



DISCERNING A PARISH VISION

Facilitator's Guide

Overview

Purpose: The purpose of the three sessions outlined in this resource is to help your parish discern an answer to the question: *What is our parish vision?* The three sessions are:

- Lectio Divina for Vision
- Discerning the Vision
- Drafting a Vision Statement

This exercise is an extension of the book *101 Ways to Evangelize* by Susan Windley-Daoust.

Time: Allow 60–90 minutes per session

What you'll need

- 6–10 people, ideally including the pastor, select staff, and invested parishioners.
- A facilitator; ideally this is an outsider to the group. However, it could be an insider who understands the process and keeps it going.
- A designated notetaker.
- A translator (for bilingual parishes).
- A presentation board for recording and sharing ideas, as well as the vision statement.
- Snacks and drinks—keep it relaxed.
- Bibles (or copies of the Scripture text chosen for *Lectio Divina* in session 1).

Background

It's virtually impossible to become an evangelizing parish unless the parish operates within a common vision of who they are called to be.

Vision doesn't get the attention it deserves: Americans are practical at heart, and tend to think of vision and mission as nice, but superfluous. But the lack of a common vision for the parish means that any decisions tend to be based entirely on less

helpful guides—personal appeal, cost, familiarity, etc. A common, articulated vision serves as a North Star, and gives you the ability to measure your progress in reaching the vision for your parish. Without one, you have no way to assess progress other than "people like it." (People like ice cream, too, but too much can kill you.)

It is common for many organizations to create a vision statement. Parishes, however, don't create vision statements; they *discern* God's vision for their parish. Whether you pen a formal statement or not, the discussion is essential if you want to be a parish on mission. You need to see, point to, and name that North Star!

A parish vision must be:

1. aspirational;
2. about who you desire to be, not who you are;
3. centered on God's relationship to his people;
4. relevant to every person in your parish boundaries, Catholic or not.

An articulated parish vision is *not* 1) a description of your current ministries; 2) overly focused on weaknesses; 3) a how-to manual of discipleship; or 4) triumphalistic.

Most parishes think too small when they think about vision. Resist small. Now is the time to dream God's own dreams for humanity, and those dreams are as big as God himself. If this parish were radically open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, what would that look like? Name that reality in concrete, specific terms.

The following sessions offer a way to move into a discernment discussion about parish vision. Ideally, those present are the pastor, select staff, and invested parishioners with a heart for God and your parish. (Choose prayerfully and judiciously—you want spiritually wise and creative discussion partners.) Plan for 60-90 minutes per session.

PREVIEW



DISCERNING A **PARISH VISION**

Session 1: Lectio Divina for Vision

Preparation

If you wish, you can read the chapters on Catholic vision in two excellent parish renewal books: Deacon Keith Strohm's *Ablaze*, chapter 3, or Tim Glemkowski's *Made for Mission*, chapter 4.

Deliberate prayer before the meeting is essential. This exercise gets at the heart of what it means to be a parish, and prayer for insight, guidance, and honesty in the days leading up to these discussions would be most appropriate. The participants should pray; asking people outside the conversation to pray would also be wise.

Bring Bibles to the meeting.

Process

Begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit ("Come Holy Spirit" or your own).

As a group, you are going to pray with three Scripture passages connected to vision:

- Matthew 28:18-20
- Isaiah 61:1-3
- Matthew 13:31-32
- or, choose your own.

One passage at a time, pray each Scripture through a group *Lectio Divina* (20 minutes per passage). If you have never done this before, choose a leader to facilitate this simple process:

1. Read the passage aloud, slowly. Everyone else should listen prayerfully, perhaps eyes closed.
2. When done, the participants should be invited to read the passage silently to themselves for a few minutes.
3. The facilitator reads the passage aloud a second time, and asks people to listen for one word or phrase that strikes them for some reason.
4. After a few moments of silence, the facilitator invites individuals to share the word/phrase that struck each of them.
5. Now, discuss: How does this Scripture passage help you see what is possible for a shared parish vision? Take notes.

Conclude the session by bringing together all insights from these three passages. Is there anything else God is bringing to mind?

End with a closing prayer.

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Session 2: Discerning the Vision

Preparation

This session is less structured, and more of a conversation around three topics. Plan to spend between 20-30 minutes discussing each topic, using the provided prompts. Be sure to have a notetaker recording the group's insights. Take a short break between topics.

If you have done any assessment of your parish boundaries (see Gracewatch.org for a printable with suggestions), distribute that ahead of time.

Process

Begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit ("Come Holy Spirit" or another).

Review the first session's notes, especially insights from the group *Lectio Divina*. Then launch into the following discussions.

1. Describe the most faithful, vibrant, reverent Church you could possibly imagine.

- Who would be there?
- How would they express their faith?
- What would they look like outside of church?
- What impact would the church have on the larger community?
- What is the liturgy like?
- How many young people would consider entering the priesthood/religious life?
- How many would be in RCIA?
- If there is a school attached, what would make that school notably a parish school?

2. Discuss the reality that your parish has a mission given from God through the successors of the apostles.

Share the following: *A parish is a geographic boundary set by the diocese's bishop, the local successor to the apostles. Our parish is ultimately here in obedience to Jesus's instruction: Go and make disciples of all nations.*

That worldwide mission was entrusted to the apostles, and is handed directly to us. According to canon law, each local parish church is responsible for the spiritual welfare of everyone within its boundaries.

- Did you realize you have a mandate that reaches back to Jesus Christ?
- What do you think when you consider that our parish includes everyone within our parish boundaries, not primarily the building and the people who attend?
- The apostles went and made disciples of all nations after receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Is this parish open to the inspiration and movement of the Holy Spirit? How? Where could we improve our openness?
- What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? How could that be measured? (This could be and should be another discussion, but touch on it now.)

3. Discuss the supernatural reality of what it means to offer Mass within this geographic boundary.

- How do we honor the centrality of the Eucharist celebrated and given at each Mass?
- How can we acknowledge the communion of saints present among us, especially at Mass?
- How do people know this building is dedicated to God?
- Is being present in this church, especially for Mass, a refuge? An oasis? Find a word.

Closing

Use the last five minutes of the session to assess what seems to be rising to the top of the discussion. Invite the participants to go home and write two vision statements, each twelve words or less, based on the preceding discussion and their own prayer. Ask them to bring these statements to the third session.

Close in prayer.

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Session 3: Drafting a Vision Statement

Preparation

Vision statements are aspirational, rooted in our Catholic faith and God's promises, and short—typically, the shorter the better. They don't need to be clever; they need to be a North Star.

If you feel you need to write a paragraph that fleshes out the vision, that is okay. But stick with *short* for the actual statement. No one remembers a paragraph. The statement needs to be repeatable. This is not a catechism, it is a visualization of excellence.

Each participant should come to this session with the two vision statements she or he drafted at the previous session (or in the intervening time).

Process

The facilitator begins with a prayer to the Holy Spirit.

Then, each person shares their two vision statements (under 12 words) on the board, or presentation sheets attached to a wall.

Invite everyone to walk around reading the different

statements.

The facilitator opens the discussion by asking participants to consider which statements capture the spirit of the last two meetings. Hopefully, you will begin to focus on two or three.

Once you have culled the options, check for these items in each statement:

- Is God clearly central to the vision?
- Is our call to discipleship clear?
- Is our outreach to the community evoked?
- Is it aspirational rather than descriptive?
- Does it help us direct where we need to go?

Use the discussion to adjust the wording in each statement as needed.

How do you land on a final vision statement? This could be the pastor's decision, or the decision of the group. There could be wisdom in praying on this for week, and then making the decision.

Close with prayer.

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