



leadership

Lesson 1: Determine What You Want

Creating a vision for your ministry is one of the ongoing tasks of leadership. It takes time to articulate a vision – time on the clock and time on the calendar. It takes relationships, too—a vision for a congregation isn’t created in a vacuum, of course. Vision is also important for stewardship. We’ll talk more about how to cast the vision to others later in the course.

Leadership starts with you. The vision starts with you. And one of the best ways to begin to work on a vision is to ask yourself, “*What do I want?*”

However, you may instead be asking, “Isn’t ministry vision about what **God** wants, not me? Isn’t it a little selfish to ask myself what *I* want?” Of course, prayerful discernment is part of the process. I suggest you prayerfully and thoughtfully begin to ask yourself what you want.

And remember:

“Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Psalm 37:4, NRSV

This doesn’t mean you get everything you want. A mentor of mine, Dave Ellis, says we only get about 25% of what we want, so we might as well want—and imagine—a lot. Instead, I think we often assume we can’t have what we mostly deeply want so we don’t even articulate it for fear of disappointment. I’d love to see pastors think bigger and more hopefully about what they want.

I saw an interview once with actress Sharon Stone. She said that growing up in a small Pennsylvania town, she told people, “I’m going to be a movie star.” Of course, everyone thought she was crazy. Yet she reached her dream. There are no guarantees—plenty of girls in small towns have dreamed of stardom. But few people reach stardom (or anything else) without dreaming about it first.

What do you want? What are your dreams?

Here’s one of the best ways I know to figure out what you want:

Take a retreat



leadership



money



productivity



relationships



personal growth



communication

Rabbi Edwin Friedman used to recommend this: “Take your Bible and go off by yourself and discern your vision.” It’s hard to get clear about what you think and want amid the noisy voices of other people—church, family, denomination—who are all telling you what *they* want. You need some space and time.

Find a quiet place for at least a day. Is there a church camp or retreat center within striking distance? If not, perhaps you might spend the day at a neighboring church or in someone’s home while they are away at work or on vacation. If you can spend the night, so much the better. I find my brain often works better out of town, even if I’m only 30 miles from home.

Bring paper and pen. I suggest writing by hand to fully engage your brain. Neuropsychologist Angelo Bolea says that handwriting is a complex brain activity, and he recommends we do it more. You want all your brain resources at work for this process. I use 3x5 cards for my own planning, so you could bring a few packs. Or a favorite notebook. Do what works for you. If creating a vision on your laptop or even your phone works for you, do it.

I’m offering a possible schedule for a discernment day. You can adapt to fit your own rhythm. I’m a morning person, but you may not be able to think about much before 11:00. I recommend you turn your phone off or put it on airplane mode if you want to use it as a clock or timer. Either way, make sure you won’t be interrupted.

If you are a strong extravert and can’t imagine spending a day alone, here are a few possible options:

1. Just do it.
2. Try it for half a day.
3. Take someone with you (not a spouse or church member). Ask them simply to listen and give you feedback for clarity, not to weigh in with their own thoughts and opinions.
4. Go to a retreat center so you can talk to people at lunch.
5. Find a workshop that will help you do this in a group. I recommend Dave Ellis’ Falling Awake workshops, www.daveellisleadership.com.

If a day away is impossible—If you have little kids or are bivocational or can’t get away for other reasons, try taking half an hour at the beginning of every day (or at night if you’re a night person) to do this. Following the retreat outline, I offer a suggested way to do this daily for a week.

Suggested Schedule

9:00 Read Scripture and pray for guidance. (Try Psalm 23, Philippians 4:6-7, or another passage that is meaningful to you.)

If you are comfortable practicing contemplative prayer, try this:

In-breath: Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness

Out-breath: make your way straight before me.

Even if this is a new practice for you, give it a try it for a minute, or five minutes.

Note: I left out “because of my enemies” from this text (Psalm 5:8), but don’t forget about this phrase—the enemies of fear, doubt, discouragement and resignation can derail this process. Trust God to protect you from them through this time and beyond.

9:30 Write for ten minutes on this statement: “I am called to...”

Or another option is to answer this question: “What is the best use of my life, given this much blessing?”

Then take a five minute break. Come back and see if you can quickly draft a purpose statement for your ministry – or even your life as a whole. You don’t have to get it right. It doesn’t have to take hours. I was in a workshop once where we had to write a purpose statement in two minutes (on a 3x5 card). I was shocked, but I was surprised how well it worked. Just make it a first draft.

10:00 Take a walk. If you’re a runner, make it a run. Or a run-walk. Movement will help with your discernment. (Dr. Bolea, the brain expert I mentioned, says our brains need movement to work properly.)

10:30 Take another look at your purpose statement and revise to make it more fully reflect who you are and what you are called to do and be.

10:45 Take the list of ministry visioning questions and answer them one by one. The long-term ones may be harder, but see if you can write at least one answer for every question. If you are using 3x5 cards, write one idea per card. Or you can print out the visioning questions in advance and write right on the list. You can come up with more than one answer for each question—for some of them it will be easy to generate many answers. Let yourself freely generate ideas; include the everyday and the impossible.

Ministry visioning questions (Adapted from Dave Ellis)

What do you want?

- What do you want for your ministry? (*This can get harder as you go further. But, if you stick with it, it can lead to answers that can improve your life and ministry significantly by helping you develop a long-term perspective.*)
- What do you want right now?
- What do you want today?
- What do you want this week?
- What do you want this month?
- What do you want this year?
- What do you want during the next five years?
- What do you want for the next ten years?
- What do you want for the next 25 years (for this church, even if you leave sooner? And for yourself)?
- What do you want for the next 50 years, for this church, the wider church and the world at large?
- What do you want for the next 100 years?
- What do you want for the next 1,000 years?
- What do you want forever?

What do you want in every category of your ministry?

- With regard to worship, what do you want?
- With regard to outreach, what do you want?
- With regard to the spiritual growth of your people, what do you want?
- With regard to support for those who have pastoral needs, what do you want?
- With regard to money, what do you want? (your salary, giving, spending, giving beyond the congregation, managing)
- With regard to the building, what do you want?
- With regard to leadership development, what do you want?
- With regard to educational ministry, what do you want?
- With regard to relationships, what do you want?
- With regard to specific ministries (youth, children, young adults?)
- With regard to music, what do you want?
- With regard to staff, what do you want?
- With regard to anything else that is important to you in ministry, what do you want?

- What do you want the ministry to have? (circumstances, results)
- What do you want the people to do to do? (actions, activities)
- Who do you want them to be? (values, attitudes)
- What do you want for others in your life
- What do you want for the descendants of this church?
- What do you want for your community?
- What do you want for your country?
- What do you want for others around the world?

11:45 Set aside your notes or cards, and spend fifteen minutes in prayer. You can repeat the centering prayer above, or perhaps use the words of a gospel song, like this:

In-breath: Guide my feet

Out-breath: while I run this race.

Or pray in whatever way works for you: prayer in words, silent prayer, or noon-day prayer from the prayer book.

12:00 Lunch

Take a full hour break. Read, sing, take another walk. Take a nap if you are in a place where that is possible— don't even set an alarm. If you don't wake up by 1:00, you needed the sleep more than further thinking

1:00 Read the purpose statement again. Place your hand on your heart and ask God, "Is this my purpose?" See what further insight you gain, and adapt. Remember, it doesn't have to be perfect to help you move forward in your ministry and your life.

1:15 Reflect on the times in your ministry when you've had the greatest joy. Notice the thoughts and feelings that come into your mind.

Go back to your answers to the ministry visioning questions. Take a few moments with each answer, and notice which ones give you energy and the same sense of joy you remembered from other times in your ministry. Mark those. Let go for now of thoughts of how to do it, and even more importantly let go of thinking, "I could never do that/get that/have that." And set aside the ones that smack of obligation or "should-ness." Ministry has plenty of things that are obligations without you adding more to yourself.

Now, prayerfully review the ones that give you energy. Keep your purpose in mind. Ask yourself, "What do I want to do now?" Make one pile of cards, or one list. "What do I want to do in one year?" Make another pile or list. "What do I want to do in three to five years?" "What do I want to do before I die?" If you get more ideas, you can add them to your list.

2:15 Take a break (walk, song, snack, more prayer).

2:30 Now look at the items you want to do now. Choose the items you are truly committed to moving forward on. Maybe it's making a big leap in your preaching. Or taking your day off every week. Or starting to sing again. Or spending more time connecting in the community. Or working with key leaders to learn more about community needs and starting a new ministry.

Start making plans

I'm going to share briefly a planning process that can help you get started on moving forward on your most important goals. I'll talk more about this in a future lesson.

Try this: Take the idea to do right away that excites you the most:

Let's take one idea, say, improve your preaching (remember, only if this idea gives you joy at the thought!) as an example

Ask yourself:

How do I improve my preaching?

Write down as many ideas as you can think of (don't be afraid to make some of them a little crazy or out of the ordinary).

For example:

Spend half an hour more in preparation.

Attend a preaching conference.

Hire a coach.

Join Toastmasters.

Ask someone in the congregation I trust for feedback.

Partner with a colleague.

Read a preaching book.

Try a different method each Sunday for a month, Manuscript, outline, Mind Map, note cards, no notes.

Watch preachers I admire on YouTube.

Preach from the back of the church.

Sing a sermon.

If you have a crazy idea, you might be able to make a good one out of it. (Singing a sermon, for example, might actually be a good idea—or at least sing it when you're practicing it.)

Of the ones you decide you like, you can take them down a level to the more specific:

For example: How do I partner with a colleague?

Pick someone I like

Pick someone who's a challenge

Pick someone from my denomination

Pick someone from another denomination

Video sermons and exchange

Do a pulpit exchange and get feedback from the other preacher's members

Read a preaching book together and implement the ideas

You get the idea. Then you pick the ideas that sound the most fun or helpful and schedule them:

Call or email Fred on Tuesday about partnering in this way.

You won't have time on this retreat to make even a plan for every one of the items on your do-now list. But you can start. And a plan can be made surprisingly quickly. It doesn't have to be perfect, only enough to get you going. And you probably don't need more than a few new items to feel like you have more control over your ministry and more enjoyment in it. Some of those will be things you are already doing—you just may want to do them in a different way.

3:15 Take at least the last fifteen minutes to prayerfully offer this purpose and these hopes, dreams and plans to God. And before you leave, decide what you are going to do the next day to move this forward, even if you only have five minutes to do so.

3:30 Head home.

Or, if you are able to stay overnight, take time for a real break. In the evening, you can continue this process with the other items you want. Take at least one of the “before I die” dreams to do some initial thinking and planning about.

At-home daily retreat time

Here's an outline for a daily-practice alternative to the retreat schedule:

Day 1

Read Scripture and pray for guidance. (Try Psalm 23, Philippians 4:6-7, or another passage that is meaningful to you.)

If you are comfortable practicing contemplative prayer, try this:

In-breath: Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness

Out-breath: make your way straight before me.

Even if this is a new practice for you, try it for one, five or twenty minutes

Write for ten minutes on the statement, "I am called to..." Or the question "What is the best use of my life, given this much blessing?"

Day 2

Draft a purpose statement for your ministry—or perhaps your life as a whole. You don't have to get it right. It doesn't have to take hours. Just make it a first draft.

Get up and walk around for a few minutes

Take another look at your purpose statement and revise to make it more fully reflect who you are and what you are called to do and be.

Day 3

Take the list of ministry visioning questions (see pp. 4-6) and answer them one by one. The long-term ones may be harder, but see if you can write at least one answer for every question, more if you want. Let yourself freely generate ideas and include the impossible and the everyday.

Day 4

Finish the ministry visioning questions, or review them for more answers that have come up overnight. Spend time in prayer for the visioning process you are in.

Day 5

Read the purpose statement again. Place your hand on your heart, and ask God "Is this my purpose?" See what further insight you gain, and adapt. Remember, it doesn't have to be perfect for it to help you move forward in your ministry and your life. Reflect on the times in your ministry when you've had the greatest joy. Notice the thoughts and feelings that come into your mind.

Go back to your answers to the ministry visioning questions. Take a few moments with each answer, and notice which ones give you energy and the same sense of joy you

remembered from other times in your ministry. Mark those. Let go for now of thoughts of how to do it, and even more importantly let go of thinking, “I could never do that/get that/have that.” And set aside those that smack of obligation or “should-ness.” Ministry has plenty of things that are obligations without you adding more to yourself.

Day 6

Now, prayerfully review the ones that give you energy. Keep your purpose in mind. Ask yourself “What do I want to do now?” Make one pile of cards, or one list. “What do I want to do in one year?” Make another pile or list. “What do I want to do in three-five years?” “What do I want to do before I die?” If you get more ideas, you can add them to your list.

Day 7

Start making plans: Now look at the items you want to do now. Choose the items you are truly committed to moving forward on. Maybe it’s making a big leap in your preaching. Or taking your day off every week. Or starting to sing again. Or spending more time connecting in the community. Or working with key leaders to learn more about community needs and start a new ministry.

See retreat outline, above, for the planning process. Start with one item that sounds the most energizing to you. Make a quick plan.

Finally, offer the plan you’ve made to God in prayer.

You can keep going by spending 15 minutes each morning on one of the items that gives you joy and create a plan and set the first action.

Why vision is important

It's hard to move forward in a sustained way if you don't know what you want, or if you are working out of obligation. I once took my parents to lunch at a Sizzler restaurant (their choice...). My mother, well into her eighties at this point, enjoyed her lunch. I was going up to get dessert, and I asked her, "Mom, do you want dessert?" She said, "Well, I *should*..." (because it was included in the price!). I said, "I don't think *should* is part of the equation when you're talking about dessert, Mom." She did have a bowl of ice cream, and enjoyed it, too. I was raised with a powerful sense of *should*. It's been liberating to move away from *should* and toward mature wants.

We constantly find ourselves in ministry saying, "I **should**: get better at church finances, visit more, be more up-to-date with trends in church life, be able to grow this church." You name it. You've got your own list, I'm sure. And while all these things are important, a life of obligation in ministry is not satisfying. You won't be giving your best self if every day is filled with the shoulds and none of the wants, much less the love-to's.

What do you love to do in ministry, and can you do more of it?

Getting what you want in ministry means putting a higher priority on what you want. That means sometimes you have to put a lower priority on what other people want, which can be challenging. We'll talk more about this in later lessons. For now, focus on getting clear.

One of the challenges for many clergy in a process like this is that we were born into families where we ended up in a position of pleasing others. We were programmed to be "unselfish" and conflict-averse, and to be more attuned to meeting the needs of others than our own. This isn't true of all clergy, of course, but in my own coaching and consulting practice, I see this often.

Yet many pastors, when I ask them "What do you want?" say dreamily, "That's a good question." If you find yourself gazing off into the distance at that question, it's a good sign!

Another challenge is the danger of resignation. We come to think we can't possibly have what we want. Some congregations are more open than others, it is true, but when we start out by assuming nothing is ever going to happen, chances are nothing ever will. We don't even start the conversation.

Thus, you have to put it out there, which we'll talk about in a future lesson. What's the best way to tell them what you want? (There are elements of leadership, relationship, and personal growth involved, so this will show up in more than one upcoming module).

Rev. Larry Matthews, founder of the Leadership in Ministry workshops, talks about the importance of three things: self-definition, self-regulation and staying connected. This lesson is mostly about getting clear so you can define yourself to your congregation.

Self-regulation and staying connected are critically important as you move forward, when people inevitably react.

Warning: Some churches and lay leaders are allergic to pastors who are self-defined and know what they want. We'll be talking as we go along about how to put your wants, desires and vision out to the congregation, and what to do when individuals or groups react, as they inevitably will. No church actually says, en masse, "Sure, that sounds great, pastor!" Don't take it personally when some say instead, "How can you say that, pastor! We're not going there." It's just the beginning of the conversation.

Always remember, **you are the biggest gift to your congregation.** The more you lead out of your deepest self, the better a pastor you will be. This doesn't mean you say, "That's just how I am," and never pay attention to feedback or work to develop yourself. It does mean that constantly adapting yourself to your congregation and what it wants is not actually in their best interests—or yours. What they need (whether they know it or not) is a leader who is clear and self-defined. Finding a way to connect who you are with who they are, will over time, have the most potential for productive ministry.

Start here: What do you want?

If you would like some help with your visioning or planning, contact me, Margaret@margaretmarcuson.com. I coach about twenty pastors a year, and if I have room I'd be happy to have a conversation about coaching. If not, I can refer you to someone else I trust.

© 2016, 2017 Margaret J. Marcuson