

Church 3.0, the upgrade

by John O'Keefe

I firmly believe truth is in the narrative; all stories have meaning, function and direction. All story, no matter the style, share with us truth. An example of this is found in the fact that nowhere in scripture does God tell us "you must have one wife." Yet, an interesting fact comes to light when we read the stories of the Old Testament leaders; whenever they have more than one wife, or a wife and a concubine, trouble comes. No matter who they are, no matter their place in God's plan, having more than one wife causes trouble. So, on one hand, a person could say, "you can have more than one wife, because scripture does not forbid it." Yet, on the other hand, one could say, "having more than one wife will cause trouble – on many levels." When I got my mind around it, it came to me – it is the difference between "modern vision" and "postmodern vision."

MODERN VISION

Vision is based on one set of plans and goals, with limited flexibility and quantitative measurements designed to insure that we are "the best stewards of God's resources" (usually meaning the money they give to the church). One person, usually the Senior Pastor, declares – "I have a vision" and everyone else follows the vision for the church. Vision by planned goals and objectives usually has a five to ten-year plan that must be followed. All decisions are based on meeting the goals; even when the ability to deviate from the plan is included in the plan, deviations seldom, if ever, occur. This system does not take into account that there can never be enough available information to make a "right decision." If the "right decision" is based on meeting future goals, you automatically limit the possibilities because the decision is based on a desired outcome, and not what is currently happening. Since Vision by Plan is motivated by meeting goals based on an uncertain future, we must admit that it is impossible to meet the plan because we are moving to an uncertain future. There are several problems with this concept, zero flexibility, failure blamed on one person (usually the Pastor, after all it is his vision, and never the Board – I call this "failure motivation) outcome is usually measured on hard numbers and not human involvement. We can see this system as a "macro-planning" system, but we need to understand that long range planning (macro-planning) is dead [1].

POSTMODERN VISION

Vision by Narrative, vision on the story, is very different from Vision by Plan. First, it is highly collective in nature and function – vision is not based on the desires of one person, but that one person's understanding of the collective vision of the community. But, it is not "vision via committee;" it speaks to all because it is collective, coming from all – the leaders need to be "empathic" at a core level, and listen to the hearts of the people. While Vision by Plan is based on a limited understanding of distorted facts, Vision by Narrative is based on a spiritual connection. The narrative of the vision is not a concrete plan based on committee and subcommittee, with plans and rules designed to get us to a place we may not desire to be. Because of its collective nature, it changes on a regular basis – it "goes with the flow" if you will. A community of faith may believe that God is leading them to particular ministry settings, and over time that setting might change. For example, a local neighborhood Italian Food Store, noticing a change in the neighborhood, starts to add other items to meet the changing needs of the new people in the area. If they had been driven by a Vision by Plan method, they may have closed the doors a long time ago – because decisions would have been based on being a "great Italian food store." It is not failure motivated (one person getting the blame). Because it is a collective endeavor where people strive to accomplish the results, results of the narrative, there is not "one" to blame. When we see the narrative is to share the gospel, we can repeat the story – we can even add to the story – but the bottom line is this – we share the gospel. Our vision narrative is to share the gospel, with everyone we know and meet – not just the select few we believe fit the image of our church, or the numbers of our goals.

DEFINING A PEOPLE

The narrative helps define who we are and what we do – it is a core part of our DNA. No matter the story, no matter the ending, truth is in the narrative. All story is valid, all story – both individual and group-- can add to the collective of the community. When we see life as simply a collection of story, we start to understand both our humanity and God's divinity. The narrative allows for creative, adaptable, nonlinear thinking with group input and an interactivity based on transparency and a living worldview. The narrative is, if you will, a new operating system for the church in the new millennium. It is both virtual and non-virtual, and it leads us to the future revitalizing the church.

Some may view this style of vision development as “vision by chaos,” and they would be right. But out of chaos, God creates order. The problem is, out of order humanity creates a repressive system based on rules designed to control, and not motivate. Vision by Narrative seeks to find the fun side of life – be crazy, be creative, find the humor. Vision based on narrative pumps life into the organization, fresh ideas, current trends – it keeps the life blood red and flowing. It is the oxygen that fuels the burn in faith. Change, if you will, is in the air. While Vision by Narrative defines this generation, it is not the operating system of the Institutional Church [2]. The Institutional Church still operates on the Vision by Plan method, and does not find value in the Vision by Narrative method-- because they lose power and control.

THE PROBLEM

The Institutional Church has become it's own best listener. They have made excuses for their failures based on the success of others – the old, “blame the victim” model of management. They develop ways of seeing their individual Vision by Plan as being effected by outside sources. I can remember being in meeting with other ministers, when I served in the United Methodist Church, when the conversation turned to the then grown “seeker movement” would say, “the only reason these churches are growing is because they water down the message.” They would all agree, and then they would start saying how “bad” the seeker model was for Christians. I found it interesting, that a church that spoke about being inclusive and universal was quick to condemn a church movement that was working in powerful ways. That is one of the problems of the current Institutional Church; they claim inclusiveness while condemning those who think differently. Another problem-- it's a business.

The Institutional Church has become interested in only one thing – money. If that was not the case, it would not be so central to their Vision Plan. The Presbytery Church, USA actually lists churches based on the amount of money they give in offering each week [3]. When you check out the stats of any of their churches on the internet you will be given stats on church growth, growth as it relates to an offering, average offering given, breakdown of offering to age, and the history of giving. I remember emailing them about a year ago asking questions on the average age of their congregations. I was told that it was impossible to get that information based on individual congregations. Yet, I could get the giving based on the age of the people in the congregation – it's all money.

The Institutional Church is seen as a faceless corporation with limited compassion where profit is central, no matter what. A good example of this can be found in their lending money to individual churches for building projects. Each Institutional Church has a “Loan Program” where Vision by Plan is central. It is here where you can see Vision by Plan in action, the Institution changes interest on loans made to congregations where the Institution actually owns the land and the building. All this, given the express forbidding of charging another believer interest on a loan [4] of any kind (in fact, the Prophets expressly forbid charging interest as a heinous sin [5]). It is also interesting that the Institution owns the building and land, meaning THEY benefit from the increased value of the property after the improvements, and from the interest that must be paid

from the local congregation. This whole reality is a “twist” in finding truth in the narrative, and shows the corporate desires of the Institution.

Most Institutional Churches claim they need to charge interest because they are “simply being good stewards of the money entrusted to them from God.” But why would God violate his own teachings of no charging interest to another believer because of stewardship? They also claim that in two parables [6] (very cool stories) Jesus taught that charging interest is all right. This is proof of taking the facts (decisions) and trying to make them fit the goals of the organization. These stories have nothing to do with “charging interest” they are designed to teach us other lessons. One, the King’s ten servants teaches us that God has given each and everyone of us gifts we need to share with others; while the other, concerning the Talents, is to teach us not to hide our faith, but to express it and share it with others – the talents are people and when we express our faith, the kingdom of God grows. It is totally outside the Truth of the Narrative to express these stories as allowing charging interest, given the clear expressions of forbidding such a practice – it is profit over prophets.

THE SOLUTION

So, how do we move from a “Vision by Plan” to a “Vision by Narrative” way of operating? I believe the answer is simple, we need to look deeply at who we are, what we say, how we say it and what we truly mean by it all, making sure they all match. We need to change the operating system of the church to allow people to express themselves in opening and dynamic ways. We need to remove any and all traces of the Institution from our view. The institutional Church needs to redefine themselves to being more of an advisory board, then a controlling organization. I believe this can happen if we do the following [7]:

Be Creative-- lose control, relax and allow people to develop their artist side. Churches could sponsor Art Shows and allow their members to show their art. Churches could publish a book on the writings of its members, - essays, poetry, theology whatever they desire. Why not help a few members develop their music talent? Help with studio time by picking-up the tab.

Think Nonlinear-- Get out of the box and start looking at life deeper and wider. Develop a peripheral view of life. Become bendable and flexible; seek the possibilities and not the problems. Allow people to see what they can do, and not what they cannot do.

Be Adaptable-- Uncertainly rules get ready for the ride of your life. Be ready to work with accidents and not against them.

Group it Up-- Get connected into “groupthink” and be p2p. Develop a community website where members can have a page or two. Develop an “elist” of edress to help people keep connected. Sponsor chat rooms and message boards for people to express themselves and open discussion. Become tribal, and welcome different people.

Have a Worldview-- Get cultural, and stop limiting the vision based looks. Become an “Acts” church-- welcoming people of different languages and cultures, and learning from them. We need to stop telling those outside the church to “come on in” and meet us and start looking at those inside the church and tell them to “go out” and meet the people.

Be Transparent-- Be ready to express your humanity and accept your flaws. We are a people who desire to “become” and not live in “one is.” We desire growth and learning, not dogma and doctrine. Transparency means that there are no secrets in the Postmodern world.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge facing us today is “change.” We need to remember, everything changes-- everything changes. If it is alive, that change is called “growth;” if it is dead, that change is called “decay.” What I find interesting about this is, that when something is decaying it first gives the impression of growth, we can be misled. Since everything changes-- always and everything-- I am amazed at the reaction people have concerning change in the church. None of us live the way we did 100 years ago, 50 years ago, 25 years ago, 10 years ago, 5 years ago so why do we expect the church to remain the same? Most do not, and because the church refuses to change we left, and found faith in other non-traditional churches and communities of faith. We have allowed change in every sector of our lives, except the church. We need to change and change fast. Keep in mind, I am not suggesting incremental change, I am suggesting exponential change – we do not need to make small changes designed to give the impression we care – we need to flat out get off the stick and shake, rattle and roll.

Exponential change is the upgrade. If you and your church truly desire to reach a new generation for Christ, you will need to look deep into who you are and what you are doing. Seek change where change is needed, and do not sweep anything under the rug. It is now time to get past the debates of “Are we truly in a postmodern age?” (yes we are) “Is change really needed?” (yes it is) “Do we really need dramatic change?” (yes we do). Len Sweet says it best, “Deal with it, get over it, or get help [8].”

[1] Henry Mintzberg, The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning, (Free Press 1994)

[2] The Institutional Church is defined as, all Denominational Churches and Independent Churches who maintain a limited world view.

[3] Go to www.pcusa.org and look up the stats on individual churches

[4] Exodus 22:25

[5] Ezekiel 18:8,13,17 and Jeremiah 15:10

[6] The parable of the King’s Ten Servants (Luke 19:23) and the talents (Matthew 25:27)

[7] Over time, my desire is to develop each of these areas and place them collectively into a book entitled Church 3.0, The Upgrade – redesigning the operating system to minister to a new world. God willing, and finding a Publisher, this will happen.

[8] Len Sweet, SoulTsumni, (Zondervan 1999), p51-53



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