuous* woman. Among her virtues is a concern for the unfortunate. "She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy" (verse 20). Job 31 depicts the *righteous* man. His deeds include caring for the widows (verse 16), serving as an adoptive father (verse 18), and using his wealth to help the poor (verses 16, 19, 25). *Righteous* people serve the needy.

A Just Person Helps the Poor

Isaiah 1-5 deals extensively with the nature of a *just* person. After describing the people of Jerusalem as selfish, self-centered, arrogant and wastefully affluent, Isaiah called them to be *just* and explained what being a *just* person meant: "Seek justice, undo oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (1:17). Out of justice, Isaiah hoped for a different treatment of the most vulnerable in Jerusalem society. Another prophet, Jeremiah, agonized over the relationship between God and his people. When pressed to offer the leaders direction, Jeremiah called them to be *just* and *righteous* people and explained what that meant: "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place" (7:5-6). Those who are *just* reach out to the unfortunate.

Foundational Qualities

Ministry to the poor does not exhaust the nature of righteousness or justice, but it finds its foundation in these qualities. God calls his people to minister to the needy because he expects them to treat each other with righteousness and to promote justice in their communities. Serving the poor is what a righteous person does. Helping the widow and orphan reflects a righteous orientation to life. Seeking to end oppression is what

a just person does Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked are means of seeking justice in an unfair world Ministry to the poor is rooted in the principles of a righteous and just life

Yet the foundations of this kind of concern for the unfortunate go beyond the *principles* of a righteous and just life to the very *nature* of God Righteousness and justice, in addition to being part of the character of his followers, are also part of the *character of God*

God is Righteous and Just

Both testaments cite the righteous nature of God Jesus in his unity prayer pleaded, "O righteous Father" (John 17:25) just as David cried out in his complaint prayer "O righteous God" (Psa 7:9, 11) Isaiah 30:18 cites the justice of God "Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you For the LORD is a God of justice, blessed are all those who wait for him "

In many of the cases where righteousness and justice appear in the same context, they are dual aspects of God's nature, as indicated in bold in these texts:

*"The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, **just and right** is he" (Deut 32:4)

*Psalm 97:2 echoes the same thought "Clouds and thick darkness are round about him, **righteousness and justice** are the foundation of his throne "

*Jeremiah suggests that humans often miss this part of God's nature "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practice steadfast love, **justice, and righteousness** in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD" (Jer 9:23-24)

God's own concern for the orphans, widows, oppressed and poor arises out of *his just and righteous nature* God's justice leads to his concern for the poor God's righteousness

makes him attend to the needy Justice describes the core of God's nature, forms the foundation of just living, and empowers ministry to the unfortunate Righteousness describes the nature of God, overflows into the nature of living for God, and is foundational in service to the needy

God calls for imitation of his justice and righteousness His followers are just because God is fundamentally just. Ministering to the poor is a quality of a just person, and a just person is a reflection of God Believers in God seek righteousness because God is righteous Serving the unfortunate is part of a righteous life and a righteous life is rooted in the nature of God

Rationale Behind the New Testament Examples

When Jesus preached good news to the poor and served the needy as part of his anointing by God, he did so because that is what the just and righteous God wanted and because that is what a just and righteous person does When the Jerusalem church rose up to meet the needs of the poor among them, and when James called attention to the orphan and widow, such conduct reflected a life of justice and righteousness and originated in the nature of God, who is defined as just and righteous

Those who serve in child care agencies and the churches that support them, along with those who lead in urban ministries and the volunteers that work at their side, and those who load disaster relief on tractor-trailers engage in ministry which is not tangential to the concerns of God, or an optional part of the Christian community Their ministry of mercy imitates Jesus and the early church Their ministry to the needy arises from the deep core of biblical teaching on justice and righteousness Each expression of mercy finds its ultimate justification in the justice and righteousness of God himself

In seeking to understand the rationale behind ministry to the poor, Scripture points us beyond imitation of Jesus and the early church to the nature of God *Ultimately what we do results from whom we serve*

Righteousness and justice will be done In the imagery of Amos, it flows like a mighty river Our action or inaction will not stop God's ever-flowing stream God's eternal plan for justice and righteousness does not depend on our support Our choice is whether we join God's efforts Do we stand idle as God's

mighty river crashes down the mountainsides of history or do we
join God's mighty crusade?